

Primrose Memorial Concert 2015

Myrna Layton



Atar Arad working with Jake Davis, student of Roberta Zalkind, at a masterclass at the University of Utah, January 23, 2015 (photo courtesy of Claudine Bigelow)

The Primrose Memorial Concert was held at Brigham Young University on January 23, 2015, with Atar Arad as guest artist. This annual concert series was instituted in 1982, the year of Primrose's death, making this the 33rd year of the concert. Primrose passed away on May 1 of that year, and the first memorial concert in his honor was held on September 15, with Emanuel Vardi, one of Primrose's former students, as guest artist.

While the date has varied from year to year, finally settling toward the spring rather than the fall, the intent of the concert has remained the same: to pay tribute to the artistry of William Primrose as a viola soloist and exponent of the instrument. Guest artists typically play at

least one of Primrose's viola transcriptions or a work that was part of Primrose's celebrated performance repertoire.

It has become customary for the guest artist to conduct a masterclass for the viola students at Brigham Young University—this year, Atar Arad conducted not one, but two: one at the University of Utah and another at the home of David Dalton. Thanks to the sponsorship of the Utah Viola Society, students of Roberta Zalkind (the University of Utah), Brad Ottesen (Utah State University), and Claudine Bigelow (Brigham Young

University) were able to observe or participate in these sessions.

Atar Arad is a masterful player and a kind and careful teacher. Several themes ran through the advice he gave to the student performers:

- Opportunities to perform do not come frequently, so make the most of them when they come. Look your best, prepare your best, memorize the music if possible—do everything in your power to maximize the opportunity. Playing for your teacher at the beginning of a lesson, for example, can and should be viewed as a performance opportunity.

The Creation

*Text and music by
Myrna Layton*

Tranquil $\text{♩} = 80$

1. On the first day, God said “Let there be light.” We
2. The sec-ond day, God said, “Let there be sky.” With
3. On the third day, God said, “Let there be land.” The

need the world to have both day and night.
clouds a - bove to rain on you and me.
wa - ters in the sea are al - so planned.

Let there be light; let there be light.”
Let there be sky; let there be sky.”
Let there be land; let there be land.”

4. On the fourth day, God said, “Let there be time.
With seasons marked by stars and moon and sun.
Let there be time; let there be time.”

6. On the sixth day, God said, “Let there be man.
First animals, then people, is the plan.
Let there be man, let there be man”

5. On the fifth day, God said, “Let there be birds,
And creatures in the sea made by my words.
Let there be birds; let there be birds.”

7. The seventh day, God said, “My work is good.
Let’s rest, for we have done all that we could.”
God’s work is good; God’s work is good.

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INTRODUCTION

It is my privilege to write an introduction to this beautiful book of Christmas songs by the talented Watkins/Gardner team. Vanja Y. Watkins, a music educator who taught at Brigham Young University (BYU), is the author and/or composer of 27 songs in the *Children's Songbook* of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; she is also the composer of two hymns in the 1985 LDS hymnbook. Marvin K. Gardner, who spent 28 years as an editor for the *Ensign* and *Liahona* magazines and is now a professor of editing, writing, and publishing at BYU, also wrote hymn and song texts that have been published in the LDS hymnbook and the *Children's Songbook*.

The publication of their hymn "Press Forward, Saints" led to a collaboration that has lasted nearly three decades. *Music of Christmas: Songs by Vanja Y. Watkins and Marvin K. Gardner* features the team's Christmas songs, one category of the many songs and hymns they have written together.

In 2014, my son David Layton interviewed Vanja Watkins for an article in *Mormon Artist*, an online journal. He was thrilled with this opportunity—having grown up in a family where we pay attention to "who wrote this?" Vanja's name was well known to him because she had written so many songs that he and his siblings loved and grew up singing, such as "I Will Follow God's Plan," "I Will Be Valiant," "Latter-day Prophets," and "Families Can Be Together Forever."

While reading David's article (see <http://mormonartist.net/interviews/vanja-y-watkins/>),

I was captivated to learn that every year for nearly 30 years, Vanja Watkins and Marv Gardner had written Christmas songs and sent them to friends and family as Christmas greetings.

