The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a long-standing tradition of congregational part-singing, setting it apart from most mainstream Christian sects, where unison singing is far more prevalent. Though the part-singing practice has largely been embraced by both leaders and parishioners, there has been a small but vigorous constituency within the church advocating a shift to unison-singing. The debate, which is fervently argued on both sides, is best understood within the context of the church’s historical singing practices and the primary influences that shaped them. Chief among these are the nineteenth-century American singing schools that were en vogue at the time of the church’s early development through the 1830s and ‘40s, and the hymnological aesthetics imbued in those same years by the heavy influx of British converts who then became the church’s earliest music leaders.

Though there are few period sources detailing the exact congregational singing practices of the early church, it is highly likely that the singing was initially done in unison. From its inception on April 6, 1830 through its second year, the church did not have published hymnbooks or hymns in any printed form, as it lacked access to a mechanical press; it is known, however, that singing was a part of its worship, implying some sort of oral tradition. When a press was finally acquired in 1832, the “hymns” produced consisted of texts only and were completely void of not only of musical notation, but even suggestions for tunes (see Figure 1). If the practices of the church’s contemporary Protestant sects are any indicator, the technique of “lining out” very well could have been used. The method entailed a pastor or designated song leader singing a line or two, followed by the congregation singing them back. This “old way” of singing, as it came to be called, has been characterized as chaotic and unruly:

The semi-improvisatory oral tradition of old-way singing freely ornamented melodies with scoops, slurs, and emotion-laden hiccoughs, and it executed tunes in ponderously slow tempi. When an entire congregation indulged in it, the effect was
raucous and discordant to those versed in regular singing, that more reverent form of singing that followed the printed notes.¹

The “lining out” method would have changed by the time the first hymnbook was printed in 1836 because a hymnological philosophy favoring part-singing, even with the texts-only hymnbook, emerged almost immediately²; part-singing became the convention and, interestingly, has remained the standard practice in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to the present day. The earliest factor giving rise to this new practice was founder Joseph Smith’s instigation of a formal singing school that same year, which led to many more singing schools and other formal, church-sponsored music training organizations. The exact note-reading curricula that the Saints used prior to 1841, if any formal or standardized curricula were used at all, is unknown; from 1841 on, however, Lowell and Timothy Mason’s Sacred Harp, which was notated entirely in parts, was a staple in the book section of the church’s printshop.³ Lowell Mason, a prominent music educator and church musician, was a staunch advocate of congregational participation in liturgical music. Since his tunebooks were notated in parts, he apparently saw part-singing as the possible, even preferred, modus operandi for congregational singing; his works aimed to facilitate musical literacy in general, not just among choirs. This is an important philosophical distinction, since those advocating unison singing within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today do so with their main premise being that unison singing is necessary to enhance congregational participation.

From their onset, the singing schools of the Saints were probably patterned after the singing schools that were popular at the time, all of which emphasized reading by note and in

¹ Michael Hicks, Mormonism and Music: A History (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 38.
³ Ibid., 41.
parts, rather than the “old way” method of simply singing back a demonstrated melody. Harry Eskew explains that the conglomeration of New England psalmody along with the residue of oral tradition – folk hymns, spiritual songs, and the like – “were set for three or four voices, with the principal melody in the tenor and the other parts composed quite independently.”⁴ Seeger states that “the contrapuntal style of the…shape-note hymns is part and parcel of the general Anglo-American folk-music idiom of the New World.”⁵ The singing schools perpetuated beyond Smith’s presidency and continued to permeate Mormon culture through the 1840s and ‘50s. Other even more ambitious church-sponsored music organizations began to cultivate the singing of masterworks of the likes of Handel, Haydn, and Mozart years later, after the Saints had resettled in the Salt Lake Valley, where Brigham Young carried on Smith’s vision of establishing the “New Jerusalem.” A major effort in achieving this aim was through a very deliberate fostering of refined vocal music. “Refined vocal music,” imparted in singing schools, often by those formally trained, was vocal music that was sung in parts.

