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It Starts with a Song: Celebrating Twenty-Five Years of Songwriting at BYU, produced by Ron Simpson

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traditional marriage. These authors passionately support marriage between a male and female as the foundation of family and community morality.

University of Minnesota law professor Dale Carpenter, in one of four chapters defending same-sex marriage, likens gay families to “a rising river, stretching across the country,” and conservative opposition as a dam that blocks the way. “Impeded in its natural course, the river does not dry up. Its flow is simply redirected into a hundred rivulets and low pastures all around the countryside.” Whether readers agree with Carpenter’s views on same-sex marriage, he is right that such oppositional forces are not likely to retreat: “Many conservatives may think that the collateral damage that is being done by the opposition to gay marriage is worth it in the end” (324).

If there is going to be any resolution in this divisive debate, it will most likely take place in a flood of credible information. Such is the goal of Wardle’s 393-page paperback anthology published by University Press of America. *What’s the Harm?* is a critical and timely book for those of various religious faiths and political persuasions who desire to open a dialogue with those of differing views as well as to defend marriage in an educated way.

Perhaps the most unsettling analysis of potential damages to family, constitution, and society is in chapter 17, “Or for Poorer? How Same-Sex Marriage Threatens Religious Liberty,” by Roger T. Servino. He describes the chilling effect that same-sex marriage would have on religious liberty and religious institutions should the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) be changed or repealed. Such a transformation would impact “adoption, education, employee benefits, health care, employment, discrimination, government contracts and subsidies, taxation, tort law, and trusts and estates.” In turn, the new legal

regimes would “directly govern the ongoing daily operations of religious organizations of all stripes, including parishes, schools, temples, hospitals, orphanages, retreat centers, soup kitchens, and universities” (326).

Servino and other authors argue that “current law provides no room for non-uniform definitions of marriage within a state, it is all or nothing. But even across state lines it is difficult to countenance variable definitions . . . because of difficult questions like child custody. The high stakes reinforce the uncompromising posture of the contending sides.” Legalizing same-sex marriage will further induce governments to strip benefits from religious institutions that refuse to treat a legally married same-sex couple as morally equivalent to a married man and woman (326).

Although supporting same-sex marriage in Canada, Martha Bailey’s essay “*Dwelling among Us*” calls for “a more nuanced and careful response to this divisive issue. We do not all hold the same values, but we can agree on much, particularly on the importance of healthy human flourishing, tolerance and mutual respect.” Genuine pluralism can flourish when differences are “debated rather than ignored.” A unity can unfold in human affairs when we engage in what John Courtney Murray calls “the unity of orderly conversation” (160). *What’s the Harm?* most certainly moves us in the direction of a more nuanced and careful response as well as orderly conversation while helping to flood us with balanced information.

—Alf Pratte

It Starts with a Song: Celebrating Twenty-Five Years of Songwriting at BYU, produced by Ron Simpson (Provo, Utah: Tantara Records, 2009)

In the 1995 film *Mr. Holland’s Opus*, a musician and composer tries to write

one memorable piece of music to gain fame. He takes a job as a high school music teacher to pay the bills and over time discovers unexpected and even greater fulfillment during his thirty-year teaching career.

Such a story has parallels to that of Brigham Young University's Ron Simpson, producer of this CD, general manager of Tantara Records, coordinator of the Media Music Division of BYU's School of Music, and music director of the Young Ambassadors. Simpson left a career as a studio owner, producer, music publisher, and composer to take the lead of the fledgling BYU songwriting class in 1984. Since then, some fifteen hundred students have been through the program. *It Starts with a Song* may be similar to the crowning climax in *Mr. Holland's Opus*, when all of the main character's former students form an orchestra that premieres his long-awaited symphony—but it is less about the music and more about the tremendous number of lives he has touched and the love his students have for him as their teacher.

Simpson and his associates have taken not Simpson's own music but the music of his students and have assembled a two-disc CD of the best representatives of their work over the last twenty-five years. The songs were chosen on the basis of song quality, finish level, and how they fit in the overall continuity of the program. Many of the names will be recognized by local audiences: Hilary Weeks, Cherie Call, Rebecca Lopez, Mindy Gledhill, Jenny Jordan Frogley, Julie de Azevedo, Jericho Road, Tyler Castleton, Staci Peters, and Jeff Hinton.

Over the years, the media music program has become so popular that many are turned away, leaving a high-quality top tier of ability. One reason for the quality is that Simpson teaches song-

writing as a craft that can and should be learned. The names of students who have gone on to serious amateur or professional status are listed in blue in the liner notes—another evidence of the effectiveness of the program.

The material itself encompasses a wide variety of styles, quality, and genres. Though many of the songs would not stand up as hits on today's radio, they also cannot be judged as such. In some cases, the recording is an original version of a song later recorded and released commercially, with its original roots lying in the songwriting class itself. Others are recordings taken from unreleased albums. As a listening experience, one might expect a lot of devotional music. Simpson purposely avoided that obvious assumption, and a smorgasbord of music has emerged: acoustic folk, alternative rock, Bolivian, orchestral ballads, synth loop-based pop, guitar ballads, western folk-flavored songs à la the Eagles, and much more.

Perhaps the best approach for the listener is to consider this collection as a silver anniversary yearbook of sorts or perhaps an audio class reunion. Taken as a whole, it is a tremendous collection of talent representing even more works that were not chosen for the album. Its appeal is evidence of the contribution of a well-lived life and how much an individual can accomplish over a career.

Ron Simpson and his team deserve hearty congratulations for this outstanding collection of BYU's songwriting talent. We are lucky to have such talent preserved in such a convenient format. Future generations will be grateful that the project was undertaken.

—Greg Hansen