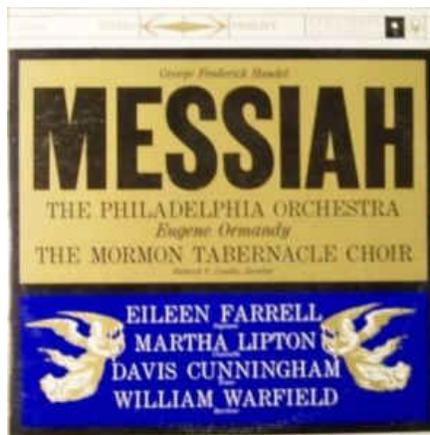


“Messiah”--Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Richard Condie, director; Philadelphia Orchestra, Eugene Ormandy, conductor (1959)

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by Michael Hicks (guest post)*



Original album cover

Since its premiere in 1742, Handel's oratorio "Messiah" has burrowed into the consciousness of listeners on every continent. Perhaps no other classical work has had such an equal measure of populist appeal and aristocratic luster. Choirs in small towns and big cities, public schools and private chapels, state fairs and royal coronations, have mounted tens of thousands of performances of some or all of it for over 250 years. In some ways this particular Columbia recording has little to lift it to distinction. In other ways it gives a vivid snapshot of American cultural aspirations and religiosity in the post-war era.

The Mormon faith emerged in upstate New York near the Erie Canal in the decades after the War of 1812. A stepchild of Protestantism and vision-borne esoterica, Mormonism promoted cultural education via the motto "the glory of God is intelligence." When Brigham Young led most of its adherents into the Great Basin in the 1840s, they founded settlements that had "tabernacles," public meeting houses for religious, political, and social events. Most tabernacles had their own choirs, each named for its location, with the Salt Lake City Tabernacle Choir being the figurehead of them all.

That choir sang "Messiah's" "Hallelujah Chorus" as early as 1853. In 1875, they performed the entire oratorio in the tabernacle--a cultural coup for a pioneer group in the American southwest. In 1893, using the broader name "The Mormon Tabernacle Choir," the group stunned the choral world by taking second place in the singing competition at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, largely for their performance of "Worthy Is the Lamb," the final chorus in "Messiah."

In 1910 the Mormon Tabernacle Choir recorded the "Hallelujah Chorus" on a two-sided disc for Columbia, although, to downplay its Mormon origins, the label credited it to the "Handelian Chorus." The group's next recording session, for Victor Records in 1925, included "Worthy Is

the Lamb.” Within four years, the choir began a weekly network radio show (first on NBC, then CBS), on which they often sang choruses from “Messiah.” In 1930, the group performed excerpts of the oratorio as part of a Mormon centennial pageant called “Message of the Ages.” That same year, NBC had the choir perform the network's annual Christmas broadcast of “Messiah.” In 1940, Harvey Fletcher pioneered the first stereo recordings with, among other things, a recording of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing “Worthy Is the Lamb.” The choir routinely included portions of “Messiah” in its concerts and tours as they visited fairs, expositions, cathedrals, and stages across the country and, starting in 1955, around the world. As their record sales mushroomed, tours sold out, and awards and tributes multiplied, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir became a fashionable gold standard for choirs, always with snatches of “Messiah” in tow.

Beginning in the 1920s, conductors began mounting recordings of the full oratorio. The most celebrated of these were those by Sir Thomas Beecham (1928 and 1947), Malcolm Sargent (four of them, beginning in 1946), Hermann Scherchen (1954), and Sir Adrian Boult (1955). As was the custom for the previous two centuries these recordings all varied the size of orchestral and choral forces and (except for the Boult) freely omitted some less popular movements of the 54 in the original.

In the fall of 1959, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir mounted a 20-concert East Coast tour, which included two prospective days of recording with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy, which had lately become their regular recording partner on Columbia. Ormandy had assumed they would do a large-scale masterwork together. The choir's conductor, Richard Condie, along with his assistants, narrowed the field to three works: Mendelssohn's “St. Paul” or “Elijah” and Haydn's “Creation,” all of which the choir had performed for more than 50 years. Apostle Richard Evans, the choir's broadcast and tour emcee, said it would be “splendid” if they recorded “Messiah.” The choir team pushed back: “Messiah” was overdone and over-recorded. But Evans pressed his case and, by authority, overrode the others' rejection. He notified Ormandy, who phoned him back and explained that Columbia had just recorded a version with Columbia's star conductor Leonard Bernstein, the New York Philharmonic, and the Westminster Choir, to be issued in 1959. Columbia would *not* issue a second version in competition with itself.

Nevertheless, Evans insisted they do “Messiah” because people were confusing “Mormon” with “Moslem” and he wanted to emphasize his church's Christian roots. So Condie and Ormandy hired noted soloists--including William Warfield, who'd sung in the Bernstein version--and worked up “Messiah” for a concert on the tour, knowing that a recording of it was off the table. But senior Columbia recording engineer Fred Plaut attended the Philadelphia performance and excitedly called producer John McClure to insist they record this version, which, he said, was the best he'd heard. McClure refused until Plaut pledged to put up the money for recording costs. So Plaut oversaw the recording and Columbia opted to issue Bernstein's version in spring 1959, for the Easter market, and Ormandy-Condie's version in the fall for Christmas.

The two-LP Tabernacle Choir version massively outsold Bernstein's. It also got strong reviews, especially for the quality of Plaut's engineering. Handel purists snubbed the grandiosity of this nineteenth-century-style rendition of the work, but the choir had become in McClure's words “a

cultural necessity” through its overwhelming broadcast and recording presence--including winning a Grammy for “Battle Hymn of the Republic” the same year its version of “Messiah” came out.

In 1963, the album finally earned a Gold Record. In a minor twist of fate, in September of that year, Bernstein teamed up for the first and only time with the Tabernacle Choir to record “The Joy of Christmas,” which became one of the all-time bestselling Christmas albums. It contained nothing from “Messiah.” When it was finally released on CD in 1997, it ended with a bonus track of the “Hallelujah Chorus”--recorded with a different choir.

The Mormon Tabernacle Choir's 1959 Columbia recording of “Messiah” was reissued over the next five decades, including a 1985 remastering for compact disc. The choir also capitalized on the success of this recording time and again: in 1969, they issued an LP of Handel choruses from “Messiah” and other works, in 1974 an LP called “The Great ‘Messiah’ Choruses,” and in 1996 and 2016 new CD recordings of the full oratorio, the latter of them with no movements omitted and a trimmed-down more “authentic” performance. But, awash in countless top-flight recordings of the work, most with their own niceties and selling points, the audience for “Messiah” recordings was sated. No Tabernacle Choir recording of “Messiah” could repeat the splash made by that unlikely 1959 release.

Michael Hicks is Professor of Music at Brigham Young University. A former editor of the journal “American Music” (2007-2010), he is also the author of five books in University of Illinois Press’ Music in American Life series, including “The Mormon Tabernacle Choir: A Biography” (2015).

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.