

LESSONS FROM THE CONCERT HALL

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As I approached this invitation to address the question set forth in the Mind & Spirit lecture series—“How does my scholarship inform my theology?”—I struggled to square the question with my self-perception. The struggle reminded me of some of my doctoral exams in musicology or music theory. Then, as now, I felt certain I could provide insightful answers if only I could slightly modify the questions. My instructors and committee members at the University of Michigan blocked such creative license on my part. I was the student and they were the faculty, and they claimed their prerogative to dictate the details of the inquisition through which I must pass. Accordingly, I played by the rules and answered their questions to the best of my ability. I still remember, however, the unvoiced yet primal cry that welled up inside of me as I exited the interrogation chamber after finishing my final oral exam—“Never again!”

So back to the question at hand, “How does my scholarship affect my theology?” After wrestling for months with the query, I simply have chosen to modify the question, partially because at this point in my career, I can finally do so. However, the main reason for the change is because I have never viewed myself as a music scholar. I am much more comfortable being seen as an artist, a musical craftsman if you will. The components of my craft are: first, performing music with artistry; second, teaching skills to help others do so; and third, preparing a listening audience to appreciate the music we endeavor to perform. I have always found myself much more drawn to the physical, emotional, and spiritual experience of the art form itself than to an intellectual analysis or clinical dissection of its component parts.

This is not to suggest that I have no interest in the exciting, challenging, and rewarding pursuit of intellectual inquiry in this and other disciplines. Perhaps a quirk of my somewhat schizophrenic personality (as evidenced by nearly a quarter century of Halloween concerts as “The Count”) is that my scholarly interest is actually greatest in fields outside my own nominal area of professional expertise. I would much rather dive deep into another account of the American Civil War or explore a fresh perspective on the complex history of the Middle East than bury my nose in some new treatise on the retrograde cyclical elements in the symphonies of Beethoven or Brahms.

In essence then, as both a musician and teacher, I see myself more as a craftsman than as a scholar. My personal focus is more on the doing and teaching of the same to others than on an intellectual and scholarly study of the discipline. My own degree is a Doctorate of Musical Arts, a DMA

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not a PhD. As described by the National Association of Schools of Music, a PhD in music “focus[es] on the preparation of scholars and researchers.” On the other hand, the DMA degree “focus[es] on the preparation of artists, pedagogues, therapists, or other music professionals.”¹

I hope this helps you understand my dilemma with a question that asks about the relationship between my scholarship and my theology. The revised question I propose to answer is, “How does the study of my *craft*, the performing and teaching of music, affect and influence my theology?” That is a question to which I find a wealth of answers from nearly a half-century of amazing experiences.

Now, I hope you will allow me to share with you a series of personal experiences I have had while practicing my craft and try to describe how they have affected my theology and my approach to a better understanding of God’s plan for me, one of the least of his children.

AT THE ALTAR WITH MUSIC

I begin with an experience that took place very early in my career at this institution, while the school was still in both name and spirit Ricks College. I considered it then one of the best-kept secrets in the Church and shared the view that it would never become a four-year school. The father of an extraordinarily talented student told me something that would forever after clarify the relationship between my craft and my theology. At that time in the history of the school, it was nearly unbelievable that such an extraordinarily gifted student from a large and culturally rich metropolitan area would come to an obscure junior college in rural southeastern Idaho to study music performance. As a testament to this student’s world-class talent, she would go on from Ricks College to complete a performance degree at a nationally recognized music school and win top honors in prestigious national competitions.

When I asked this father why his daughter had come to Ricks College, he responded without hesitation, “Because at Ricks College I know she will learn how to worship at the altar *with* music rather than at the altar *of* music.” With this simple yet profound phrase, a wise parent not only guided the educational path of his gifted daughter, but he also helped me find the words I would subsequently try to adopt as a personal mission statement while teaching the art of music at this institution.

Passages from my own patriarchal blessing, received as an eighteen-year-old pre-missionary and spoken years before any decision to pursue a career in music, made reference to “my music” and the spiritually sustaining effect it would have on those around me. I had often wondered about these statements, trying to understand better what aspect music was to play in my service and my worship.

