

Mormon Artists Group: Adventures in Art Making

Glen Nelson

It is an elaborate experiment really, this Mormon Artists Group that I founded in 1999, seven years ago. In my interviews with the press, I have been saying that the number of LDS writers, painters, photographers, composers, etc., in New York City is about fifty, but that figure (which does not include performing artists) is frequently closer to one hundred. We began creating works together, including limited edition books and prints, five years ago.

Sometimes I am asked by journalists about the state of Mormon arts and what I think it means to be a Mormon artist today. To be honest, I do not have a satisfying answer. But I do know that Mormon Artists Group is having success finding LDS artists who aspire to the highest levels of achievement, and we are also attracting a new audience to their work, both in the United States and abroad.

I was surprised to come in contact with the art of Mormon New Yorkers. It was not the work itself that was unusual. The shock to me was that these were people I already knew, but I had no idea they were artists. I simply knew them as bishops and Relief Society presidents and high councilors and Sunday School teachers who lived near me in Manhattan. We were an underground subculture, and we kept our art mostly to ourselves.

I established Mormon Artists Group in 1999. Our first tasks were to create a series of exhibitions, charity events, and a CD-ROM portfolio of our works. We formed a lending library, a writers' group, and a virtual discussion group. These forums provided for regular communication among us. We proclaimed tentatively and primarily to each other: We exist.

In 2001 when we were readying our first publication under the ban-

ner of Mormon Artists Group Press, the writers whom I had invited to contribute personal essays after 9/11 for the volume titled *Silent Notes Taken* voiced a total lack of confidence that any reader would want to purchase a copy. They doubted, even though the books were beautiful, hand-bound volumes covered in natural linen, with hand-marbled endpapers, an introduction by Richard Lyman Bushman and four large etchings by Stephen Moore. We planned to offer it at \$100 (or \$400 for the book and an extra suite of the etchings in a matching portfolio case). The writers were quick to predict that none would sell. Reluctantly, they sent prospecti to friends and family. The entire edition of fifty sold out in a week, and a commercial publisher brought out a paperback edition six months later. It was a good beginning, and I was quite happy to wave royalty checks under the writers' noses. But if I felt encouraged by our initial success, the glow did not last long.

At roughly the same time our first book appeared, I sat in a rehearsal for an LDS concert performance at Carnegie Hall. One of the members of the 150-voice choir asked the conductor why there were no works by LDS composers on the program. His answer got a big, knowing laugh, "Because there isn't any Mormon music worth singing." I wanted to reply with a volley of LDS composers' names that could rival in quality our programmed Mozart, Fauré, and Barber. I thought I should defend our own composers, but I was too ignorant to do it.

My frustration took me to the library. Armed with the names of composers from our hymnal, I found numerous catalog entries for symphonies, operas, string quartets, ballets, chamber music, art songs, and choral works written by Mormons. Next, I found lists of contemporary LDS composers and searched for their works in our public and university libraries. I discovered over two hundred listings of fine art music that were on library shelves in New York. I could tell from the score descriptions, their titles, and the performance histories of the works that they were ambitious, serious compositions. How was it possible that I didn't know any of this music?

Our second volume became a reference of these findings, *Musical Compositions by LDS Composers in New York City Library Collections*. A few other artists helped me put the volume together. It was a book we published and sent free of charge to anyone we could think of who might care about music. We were lucky and received a small grant that allowed us to produce

it. When we launched a website (www.mormonartistsgroup.com), we made the book available as a free PDF download.

I am aware that the idea of LDS music and other LDS arts may not interest everyone, but I suspect that there is a critical mass of Mormons who will respond to LDS fine artists and be as engaged by them as they are by Britten, or Nabokov, or Warhol. That is our target audience.

I look back on it as an embarrassing act of hubris; but on the heels of my discovery that so many LDS composers existed, I wrote letters to sixteen prominent and emerging LDS composers in the fall of 2002 and invited them to collaborate on a grand venture. In the project I envisioned, each composer would select a visual artwork created by a Mormon artist (living or dead) and then write a piano work responding to it. I was working with Grant Johannesen at the time, writing the memoirs of his life as a concert pianist, and I asked him whether he liked the idea. He enthusiastically agreed, sight unseen, to learn and record the works. We planned to structure the compositions something like Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" rather than merely a collection of separate pieces. Whether the scores would be good and might coalesce as a whole, we could only hope.

