

# THE DELIGHTS OF MAKING CUMORAH'S MUSIC



*Crawford Gates and Harold Hansen. Photo courtesy of the author.*

BY CRAWFORD GATES

CUMORAH HAS BEEN A PLACE OF WONDER TO ME SINCE THE DAYS OF MY SERVICE IN THE EASTERN STATES MISSION (1940–42). I VISITED “THE HILL” FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE SUMMER OF 1941. ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY MISSIONARIES FROM THE FOUR-STATE MISSION ASSEMBLED TO FUNCTION AS CAST, CREW, AND USHERS FOR THAT YEAR’S PRODUCTION OF THE PAGEANT, WHICH CONSISTED OF A WEEK OF REHEARSALS AND A WEEK OF PERFORMANCES. I RECALL HEARING THE PAGEANT’S EARLY BACKGROUND MUSIC FROM THE SOUND SYSTEM SECURED HIGH IN THE LIMBS OF TREES SURROUNDING THE STAGE AREAS—STRAINS OF WAGNER’S “PRELUDE TO ACT I” OF *LOHENGRIN*, THE OPENING STORM MUSIC TO HIS OPERA *DIE WALKÜRE*, AND THE FOURTH MOVEMENT OF TCHAIKOVSKY’S *PATHÉTIQUE* SYMPHONY, ALL FROM SELECTED DISC RECORDINGS.

I loved the music and considered its general mood appropriate to the Book of Mormon scenes it served. But even then I thought that this magnificent pageant needed its own unique musical score, one tailor-made to suit its singular message. And I hoped to someday have the privilege of composing such music. Little did I surmise that the Lord’s servants would extend to me that wonderful privilege, not once but twice.

During that wondrous first summer on Cumorah’s slopes, I served as a member of the stage crew, with the assignment to turn the water-pipe valve on and off at the proper moment to produce the water curtain that created a misty effect for Nephi’s vision of the Savior. I also lit several of the smoke bombs that helped “destroy” Zarahemla. Clothed in dark dungarees, I would slither, unseen by the audience, through the tall, damp grass to perform these functions in the darkness just beyond the stage areas. Each night before the pageant began, I was at my assigned place. I recall the thrill of seeing the throngs assembling below to witness the wonderful spectacle and of being touched not only by

its visions of color, motion, and setting but also by the heart of its message. My participation that year made unforgettable impressions on me.

Before the 1940s ended, I was again in Cumorah’s precincts, this time at the Eastman School of Music of the University of Rochester for two academic years and two later summer sessions. One bleak, snowy day, I drove to Cumorah from Rochester to drink again from the spirit of that sacred place. This particular excursion was in stark contrast to that of the sultry summer of 1941. From the base of the hill, I braced myself against a chill wind and trudged through foot-deep snow up to the solitary Moroni, there in silent metal, high atop the stone monument. I looked up into the eyes of this lifeless but impressive image and pondered the reality of the person behind it—Moroni, that lonely warrior, scribe, prophet, and resurrected messenger of the Most High, who, with kindness and gentleness, tutored the teenage prophet-to-be, Joseph Smith. I tried to visualize those singular interviews, some of which took place near this very spot. Here was the holy ground on which the Lord Jesus Christ

chose to initiate the reestablishment of his church and kingdom on earth. No wonder that the growing tradition of the Hill Cumorah Pageant has had such lasting impact on those associated with its creation and production and on the hundreds of thousands of observers who have witnessed its power, beauty, and truth.

### **Composing the First Score of Original Music for the Pageant**

The summer of 1953, some 12 years after my missionary experiences at “the Hill,” I was back in Rochester, this time putting my full intellectual energies toward the completion of a PhD degree at the Eastman School. My wife, Georgia, and I had married the previous year and were renting a small

rehearsals and an early performance or two. During that time, I was given the script written by H. Wayne Driggs that formed the textual basis of the early Cumorah pageant. Using a stopwatch, I timed the current musical cues and noted on the script the precise locations where they started and stopped.

One memorable afternoon, Dr. Hansen, accompanied by a secretary, took me up the hill and unfolded his intent for the future musical score in terms of its dramatic content and the specific timing of each section. In some cases the new timings differed from the timings I had just taken in rehearsals. His remarks included the instruction that the opening two-minute prelude should create the feeling of “a large wave approaching us, under control but full of promise and power.” At the climax of this wave should be the new “Christ Theme”

UPON HEARING IT, WE BOTH KNEW IMMEDIATELY THAT THE MUSIC WAS NOT GOOD ENOUGH, NOT PROFOUND ENOUGH. IT DID NOT CONTAIN THE POWERFUL BEAUTY NECESSARY FOR THIS FUNDAMENTAL BUILDING BLOCK OF THE WHOLE SCORE. SO I WENT BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD, BACK TO THE BLANK SHEET OF MUSIC SCORE PAPER, WITH A NEW PRAYER.

second-floor apartment. One hot night, Dr. Harold I. Hansen, the artistic director of the Cumorah pageant, and a few of his production assistants came to Rochester to attend a performance of the “Opera Under the Stars.” When a thunderstorm developed, the opera was canceled and Dr. Hansen and his associates visited us instead.

