

WHY NOT UNISON SINGING?

A Presentation by Dr. Robert Cundick
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I appreciate the opportunity to address this workshop audience today. You don't represent a typical LDS congregation, as you are all dedicated church musicians, mostly women, including, perhaps, some not of my faith. Never-the-less I ask you to consider what I have to say as I speak of my present circumstances and heart-felt desire to be of service in promoting improved worship through music in LDS as well as other congregations.

The Case for Unison Singing

In primitive Christianity, as well as in secular music of that period, monody (i.e. melody only) was the universal norm. Polyphony and Harmony appeared centuries later and, in many ways, are inter-related (i.e. combined, they are heard both vertically and horizontally). Monody, in the form of unison singing, has persisted as the norm for Christian congregational singing to this very day. Harmony is added in the form of solid organ accompaniment. The result is a powerful and emotionally stirring, active participation in worship by the entire united congregation.

This is impossible if each member of the congregation sings parts at will independently, or worse still, doesn't sing at all. Heard from the pulpit, the usual result is a musical disaster with a few dominant solo voices singing parts at random with no balance, plus a generally somewhat apathetic majority wandering somewhere in between. Our chapel acoustical design, lacking in essential musical resonance, is no help. What can be done to change this lamentable status quo?

Obviously the answer lies in encouraging unison singing by the entire congregation. For altos and basses to participate effectively, the highest note of the melody must be in their comfortable range. I feel that middle C is a practical upward melodic limit for the men, with the women singing an octave higher. The music as printed in the hymn book is accordingly transposed down, if needed, to achieve this result. Many newer electronic organs have transposing knobs to easily do so. For organists not comfortable with transposition, Don Cook and I prepared a number of standard hymns transposed to a suitable key. Moreover, the superfluous repeated notes in the lower voices have been eliminated, resulting in a true organ style accompaniment. They are available in either two or three stave format at www.organ.byu.edu (click general information, then on line reference). The entire hymnal is also available in all transpositions at lds.org/churchmusic, but watch out for accidentals in some transpositions, as the computer program will arbitrarily select spellings that obviously will need changing.

With priesthood approval and complete cooperation, unison singing is an optional approach for individual wards or branches. In fact, to instigate unison singing, I suggest that it be introduced in priesthood meeting. Start with a few familiar hymns. Repeat them in alternation for succeeding weeks until the hymn text for all verses is memorized and all brethren, including the Aaronic Priesthood, are singing with enthusiasm and conviction. Remind them that this is the very way the Savior and his apostles sang their hymns. The First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve still do so in their weekly temple meetings.

When the priesthood are converted, then introduce unison singing in Sacrament Meeting. Some will undoubtedly resist, especially experienced sopranos and tenors. Remind them that "united we stand, divided we fall". While their low notes are somewhat soft and uncomfortable, the higher notes will emerge with strength. The reverse is true for the altos and basses. The result will be a balanced unison, powerful and inspirational sound. This assumes, of course, that a competent conductor and well prepared organist are present. If piano, rather than organ is used, one might consider 4-hand accompaniment with soprano and bass octave doubling. I suggest that Relief Society continue as usual, with soprano, alto and even tenor (for low voices who can read bass clef).

For those who are frustrated because of lack of part singing under such a general format, the solution is found in a continuing, competent ward choir. Here is a rewarding outlet in truly meaningful service for dedicated singers.

For many years highly trained musicians throughout the Church have advocated unison singing, but have been "prophets in the wilderness". I have personally been such an advocate. I spearheaded two separate pilot multi-stake trials with mixed results ranging from enthusiasm to apathy and even antagonism. As a couplet I wrote while riding on a train to Hyde Park Chapel in London, England, many years ago reads: "The status quo, I know, is the hardest row to hoe." Fifteen years after leaving Temple Square, I have continued to "fight the good fight with all my might" for every praiseworthy musical cause or musician from my vantage points in the trenches, so to speak. Now just three months

short of my 80th birthday, I am presently serving as organist for our ward choir under my wife's baton. Our choir sings for Sacrament Meetings twice each month. I play the entire service on these Sundays.

While we were both colleagues at Temple Square, my long time dear friend, John Longhurst, and I composed the Hymnal Plus series. They are heaven-sent at the present time. They were originally composed for the Tabernacle Choir for on-the-spot usage to permit quick learning and subsequent broadcast that same morning. With such minimal effort and maximum result, my wife and I have made quite a splash in our Sacrament Meetings by using them as our basic choir repertoire during the past few weeks since we were called to serve.

I was originally both frustrated and annoyed by the noisy hubbub preceding the officiating Bishopric member's appearance at the pulpit microphone to begin the meeting. With our Bishop's strong support, we are using a novel approach to counteract this lack of proper reverence. Our tiny Reuter pipe organ has but five unified ranks: Diapason 8 ft. with 16 and 4 ft. extensions, Gedeckt 8 ft. with 16, 4 and 2 2/3 extensions, Salicional 8 ft. with 4 ft. extension, plus two other ranks of questionable priority---namely an 8 ft. Celeste T.C. with 4 ft. extension and a very soft Dulciana 8 ft. with 4 ft. extensions. No couplers, no combination action, all enclosed in a single expression chamber with an always unpredictable abrupt and jerky swell shade opening. As a final, completely non-essential touch, a chromatic nineteen tube set of chimes is included. What a come-down from those wonderful instruments at Temple Square, Hyde Park Chapel and the Jerusalem Center! But by playing this very limited instrument on its own terms, with careful registration and practice I have been able to play both hymns and choir accompaniments with confidence and musicality.

