

Filling the World with Music of Faith

JANICE KAPP PERRY

Some of you here today may feel it has been a long road to receiving your degrees. Would it make you feel better to know that it has taken me sixty-four years to receive mine?

I am eighty-one years old, and a few years ago, my son John, who manages our music business in our home, heard me complaining about some of the challenges of old age. One day he came in from the mailbox holding up an *LDS Living* magazine and saying that they had named the 100 coolest Latter-day Saint women still living,¹ and I was one of them!

I asked, "Can you still be 'cool' at my age?"

And he said, "No. I thought you would like the part about still living!"

When President Kevin J Worthen and his wife, Peggy, came to my home last December, I had just recently been released from the hospital after experiencing a severe stroke. I thought it was so nice of them to come and check on me. When President Worthen explained that BYU was going

to award me an honorary doctorate in Christian service in music, I was dumbfounded.

I said, "President, I was only able to attend BYU for two years. After my husband and I were married, he served in the Army Security Agency for three years, and after that we concentrated on completing his degrees at BYU and Indiana University while I focused on raising our children."

President Worthen said, "Sister Perry, that is why we call it an 'honorary degree.'"

I am humbled and most grateful to receive such an award from this university, which I have tried to honor throughout my life by using my two years here as a music major as a springboard for adding to the music of our faith throughout the world. I consider it a culminating event in my life.

Two other times throughout my music writing career, Brigham Young University has honored me in ways that I never expected: first with the Alumni Distinguished Service Award in 1997, and

Janice Kapp Perry received an honorary doctorate when this BYU commencement address was given on April 23, 2020.

again in 2009 when BYUtv filmed a sixty-minute documentary of my life titled *Janice Kapp Perry: A Life of Service and Song*. During my forty-plus years of writing, publishing, and recording my testimony in song, I could never have dreamed of such recognition. I am most grateful to the university whose faculty gave me the training and confidence to make this contribution in the second half of my life.

“I Promise I Will Do Something!”

I am a descendant of faithful ancestors from Holland and the British Isles who recognized the truthfulness of the gospel and had the courage to leave their homelands and gather in the United States to build up Zion—as Church leaders were encouraging new converts to do in the late 1800s. My siblings and I were all born in Ogden, Utah, where we enjoyed the fellowship of these great pioneer ancestors as we grew up. In time, the Church encouraged families to branch out to other states to strengthen the wards and provide leadership. My family and two of my uncles’ families made the long trek to the small farming town of Vale, Oregon, where the three families farmed the land, milked cows, and raised children who were strong in their testimonies. I attended school there from third grade through high school graduation. I experienced an idyllic childhood as my testimony grew through the teachings of my parents and Church leaders.

My home was always full of music! Dad and Mother played drums and piano in a dance band they called the Kapp Orchestra, and they played for every high school and Church dance I attended. Dances in our Vale ward were held frequently, and their wonderful toe-tapping music was a big hit in the farming community. The orchestra played for temple wedding receptions for free, and when I was married, all those for whom they had played for free chipped in a few dollars each to pay for a different band so that my parents could stand in my wedding line.

My mother taught me to play the piano, and I was kept busy with music callings in the Church. Back when Primary was held on a weekday, I accompanied the Primary for five years before

leaving for BYU. I was also sacrament meeting chorister for a few years, including one Sunday when President David O. McKay was visiting our ward. I stood just a few feet away from him as I conducted the congregation in singing, “We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet.”² I received a burning witness during the singing of that hymn that he was in very deed a prophet of God.

We had wonderful youth choirs, especially on the stake level, and my testimony grew to full fruition as I grew up in such a spiritually strong environment.

Mother and Dad gave birth to a mixed quartet of children, and with no TV in those days, Sundays were spent gathered around the piano to sing or play our band instruments with Mother accompanying us. My brother Jack taught me a love for sports, as he needed a practice partner out on the farm, and I was second to him in age. He taught me well in all sports but especially fast pitch, and I played on city and Church teams until I was forty, when injuries were becoming a bit too serious. I was very active in both music and sports in high school, playing percussion instruments in the band and playing in intramural sports tournaments at school. I worked in the potato sheds as a teenager and accompanied Grace’s School of Dance on the piano for fifty cents an hour until graduation.

Neither of my parents were able to graduate from high school—each had to quit school and work to help support their families. But we children each grew up with a love for BYU and a goal to earn good grades so we could go to BYU after high school. My love for BYU began when I would often see my mother wrapped up to keep warm in the dead of winter and sitting in the car for a couple of hours listening to a static-filled broadcast of a BYU football game. I soon got hooked too, and I went out to listen with her. It makes me laugh now to recall how we two cheered our hearts out for BYU! Every now and then she would start the car up to generate some heat, and then she would turn it off again so we could hear better.