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As this father so powerfully, yet simply, expressed this thought, I had no problem remembering and picturing many of my recent student colleagues at Michigan whose truly amazing talents and lives literally revolved around the altar of music. Nothing was of greater importance in their lives, or so it seemed, than the perfection of their remarkable skills. This commitment and dedication showed not only in the seemingly endless hours of practice they devoted to developing their artistry. Everything else appeared to take a backseat to their quest for musical perfection. Even though their masterful artistic performances could move and inspire me and others, too often I knew something of the sobering voids and holes in the lives of my gifted friends—waste places that no amount of practice, musical accomplishment, or standing ovations could ever fill. Though their artistry was good and inspiring and moving, and though their practice demonstrated significant self-discipline, some better—and even essential—elements were missing from their lives.

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Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught in a recent General Conference address entitled “Good, Better, Best.” “We have to forego some good things in order to choose others that are better or best because they develop faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.”² In a discipline like music that requires such dedication, self-discipline, and constant striving for perfection, it can be easy to lose sight of what is good, what is better, and what is best. In a discipline with a literal stage where excellence is openly and publicly rewarded by the applause of men, it can be easy to forget at whose altar we are commanded to worship.

That father’s words have repeatedly helped me understand my purpose at this unique school where students can be taught both how to perfect their individual musical skills and how to consecrate the use of these same abilities to the worship of their God.

A direct result of that focus was the creation of the University’s biennial Sacred Music Series. In an effort to answer President Kimball’s call to tell the stories of Mormonism more powerfully in music and art, music students at BYU–Idaho (majors and non-majors) perform newly-commissioned, choral-orchestral compositions based on Latter-day Saint scripture, much in the spirit of Handel’s great oratorio *Messiah*.³

True success for music educators at BYU–Idaho comes when we not only teach our students to be great artists, but also teach them the more important lesson that the greatest use and expression of their talents and art will be in the worship and adoration of the Lord.

LIFE IS NOT A COMPETITION

Go with me now, if you will, to an even earlier episode in my music-teaching career. It led to one of the most powerful epiphanies I have ever experienced as a music teacher and helped me see both music and

life in a more balanced way. This experience occurred during my first or second year as a public school music teacher at Provo High School, literally across the street from Brigham Young University, where I was concurrently working on a master's degree in Viola Performance.

I had secured this, my first teaching position, at Provo High School the year after Timpview High School opened on the other side of the city. Now one city's population divided between two archrival schools, and competition between the two institutions was palpable. I learned very quickly that if I needed money for equipment, instruments, or travel, the surest path to funds was to mention to my principal that Timpview had whatever it was I needed. In hindsight, and now with a bit more wisdom, maturity, and a tinge of remorse, I confess that I played that powerful trump card more than once.

Each spring, just prior to the end of the academic year, the orchestras from all of the high schools in our region would come together for what was euphemistically called a "festival." Thanks to the cross-town rivalry, this festival had become nothing short of a cutthroat competition. Provo High School had long enjoyed an outstanding and nationally recognized orchestra program. The teacher largely responsible for that success, and a good friend and mentor, had moved to Timpview. With him had gone a majority of the older and stronger players, for the most part following the new school boundaries. Yet Provo High still boasted an outstanding orchestra.

That year, however, Timpview's roster of musicians contained an extraordinary number of talented seniors, and my orchestra at Provo was comparatively young. Within two years, the relative strength of the two programs would reverse. But as we approached the festival, held at nearby Springville High School, my students and I wanted to perform to our best, motivated in large part by the raw desire: "Beat Timpview!" There was actually a reasonable chance that we could win this festival if all the stars aligned in our favor: if high strings played absolutely in tune, if no clarinets blasted us with any ear-piercing squeaks, if the young conductor avoided panicking on the podium, and if the three judges accepted and appreciated our particular musical interpretation of the pieces to be performed. We took to the stage early in the festival, and the kids played beautifully. I could not have asked or expected anything more. Jubilantly we returned to our seats in the auditorium to listen and theoretically enjoy the performances of the other schools at the festival. As the day progressed, it was evident that our performance had truly been outstanding. We should definitely be in the running for the grand prize. But Timpview's orchestra was still to play and was actually slated to be the final group of the day.