Probably because Grant's name was attached to it, Crawford Gates, Robert Cundick, David Sargent, Reid Nibley, Rowan Taylor, Deon Nielsen Price, and other LDS composers from around the country signed on to the project despite their unfamiliarity with me. *Mormoniana*, as it was eventually titled, became increasingly ambitious as it developed. Ultimately, the volume contained an eighty-page score, a fifty-five-minute CD recorded by Grant, an original, signed, and numbered frontispiece print by Valerie Atkisson, sixteen full-color reproductions of the artworks chosen by the composers, and an 8,300-word essay on the subject of Mormon music and art by composer and author Michael Hicks. The volume was hand-bound in brown silk, with a twelve-color original artwork embroidered onto the front cover.

For me, it was an illuminating adventure that further encouraged me to seek a base of support for LDS fine art, and I learned a lot of lessons I had not anticipated. For example, the most famous composers were also the most generous. They were the first to turn in music, the first to send letters of gratitude and encouragement, and the first to turn over their considerable rolodexes to promote the project. I had likewise never imagined that the music I most admired would come from composers who suf-

ferred from the most self-doubt. One highly regarded composer wrote to me in a cover letter to his score, "I don't know if this is any good at all. If you don't like it, tear it up, and I'll start over." Two other composers constantly threatened to withdraw in frustration that they were not up to the task, only to turn in brilliant, challenging music at the eleventh hour.

This project coincided with a dismal year in which my family suffered through the hospitalization of my daughter for a brain tumor. When I realized that the collaborators' efforts might also be impacted by delays and perhaps even be abandoned, I wrote to them about my situation. The artists responded with a torrent of compassion—and this from people I had only recently met and even then only through correspondence. They confided to me their own physical challenges, which were shocking and extensive.

There is a stereotype about artists. They are said to be sensitive people—a statement laced with a pejorative bite, I suspect. But I can attest to a level of intimacy and kindness from these artists that I certainly didn't have any right to expect. Even now, every conversation with them begins with an inquiry after the health of our little girl.

Of course, I did not know it at the time, but *Mormoniana* turned out to be the last project for a few of the artists. Two became ill in their advanced age, and they lost the physical strength to compose within a year of completing it. A third, Grant Johannesen, passed away in the spring of 2005. *Mormoniana*, it should be said, is a very complex and technically demanding work for any pianist, let alone someone in his eighties. Grant left a very distinguished legacy of some fifty recordings. He was a pioneer, the first pianist to make long-playing classical music recordings, and he championed great music from all over the world, including music by Mormon composers. Our project was his final recording. *Mormoniana* came to be available in four separate editions that range from a deluxe volume signed by all the collaborators (\$500) to a paperback edition (\$50) to a single CD recording co-produced by Tantara Records (\$15.95).

From time to time, someone will approach me and inquire why so-and-so participated in one of our projects. They ask me, "Are they Mormon enough?" I found that question frustrating and unanswerable until I attended a seminar on African American poetry, and a panelist claimed that one of my favorite Harlem Renaissance poets should not be considered African American because his mother was white. To his mind, the poet wasn't fully qualified to tell the African American experience. It oc-

curs to me that my job is not to put such limits on Mormon culture. I am more interested in this question: Who owns the Mormon experience?

It is true that some of the artists in our projects are not devout, and we are very careful to make clear we are not affiliated with the Church other than by the fact that we are members. I've never asked artists what they believe. If an artist tells me he or she is an artist, I say, "Glad to meet you, artist." Then I expect them to show me that they are serious about it. Likewise, if they say they are Mormon (whatever that means to them), I do not stop to ask them what they do on Sundays. I care about their belief, naturally, because I believe, but I also value their contribution and experience whatever their level of immersion. I might be wrong in that approach, but it feels right and fair to me. At the very least, I do not think it's my role to judge and exclude.

It seems to me that, as a culture, we have no obligation to pay attention to our artists, but a lot to lose if we don't. There is clearly a tension between quality and faith. Two anecdotes illustrate it. Lansing McLoskey, one of the emerging composers who contributed a work for *Mormoniana*, said to me that everyone in his department at Harvard, where he was getting his Ph.D. in composition, knew he was a Mormon. His music even had elements of LDS theology in it. But he confided, "Even so, I can't get any of my music performed in church, and I'm the ward choir director!" Deon Nielsen Price, an LDS composer from California with a fine national reputation and a solid body of work, told me of a recent conversation with a student after a lecture. The young woman came up to her and, commenting on Deon's faith, asked incredulously, "How can you be both a composer and a Mormon?"

