PERSPECTIVE

How Beautiful Upon the Mountains
DALLIN HANSEN

Purpose of Art Music
For most in our society, entertainment has become art’s utilitarian purpose. Although there is nothing inherently bad or harmful in viewing art as entertainment, great art—art crafted with depth, complexity, and meaning—compels us to ponder, to question, perhaps to struggle, to look at the world differently, to become something better. Music is a powerful form of art by which meaningful human change can flourish. In response to a compliment about the “noble entertainment” of his oratorio Messiah, George Frederic Handel said, “I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wish to make them better.”

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2014 Sacred Music Project
The music for this project was composed by Daniel Gawthrop, well known as a choral and organ composer. The text, taken from the book of Mosiah, highlights the teachings of Abinadi concerning the mission and Atonement of the Savior. The title text comes from Abinadi quoting Isaiah, whose writings are so naturally expressed in music for their doctrinal, poetic power. Gawthrop set the “mountains” phrase several times in the course of the oratorio, interspersed with other verses from Abinadi’s teachings.

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Production Process
The creative process began with crafting the text. Jane Griner, the librettist and Brother Gawthrop’s wife, compiled and refined the scriptural text, a process that took about a year. The music was first created and notated in a piano score, a simple format indicating solo and choral parts over a harmonic accompaniment. The piano score represents the bulk of the composer’s creative output. After orchestrating the score, Brother Gawthrop coordinated with me, the conductor. I contributed bowings, articulations, and other small changes to help clarify his intent to the student musicians.

A few weeks before the premier of the work, the student ensembles began rehearsing separately. The Gawthrops attended the first combined rehearsal, and spoke to the students about their experience with the text and writing the music. This helped immensely in unifying the group in purpose and spirit.

Performances and Impact
Minor adjustments and additions to the score were made right up to the time of the first performance in
Twin Falls, Idaho on June 25, 2014. How Beautiful Upon the Mountains was performed the following week in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, and then in our “home” venue of the BYU-Idaho Center. Each venue had its strengths and challenges, and although the performances were not perfect, they were excellent, and were given and received in the right spirit. The students were professional in their work ethic and attitude, and the response from the audiences was overwhelmingly positive.

A particular highlight was observing the enthusiastic response of Elder L. Tom Perry of the Twelve as he stood and applauded in the tabernacle. We received meaningful feedback from audience members, not only about the quality of the presentation but how the work had impacted them personally. Brother Alldredge, a former mission president who was then serving as President of the Salt Lake Temple, was visibly touched during the performance. He later observed:

“[How Beautiful Upon the Mountains] is truly inspired. Listening to the performance in the Tabernacle transported us to a different sphere where we could contemplate that which is truly important, including the purposes for the creation of the earth and the amazing role of the Messiah. The feeling that came was very sacred—a love for the Savior and a longing to be a part of the future scenes that are yet to be enacted. Through our recent involvement in the temple, we related to the beautiful mountains of the Lord’s houses which help you to appreciate the place of the Savior.”

For the first time in the history of the Sacred Music Series, the 2014 project was presented beyond the performance venue via internet streaming. Hundreds who would not otherwise be able to participate, including family and friends, BYU-I alumni, and others saw and heard the event unfold in real time. Chris, a former student and SMS participant, wrote:

“Thank you for the beautiful performance from last night. We were thrilled to be able to watch the live performance all the way out here in our Virginia living room. It was my daughter’s first introduction to the Sacred Music program and hopefully she will develop the same love and feelings for many of these oratorios as I have. . . . It is a rare opportunity to see new [works] commissioned and I’ve witnessed the effort it takes to succeed. . . .

My dream is to perhaps see one of my own children performing the oratorio someday. I know the testimonies and sacred experience of the work and remember fondly my own involvement.”

A Poignant Connection

Conducting How Beautiful Upon the Mountains was a singular privilege for me, but not my first experience with the BYU-Idaho Sacred Music Series. As a high school student growing up in Rexburg, I attended the premier performance of Crawford Gates’ Visions of Eternity, and the event had a profound effect upon my young life. I was impressed not only by the quality of the musical product, but could sense a deep sincerity, expression, and spirit of
consecration among the composer, soloists, conductor, and student musicians. To this day, I cannot read Doctrine and Covenants section 76 without hearing beautiful melodies and powerful musical moments retained in my memory. This work had a profound effect on my young life, both musically and spiritually.

After graduating from high school, I studied music at Ricks College. Among my most treasured experiences was participating in another project in the series, Merrill Jensen’s, *Come Unto Christ*, this time as the concertmaster of the Ricks College Symphony Orchestra. With intense effort, including hours of rehearsal, I was changed by the testimony of Book of Mormon prophets, particularly the conversion story of Alma the Younger. Being “inside” the music had given me a certain intimacy with the feelings and experiences of these men coming to Christ. The message and language of the music had changed me for the better.

Contemplating my experience as the conductor of the 2014 project, there were many powerful moments that touched my heart and opened my mind, some too sacred to share. However, I was touched in each performance by these words:

> When his soul has been made an offering for sin he shall see his seed. And who shall be his seed?

> Whosoever has heard the words of the prophets, all those who have hearkened unto their words and believed that the Lord would redeem his people and have looked forward to that day, these are his seed, they are the heirs of the kingdom of God. These are they whose sins he has borne; these are they for whom he has died to redeem them from their transgressions.

> Through the musical setting of this text, I was reminded of the miracle of becoming sons and daughters of Christ through His Atonement—to know that it is real and available now. In performance, the following words became very real and personal: “*these* are his seed . . . *these* are they whose sins he has borne; *these* are they for whom he has died . . .” (emphasis added)—“these” referring to not only the audience members, or potentially all of God’s children who choose to accept the Savior, but also *these* amazing students whose testimonies were being carried with power through this work of art. For me, this was a moment of unity, love, doctrinal power, and meaningful change. *These* are his seed! 🎶

REFERENCES
4. Libretto text taken from Mosiah 15:10-13. The musical setting can be found in movements 10 and 11 of How Beautiful Upon the Mountains by Daniel Gawthrop.

Video of How Beautiful Upon the Mountains is available at “https://video.byui.edu/media/How+Beautiful+Upon+the+Mountains/0_1g0gw7dw” or use the QR code to locate this work using your mobile device.