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When the time came, their enormous and well-disciplined orchestra set up on stage, filling many extra chairs on stage. As they began to play, my field education as a new music teacher commenced. Under the baton of my good friend and master teacher, these young musicians produced sounds and music that I had not imagined possible from high school students. The final selection on their program was the “Berceuse and Finale” from Igor Stravinsky’s *Firebird* ballet. In my opinion, this is one of the greatest orchestral pieces of all time. Their music making was amazing. It did to and for me everything great music and art should do. My emotions were literally swept along with the music. On that day, these young people’s music accomplished what a couplet by an unknown author proclaims, a phrase which my mother cross-stitched for me years ago and which still hangs on my office wall:

For heights and depths no words can reach,
Music is the soul’s own speech.

I looked around to see if my students in the darkened auditorium were sharing this same powerful experience. What I saw repeated over and over again on their individual faces was not what I would have hoped for, not what I should have been teaching them. Rather than experiencing the power of this great and wonderfully performed music, all I saw on the faces of my students was their anxiety, anticipation, and hope that something on stage would go terribly wrong, that someone would panic and mess up, count wrong, play wrong notes, or even, providence willing, squeak—anything to ruin Timpview’s performance and secure for Provo High School the first place prize.

What had I been teaching them? Why were we at this festival? Why did we spend so many countless hours rehearsing and learning how to make beautiful music? Why were we even musicians? Just to beat somebody else? Here my students were, unable to enjoy the beauty of the music filling the auditorium. Something in my approach to music and teaching and motivating students was definitely wrong. In my desire to motivate my students, I had sold out to that most ancient of temptations: pride. I had let a competition erode and undermine the very beauty we had been collectively striving to create all year in our classroom. The ride home on the bus for me was agonizing. Perhaps my students thought it was because of the second-place certificate we carried along with us. I literally could not express to them at that point what I was feeling, so I sat relatively mute. My anxiety and disappointment in myself were only heightened as a vengeful cheer went up from my students when our bus passed the Timpview orchestra equipment truck at the side of the road. Some percussion equipment had spilled out as they returned to Provo and they were retrieving it as we drove by.

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What did I learn that day? Like life itself, music should not be made into a competition. If we spend time and energy comparing ourselves to others, we risk missing the beauty and joy that surrounds us daily. Yes, we must strive with our best efforts to add to that composite beauty, using and developing the God-given talents we have, but the successes of others, even when they may overshadow our own achievements, can do nothing to diminish our own joy, growth, and experience unless we let them. I vowed to teach my students that lesson from that day forward.

PROGRESS IS MOST OFTEN EPISODIC AND NOT
CONTINUOUS

A third lesson learned while pursuing my craft is that in our lifelong pursuit of progress, be it as a budding violinist, a student of the gospel, or a first-time parent, I have come to believe that measurable progress is often more episodic than continuous. Many of my daily actions (and reactions) painfully remind me that I am not always a better or wiser parent today than I was yesterday, last week, or even last year.

My personal study of music has helped me to better understand, accept, and deal with both the positive and negative aspects of this episodic path of personal progress. It took four years to complete my master's degree at BYU, primarily in the late afternoons and evenings, while my real education continued during the day while teaching at Provo High School. Then I resigned, packed up my wife and two young children, and set out for doctoral studies in Michigan. Everything we owned, except the dog that stayed behind with a willing brother and sister-in-law, made its way via our rented 24-foot Ryder truck to student housing in Ann Arbor. By the third day together in the cab of that truck it felt like an eternal "Family Night from You-Know-Where" as the Dramamine that had kept the children somewhat listless for two days actually backfired.

We arrived at our cozier than anticipated student townhouse with two kids bouncing off the walls and a weepy wife convinced that all our stuff could never fit into that tiny space. But we managed, thanks to her amazing left-brained organizational skills. A few days later her rather right-brained husband set off for campus for what I expected would be two years of uninterrupted and amazing progress as a musician and artist. I would now be free to practice and study more than ever before without the day-to-day responsibilities of teaching.

