

The Power of Simple Music

by Janice Kapp Perry; originally posted in [Meridian Magazine](#) and reprinted with permission

I grew up loving music. My home was filled with it. My grandpa had me convinced at age 3 that every meadowlark was singing “Jani is a pretty little girl,” and my grandmother often sang charming little folk songs for me.

My parents played in a dance band for 25 years — wonderful, toe-tapping music that everyone loved. Mother wrote and produced musicals for our church and community and taught her children to play the piano and enjoy singing. Music always felt good to me!

When Dad came in from his farm work each evening, he sat back in his easy chair and asked Mother to play for him. As she played her swing music from the dance band or hymns or Primary songs, I had a peaceful feeling that all was well in our home.

Very early in life I recognized that simple music could cause a powerful stirring inside of me, and that combining a sacred gospel truth with an appealing melody was a most palatable way to learn about the gospel.

The Power of Simple Music

I appreciate and respect great composers and their works and have been generously exposed to them through my years in BYU choruses, bands, and orchestras and in my years as a member of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Nevertheless, I want to offer one sincere voice in praise of simplicity and the idea that sometimes in music, less can be more.

Years ago a speaker at the Workshop on Church Music, Minnie Hodapp, said, “I’m not in rebellion against the fine musicians. But as we admire orchids and roses, we also love sunflowers, asters, and wayside offerings.” ¹

Elder Packer has said:

Some of our most gifted people struggle to produce a work of art, hoping it will be described by the world as a masterpiece! Monumental! Epic! When in truth the simple *I Am a Child of God* has moved and will move more souls to salvation than would such a work were they to succeed. ²

The power of music seems to defy description, but Elder Packer further adds:

We are able to feel and learn very quickly through music ... some spiritual things that we would otherwise learn very slowly. ³

I had my formal training in music at BYU in the late 1950s. Then during the next twenty years I used that training only in our home with our own children and in church callings. As I was approaching forty, our bishop asked me to write original music for a ward roadshow. I soon found that I loved writing and wanted to continue.

I gave serious thought to what kind of music I wanted to write. I realized that very simple music had moved me most through my life — such songs as *I Am a Child of God* and *When He Comes Again* — music that looks so simple on the page but is so profound in its meaning. I set my heart on adding to this simple music and have found the task very fulfilling.

A Shared Hymn

I love to hear stories about how a hymn or children's song has affected someone's life for good. A few years ago, in a telephone conversation about music with my brother Jack, he said, "Don't you love the hymns!" Then he related the following experience.

Years ago he had gone fishing in the high Uintahs with a friend who had been inactive in the Church for years. Sitting in absolute silence by a lake with their lines cast in, the inactive friend said, "You know, I ought to do better in the Church. I remember one hymn from my childhood — something about earth being accountable for Joseph Smith's death."

Jack asked, "Do you mean *Praise to the Man*?"

"Yes, that's it — do you know it?"

"Yes, I do. I know all four verses."

"Will you sing it for me?"

Then he listened as Jack sang all four verses of that beloved hymn. As the song ended, the friend turned his face away with tears in his eyes. Jack said, "The best part is that it's all true."

"Yes, it probably is," replied his friend.

After the fishing trip, they didn't see each other for two years, but their reunion was a joyful one as the friend had come back into full activity after the fishing trip. In that setting, and at the right time, the hymn had great power.

This same brother recently returned from a church history tour. He was appointed as music director for the tour, and on the last day they decided to sing all the Primary songs they remembered from their childhood. This group of Saints, mostly in their fifties and sixties, sang on for more than 45 minutes, remembering all the words from forty or fifty years ago. Some commented that much of their testimony was based on simple songs, such as *Jesus Once Was a Little Child*, *Oh Hush Thee*, *My Baby*, and *Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam*.

Simple Songs and Hymns Invite the Spirit

In 1999, I enjoyed a three-week European tour with the Tabernacle Choir, which performed some great musical literature in the finest opera halls in Europe. I always felt we saved the best for last when we sang *I Am a Child of God* as an encore.