Nineteenth-century sacred British vocal music was the inspiration for the singing schools that ultimately shaped choral singing in America. Moreover, many of the church’s earliest music leaders, functioning as singing masters and in other music leadership capacities, as well, were British. James Smithies, David Calder, John Tullidge, Ebeneezer Beesely, and George Careless were all men who drew heavily from their British musical roots in exercising their new musical stewardships. Their influences were exerted in the realms of vocal instruction, composition (especially hymn-writing), and conducting. Besides these leaders, British converts in general—familiar with much more elaborate sacred music than their American fellow Saints, and well

⁵ Seeger, “Contrapuntal Style,” 491.
accustomed to note-reading—emigrated in droves, bringing their tastes with them. By 1841, over five hundred British converts had joined the Saints in Nauvoo, Illinois, and several hundreds more joined them in Salt Lake Valley in 1849. The emanation of British choral prowess within the church’s ranks served to “elevate Mormon singing habits, to push Mormon music into the realm of music ‘by note.’”

One of the most significant British influences on music literacy in the American church was the Scottish immigrant David Calder’s use of John Curwen’s Tonic Sol-Fa method. Curwen, British himself, and also a teacher and minister, developed the system in response to a movement to improve congregational singing in Britain.” Choral societies throughout Britain employed his methods, which also came to be the standard approach to teaching music in schools throughout the country. Thus, it is highly likely that British Mormons had previously encountered Curwen’s techniques in some fashion. For the Saints in the United States who had had no prior life in Britain, Curwen’s influence still would have been felt through Calder, who had left Scotland for Utah in January 1851, and, being enthusiastically supported by Brigham Young, oversaw what came to be called “The Deseret Musical Association,” imparting the Curwen method to several hundreds of students.

Though the tunebooks used to disseminate these and other such note-reading methods, both in Britain and in America, were written in parts, unison singing was still the mainstay in nineteenth-century British parishes. For years, the congregations of English parishes had by convention been limited to unison singing of psalms only, while harmonized singing was more

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6 Ibid.
the pleasure of cathedral and collegiate parish choirs. This had to do with both policy and practicality; practically speaking, congregations were comprised largely of completely untrained singers. This state of affairs meant important hymnals of the day usually featured unharmonized tunes or texts only. Perhaps among the most explicit pronouncements on the matter can be found in the preface to the 1906 English Hymnal, which leaves no doubt as to the mind of its editor, the revered Ralph Vaughan Williams, whose stature in British hymnody was unparalleled: “Every hymn is so arranged that it can be sung in unison accompanied by the organ….the congregation must always sing the melody, and the melody only.”9 In the early nineteenth-century there was greater exploration of congregational singing methods, however, and the separation between harmonized choral singing and unison congregational singing began to be undermined somewhat. Curwen was among those advocating part-singing even amongst the laity, while, according to W.T. Whitley, others clung to the unison models of antiquity.10

The staunch pro-unison position exemplified by Vaughan Williams is the precise sentiment of those advocating congregational unison singing in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today. Hoping to achieve the same prominence as the heritage bequeathed by the British hymnodists, they naturally embrace the approach extolled by someone such as Vaughan Williams. However, another major, admittedly much earlier but still far-reaching figure in the rise of British choral traditions is none other than G.F. Handel, and his choral writing of course was very much part-singing oriented. Veneration of Handel’s Messiah lasted throughout the nineteenth-century in Britain; in fact, along with other Handelian favorites, such as Israel in Egypt, it was a frequent subject of attention amongst the country’s numerous choral

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societies, comprised of amateur singers. Edward Tullidge, a convert who hailed from Liverpool, immigrated to Utah in 1863, and became the church’s first music critic, observed, “times are changed and in England the choruses of Handel, and other great masters, are becoming familiar to the mass, and the grand Hallelujah chorus of Handel is almost as popular as ‘I wish I was in Dixie.’” Inexpensive printing of Handel’s scores further increased accessibility regardless of training or background. That the British immigrants brought and helped to foster a viable regard for Handel in the hearts and minds of the early American Saints is evidenced by their own presentation of his works in the 1840s and ‘50s (learned, incidentally, under Calder’s tutelage, employing Curwen’s Tonic Sol-fa system), which were well received by both the learned and general populace alike.