I had chosen the University of Michigan because of my desire to study viola performance with one particular teacher. Several years earlier I had spent three weeks under his tutelage in a summer music camp in Banff, Canada. The experience had been phenomenal, and I improved more musically during those three weeks than ever before in my life. I was anticipating more of the same for the next two years.

While I did see some personal improvement in my playing during that first year of doctoral study, I was often frustrated at the apparent inconsistency and pace of my progress. One or two weekly lessons would be great, the next two or three less than inspiring. The cause was not a lack of effort on my part. I was practicing like never before. But I seemed to keep hitting plateaus. Periods of progress were followed by periods of frustration when my hours in the practice room seemed to be fruitless, with no visible improvement. In hindsight I can now see that the overall trend was certainly upward, but at the end of the first school year I wondered if I had really made much improvement. We spent the following summer in Utah earning money for school while staying in my in-laws' basement. Summer rekindled my desire to see real progress in my next year of study. As I began the second year, my wishes were soon realized.

It was an amazing year for me as a performer. I experienced breakthrough after breakthrough in my own playing. This progress left me somewhat confused, because I did not practice longer or harder the second year than I had the first. In fact, things actually became much more complicated and practice time more precious with the unexpected arrival of Katie Marie, our third child. My bout with pneumonia six weeks after her birth kept me in bed for all but a few hours each day for a month. Yet the progress continued throughout that year. I came to realize that the path of progress never follows one continuous, upward slope. It will always include frustrating plateaus, some more extensive and seemingly endless than others. There are even occasional downward depressions along the climb, in spite of our best and continuous efforts at improvement.

During my subsequent years teaching here at BYU–Idaho, I have seen variations of this same scenario play out countless times in the lives of my own students. I have come to realize that though I cannot prevent this episodic progress for my students, I can prepare them for the terrain they will face. It is amazing what happens when a student comes to realize that hitting the wall is simply a stretch of the path to be anticipated. When you know it is coming, it is not so debilitating and shocking. It is simply a part of the process. Knowing this helps students continue to persevere, to trudge faithfully to the practice room day in and day out, to keep doing the things their teacher asks them to do until the plateau is crossed and the upward climb continues.

And so it is with life. Our mortal lives are filled with boring plateaus and frustrating walls as well as with exhilarating climbs and breathtaking summits. It is nonetheless difficult to remember this truth when plodding along on a personal spiritual plateau that seems like an endless wasteland. It is even more challenging to endure the downward slopes of individualized learning craters we all encounter from time to time in an otherwise

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upward trajectory. Having seen a microcosm of this paradigm, first in my own musical development, and then over and over again in the lives of my students, helps me walk the long eternal path we all tread.

PLAY AS MANY NOTES RIGHT AS YOU CAN

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My final glimpse into the theological lessons gathered from thirty years as a music teacher came into focus only recently when I received a letter from a student of decades past. When I first came to Ricks College in 1984 and began my work with the school's Symphony Orchestra, I found a diverse group of students of widely ranging abilities. With these students my faculty predecessors had created a music program that was among fewer than ten junior college programs in the country accredited by the National Association of Schools of Music.

An important component of that accreditation was the presence on campus of this high-quality, all-student orchestra. With a relatively small student body of only freshmen and sophomores and a full-time instrumental faculty numbering only four (not counting the keyboard and vocal faculty), it was truly amazing that this small junior college, located in what might be described as a culturally challenged rural setting, could sustain this very fine all-student orchestra. Even more remarkable, this group was not a typical assemblage of music majors found in most university orchestras of this quality. Our orchestra was a non-auditioned, open enrollment class consisting of three basic types of students. First, there were a handful of dedicated and talented music majors. Second, there were a fair number of "wannabe" music majors, especially each fall semester. Most changed majors after their first encounter with the world of music theory or the daily requirement of hours of practice alone in a tiny room. Last, and by far the majority in the orchestra, were non-music majors who just wanted to play for the love of the experience or the release it gave them from their other academic studies. These students ranged in ability from those with highly developed skills who could have majored successfully in music to those with the fledgling skills of the near beginner. Creating a curriculum for this diverse and fascinating group of students each semester was something akin to trying to teach simultaneously both differential equations and multiplication tables, or *King Lear* and *The Cat in the Hat*.

