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Abstract Review of *Come unto Christ: The Conversion of Alma the Younger* (1999), by Merrill Jenson, with text compiled by Betsy Jenson.

A Musical Message of Faith and Repentance

Marian Robertson-Wilson

With this oratorio, composer Merrill Jenson has added yet another name to the growing list of large-scale works inspired by the Book of Mormon; and it comes as the fifth composition in the "Ricks College Sacred Music Series."[1] Scored for full orchestra, combined choruses, and four soloists, it offers many challenges to the performers, all of whom give a strong, dedicated rendition. Ricks College is to be congratulated for sponsoring such a series and for thereby providing ongoing, practical encouragement to our musicians—composers and performers alike.

Jenson, a former BYU student now residing in Utah County, is best known as a writer of film music for both LDS and Hollywood productions.[2] He himself has understandably stated that "writing *Come unto Christ* was a difficult task,"[3] and indeed, an oratorio does

1. Other works in this series are Darwin Wolford's *Behold, He Cometh!* (1986); Crawford Gates's *Visions of Eternity* (1993); Robert M. Cundick's *Song of Nephi* (1995); and K. Newell Dayley's *Immanuel* (1997). See Merrill Jenson, *Come unto Christ,* program notes, "About the Sacred Music Series" (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999).

2. Crawford Gates, telephone conversation with the author, Salt Lake City, December 2000.

3. M. Jenson, *Come unto Christ,* program notes, "About the Work."

Review of Merrill Jenson, text compiled by Betsy Jenson. *Come unto Christ: The Conversion of Alma the Younger.* Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999. 70-minute recording with background material and libretto. $13.95, cassette; $15.95, CD.

present problems to any composer quite different from those posed by a film score. An oratorio is a music drama similar to opera but presented in concert form without visual effects, wherein the action unfolds chronologically with the personages clearly identified in the text and characterized by the music. Interestingly enough, even a cursory analysis shows that *Come unto Christ* deviates from this customary oratorio format.[4]

As the subtitle suggests, the subject concerns the dramatic conversion of Alma the Younger, with the text being based on scriptures excerpted from many sources (see below). However, rather than beginning with that extraordinary event and then relating what follows, the oratorio opens late in Alma's life, when as high priest of the church he is preaching to the people (Part One: Invitation; text from Alma 5). Then comes a flashback to the account of his conversion and repentance, into which is interpolated counsel from Alma the Younger to his son Helaman (Part Two: Conversion; text from Alma 5 and 36 and Mosiah 18 and 27). The final section consists mainly of advice from father to son (Part Three: Testimony; text from Alma 29, 36, and 38; Omni 1:26; Matthew 11:28; D&C 76:22; and Moroni 10:32). As a result, rather than presenting a coherent dramatic story, the oratorio proclaims a message of faith and repentance.

While this approach is laudable, Come unto Christ may seem a bit confusing to the unforewarned listener. From the text alone one can neither trace the sequence of events nor easily identify the characters. Further, in their desire to focus upon Alma the Younger and his missionary zeal in later life, the authors have omitted important passages from the account given in the Book of Mormon and thus have not fully depicted certain events, characters, and aspects of doctrine.[5] Fortunately, Jenson and the editors have provided very helpful pro-

4. As examples of oratorios that have followed this format through the centuries, one may cite G. F. Handel's *Messiah* (1741) and *Judas Maccabaeus* (1746); Felix Mendelssohn's *Elijah* (1846); and Leroy Robertson's *Oratorio from the Book of Mormon* (1953).

5. As the most obvious example of incomplete presentation of an event, one may cite the appearance of the angel of the Lord to Alma the Younger. In the Book of Mormon account, the angel confronts the wicked sons of Mosiah as well as Alma the Younger, but the oratorio makes no mention whatsoever of the sons of Mosiah and depicts the angel as

gram notes that clarify most of these problems, and which the listener is advised to study beforehand. Also, the accurate scriptural references given throughout the printed libretto offer an excellent guide for further scripture study.

