

MICHAEL HICKS. *Mormonism and Music: A History*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989. xiii; 243 pp. Index, illus. \$20.95.

Reviewed by James Welch, university organist and carillonneur at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Michael Hicks's *Mormonism and Music: A History* is a veritable feast of information on a subject about which many people are passionate. Plenty of meaty courses are served up; even the appetizer/preface is a full course in itself. Some tasty trivia clears the palate between courses, and the epilogue is a wonderfully tart dessert. This engaging book leaves one with a satisfied but not-too-full feeling.

Of course, I know that tastes in food are about as disparate as tastes in music, and some may take issue with certain points presented by the authors. The book goes beyond a simple recitation of historical facts, but it is precisely the author's bias and editorializing that make it such good reading. Hicks is unrestrained in his comments about many personalities, be they authors, composers, musicians, general authorities, or prophets. I hope all the quotations (some potentially but delightfully controversial) are given in context. They reconfirm the fact that music, because it is such a passionate and personal thing, always engenders strong feelings.

In the preface Hicks introduces his thesis with a discussion of the ironies involved in combining music and religion:

The asceticism at the heart of many religions implicitly calls their adherents to forswear music's pleasures. But music is so much a part of man's profoundest utterances that religion must rely on music's effects. (ix)

Any history of a religion and an art will be a history of both aesthetic triumphs and petty disputes. For while the joining of religion and art has often led mankind to the summit of his potential in each, both religion and art as institutions have maintained a fundamental enmity. This is doubtless because they make similar claims and demands. Both clamor for people's affection and allegiance. Both promise bliss (one in the next world, the other in this). Both claim to lead their adherents to a better state of existence. And both create disciples who commit themselves to peculiar notions of truth and orthodoxy. (x)

For me the crux of the book lies in the "three points of tension in the history of Mormonism and music" that Hicks identifies as the following: "the will to progress versus the will to conserve, the need to borrow from outsiders versus the need for self-reliance, and the love of the aesthetic versus the love of utility. The Book of Mormon

itself remarks that there ‘must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things’ [2 Ne. 2:11] and the musical life of Mormonism bears that out” (x). In each chapter covering a different period of the development of music in the Church, Hicks gives good examples of these conflicts.

Later in the book, Hicks summarizes the tension between art and music:

This then may be the essential conundrum for the Saints and their music as they push forward toward the Millennium: how to reconcile their thirst for progress with their fear of contamination. While the Saints once wondered how they could sing the Lord’s song in a strange land, they now wonder if they can sing a strange song in Zion. (229)

Hicks succeeds handily in weaving the topical and chronological approaches to his subject. More impressively he has provided a volume that is interesting to the general reader but is also detailed enough to be a reference work for the expert. In addition to being useful to Mormon scholars, the book will be valuable to students of American religion, since Hicks subtly includes a good deal of general church history and doctrine.

I would suggest that the reader study the preface rather carefully. After digesting it, skip to the epilogue (yes, dessert first!). Generally such a move would be considered cheating, but Hicks is not dealing with a dinner, or even a novel, so dessert will not spoil your appetite for the main course or the book’s ending. Instead, you will obtain a clearer picture of the direction Hicks is taking as he pulls together the book’s diverse themes. Hicks exposes everything from the loftiest texts to the most jangling doggerel; he finds the amusing, the inspired, and the petty in this musical history, but his final statement is like a convincing ending to a testimony given at fast meeting—even if we did wonder when the bearer first stood up just how orthodox and converted he was.

The book’s early chapters give us the least-known and perhaps the most impressive facts about music in any period of the Church. I am astounded that so much information from early Church times was actually recorded and preserved and that Hicks was able to find it. Obviously there was more to the pioneer spirit than just pushing handcarts across the plains. I gained a new appreciation for these early Saints who did not have their music handed to them as we do today. They had to create texts and tunes and see that hymnals were published despite the press of other matters—survival, for instance. Particularly, I am struck with the early members’ great fervor and spiritual zeal for church music. It

may well be that “while Mormonism would continue to produce new hymns, they would seldom achieve the vigor and intensity of the early hymns” (31).

Chapters 1 and 2, “The Genesis of Mormon Hymnody” and “The Early Hymnbooks,” give the setting for music in general at the time when the revelation was given to Emma to prepare a hymnal. It is fascinating to see the origin and metamorphosis of many of the hymn texts (see W. W. Phelps’s multitudinous “corrections,” for instance). Chapters 3 and 4, “Schooling the Tongue” and “Bands and Ballads,” give impressive information about the sheer amount and variety of music in the early days. Where did these people get the time to learn to play instruments? Where did they even *get* instruments? And if they could do oratorios in small rural communities, why can’t we do anything better than “roadshows” today?

Readers will be fascinated (and sometimes amused) by Hicks’s tracing of the Church’s reaction to changing tastes and styles. Chapter 5, “Going Forth in the Dance,” discusses dancing and emerging popular music, but the implications of the underlying social conflict are even more interesting. While the authorities “heatedly defended plural marriage and went into hiding to escape prosecution, they also allied themselves with non-Mormons in the national outrage against the waltz, mazurka, and polka” (85). Brigham Young knew that the railroad would bring both “progress and peril” (96) to the Saints, and even while he welcomed many musical elements from the outside world, his simultaneous attempts at retrenchment provide another example of the conflict between progress and tradition.

The chapters entitled “The Immigrant Professors” and “Homemade Music” lead us into “Modern Hymnody and the Church Music Committee,” which describes the hymnals of this century, including the newest hymnal from 1985. Chapter 9, “The Mormon Tabernacle Choir,” reveals that in its formative days this famous musical institution was hardly what it is now. It was marvelously human, even casual, and not very homogeneous. Somehow it is difficult to picture the director of the Tabernacle Choir with a discipline problem on his hands!

Hicks’s discussion of musical modernism in Chapter 10, “Mormon Classics,” starts to hit closer to home, for as students are trained away from “Mormondom’s parochial centers,” they are faced with reconciling the inherent conservatism of sacred music traditions with their religion’s yearning for progress. In this vein some space is given to such subjects as Elder Boyd K. Packer’s 1976 critique of “Mormon high culture” (184). This topic has been one of the hottest for Mormon artists to handle, but Hicks does so with

considerable tact. The final chapters, “From Rags to Rock” and “Noble Savages,” bring various controversies up to the minute. “Ironically,” according to Hicks, “the current tendencies toward anti-aestheticism have reinforced many church members’ inclination toward popular music” (184).

Since all Church members participate in music, the book has great relevance for everyone. The historical, factual parts of the book are fascinating and informative, and Hicks’s vocabulary is colorful (“the millennial glee of the Nauvoo Saints” [29]). Although the book is relatively short, the book’s details, quotations, and references qualify it as the most complete single-volume work of its kind. The discussion of the *place* of music in the life of Church members of different periods is most thought-provoking. Finally, the tone throughout seems to be objective; if I were not a member of the Church, I think I would trust Hicks’s information.

I give Hicks high marks for covering his subject, not only for the historical research (even though I could not begin to verify his sources, footnotes, and other references), but also for the way he treats the broader philosophical questions. This book is probably not one that Sunday School choristers will go to for trivia gems for use during hymn practice. It is, however, essential reading for anyone concerned with music and art in the Church. Highly recommended. And a twenty percent tip to Michael Hicks.