However, the challenges I faced in working with such an orchestra were not all that surprising, as many of the issues to be dealt with were reminiscent of those I had faced while teaching at Provo High School. Most public school music teachers deal with such challenges daily. This time, however, the disparity in student abilities was wider, and the stakes were greater, for we operated in a collegiate climate overseen by a national accrediting organization.

My basic teaching strategy to resolve the problem had begun to develop when I taught at Provo High School. I certainly did not want the strongest players to drop out of orchestra because of boredom at the lack of an adequate musical challenge. On the other hand, if students at the other end of the spectrum found the music consistently beyond their abilities, I could not expect them to continue the class either. Somehow, I needed to find a way to make the experience both challenging and rewarding to everyone involved. What eventually evolved as the rule for my classes, then and now, follows: In a concert, play as many notes right as you can, and no notes wrong.

The musical concept is really very simple. Any note played out of tune, at the wrong time, or with the wrong rhythm or articulation sounds like a mistake because it is a mistake. Audiences, as well as players themselves, do not come to concerts to hear mistakes. On the other hand, a note or run of notes not played at all makes no sound and offends no one's ears. Such, therefore, became the rule for concerts.

Daily rehearsals, however, are all about making mistakes. Make them loud. Make them grand. If you are going to make a mistake, make it noticeable. Only by finding out what you cannot do during rehearsals can you then figure out how to simplify the part and adapt it to your particular skill level for the concert. Thus, when I tested students individually prior to each concert, I expected not to hear every note perfectly performed as written by the composer; instead, when needed, I listened for the simplified version the students had worked out for themselves.

As a technique for teaching music, the system seems to have worked well over the years. As the overall ability level of the Symphony Orchestra improved, the number who simplified parts became fewer and fewer. Some fifteen years ago the orchestra had grown so large that it became an audition-only group. Some disparity still existed between strongest and weakest players, but the gap was drastically narrowed. As the overall difficulty of our repertoire increased, we still maintained the rule: Play as many notes right as you can, and no notes wrong.

Nearly two years ago, after twenty-four years of directing the Symphony Orchestra, I decided it was time to step aside and turn the baton over to one of my younger colleagues. Over the nearly quarter-century that I directed this orchestra, our group of instrumental faculty had grown from four to thirteen. The Symphony Orchestra now consisted primarily of music majors and a handful of very talented "could-be" music majors who chose to remain in the world of the true amateur, playing only for the love of the art. It had been quite some time since I needed to teach the venerable rule to play as many notes right as you can and no wrong notes. Yet at this time a former student, participating in a Symphony Orchestra alumni reunion, finally opened my eyes to the broader application of

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what I had always considered a survival technique for teachers in my situation. As she makes the point more eloquently than I can, allow me to quote directly from her letter:

Dear Dr. Call,

My name is Susan [not her real name]. I played viola in the orchestra from the fall of 1987 to the spring of 1989. My family and I attended the alumni Halloween concert last Saturday and enjoyed it immensely. I have often told my husband and children about the fun we had in orchestra. My husband always thought I was exaggerating. After the concert, he said, "OK, you were right."

After Ricks I went to Weber State University and received my teaching certificate, taught 7th, 8th, and 9th grade English...[and] met my husband.... Our family has had some trials on this earth that I never would have wished for.... But I have learned and grown more than I ever imagined as well. I suppose that is the Lord's plan, isn't it? Give us very difficult trials so we grow....

