

## TABERNACLE ORGANIST RICHARD ELLIOTT: MAKING THE “KING OF INSTRUMENTS” DANCE

Richard Elliott took an unconventional path to becoming the principal organist for The Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square. His two musical passions were discordant opposites. On Saturday nights he wore glittery outfits and played keyboard in a rock group. The next morning, he slid onto the organ bench in the local Lutheran church and played hymns for the service.

As this budding performer straddled the spectrum of musical expression, the contrast allowed him to learn about himself as a musician. He began to feel that his music shone most brilliantly when it was coupled with spirituality. “Popular music can help people escape their problems momentarily,” he mused, “but the spiritual hymns seem to do something more—they help people to face up and conquer their problems.” This epiphany set a foundation for the rest of Elliott’s life and ultimately put him on the path to becoming the principal organist for the world-famous Choir.

During high school Elliott decided to pursue a serious study of the organ and embarked on his musical studies at the Peabody Conservatory of John Hopkins University. He majored in organ performance, studying at the Catholic University of America and the Curtis Institute of Music, from which he received a bachelor of music degree.

It was while he was a student at Curtis that Elliott began to seriously consider membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Baptised the week of his graduation ceremony, he soon decided to serve a Church mission in Argentina. In a relatively short number of years, Elliott had undergone a drastic transformation from rock musician to missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. After his mission he returned to study at the Eastman School of Music, where he received master of music and doctor of musical arts degrees.

Now in his late 50s, Elliott still has a flair for performance that has made him a popular organist as well as a highly respected one. His organ solo arrangement of “Go Tell It on the Mountain” has a combined total of over 2.5 million YouTube views. In that piece, to the audience’s great delight, Elliott plays the rapid melody with his right foot and the bass line with his left. “It’s my goal to make the organ dance,” he says. One wonders if this knack for performance is from his younger years on stage with his band. But whatever its origin, his rock star showmanship generates new enthusiasm for the pipe organ.

And that is precisely what Elliott intends to do. “I have always wanted to win friends for the organ,” he says. He hopes to counter pop culture’s negative portrayal of his favourite instrument. “A lot of people associate the organ with Halloween or with funerals. People tend to think that it always has a very slow or sombre sound,” Elliott says. “Even Hollywood movies have a tendency to make the organ the instrument of spooky characters like in *The Phantom of the Opera*.”

He says the organ has not always been so maligned. “If you go back in time, you’ll find that it was a well-respected instrument. Mozart called the organ the ‘King of Instruments.’ In Mozart’s era, the two most impressive feats of human engineering were considered to be the mechanical clock and the pipe organ.” It is one of Elliott’s lifetime goals to restore the organ to its former glory. His fans would argue that he is doing a fine job.



Another of the ways Elliott is bringing new appreciation for the organ is by injecting his music with the sounds and motifs of popular music. In his personal time, he rarely listens to organ music. Instead, he listens to many other types of music in order to infuse these into his musical style. “I feel that to be a good organist, one really needs to be listening to a lot of other things. That way I learn to make the organ more expressive than I could if I listened to only organ music,” Elliott says. By gleaning inspiration from all of these genres, he is able to make organ music more accessible to the mainstream listener. His musical eclecticism explains the origins of popular arrangements like “Go Tell It on the Mountain” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” or his original arrangement, “Holiday Hoedown,” where he incorporates the sounds and style of fiddle music to give a western sound to a Christmas jingle.

Anyone who has heard one of Elliott’s featured organ solos at the Choir’s annual Christmas concert or on tour will tell you there isn’t a hint of boring in the performance. Audiences consistently leap to their feet in thunderous, sustained applause. All this is due to his amazing agility both on the keyboard and the pedals, coupled with ingenious arrangements, many of his own devising.

Both Elliott’s ability as a performer and his genre-defying experimentation make him uniquely qualified to help The Tabernacle Choir appeal more to younger audiences.

The Tabernacle Choir music director, Mack Wilberg, says, “Richard’s genius is unquestionable. Richard plays so masterfully that the organ seems only to be an extension of his person. I think he was made to play that instrument.” Elliott has received the praise of many of his colleagues, including Frederick Swann, organist at the former Crystal Cathedral, and Michael Barone, host of Minnesota Public Radio’s *Pipedreams* organ program.

Elliott has been a full-time Tabernacle organist since 1991 and the principal organist for the Choir since 2007. He and a staff of four other organists share the responsibility of a full schedule, including daily recitals in the Tabernacle (twice daily during the summer), weekly broadcasts of the famous *Music & the Spoken Word* and the semiannual general conferences of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In addition to these duties on Temple Square, Elliott also performs in concert for audiences worldwide at some of the world’s most prestigious and interesting venues.

When he is not playing the organ, he enjoys hiking with his family and riding roller coasters (a lesser known hobby). He is married to Elizabeth Cox Ballantyne, a talented pianist in her own right and a member of the Orchestra at Temple Square.