Still, I am not a reformer. I do not think it my job to alter a culture or to prove to somebody or everybody that art is hip or good or worthy; nor is it of interest to me to place values on artworks by Mormons and to categorize them as good, better, best. I leave the role of critic to others. I prefer advocacy. I like patronage. And I like making things with people who are interesting.

People can ask (and they should ask) whether the books and art published by Mormon Artists Group Press are any good. By that, I mean really good: Copland-good, Picasso-good, Milosz-good. That's our benchmark. To aspire to make anything less is like fishing on the ocean to land a minnow.

For the most part, it is a wonderful enterprise. My task is not with-

out dangers, however. I recently attended a lecture by James Levine, the artist director of the Metropolitan Opera. His candor was extraordinary. He discussed the fact that he repeatedly places musicians in positions of risk. I paid attention to this remark because I was in the audience the night a singer fell and died onstage. Dangers are real. Of course, he was referring to artistic risks. He said that his musicians will sometimes succeed but often fail. He noted, however, that artists must be put in such circumstances in order to flourish. It seems to me that the LDS artists whom I know are willing to put themselves and their reputations on the line as true artists must do.

I had a phone call one day in late 2002 from the most successful artist in our community, Lane Twitchell. Originally from Ogden, Utah, he had moved to New York and more or less conquered the art landscape with awards, museum exhibitions, grants, one-man shows at prestigious galleries, articles in national culture magazines, and reviews in the country's most influential art magazines and newspapers. Some might have been surprised at this because his early artwork was obviously about Mormonism, a risky move for an unestablished artist. His background did not discourage interest; rather, it fascinated the art world.

It is quite a strange experience to walk into a New York City museum and see a painting with the Salt Lake Temple in the middle of it, or with references to pioneers, the Deseret Alphabet, and other semi-hermetic symbols. That is how I felt as I encountered Lane's pictures at P.S. 1. It was a strange and also a cool experience. There was a sense of arrival, and I suppose that is what I want from Mormon artists: the aspiration of arrival.

I had asked Lane whether he wanted to collaborate on a project some time, and he called to propose that we produce some original prints together. I mention the process because I found it instructive to discover how collaboration can work, how fine art can find an audience in Mormon culture, and how Mormon art is absorbed into the larger culture of the world.

Lane liked to collaborate by throwing ideas around and soliciting responses. At first I was self-conscious, but Lane was encouraging. After I gave an idea, sometimes he would politely say, "I'll have to think about it," and at other times he would say, "Yes, and let's go even further than that . . ." The imagery of the prints came to be about aspects of New York City and the art market after 9/11. The title of the prints is *Mona Lisas and Mad Hatters*, also after an Elton John song that questions class tensions in New

York society. The prints were created by an unusual process of layering laser-cut paper and giclee prints.

The next step was the matter of selling our prints. Merchandising art is tricky. In this case, we settled on a price for the prints of \$250 each or the set of three for \$650. We wanted them to be affordable. The edition size was fifty. His gallery, located on Fifth Avenue and 57th Street, rolled their eyes at our pricing ("Far below market value," they whispered), but they consigned a group of prints, and we sent out the prospecti as well. Our customers responded quickly, and the gallery also sold prints immediately. The collectors were aware that the artworks were published by Mormon Artists Group Press, but I don't think the word *Mormon* had much influence on their purchase decisions one way or the other, and I think I enjoy that. Since then, the prints have been acquired by museums and major collectors around the world, and the majority of the edition is already sold.

We are fortunate to have developed relationships with some LDS collectors and institutions who have said to us, "We'll buy anything you dream up." That is a liberating position to be in, obviously. Still, \$250 is a lot of money for most people, and the idea of spending such sums for something that can't be eaten, worn, or driven is a barrier. In the case of these prints, after a specified number of months, Lane's gallery was able to reset the price to market value. They have raised the price by 500 percent to date. I like the fact of the increases and also dislike it. I want art that average people can buy and love, so we keep a range of items available at various price levels. I try to think of art as something that is not restrictive, but I realize that art with a capital "A" is an acquired taste that requires effort, time, and cash.

Money is not the primary obstacle, though. Working with artists, I hear the stories of their art acquisitions. The composer and educator Gaylen Hatton told me how he came to own a rich collection of paintings by Monte Anderson. Anderson's children needed music lessons, and the Hattons loved his paintings. They made an exchange of horn lessons for paintings. If there is anything I want to encourage, it is a mindset of patronage, and I have seen it function beautifully at every price level. Commissioning an artist is tremendously satisfying. Patronizing the artists within one's own culture should be the most natural and rewarding thing in the world.