[As] I said, I played the viola. I was never very good. I was always last stand, my entire playing career. But I loved the music and I played for me. That was what was important to me. But I am also somewhat of a pleaser, I guess you would say. I hated not doing what everyone told me to do. Ever since I started, I was always told I had to play all the notes perfect. I never could do that, and so therefore, was a huge disappointment (in my eyes) to everyone. As we were preparing for one of our Halloween concerts, we were having a viola sectional [rehearsal]. We were working on "Ride of the Valkyries." I was astonished when you told us we didn't have to play all of the notes. We could pick the ones we wanted to play. But those notes that we did choose to play needed to be perfect. I even asked if I only chose eight of the 32, I think it was, that would be all right? You told me I could choose four of them if I wanted, just make those four perfect.

For the first time, I realized I didn't have to do everything. Now as my own children are learning how to play instruments, and struggling with it, I share that story with them....

As I was driving up to the concert, I spent a lot of time thinking and reflecting. I came to the concert straight from the funeral of my grandmother, so I was in a pensive mood. I realized that the lesson you had taught me, I had unconsciously applied to my life. When things get terribly overwhelming, I think, "I don't have to do all this. What two things (or one, three, whatever) are the most important?" I focus on those things and make sure they are done well. I have found that if I do that, more times than not, I can fit everything else in as well, and it is not so overwhelming....

I know you were talking about music, but it carried so much further in my life. I have learned that I am OK, even when I am not pleasing everyone. I wish some people could accept that as well, but I can only change me, not them.

What a powerful lesson about life my former student taught me. I have thought and pondered and reread her letter in the two years since receiving it.

We do believe in a theology that not only teaches, but also emphasizes the Savior's own words, "Be ye therefore perfect" (Matthew 5:48; 3 Nephi 12:48). How many times have Susan's words, describing her feelings about playing all the notes, been my feelings about this spiritual command? "I never could do that, and so therefore, was a huge disappointment (in my eyes) to everyone." Unfortunately, too many well-intentioned priesthood leadership talks or Relief Society homemaking lessons, designed to encourage us (and even at times, perhaps, shame us) into fulfilling some responsibility better, have only served to compound overwhelming feelings of inadequacy that many may already be feeling.

Perhaps every time we preach about doing more, each time we encourage ourselves or others to be more of whatever, every time we reference becoming perfect, we should also be required to include the Lord's words about a man not running "faster than he has strength" or laboring "more than he has means" (Mosiah 4:27; Doctrine and Covenants 10:4).

Of all the life lessons the pursuit of my craft has taught me, I think this is the most salient and profound. With just a few more hours of practice, I could play that phrase even more beautifully. With just a few more hours of practice, I could play that run a little cleaner. With just a few more hours of practice, my tone could be even deeper and richer. However, there are only so many hours in each day, and life is about so much more than notes on a page.

As an imperfect child of God (as well as an imperfect and struggling musician) who longs daily to achieve some kind of perfection in a world of challenges, I take great comfort in President Hinckley's reassuring words:

It isn't as bad as you sometimes think it is.
It all works out. Don't worry.
I say that to myself every morning. It will all work out.
If you do your best, it will all work out.
Put your trust in God, and move forward
With faith and confidence in the future.⁴

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So these are just four of the many lessons I have learned thus far—some of the ways the pursuit of my musical craft has affected my theology. My hope at this point in my own progress is to continue to be taught even more about my God and his plan for me as I continue to pursue my art and my craft. As in the past, I suspect that many of my greatest future teachers will continue to be the amazingly talented and wonderfully devoted disciple-students with whom I am blessed to work. ☺

NOTES

- 1 *NASM 2009-2010 Handbook* (2008): 100.
- 2 Dallin H. Oaks, “Good, Better, Best,” *Ensign*, November 2007, 104–8.
- 3 See Spencer W. Kimball, “The Gospel Vision of the Arts,” *Ensign*, July 1977, 3. (Adapted from “Education for Eternity,” an address to the Brigham Young University faculty and staff in *Speeches of the Year*, 1967–68, 12–19.)
- 4 Gordon B. Hinckley, Jordan Utah South Regional Conference, Priesthood Session, 1 March 1997, emphasis and paragraph breaks added. Retrieved at http://www.lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?hideNav=1&locale=o&sourceId=6b2ea1615acoco1oVgnVCM1000004d82620a____&vgnextoid=2354fccf2b7db01oVgnVCM1000004d82620aRCRD.