As the storm raged outside, Dr. Hansen disclosed his own hopes and plans for the long-term development of the pageant. Before I knew it, he had informally asked me to compose the original musical score he had in mind. His proposal was later approved and then confirmed by a letter from the First Presidency that extended this appointment to me. The immediate follow-up was Dr. Hansen’s invitation that my wife and I join him at the Hill Cumorah directly after the close of the summer term. Soon we had moved to Palmyra for a week to attend daily

I was to musically create. The attending secretary recorded this and many other suggestions. I later received a typewritten transcript of these outlines, which proved helpful as I began to compose the musical substance.

Dr. Hansen had hoped that my new score would be ready for use in the 1954 presentation of the pageant. But the task was enormous. It included the creation of a musical score of 72 minutes’ duration for a full symphony orchestra and chorus. The score needed to be of the highest quality. It was to be dramatically appropriate to the Driggs script and was to enhance the drama of the great Book of Mormon stories. It had to be beautiful and attractive to a wide public. It needed to meet the artistic vision of Dr. Hansen and to be permeated with spiritual depth throughout. This was a tall order. On the other side, my 60-hour workweek on the

Brigham Young University music faculty was not reduced, and my ward callings and assignments in connection with the MIA General Board continued. Georgia bore our first son that fall and was soon pregnant with our second child. There simply was not time to create a score in the ensuing 12 months.

My first task was to compose the “Christ Theme.” I made over a dozen preliminary sketches, discarding each of them. I even orchestrated one of the later ones and had the BYU Symphony and Choir read and record the same, with Dr. Hansen present, in the empty auditorium of the Joseph Smith Building on the BYU campus. Upon hearing it, we both knew immediately that the music was not good enough, not profound enough. It did not contain the powerful beauty necessary for this fundamental building block of the whole score. So I went back to the drawing board, back to the blank sheet of music score paper, with a new prayer. If I expected the incomparable blessing of inspiration to help me fulfill this calling, I needed to improve my own spiritual life, to recleanse myself. Georgia and I went to the temple more often. I taught a Book of Mormon class at BYU to more fully immerse myself in this scripture. Dr. Hansen and I both received special blessings at the hand of Apostle Harold B. Lee. My blessing was a particularly wonderful one. When I returned home, I recorded in writing as much of it as I could remember. Its conditional promises were indeed fulfilled in my behalf and in behalf of the missionary thrust of the Cumorah pageant.

One of the great blessings of my life has been the fact that this creative effort also yielded one of my life’s greatest satisfactions, that of believing that many others have felt value in this music. The initial score for the Cumorah pageant ran from 1957 through 1987, totaling 248 performances of the pageant during 31 years. I do not wish to inflate my own service as a composer of music, but I have to humbly admit that I find great personal joy in knowing that the Lord invited me, through his servants, to provide this accompaniment to his message and that this music had an apparent value toward that objective. One naturally hopes that others will find meaning and value in one’s deepest efforts. I have found such a wondrous blessing in my small contribution to the success of the Hill Cumorah Pageant.

## Composing a New Score for a New Script

In early 1987 I was contacted by Michael Moody of the church’s General Music Committee. He informed me that the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve had approved a new effort to write and produce the Hill Cumorah Pageant. I was happily surprised to learn that I had received the appointment to write the musical score for this new production. Orson Scott Card had been commissioned to write the script, and Dr. Charles Metten was to be the artistic director of the pageant for its first two years. I was delighted to collaborate with Charles again. He and I had worked together 21 years earlier in producing Verdi’s *Aida*.



Charles Metten in the Cumorah bowl directing a dress rehearsal. Photo courtesy of Gerald S. Argetsinger.

On 31 July the creative team assembled at the hill. We all bade good-bye to an old and dear friend, the earlier pageant. The next morning we no longer looked back. A new vehicle for the Lord’s Spirit to be manifested was to be born. We felt the power of inspiration being harnessed and placed in unison toward a single objective. We rejoiced in the priesthood leaders who gave inspired directions and blessings. It was a day of vibrant planning and vision, the start of a fresh tradition.

