

Mack Wilberg. *Requiem and Other Choral Works*.

The Mormon Tabernacle Choir and the Orchestra at Temple Square.

Mormon Tabernacle Choir Recordings, 2008

Reviewed by Greg Hansen

While not the first review of Mack Wilberg's *Requiem*, this review by a contemporary fellow composer may bring to light several insights not previously illuminated. Wilberg's *Requiem* is unique in at least three ways: First, it represents a historic departure from previous works by Latter-day Saint choral composers in that it is a requiem rather than an oratorio; second, it is singular given the circumstances under which it was composed; and third, it contributes significantly to a dynamic artistic direction for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir organization originally set in motion by former director Craig Jessop.

The requiem as a compositional form started as a Catholic mass for the departed, then was later adapted to Lutheran, Anglo-Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox usage. Over the last hundred years, the requiem has become representative of a more generalized expression of longing for peace and solace, and a genre unto itself.

Wilberg's judicious use of both time-honored craftsmanship and a near-cinematic orchestral style makes his work accessible yet eloquent. The use of a four-chord unifying motif together with tasteful use of the Lydian scale gives the work an ethereal quality that evokes peace and a sense of timelessness in the listener. Impeccable counterpoint, implied extended chord harmonies, strong melodies, and competent orchestrations add to the overall solace inherent in the work. The program notes by Dr. Luke Howard provide a refreshingly intimate and excellent analysis.

Wilberg indicates that his work is indeed a "requiem for the living,"<sup>1</sup> making it completely applicable and appropriate to the doctrines of the restored gospel. Since the oratorio is the more accepted form of expression within the ranks the LDS community of composers, Wilberg's *Requiem* represents a fresh departure from the norm.

Wilberg's characteristic sincerity, his absence of ego, and his roots in a humble Utah mining town all add to the appeal of the work as a personal

expression of the composer. Wilberg dedicated the score “in memory of loved ones passed”—no doubt a reference to his own life’s losses. Yet the work remains tremendously comforting and positive.

With his *Requiem*, Wilberg has demonstrated he is more than a nationally recognized arranger of folk songs and hymns, beloved by the Choir, his audience, and ecclesiastical leaders. He has risen to the stature of a composer of significant works, a formidable original artistic force of his own. Wilberg’s musical journey to the point of writing an original requiem completely sanctioned by his patron was an accomplishment of significance. Overcoming the label of an “arranger only” was a delicate task known only to a few in similar circumstances. Inherent difficulties arise with such a venture.

One difficulty in achieving respect as both an arranger and a composer is that arranging is commonly held to be something less than composing, as is the art of orchestrating. Newell Dayley, a composer and former academic vice president of Brigham Young University, once stated that “arranging is nearly the same as composing; the difference is that part of the work has already been done.”<sup>2</sup> Any accomplished arranger will experience some angst concerning the accurate perception of his work. To those familiar with arranging, the craft can become as rewarding and challenging as composing.

When taking a familiar hymn melody as a starting point, a competent arranger must address a number of critical issues: the traditions or “baggage” that particular hymn may bring with it in terms of audience perception, the cultural understanding of music within the society for which he is writing, the generational style vocabulary of that audience, and even the musical tastes of those employing him. The parameters of such a challenge have been the downfall of many a composer who insisted on art over effectiveness, atonality over western harmonic traditions, and who ignored any propriety toward the listener, subject matter, and patron. Wilberg has overcome—even moved well beyond—all of these issues so effectively over the last nine years in his position with the Tabernacle Choir, that he has earned the trust of both his leaders and his audience. Because of that trust, his original *Requiem* enjoys the position of being a significant, original contribution to the artistic achievements of the Choir since starting its own label.

It is a credit to Wilberg’s devotion and testimony that he has so effectively reached such levels with his humble genius and disdain of personal recognition. He is first to acknowledge former director Craig Jessop’s vision and encouragement for setting in motion the idea of Wilberg composing a full requiem, coming as a result of his commission to write an *Innoit* and

*Epilogue* to Vaughan Williams's *Dona nobis pacem* for the Carnegie Hall National High School Choral Festival. His *Requiem* now joins with Leroy Robertson's *Book of Mormon Oratorio*, Robert Cundick's *Redeemer*, and other significant contributions burned into the collective consciousness of Restoration art history.

Upon the framework built by those who have gone before, Wilberg has added both walls and roof to the LDS Church's sole officially sanctioned musical voice. To date, few contemporary classical composers have enjoyed such broad commercial market recognition, except perhaps John Rutter and the Cambridge Singers. Since the Tabernacle Choir is an entirely unique artistic entity that could not be financially feasible in either a commercial or educationally sponsored setting, it also enjoys singular status in the world. Surely the actual role of the Tabernacle Choir director could not have been more effectively understated than in this published job description: "To provide missionary and public relations service through performances with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, the Orchestra at Temple Square, the Temple Square Chorale and the Bells of Temple Square, such service to include telecasts, recordings, tours, concerts, and other appearances."<sup>3</sup>

Given these circumstances and his recent rise to full directorship, Wilberg now has the opportunity to continue to build village, castle, and crown jewels upon the foundational fires of momentum lit by former Choir directors.

It would seem to be providential that the greatest potential of the organization should exhibit itself in this era—one of unsettled and uncertain world conditions. The voice of the Tabernacle Choir and Wilberg's own future work can ring true as a vehicle for peace, comfort, and surety; as a light on a hill; and as a powerful musical voice of the Church.

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1. Mack Wilberg, interviewed by Greg Hansen, July 2008.
2. Author's notes from BYU Media Music class, October 1980.
3. Job description for the associate music director's position posted on August 1, 2008, on the Tabernacle Choir's website, [www.mormontabernaclechoir.org](http://www.mormontabernaclechoir.org).