MORMON TABERNACLE CHOIR

The Mormon Tabernacle Choir originated in mid-nineteenth-century Salt Lake City. It consists of 300-plus voices carefully selected from many volunteers. Its members give of their time and talents freely in practices and performances, serving without pay. Probably best known for its weekly radio and TV program of inspirational music and messages, "Music and the Spoken Word," the choir has performed and recorded extensively. It performs regularly in the Tabernacle on Temple Square and provides music at all general conferences of the Church.

The origins of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir may be found in the desire and commitment of early converts to include appropriate music in both sacred and secular events (see MUSIC). The process of collecting hymns for instruction and worship began only four months after the Church was organized in 1830 (see HYMNS AND HYMNODY), and a choir was organized as early as 1836 for the dedication of the Kirtland Temple.

As the Latter-day Saints moved west, President Brigham Young included musicians among members even of the advance parties. Consequently, a small choir first sang for a conference in the Salt Lake Valley on August 22, 1847, twenty-nine days after the first party arrived.

Early choirs in the Old Tabernacle (built in 1851) and in the present Tabernacle (completed in 1867) were small and undisciplined by later standards. With the appointment of George Careless as conductor in 1869, the Tabernacle Choir began to flourish. Careless assembled the first large choir, a total of 304 singers, by adding smaller groups from other areas to the eighty-five singers in the Salt Lake Tabernacle Choir for a general conference performance on October 8, 1873. The vision of a choral ensemble to match the size of the Tabernacle was thus born. Early conductors who had prepared the way for Careless included John Parry (1849–1854), Stephen Goddard (1854–1856), James Smithies (1856–1862), Charles John Thomas (1862–1865), and Robert Sands (1865–1869).


During his tenure, Evan Stephens increased the size of the choir from about 125 to more than 300, making it the leading musical organization of Salt Lake City. To accommodate this larger size, the choir area of the Tabernacle was redesigned to create the present semicircular tiered seating. Stephens also took the choir to Chicago in 1893 on its first tour out of the state, beginning its now traditional role of emissary for the Church and the region.

Anthony C. Lund brought solid vocal training and a European choral sound to the choir. He excelled in music that required control and subtlety. J. Spencer Cornwall labored to raise the standards of the choir, to improve its sound as an ensemble, and to increase its repertoire from little more than one hundred pieces to almost a thousand. Under his direction the choir was active as a concert organization and released its first long-playing recording, in 1949. Richard P. Condie accelerated the recording activities of the choir and greatly increased its touring schedule. He produced what has been described as "the Tabernacle Choir sound," a large, romantic choral tone, heavy with feeling. Jerold D. Ottley has refined and shaped the traditional tone of the choir into a more flexible, precise, and energetic sound, one capable of expressing the subtleties of the finest choral literature.

Beginning with the installation of the first pipe organ in the Tabernacle in 1867 (see TABERNACLE ORGAN), organists have been appointed to assist the choir. Among the finest musicians in the Church, they have also performed recitals, played for church and civic meetings, and composed music (see MUSICIANS).
The choir has profoundly affected music throughout the Church. Its consistently high artistic standard, frequent use of hymns and hymn arrangements, and exemplary service through music continue to inspire, instruct, and encourage Church musicians and the members they serve.

The choir rehearses for two hours every Thursday evening in preparation for its weekly broadcasts and uses Tuesday evenings as needed to prepare for recording sessions, concerts, tours, and general conferences of the Church. A number of choir members have university degrees in music, and many others are professionally trained. All are competent musicians. They include men and women from many walks of life.

The choir has released more than 130 recordings and several films and videotapes. Five of its recordings have achieved “gold record” status. Most popular has been a 1959 release of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” with the Philadelphia Orchestra, for which the choir received a Grammy Award.

Many notable personalities, soloists, and conductors have appeared with the choir, including Eugene Ormandy, Jerome Hines, Sherrill Milnes, Marilyn Horne, and Maurice Abravanel.

The choir’s first major concert tour culminated in a performance at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Subsequent domestic tours have included performances in thirty-two states and the District of Columbia. Tours outside the United States have included Canada, Australia, and sixteen nations in Europe, Asia, South and Central America, the South Pacific, and Scandinavia. The choir has appeared at thirteen world’s fairs and expositions, performed at the inauguration of
four U.S. presidents, and sung for numerous worldwide telecasts and special events. In his remarks during a broadcast marking the completion of sixty years of weekly broadcasts, U.S. President George Bush called the choir “one of America’s greatest treasures.” It has become an American institution.

[See also Mormon Tabernacle Choir Broadcast (“The Spoken Word”).]

BIBLIOGRAPHY


K. NEWELL DAYLEY

MORMON TABERNACLE CHOIR BROADCAST (“THE SPOKEN WORD”)

The Mormon Tabernacle Choir Broadcast is the traditional Sunday broadcast of the MORMON TABERNACLE CHOIR. It originates in the SALT LAKE TABERNACLE and is open to the public. Begun in 1929, this weekly performance has become the longest continuously presented nationwide network broadcast in American radio history.

During World War II, the choir broadcasts were aired extensively over Armed Forces Radio Network in Europe and the Far East. Thereafter, local stations extended the broadcast into the Pacific Islands, Australia, and South America. The choir made its television debut in 1962, and the weekly broadcast was relayed to over eight hundred radio and television stations worldwide.

With the sacred hymns and choral works, backed by the TABERNACLE ORGAN, a brief message, the “Spoken Word,” is given each Sunday. For forty-one years the voice and message were those of Richard L. Evans, who during that period was called to be a seventy, then a member of the QUORUM OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES. His messages and delivery attempted to capsulize—usually in less than two minutes—universal principles related to character, human relationships, and the conduct of life. In the spirit of bridge-building, he aimed at both timely and timeless insights. His undergirding message was that the differences that separate people are not nearly as great as the factors that unite them. Selected Spoken Word messages ran in a weekly syndicated newspaper column circulated nationally and were later published in a series of books. Over two thousand such messages were given before his death in 1971.

Through thousands of broadcasts the opening hymn has remained “Gently Raise the Sacred Strain,” and the closing one, “As the Dew from Heaven Distilling,” and the signoff phrase is “May peace be with you, this day and always.”

[See also Mormon Tabernacle Choir; Tabernacle Organ.]

PAUL H. EVANS

MORMON YOUTH SYMPHONY AND CHORUS

The Mormon Youth Symphony and Chorus (often abbreviated MYSC) is an officially sponsored musical organization of the Church. It was organized in 1969 with a primary commission to promote a