

## **TO THE GLORY OF GOD, III: MUSIC, THE BEGINNING OF A TRADITION**

by Tom Cox

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. . . .” Over the years, members of the First Presbyterian Church have hearkened well to those words from Psalm 98. Indeed, music was central from the very first. S. E. Wishard and Hugh Rankin brought a pump organ with them to the gospel tent meetings out of which the church came, listeners were moved by Wishard’s beautifully modulated singing voice. On July 15, 1904, the *Pocatello Tribune* announced that music would be a special feature at that evening’s gospel tent meeting, with Indians from Fort Hall singing “some gospel songs in their own language.” As Leigh Gittens put it, “good spirited music resounded at all [of the gospel tent] services.” Nor did it cease when Wishard and Rankin left. When the Rev. James Hedges arrived to become the congregation’s first minister, he found the church meeting in “an old warehouse” with the piano player sitting on an apple box — but piano there was, and every indication is that it was well used.

Music was not just a part of worship services; it was also a major element in other church functions and in outreach to the community. The church offered a New Year musicale in 1906 that the *Tribune* called “one of the best musical programs ever given” in Pocatello. On Easter Sunday that same year, the church presented a cantata, “The Nazarene.” Directed by Professor Edward Carlton of the Academy of Idaho — with assistance from his wife, Nellie, Mrs. E. C. White, and Mrs. Norman Belcher — it was open to the community. Easter cantatas were apparently held regularly thereafter; that of 1915, the *Tribune* noted, included “some of the best talent in the city.” Music appeared in other guises as well. In 1906 the popular W. A. Samms family orchestra provided frequent entertainment for the church, and its piano player sometimes played at services (An old photograph in the possession of May Hronek shows her the Gabriel Norbys standing in front of their house sometime before 1918; seated beside them is the Samms family orchestra). When Ladies Aid sponsored a reception for new members at the Earle White residence in 1909, the program featured two vocal solos, two piano solos, a flute solo (with piano accompaniment), and a zither solo; the local newspaper called the gathering one of the “most delightful events of the season.” Then, on the evening of May 6, 1910, the church presented the public with a musicale featuring piano, voice, and violin pieces. Nor was this all. Nellie Carlton directed a church choir; just when it was first organized is not clear, but it was obviously in place by April 1906; it continued thereafter, apparently continuously, under first one director and then another, although the names of some do not appear in the record. In 1915, the *Tribune* reported, Professor Robert E. Crossland was director of the church’s Cecilian Choral Club — whether this also served as the church choir is not clear, but Leigh Gittens wrote that Crossland was choir director that year. The names of subsequent directors *are* known.

For all this activity, perhaps the most notable of the church’s public presentations were the annual Scottish concerts held in January on Robert Burns’s birthday. These began in 1912 and continued for many years. Burns was a secular figure, with only tenuous ties to the Presbyterian church, but in honoring this favorite Scots poet-nationalist, First Presbyterian was joining thousands of others around the world in paying homage to the church’s and many of its members’ Scottish roots. The Scots concert of 1912 was not actually sponsored by the church,

but by its Christian Endeavor group, and the program was held at the First Congregational Church, whose west-side location was still Pocatello's population center and the dwelling place of most of the town's more affluent citizens (many, if not all, subsequent Scotch concerts seem to have all been held at the First Presbyterian Church). That first program featured music, dance, and recitations and was highlighted by a long tribute to Burns by Colonel H. V. A. Ferguson. In reporting on the evening's events, the *Tribune* saw fit to reproduce Ferguson's oration in its entirety. Whether that first Scotch concert turned a profit remains unclear, but many subsequent ones did — some bringing in more than \$250 — and over the years they became a favorite means of fund-raising. Later concerts, like the first, primarily drew upon local talent, although on at least one occasion bagpipers and sword dancers were brought in from Rock Springs, Wyoming. In 1932, when the church was hard-pressed by the Great Depression, the finance committee took over sponsorship of the event, seeing it as something of a desperately needed cash cow.

Somewhere along the line, the piano that had been present when the Rev. Hedges arrived was replaced by a pump organ, which supplied musical accompaniment at services for years thereafter — although, as Grace Tarr Bistline recalled, not without some difficulties at first. The church had a pianist who was unfamiliar with pump organs, and he kept forgetting to pedal; in the end, young Grace got down on her hands and knees beneath the organ and pumped for him by hand so that the services could proceed. In 1918, the church rented a piano; satisfied with the results, the following year church leaders voted to purchase it for \$160. At some point thereafter, a new pump organ apparently was purchased, but the records are not clear; this may have been the same organ that had been there prior to 1918. What is certain is that by 1941 the church's pump organ was wearing out, so in 1942 Ladies Aid, with the help of others, purchased an Organ-tron organ. By 1951 it too was showing its age, so Evelyn Turner donated a new Hammond electric organ; it was to remain in service until the installation of the present Wicks pipe organ in 1978, at which time the Hammond was sold to another church where it was to continue in service for many years.

Thus, by the 1920s, music — sometimes in conjunction with other sorts of entertainment — had become a central part of the First Presbyterian Church, a hallmark that set it apart and gave it an identity. It has remained so ever since, gradually growing and deepening until today the ministry of music stands tall among the programs of the church, a form of worship and praise that the author of Psalm 98 would surely applaud.