In September I met with Charles in Chicago, and for two days we delved deeply into Orson’s new script. Each line of dialogue, each stage action, and each pause was timed to establish the parameters

of the musical composition. Charles's ideas for the character of the music were noted in my copy of the script. This meeting between artistic director and composer was essential for me. The recording sessions with the Utah Symphony and Mormon Tabernacle Choir were set for 24–26 May 1988 (later changed to 25–27 May 1988 because of President Marion G. Romney's funeral on 24 May). I laid out a special calendar for the next seven months. I was conductor of the Beloit Janesville Symphony and was artist in residence at Beloit College. I divided these two professional obligations into small units of time by the week to free up time for my work on the music for the pageant. From that point on, my workdays started at six o'clock each morning and ended at midnight.

Charles wanted “wall to wall” music, except for 40 seconds of silence following the crucifixion. The total was 78 minutes of music. I blocked off a certain number of workdays for each section and began writing the music to fit precisely the action and dialogue of the script, scene by scene.

On 4 December I was to appear before some of the General Authorities of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City. The Missionary Committee wanted to hear some of the music that was being prepared for the new pageant. It was, in effect, a command performance. The only practical way to respond was for me to play a portion of the score on the piano. I elected to play the “Cumorah Processional,” an orchestral opening to the pageant. Charles's vision was for the processional to start at full volume at the back of the meadow. At the same moment, the lights were all to turn to catch the full impact of 600 people in colorful costumes, who then were to march with enthusiasm through the audience, greeting them by gesture, to the main stages on the lower part of the hill. Charles determined the time required to move 600 people to places on the stage was two and a half minutes, so this was the duration of the processional I was to compose. I practiced a piano reduction of this piece in preparation for my presentation.

Another subtle but important aspect of this 4 December meeting was the fact that the produc-

tion budget for the 1988 pageant had not been fully approved, even though substantial monies in production costs had already been spent. Charles hoped that the enthusiasm for the pageant's music generated at this meeting would be the catalyst for budget approval.

The day arrived. I flew to Salt Lake City and appeared ahead of time at church headquarters. I did not know what kind of piano I would have available for my performance. I envisioned a shining six-foot grand piano, or larger, with a fine bench. But the meeting room had a vintage upright piano whose appearance did not give me confidence. A further problem arose: most of the chairs in the room had armrests, which render piano playing impossible. Someone brought forward a

A page of handwritten musical notation for a pageant score. The score is written on multiple staves, including vocal lines and piano accompaniment. The notation includes notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as 'piano' and 'crescendo'. There are some handwritten annotations and corrections throughout the score.

Excerpt from Crawford Gates's handwritten score for the pageant. Courtesy of the author.

metal folding chair from the back corner of the room, but it was too low to allow any power or speed in performance. There were no pillows or other objects to raise the height of the chair, so I placed my briefcase at an angle and sat on its unstable surface. My appearance did not promote my dignity or the observers' confidence. I looked more like I was imitating Victor Borge's comic sketches. Should the pageant's future (including its budget) and my own reputation as a serious composer rest on such dismal performance circumstances?

The moment of truth arrived. Charles briefly outlined the status of the new effort and emphasized the mammoth job that still lay ahead. He then turned to me to comment on the status of the musical score and to perform a sample so that all



could experience something of its spirit. I looked at the august audience, which included three members of the Quorum of the Twelve. I knew and honored them all and knew they supported my effort. But the stakes were high. The hoped-for budget from church funds was very substantial, and the national visibility of the Cumorah pageant, especially in its new dress, would be wide and important. I do not remember what I said, but there was a good climate. I had offered many prayers in behalf of the success of the Cumorah effort years ago. But now I offered a new prayer—that in spite of my shortcomings and those of the performance circumstances, I might communicate the vibrancy and testimony in my heart that would eventually be the essence of the new pageant's music.

I took off at the keyboard as though I were playing my debut in Carnegie Hall. My performance was not perfect—I played a few wrong notes—but it had lots of heart. I played my soul out for the longest two and a half minutes I can remember. I wondered if I would ever get to that last bar. When I did, the response was wonderful. I saw in the faces of those faithful servants of the Lord that they had heard and seen what was in my heart and soul. And they blessed me with their warm, enthusiastic approval. Charles received assurance that his full budget was approved, and I was encouraged to continue my intensive work on the score. We all left the brief meeting in a state of euphoria. I felt like the Prophet Joseph must have felt after the Three Witnesses saw the angel and the plates. No longer was he the only witness, and he had great relief. Up until 4 December 1987, no one but me knew the content of the forthcoming music. Now there were others and they shared my joy.

As the weeks wore on, I got behind on my projected completion date of 1 May. Periodically I had a clear view of what might happen, what I called my "vision of terror." In my mind's eye I saw the opening rehearsal in the Tabernacle. I saw the famous choir in their seats, beautifully calm and well prepared. I saw the smooth professionalism of the 90 performers of the Utah Symphony, all ready in their seats with instruments tuned. I saw my respected colleagues, Drs. Robert Cundick and Clay Christiansen, at the great Tabernacle organ. I saw the recording engineers in the control room. I saw the Salt Lake Children's Choir in disciplined quiet, awaiting their first cue to stand and sing

their hearts out. I saw a porcupine of microphones sticking up everywhere to catch the majesty of the anticipated sound. I saw myself standing before this incomparable assembly and heard myself say, "I'm so sorry. I didn't finish."