Mormon Artists Group's projects have included works by sev-

enty-three artists so far. Our business policy is that any proceeds are divided equally among the participating artists. Mormon Artists Group gets nothing. Some of our works have been religious in nature and some not. That is how I perceive Mormon art. At its simplest, it is art made by Mormons.

In 2005, however, we created an identifiably Mormon project—a suite of photographs entitled *Manhattan New York Temple Portfolio*. It was interesting for two reasons. First, the street atmosphere surrounding the temple, located across the street from bustling Lincoln Center, is as inherently spiritual as a hockey rink and therefore presents a fascinating visual challenge. Second, the six New York artists who participated are highly successful commercial photographers, with photo credits in the *New York Times*, *Glamour*, *GQ*, *Rolling Stone*, *Oprah Magazine*, *Martha Stewart Living*, *Spin*, and on and on, but they are also spiritual people who rarely get to focus, so to speak, on objects of their faith.

The resulting images turn the idea of a temple photograph upside down. Seth Smoot did so literally, by standing directly under the building's corner ledge and shooting straight up to Moroni atop his spire. The photographers had to deal conceptually with traffic and visual noise. Should the rush of yellow taxi cabs be embraced as a whirling symbol around holy ground, as James Ransom determined, or obliterated? I was curious to see how they would present the surrounding skyscrapers. Jon Moe waited for a snowstorm that diffused the other towers while Kah Leong Poon captured a panoramic four city blocks with the temple at its center. Natasha Layne Brien made a nightscape as romantic and glamorous as possible, and Matthew Day brought whimsy and a philosophical edginess to his image in which his daughter holds a frame in the air that masks all of the temple but the statue of Moroni. We offered the photos separately for \$100 each or in a portfolio box covered in silk to match the temple's travertine marble for \$500 (edition of ten).

Another recognizably Mormon project we released recently was a new musical setting of the complete Articles of Faith composed for voice and piano by David Fletcher (\$7.95). Trained as a classical composer and then falling under the Broadway tutelage of Stephen Sondheim and Richard Maltby, D.'s music is naturally beautiful and unlike anyone else's. It is interesting to me to develop projects that allow an artist to take an aspect of our culture and put his or her stamp on it, like these basic tenets of faith turned into a song cycle.

Frequently, our projects have elements of Mormonism in them, but they always retain a strong artistic point of view. In late 2005, we produced an animated short film by Annie Poon—a young artist whose work has been acquired by the Museum of Modern Art. The film, *The Book of Visions*, combines the stories of Joan of Arc, the Sioux chief Black Elk, and Joseph Smith Jr. into a work of great originality and mystery. The twelve-minute film has already been accepted into two prominent U.S. film festivals. Annie also created a limited edition object for Mormon Artists Group with handmade objects related to the characters in the film housed in a crimson silk box (\$14.95, \$400.00).

In early 2006, we published a volume of poetry, *Curses for Your Sake* (\$14.95, \$100.00), by Javen Tanner, a poet whose work has appeared in many American poetry journals. His readers are likely unaware that he is LDS. The title of this, his first collection, gives a Christian clue by referring to the book of Genesis but adds little more; however, knowing he is Mormon gives the poetry an extra layer of meaning. That is significant, it seems to me, because the question of audience is tricky for many LDS artists. We think it need not be.

We like to produce books and original artworks—we frequently combine the two—and we alternate between book projects and fine art projects. Kent Christensen created a beautiful etching for us in the spring of 2006 based on his acclaimed series of paintings depicting candy, which teem with art historical and Mormon cultural references.

There are many projects in the hopper. Several artists are currently preparing holiday cards for Christmas 2006 that will be signed mini-editions. We are working with the Harold B. Lee Library to amass a comprehensive archive of LDS music to be housed at BYU (we have located some 300 symphonies by Mormon composers, for example). In 2005, we invited a large group of LDS artists and designers from across the country to create for us a new lexicon of visual graphic symbols that depict our belief, history, scriptural stories, and culture. We expect to publish this ambitious volume, called *New Symbols*, in 2007. And that is only the beginning.

Now I find myself in a terrifying and wonderful position. It is frightening because I worry that I am not up to the task. I am working with artists who may end up being historically significant. I expect their best; but if that is so, I should be better too, much better. Our press should aim for greatness toward the level of Kelmscott, Arion, and Golden Cockerel presses. Probably, it isn't possible. I certainly have a long way to go and

much to learn. On my more realistic days, I am sure I will fail at it. But my situation is also wonderful in that I have access to artists who wish to collaborate on projects that I suspect will be valuable additions to contemporary American art and, I hope, for Mormon art.