The non-member tenor soloist who traveled with the choir was overheard to say one evening that he felt we reached the audience in a special way when we sang this simple song in their language — he saw it in their countenances and felt it in their response. During our final concert in Lisbon, my husband stood in the highest balcony observing the concert. He noticed a girl and her grandmother enjoying the whole concert, but during the encore, as *I Am a Child of God* was sung in their Portuguese tongue, they hugged each other and wept openly.

I often think about my Tabernacle Choir experience and of all the grand and glorious music we

performed in some of the most famous venues in the world. I will never forget those thrilling moments. But in my heart I treasure as much or more a few experiences where the music was very simple but the emotion profound:

Toward the end of President Hunter's life, when his health was rapidly failing, the choir stayed after one rehearsal to record a song to cheer him. I was so moved by the hymn in this circumstance that I had difficulty singing:

We ever pray for thee, our prophet dear,
That God will give to thee, comfort and cheer.
As the advancing years furrow thy brow,
Still may the light within shine bright as now.

Another favorite heart-touching day with the choir came after a broadcast of glorious Christmas music. A little girl came up to the choir loft with her mother, brought to Salt Lake City by the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Her wish was to hear the Tabernacle Choir in person. Many choir members choked back tears as we sang for her the simple yet profound Christmas hymn, *Silent night, holy night, All is calm, all is bright*.

Drawing Strength From a Primary Song

Just a few days after the choir returned from Europe, my husband and I were traveling north at the mouth of Provo Canyon, and he was beginning to turn left while adjusting his visor and did not see a car coming toward us out of the canyon at high speed. I cried out, but it was too late. We hit nearly head on, and then we had a second impact against a cement wall.

Miraculously, neither my husband nor the other driver was seriously injured, though both cars were badly mangled. The seat belts and airbags had saved our lives but the airbag had also injured my neck badly. By the time I was transported to the hospital, in a sitting position to alleviate the pain, my neck was swollen from internal bleeding and quite painful.

Before doctors could proceed with treatment, they needed a CAT scan to see whether my neck was broken — a test that would require me to lie flat and absolutely still for 30 minutes. That seemed impossible to me at the time. It was difficult for me to swallow or breathe or talk, and the pain was considerable. As they lowered me to a horizontal position for the test, I searched my mind and heart for something to hold onto emotionally, and in my moment of utter need the words to one of my own Primary songs came forcefully to my mind. I closed my eyes and thought of the words silently in my mind, over and over, for the duration of the test:

Pray, He is there.
Speak, He is listening.
You are His child,
His love now surrounds you.

Fortunately my neck was not fractured, and after surgery and recovery in the hospital and later at home, my recovery was complete. But I have always been grateful that the words of the song were there

in my mind to help me through a difficult situation.

That is the power of the hymns and children's songs and is one reason we want our children's minds and hearts to be filled with music that can come forward to comfort them, guide them, help them resist temptation, or bear testimony to them. I will feel completely fulfilled in my writing endeavors if, in a time of temptation, some child should have come to his mind the words, *I'm Trying to be Like Jesus*; or in times of teenaged trials a young woman should be comforted by the phrase, *I Walk By Faith*; or if, in times of family contention, the words *Love is Spoken Here* can help restore peace.

A Message to the Primary Children

I love this important message from the preface to the Children's Songbook:
Here is a book of songs especially for you. You can sing them just about anytime, anywhere. As you sing, you may feel good inside. The Holy Ghost gives you warm feelings to help you understand that the ... messages in the songs are true ...

You will remember more easily what you have learned when you sing about it. The melody of a song helps you remember the words and also brings the feeling of the song to your heart ... The good feelings the songs bring ... will help you to remember that you are children of God. ⁴

There is great power in the plain and simple songs, hymns and anthems of the Church.

Notes

¹ Minnie Hodapp, Church Music Workshop, Brigham Young University,

² Boyd K. Packer, *The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord*, Brigham Young University, 1976, p. 585.

³ Packer, p. 577.

⁴ *Children's Songbook*, Church of Jesus Christ of latter-day Saints, Preface, 1989, p. iii.