Where are these songs now? I wondered. Is someone saving them? How will they be preserved? As the Music Librarian for the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University, I have worked for many years in collaboration with my colleague Janet Bradford to collect music by LDS composers, lyricists, and performers. So I immediately thought about our need to obtain these songs for the library as part of the creative output of LDS talent. I was also concerned about preserving the songs as part of the cultural record: songs on random pieces of paper in private music collections have a way of disappearing.

When I told David what I was thinking, he contacted Vanja, she brought Marv into the conversation, and this project was born. My role has been akin to that of a film producer, who plans and coordinates things and people to keep the project moving. Because Vanja had handwritten all of these songs, my most immediate task was to find funding and talent to engrave the music for publication. I was able to secure funding through the Harold B. Lee Library to hire John C. Leavitt, a talented student who is well versed in music notation software. John is also a developing composer in his own right—a rising star to watch. He brought his musical knowledge and creative sensibility to bear on this project and,

under the tutelage of Professor Gardner, was mentored to become a sensitive and thorough editor. John often commented that he was learning so much that he felt he had a private tutor.

The Harold B. Lee Library also gave needed assistance to our project through loaning us the time and talent of Olivia Hales, a graphic design student employee of the library's Social Sciences unit. Olivia's task was the layout and design of the book. At Vanja's and Marv's request, she integrated several of the elegant wood carvings of French artist Gustave Doré (1832–1883) to illustrate the powerful yet tender gospel themes that the songs bear testimony of.

This printed publication will not be the end of the project. We want to see *Music of Christmas: Songs by Vanja Y. Watkins and Marvin K. Gardner* live on in the world of digital databases as well. The Harold B. Lee Library is home to ScholarsArchive (see <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/>), an online repository for scholarly and creative content produced by faculty and students of Brigham Young University. After its initial run as a print publication, this collection of songs will find a digital home in ScholarsArchive and will be made available to the global research audience.

We hope that people of many faiths who love and worship our Savior Jesus Christ—including

people who live in remote places where they are not likely to know about or have the opportunity to purchase this book—will, in the near future, be able to find and access these Christmas songs through BYU's ScholarsArchive.

I thank those who made it possible for me to participate in this project. Vanja and Marvin trusted my genuine interest in preserving their work and allowed me to be of service to them. My supervisors at the Harold B. Lee Library, particularly Elizabeth Smart and Mike Hunter, encouraged me and helped fund student time for John and Olivia so that this project could be realized. What a great experience it has been for students to work with well-established talent like Marv and Vanja.

It has been a great opportunity to be part of a team working together to make this lovely book of music a reality. I hope many people will discover these songs and learn to love them as much as I do!

—Myrna Layton
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Young Composers and the Viola

Myrna Layton



Leon Haxby (photo courtesy of Poppy Grant)

How does it happen that non-violist composers decide to write works for the viola? For three young composers, Leon Haxby, Michael Biancardi, and John C. Leavitt, it is all because of violists! You are exponents of your instrument and its beautiful sound, and because of you, wonderful compositions have been written and added to the viola repertoire. Works by each of these young men can be found in the collection of scores made available through the American Viola Society's website, for easy access by the people who asked for their composition.

Leon Haxby, a London-based composer, was chosen to write a piece for five violas for the Birmingham Conservatoire Viola Ensemble to premiere at the

International Viola Congress held in Porto, Portugal, in 2014. Louise Lansdown, Head of Strings at Birmingham Conservatoire, asked that the composer use an English theme. The result was *Variations on a Theme by Edward Elgar*. Michael Biancardi, a native of West Linn, Oregon, had a good friend, violist Hunter Montgomery, who asked for a viola piece. "I think in his head, he was imagining something for viola and piano," Michael says, "but I wrote a piece for nine violas." That piece, *Strata*, was performed at the 2016 AVS Festival by the Crane Viola Ensemble. John C. Leavitt, from Colorado Springs, Colorado, developed good relationships with several excellent violists who suggested he write a piece for their instrument. When John was approached by a concert organizer to write a composition for a "Night of Concertos" event in 2015, he decided to write a viola concerto, which he titled *Icarus*, and invited his violist friend Devan Freebairn to be the soloist.