The current debate is essentially whether unison or part-singing is the superior method for congregational music. Both sides desire sincere and meaningful worship, improved congregational participation, increased sense of community, and “harmony” (metaphorically speaking) achieved through unity, but disagree as to what exactly “unity” means, and how it is symbolized and achieved; further, both camps look to British practices described above as exemplars of their ideals. According to the pro-unison point of view, “harmony” is achieved when all act with one accord, and are of “one heart and one mind,” symbolized quite literally by many voices becoming one, rising together in a single united strain. They also argue that unison singing better keeps the focus on the message of the text, where struggling to follow part-writing would be a distraction. Finally, unison-singing advocates assert that the keys in which hymns designed for part-singing are written often place the melody too high for those who can’t read

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13 Ibid., 221.
music and/or are not sopranos, thus making it impossible for all to participate. Robert Cundick, former Mormon Tabernacle Organist and the leader of the unison singing initiative, argues that the power and strength rendered by unison singing are

…impossible if each member of the congregation sings parts at will independently…. Heard from the pulpit, the usual result is a musical disaster with a few dominant solo voices singing parts at random with no balance, plus a generally somewhat apathetic majority wandering somewhere in between.\(^{14}\)

While it has had some impact, the unison-singing effort to reform congregational singing has been largely unsuccessful. Its three main influences have been lowering the keys of many of the hymns in the most recent edition (1985) of the hymnbook\(^ {15}\) in order to make the melody accessible to all vocal ranges, the Unison Hymn Singing Pilot Program, conducted by the Brigham Young University School of Music in 2004,\(^ {16}\) and the 2011 release of a supplementary compilation of easy hymn accompaniments intended for use with unison male voices.

In spite of the lowered keys of the 1985 hymnal, the hymns are still provided and sung almost entirely in four-part harmony. The reason for this is because the church’s official Music and Cultural Arts Committee sought to provide a way to make the melody more accessible to all vocal ranges, while still allowing those comfortable with part-singing to do so, affording all to participate in whatever way is most suitable.\(^ {17}\)

Not to be deterred, Cundick approached Dale Monson, then Director of Brigham Young University’s School of Music, in February of 2004 to seek his oversight of a “Unison Hymn

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\(^{15}\) The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Hymns (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985).


Singing Pilot Project,” in which formal data on reception and compliance was collected while participants engaged exclusively in unison congregational singing. Three stakes\(^{18}\) representing twenty-three wards (congregations) committed their involvement. The feedback was overwhelmingly negative; most detested the unison-singing experiment and strongly favored the part-singing model with which they were accustomed. Samples of feedback received when respondents filled out a survey at the end of the study are presented in Figure 2.

Resigned to the fact that, at least in the near future, a sweeping reformation of the church’s congregational singing practices was unlikely, Cundick resolved to focus his energies on winning over the male leadership of the church, assuming that from there, the movement would take hold and then incite a steady conversion of the rest of the membership. Collaborating with Don Cook, Associate Professor of Organ Performance at Brigham Young University Cundick, he prepared the aforementioned anthology of simplified accompaniments for hymns especially suited for unison male voice, to be sung in their all-male “priesthood meetings.” Time will tell if the collection finds a place in common usage amongst the Saints.

In light of the history of the church’s congregational singing practices, the issue of whether unison singing has a place in modern worship becomes more complex, both practically and philosophically. For example, part-singing may not be practical in regions unfamiliar with Western musical traditions. In these cases, it will be enough, at least initially, to help these Saints learn even just the tunes of their new found “Zion.” Additionally, both sides claim to seek stronger, more engaged congregational singing, but what is “strong” or “engaging” to one person may not be to another, especially considering the church’s now exceptionally diverse make-up. It is difficult to institutionally enforce something as subjective as “strength” or “beauty” or even

\(^{18}\) Stakes are regional districts embodying several congregations, or what some faiths refer to as a diocese.
“unity,” as demonstrated by the respondents to the Unison Hymn Singing Pilot Program.

