

MACK WILBERG discusses *Messiah*

The Mormon Tabernacle Choir has had a relationship with *Messiah* for many, many years. In fact, the Choir's first recording in 1910 in the Salt Lake Tabernacle included the famous "Hallelujah" chorus. Over the years the Choir has recorded various selections from *Messiah* as well as the entire oratorio. In 1959, the Choir's best-selling recording of *Messiah* received gold record recognition and it was later inducted into the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress. On March 4, 2016, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and Orchestra at Temple Square released a new recording of Handel's *Messiah*, edited and conducted by Dr. Mack Wilberg.

Why another edition of *Messiah*?

"In recent years, new insight about the Baroque period has emerged. As we prepared to present *Messiah* and make a new recording, we wanted it to reflect what we better understand today about Baroque performance practice, whether it be articulation, phrasing, dynamics, tempo, or the many other facets of this interesting topic.

"We recognized that we needed to create something special and unique. The question then became, 'How should we do it?' Simply adding more strings to Handel's original instrumentation did not seem like it would be completely satisfactory nor solve the challenge."

"We know that Handel tinkered with *Messiah* during his lifetime. As a result, we do not have a definitive version of *Messiah*. In fact, one may say that there are many ways of approaching and performing *Messiah*. In 1789, Mozart, one of our greatest composers, did an arrangement of *Messiah* adding woodwinds and brass to Handel's original instrumentation.

"We certainly know that in some of Handel's most recognizable music, whether it be *Water Music* or *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, he employed many woodwind and brass instruments to create spectacular effects. He also expanded the orchestrations of several of his operas and oratorios with winds and brass when funds and resources were available. So Mozart was justified in his approach in adding instruments to create a version for his own day and time.

"Throughout the nineteenth century, there were others who attempted to adapt Handel's orchestration in order to support what were gigantic performances of *Messiah*, popular in England at that time. One of the most successful versions was made in 1902 by the British theorist and composer, Ebenezer Prout. Simply put, Prout took Mozart's version and either added to it or altered it to bring it nearer to what Prout called 'Handel's original' intention, while still making a version for larger performing forces.

"In examining both Mozart's and Prout's version of *Messiah*, I came to the conclusion that neither totally fulfilled what we wanted to accomplish with this particular recording. So with some trepidation, I made the decision to make an edition of *Messiah*, based on Mozart's and Prout's versions while more closely adhering to our present understanding of Baroque performance practice."

What would Handel have done?

“While working on this, in the back of my mind was the question ‘What would Handel have done if he had had ensembles as large as the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and Orchestra at Temple Square?’

“Doing this, it required that I examine every note of the vocal and instrumental parts and make decisions as to what would accommodate a 360-voice choir and large orchestra and still reflect our present-day knowledge of Baroque performance practices. An issue on my mind was how to preserve the most intricate, chamber-like aspects of the choruses, even though they were being sung by a 360-voice chorus, and contrast them to those big, memorable declarations of such phrases as ‘Wonderful, Counsellor,’ or ‘By man came also the resurrection of the dead,’ or ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,’ or most famous of all, that single word ‘Hallelujah!’

“Smaller choruses can and do perform those delicate, difficult, and often fast passages with great aplomb, and yet it seemed that with much discipline and work our larger chorus might be able to do the same thing while taking advantage of our size to create an even greater range of color and dynamic. The orchestra seemed to be a very important partner in creating those effects. I also have to say that in examining every note of *Messiah*, I came to an even greater appreciation of the work and the genius of George Frideric Handel.”

Performing and recording *Messiah* in the Salt Lake Tabernacle

“We worked very diligently to try to capture the Baroque aesthetic, which is not easy with 360 voices spread in a large choir loft. In fact, the top row of the choir loft is almost a half a football field away from the conductor and orchestra.

“We dearly love our home here in the Tabernacle, but performing polyphonic music, brings distinct challenges. The biggest challenge is, of course, being rhythmically together as a chorus, let alone with the orchestra, and the famous, yet challenging, acoustics of the Tabernacle did not make this easy.

“When we practiced *Messiah* over a period of weeks and months, all practices are in the evening because we are a volunteer choir and orchestra and our members have various responsibilities during the daytime. Rehearsing, performing, and recording is hard work. It requires patience. It requires endurance. It requires energy that you sometimes don’t think you possess. There was one particular recording session that will remain for me a highlight. It was the evening that we recorded the final chorus of *Messiah*, ‘Worthy Is the Lamb That Was Slain,’ which, of course, ends with the glorious ‘Amen’ chorus. There was something magical, if you will, about that evening. Everyone was exceptionally unified. Everyone was feeling a wonderful spirit as we recorded that final chorus. That evening will remain with me as one of the most memorable experiences of my career.”

Mack Wilberg was appointed music director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir on March 28, 2008, having served as associate music director of the Choir since May 1999. Dr. Wilberg is responsible for all musical and creative aspects of the Choir and Orchestra at Temple Square in rehearsals, concerts, tours, and recordings, as well as the weekly broadcast of *Music and the Spoken Word*. He is a former professor of music at Brigham Young University, and is active as a composer, arranger, guest conductor, and clinician throughout the United States and abroad. Dr. Wilberg received his bachelor’s degree from Brigham Young University and his master’s and doctoral degrees from the University of Southern California.