These young composers, respectively twenty-three (Leon), twenty-four (Michael), and twenty-five years old (John), are just at the start of their composition careers but are fully aware of the viola and its range and beauty of expression. John says, "I think what inspired me in writing for the viola is its own richness. I love that C string that gives such deep sound, but I feel like the viola still has a lot of access to the sweetness that is typically owned by the violin." Leon likes composing for the viola truly because of violists. He believes they (and other string players) "spend a decent amount of time preparing a piece before it comes to rehearsal and have a good work ethic." Because of this, violists make the compositions sound beautiful, the way the composers hope they will. Satisfaction all around!

None of these young men plays the viola himself. Leon plays bassoon and piano; Michael plays saxophone and dabbles in various other woodwind instruments; John plays violin and piano. Leon does incorporate

at first seemed intimidating. However, the first time rehearsing, I was amazed because it was like each part fit like a piece of a puzzle. At times it almost felt like we were in a drum circle, the music felt so alive.” April Beard says, “When the intertwining melodies and rhythmic motifs all came together, we really felt the groove of the piece, and I think the audience did too! The parts build on top of each other, and as they do, the music blooms. Since I just graduated this semester, this was the last piece that I got to play with the wonderful members of the Crane viola studio, so it became a very sentimental piece of music to me—you can’t help but to smile the whole way through.” As for other Biancardi compositions, Kristi Rawlinson Leavitt, who studies viola with Claudine Bigelow at Brigham Young University, has played viola on several of Michael Biancardi’s video projects. She says, “Michael was so great to work with. First of all, his arrangements make it so each of the instruments play something interesting, even if they don’t have the melody. I am a violist, so I’m used to having pretty boring secondary parts. Michael composed interesting and complex parts for everyone, even the inner voices, and that made it fun and exciting to play and listen to. Michael was also very open to suggestion. Since he is not a string player, sometimes there would be some awkward string crossings or bowings, but he was very willing to work with me to make things easier for me, but still sound how he had envisioned.”

The opportunity to play the *Icarus* solo for John C. Leavitt in 2015 was important to Devan Freebairn, then studying with Claudine Bigelow and now a student of Dimitri Murrath. John involved Devan in his compositional process early on. She advised him, for example, on the range of the instrument and on the use of clef signs to make reading easier. Devan says, “The music wasn’t too complex, but there were long slow glissandi, and it took me a lot of practice to learn how to slide my finger smoothly and slowly enough without the friction between my finger and the string making it sound jagged.” Ty Turley-Trejo, the music director of the Utah Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted *Icarus* on two separate occasions. He says, “I thought the viola solo was very well-written, with some unique, modern treatments of the instrument. The pizz.–arco interplay was perfectly suited for the main theme, and the up-slide embellishments were a distinguishing feature—both the allegro up-slides and the largo up-note sliding. The

balance of soloist with orchestra was well-conceived, and the interplay of the instrumentation was nicely done. In a concerto-type work there’s always concern that the soloist will be drowned out by the orchestra, and often times we have to rely on good composers to write lines that are *complementary* to the soloist rather than conflicting. John handled this like a pro.” Composer, conductor, and soloist were all very satisfied with the premiere performance and delighted that the audience responded to the work so favorably. Devan sums it up this way: “I enjoyed the process of learning a piece from scratch. It was very informative and enjoyable to be able to work with the composer and help him to write for viola. And I feel like the viola world gained a lovely piece in the end.”

The viola world has gained many lovely pieces through the efforts of all three of these young composers: Leon Haxby, Michael Biancardi, and John C. Leavitt. Be sure to look for their works in the “Resources” section on the American Viola Society website. Try them out!

For viola works mentioned in this article, visit: <http://www.americanviolasociety.org/Resources/Scores.php>. To learn more about the composers, visit their individual websites: <http://www.leonhaxby.com>, <http://www.biancardimusic.com>, and <http://johncleavittmusic.com/>.

Myrna Layton holds a doctorate from the University of South Africa and has taught world music at Utah Valley University. She currently teaches a Topics in Music class at Brigham Young University, where she is also the Performing Arts Librarian, an assignment which includes oversight of the Primrose International Viola Archive.