The solution to the prelude reverence problem came from a completely unexpected source: the rarely used organ chimes!

Remembering the "Y" carillon sounding of the first phrase of Come, Come Ye Saints on the hour with its inevitable warm rush of heartfelt religiously centered feelings, I play that same phrase expressively on the fully amplified chimes. The congregation can glance at their Sacrament Meeting programs where, in bold type, is printed: "Come, Come Ye Saints, we now will worship God, quietly, reverently". I then play an appropriate, brief, subdued, prelude, usually hymn based, of five minutes maximum length. I time it to conclude at the printed hour for commencement of the service. The member of the Bishopric who is conducting has just arisen and then greets the congregation.

This permits the congregation to engage in the subdued greetings and demonstration of friendship traditionally heard as they enter the chapel prior to the service. The organ music thus serves as a musical Call to Worship. In the absence of chimes I would use a single 8 ft. Diapason to play the signature hymn phrase---loud enough to be clearly heard above the congregation conversation, but not overbearing.

You are all aware of the singular power of music in worship. Hymn singing allows each member of the congregation, both young and old, to audibly participate and contribute to the spirituality of the service. I firmly believe that robust, unison singing with solid, accurate accompaniment and conducting is the best and time-honored way to "make the air with music ring, shout praises to our God and King".

I invite and challenge each of you to obtain Priesthood approval so as to join me and others to promote effective unison singing wherever and whenever you can.

Demonstration of Unison Singing Through Audience Participation

Before proceeding further, are there any quick questions about anything I have said thus far? Either Don or I or both will respond, as he, too, is a strong advocate of unison singing, as are many others.

(Brief questions and response.)

We'll begin by singing Now Let Us Rejoice (HB 3) which is one of our standard "war-horse" hymns sung during most every General Conference. Sing all three verses in unison with conviction and enthusiasm. As you sing, thrill to the deep meaning of this wonderful text by William W. Phelps. I'll let Don set the tempo. The hymnal suggests a range of 100 to 120 beats per minute. He'll play at his most comfortable speed. Playing with ease and confidence, the audience should sing in like manner. My job as conductor is to indicate verse entrances and conclusions, with proper cues, cut-offs and beat pattern in an appropriate manner.

(Sing HB 3)

Don used several performance devices frequently used by organists for unison hymn singing accompaniment. The first

was changing the organ registration for each verse. In this case he added stops for and during each verse to achieve a stirring climax at the end of the third verse. He altered the "Chinese water torture" incessant quarter note repeated rhythm of the lower voices to an effective dance-like long-short note pattern. Finally he used some modest free harmonization for the third verse. Used tastefully and sparingly, Don added a fresh and natural alteration to the usual harmony. Organists must use such a device with great care lest the congregation center on the organist rather than on the hymn itself. Parenthetically, for the past few years the Tabernacle Choir has sung all congregational hymns at General Conference in unison with transposition by the organist down to a comfortable lower key if needed. The results have been very rewarding.

Now let's try a hymn with a particularly pertinent title: Now We'll Sing with One Accord, one accord meaning unison, of course, for today's purpose. We'll sing the first verse in unison as printed in the hymnal no. 25.

(Sing HB 25, verse 1)

Now we will sing again in a more comfortable transposed lower key. Again note the elimination of unnecessary repeated notes in the lower parts of the organ accompaniment. This also focuses attention on the unison melody. We will really sing, listen and feel with one accord.

(Sing HB 25, all 4 verses)

Sweet Hour of Prayer, HB 143, would not need transposition at first glance. A step lower, however, is more comfortable for altos and basses. This is especially noticeable at the fermata where a prolonged B flat is sung without any strain. Don will also solo the melody and add a 16 ft. stop to erasure the men. Alternately he could play the melody with 8 and 4 ft. stops and 8ve lower. The alto and tenor are played by the left hand and the bass by the pedals.

(sing HB 142, both verses)

For the Strength of the Hills was originally written for choir, rather than congregation probably in F or even G major. Its wide octave and a fourth melodic range cries for unison singing when sung by congregations. In fact, it begins with a unison motif. Transposition makes the highest note possible for all singers. The basses and altos will give solid support for the beginning low note. Don will play an organ adaptation for unison singing, avoiding pedal pyrotechnics, in the same style as the chorus of True to the Faith, HB 254.

(Sing HB 35, all four verses)

The hymnal was designed for four part performance in most instances. This means that the lowest bass note practical was the determining factor for deciding the correct key. Unison singing requires the reverse (i.e. the highest soprano note is the determining factor).

For a change in mood, lets now sing The Lord my Pasture Will Prepare, HB 109. Its melodic range of a 10th requires transposition down. A flat would make the basses and altos happy, but since the high-test note appears only once we'll compromise B flat with D as the highest note.

(Sing HB 109, both verses)

Don and I will briefly respond to any questions before singing our final hymn, Sing We Now at Parting, HB 196. I've discussed a practical approach to the instigation of unison singing in your stewardship area of influence. I now hand the baton to you. Run ahead with all your might and then pass it on to other similarly dedicated musician team-mates.

(Sing HB 196, all verses)