Another factor to be considered is what, exactly, are the different roles between the choir and congregation. With an official proclamation stating that choirs are to use the hymnal as their primary resource and dismal budgets that do not allow for scarcely any purchases of commercially published choral music, the repertory between the two is fundamentally exactly the same, thus making little distinction between the two other than numbers of singers. Also notable is that the unison-singing constituents almost all happen to be organists. Perhaps part of the desire for unison-singing is for the advantage and freedom of the organist to improvise and reharmonize, rather than having to adhere to prescribed harmonies and voice-leading, thus allowing for greater range of expression. In presenting his position, Cook explained,

> While my point of view is technically “pro unison,” it is not exclusively so. I would more accurately be described as “pro worship” through congregational hymn singing with skilled, varied, and inspiring organ accompaniment. (Emphasis added.)

The irony of this, of course, is that, if greater options and flexibility afford the organist a richer, more gratifying experience, why then would it not be so for the singers? If the results of the Unison Hymn Singing Project are indicative of sentiments beyond those surveyed, it seems singers do not care to be pigeon-holed any more than organists do.

A recent phone interview with Diane Bastian of the church’s Music and Cultural Arts Department verified that the current official stance of the church is that local leaders should thoughtfully and prayerfully exercise discretion as to what best meets the needs of their individual congregations. For the hymns to unify what is now a worldwide faith, they need to

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19 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Hymns* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), x.
20 Don Cook, phone interview by author, November 17, 2011.
21 Diane Bastian, phone interview by author, November 18, 2011.
be accessible to all people, whatever form that may take case by case. This principal has always
driven the church’s congregational singing practices, as examination of their historical influences
makes clear. From the church’s onset, leaders recognized singing as a unifying force, even
before they had hymnbooks. When leaders embraced part-singing, the point was still to engage,
unify, and elevate their flock. Today, the pendulum swings both ways, depending on the needs,
abilities, and aesthetics of the respective congregations, with the aim ultimately still being
inclusiveness and connection to a faith that remains universal in its spiritual aspirations even in
the face of profound diversity amongst its adherents.

Whatever side one finds him- or herself on, both approaches can be used compellingly.
If the final aim is to draw participants closer to God through meaningful worship, as both sides
assert, then it is best to respect and facilitate the individual worshiper’s desire to intimately
commune with his or her God in whatever way is a sincere expression of that individual’s heart.
Interestingly, throughout the church’s history, no matter the form of singing employed, Saints
both past and present have singularly revered one particular passage from their canon when it
comes to worshipful singing; believed to be a revelation received in 1830 from God himself, the
scripture reveals a God who doesn’t care nearly as much about method as he does meaning:
“For my soul delighteth in the song of the heart; yea, the song of the righteous is a prayer unto
me, and it shall be answered with a blessing upon their heads.”

22 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *The Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake
City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989.)
The title page and publication information are missing from this archival source, however it is known from the spine of the book that it was published by the church’s Sunday School Union in Salt Lake City, UT, and the front matter referencing an 1874 concordance gives an approximate year of publication.
Figure 2. Sampling of responses of Unison Hymn Singing Pilot Project participants.\textsuperscript{24}

| I did not like the hymns in the lower keys. They lose some of their brightness and cheeriness. |
| The congregation does not have to sing in unison in order to “sing with one voice.” ...The singing of parts emphasizes our individuality and different voices being unified to make one beautiful sound. |
| I feel more unified with others when we are singing parts. Not only does it sound better, but each part feels needed. |
| I don’t think the goals of the program were met. Those who didn’t sing before still didn’t sing. |
| Instead of lowering our standards to make it possible for everyone to sing together, how about if we educate others so that we can all sing in harmony? |
| When we played out of the book you gave us, some...would start singing and then they gave up, because it was too low for them to sing. |
| Blah! Parts are more beautiful and uplifting. Singing in unison was very monotone, dull, and uninteresting. |
| Please don’t make us do this. It offends my soul. |
| If you make us sing in unison, you will go to hell. |

\textsuperscript{24} Monson, “Unison Hymn Singing Pilot Project,” 23-39.
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