The musical setting of the text immediately impresses one with Jenson's gift for sonorous choral writing and brilliant orchestration, especially for woodwind and brass instruments. The general sound is broad and sweeping and has a style reminiscent of the best Hollywood scores of the late 1940s and 1950s. The harmonies are obvious, containing little dissonance beyond that of the late nineteenth century, all of which makes for "very easy listening." Jenson also evinces a decided gift for melody. However, I would have found the work more interesting had it offered more variety in form, dynamics, and emotion. With nearly every passage being declamatory and performed at the *forte* level, one tends to tire of the ever-present tension and begins to long for the change that a full-fledged fugue, chorale, or aria would innately provide.[6] One also might wish that Jenson

appearing only to Alma the Younger (Libretto, item 5, "The Messenger of the Lord," through item 7, "May the Spirit of the Lord"). As for omitting an aspect of doctrine, one may cite the oratorio passage, "O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of [my] heart, That I might go forth and speak with the trump of God" (Libretto, item 11; Alma 29:1–2). At this point the oratorio completely disregards the significant passages that follow in the Book of Mormon, wherein we are advised to be satisfied with what the Lord has given us: "But behold, I am a man, and do sin in my wish; for I ought to be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me. . . . Why should I desire that I were an angel, that I could speak unto all the ends of the earth?" (Alma 29:3, 7). As for the text not clearly identifying the characters, one may well ask who are the witnesses, for they sing passages belonging to Alma the Younger, the angel of the Lord, and a narrator, among others (Libretto, items 2, 6, and 7, respectively); and regarding the spoken passage, "And now, my son, I have told you this that ye may learn . . ." (Libretto, item 13; Alma 38:9), the text itself does not tell us which father is speaking, and one wonders whether it is Alma the Father, Alma the Younger, or some other conscientious, caring father. (The Book of Mormon tells us that it is Alma the Younger advising his son Shiblon.)

6. The fugue, chorale, and aria are well-established musical forms closely associated with oratorios: the fugue is a piece wherein a given theme—known as the subject—is introduced according to more or less fixed rules, then developed in accordance with the skills and imagination of the composer, with imitation playing a large role; the chorale is akin to a hymn but is often lengthier, with a more complicated harmonic structure; the aria is a song for solo voice with instrumental accompaniment.

would have given some of his striking motifs and eloquent melodies a greater chance to develop and grow to their full potential.

A few numbers deserving special mention are the lyrical duet sung by the two witnesses, "Behold, he is the life and light of the world" (Libretto, item 13); "Repentance" (Libretto, items 6 and 7); and "Gloria: Oh, What Joy" (Libretto, item 9), which vividly evokes the meaning of the word "Joy" and which, for me, stands out as the highlight of the entire oratorio.

In conclusion, one may say that Jenson has doubtlessly succeeded in composing a moving musical exhortation that earnestly calls us to "Come unto Christ." His work contributes to our store of Latter-day Saint music and reminds us of our rich religious heritage.

While *Come unto Christ* contains a few pieces for solo voice, they are either declamatory or exhortative and thus do not give the melodic relief of the usual oratorio aria. For example, one may compare this oratorio's "I was racked with eternal torment" (Libretto, item 8) with Handel's "He shall feed His flock" (*Messiah*, near the end of part 1). For the variety of form innate in the chorale and fugue, one has only to recall the conclusion of the *Messiah*, where a chorale ("Worthy is the Lamb") and two subsequent fugues ("Blessing and honour, glory and pow'r, be unto Him" and the "Amen") contrast with each other and thrill the listener by their form alone. For a more recent example of such contrast, one may cite the fugue and chorale that conclude Leroy Robertson's *Oratorio from the Book of Mormon* ("The Lord hath made bare His holy arm" and "Glory unto the Father," respectively).