In imagining this unthinkable moment, I said aloud to myself, "This should not happen! This must not happen! This will not happen!" Then I offered a prayer for help and moved to work faster and harder so that I would finish the work with the highest quality and beauty of which I was capable, and especially *on time!* I recall so vividly the day of Thursday, 20 May 1988, when in the Salt Lake Tabernacle the combined musical resources did indeed materialize. The great choir was there, so splendidly trained by Dr. Jerald Ottley; the magnificent

Utah Symphony Orchestra was there, augmented by six percussionists; the Tabernacle organists and the Salt Lake Children's Choir were there; and the recording engineer, along with his highly qualified associates, was there. But unlike the outcome in my vision of terror, I had finished the score. As I stood on the podium facing these incomparable musical resources, more than 450 of them, my heart burst with thanksgiving to my Heavenly Father.

The rehearsals went well. The six professional music copyists who had helped copy the voluminous orchestral parts had done their work splendidly. A live concert performance of the complete work was held in the Tabernacle to a full house on Saturday, 21 May. Spencer Kinard served as narrator at my invitation, reading a brief text in advance of each of the 11



Crawford Gates conducting the Tabernacle Choir, the Utah Symphony Orchestra, and the Salt Lake Children's Choir for a recording in 1988 of the music he composed for the Hill Cumorah Pageant. Photo courtesy of Gerald S. Argetsinger.

movements. At the conclusion, by my recollection, the audience arose with a roar of fervor and approval. This night was one of the most memorable in my life.

On Tuesday through Thursday of the following week, three recording sessions were held in the Tabernacle with these same musical forces. These sessions were three hours each, with a 20-minute intermission per hour. In most commercial and professional recordings of orchestra (and chorus) anywhere in the world, each three-hour recording session would typically result in 15 minutes of flawless final recording. For a 78-minute work, such a time budget would normally involve six three-hour recording sessions. For a number of reasons, including economic, we determined to record the complete score in just three sessions. The recording time was further cramped by the fact that the Salt Lake Musicians Union had changed its hourly intermission requirement from 10 to 20 minutes.

Our earlier concert performance certainly helped toward the preparation of the recording, but I felt under intense pressure to obtain 26 minutes of final recording from each recording session. We finished good takes on all movements and sections, including retakes, by 30 minutes before the end of the last session. However, there were about eight more retakes, some small, that needed to be rerecorded in those final 30 minutes. I had all but one of those musical passages located in the lengthy score when the last 30-minute sequence started. We got within three minutes of the final moment, with only one retake to record, but it was the one I had not located in the score. So I spent about 30 seconds of that time frantically searching through the large pages to find the correct location. When I found it, I needed to instruct the musicians in four notation changes. We rehearsed the changes once. The union steward spoke out that I had only 40 seconds before going into high overtime costs. I told him in a breath that was all the time I needed. The engineers in another second said, "Tape's already rolling!" My preliminary measure gave the players the correct tempo, then the four bars in question received the definitive recording, and I gave the final cutoff just as the second hand of the clock on the wall crossed the precise closing second. We all cheered each other for this hairbreadth ending of a wonderfully successful series of recording sessions, particularly the final tense moments.

Chief recording engineer John Neal, Bonneville engineer Loren Ashcraft, sound design engineer



Composer Crawford Gates (left) and Frederick H. Clark, chief music copyist for the Hill Cumorah Pageant, discuss the orchestral score that would be performed and recorded in the Salt Lake Tabernacle shortly thereafter, in March 1957. Photo courtesy of the author.

Michael McDonough, and Bonneville director of music Merrill Jenson got together for a number of days of mixing and editing the music for the various purposes for which the recorded tape would eventually be used. Charles directed the work of combining the music track with the recorded voice track and sound-effects track for use at the hill, and Jerald Ottley and Ralph Woodward Jr. helped edit the choral portions. The editing and mixing took a total of 11 working days.

The final sound track was reproduced for all assistant directors at the hill so it could be used in rehearsals with the large cast in July 1988. The recording was balanced at the hill, locking it into its final format from that point.

When the sound engineer demonstrated the volume of the sound track, echoing the music off the hill into the meadow below, I walked alone across the meadow in the darkness of the night, enveloped by this magnificent wash of music—music that the Lord had given me to honor his holy name and to assist in pronouncing to the world the truthfulness of his latter-day work. Deeply moved by the wonder and joy of this sacred moment, I fell to my knees in thanksgiving for the privilege of composing the sacred music for a pageant that celebrates the Book of Mormon and reaches so many people. ❏