When it came time to go to BYU, I received a scholarship, but I was a bit conflicted about what to major in, because I loved sports and music

equally. Mother convinced me that majoring in music education would be more of a lifetime pursuit. Also, there was not much going on sports-wise for women in the 1950s. We packed up our car with all of my things and headed to Provo, where I lived in Heritage Halls with Delma Grigg (Saunders), my lifelong friend who later married my cousin. We were both music majors and immersed ourselves in music theory, playing percussion in the Concert Band, playing with the Opera Orchestra, singing in University Chorale, and enjoying our wonderful religion and English classes (and dating). Oh, we *loved* BYU!

During the summer break I returned to Oregon and worked in the potato sheds and at Ore-Ida Frozen Foods, which was owned by Delma's dad, Nephi Grigg.

One day my dad asked me, "Sis, why don't you give piano lessons instead of working in the potato sheds?"

I answered that I didn't think I would enjoy giving piano lessons.

He asked further: "Then what will you do with this musical training you are receiving at BYU?"

I remember pausing for a moment to think about it, and then I said, "I don't know for sure, Dad, but *I promise I will do something!*"

Making Our Way Back to Provo

During my second year at BYU, I noticed a handsome returned missionary named Douglas Perry in four of my music classes, including band, for which he was the property manager. I was curious about him but didn't feel any interest back on his part until we were in a clarinet workshop one day. Just before I was to play for my midterm exam, I was sucking my reed to soften it, and he nudged me.

I said, rather impatiently, "What do you want? I am playing next."

He turned toward me and said, "I was just thinking: those lips look like they were made for something better than playing the clarinet."

What?! That line was the beginning of the end of my college career. After a fun school year of dating, we were engaged to be married at the end of the next summer. I went home to Oregon, and

Doug returned to his family home in Chicago. He decided to check with his draft board and found that he was to be drafted in September, so he decided to enlist for a three-year period in order to have more choice of the type of service he would give. This ended my chance to continue on toward graduation from BYU.

During the summer, Doug did his basic training at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri. Then his parents picked him up there on the way to Utah for our marriage in the Logan Temple. Our reception was in Vale, Oregon, and then we were off to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, where Doug was assigned temporarily until he could start his training in the Russian language at the Presidio of Monterey, California. Our first son, Steven, was born at Fort Ord, California, a little over a year later. Doug graduated number one in his class of 105 servicemen learning Russian, and he was then assigned to a post with the Army Security Agency in Japan for fifteen months with no possibility of Steve and me going with him. I returned to my Oregon home, where we spent those months with my parents.

During the two years following Doug's return, he received his bachelor of arts degree in Russian at BYU, and another son, Robert, was born, followed by a daughter, Lynne, the following year. These were busy days with our growing family, but happy times too, as we worked in the Church and enjoyed our children. And I played ball on Church teams.

Soon Doug moved on to pursue higher degrees in Slavic languages and literature at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. There I started typing for students and professors and babysitting other children to supplement our income. Doug did well in his classes, taught French, sang in a Russian chorus, and continued his studies for a few years. I played on a very competitive women's softball team, and Doug and I often played coed volleyball with Church friends. I had been playing racquetball for years and enjoyed frequent matches with women in our ward. Doug was called as a Seventy and was heavily involved in missionary work during our years there, as the university was a fruitful field

for conversions. We enjoyed various other Church callings in music and teaching while there.

Two additional sons, John and Richard, were born to us in Bloomington. The Rh factor had become a problem for our babies and was first manifested at Lynne's birth, when she needed a blood exchange at birth to restore her health. It was more severe with John, and our bishop, Don Sorensen, donated blood for his exchange. John was induced two weeks early, and after a blood exchange and a blood transfusion, he was okay. But Richard's health was deteriorating in the womb, and one day I had to be rushed to Indianapolis, where the doctors tried to infuse him in the womb with whole blood plasma, trying to buy a few more weeks. Unfortunately the procedure started the labor, and Richard was born the next night, two months early. The doctors did a blood exchange, but Richard's lungs were not mature enough to sustain life, and doctors did not know in 1968 how to treat this. Doug gave Richard a name and a father's blessing, and he passed away a few hours later. Since this problem was worse with each child, we knew we would not be able to have other children. This was a great sadness for us.

Computers were becoming a big thing in the world at this time, and Doug's passion for them made him leave his studies and work full-time in data processing, which he did for several years in Indiana. It was easy to find work, and companies were willing to train workers on the job. He enjoyed this work very much, and he worked in this field for most of his remaining career.

My father was close to dying in Utah, so we left Indiana and returned very quickly so we could be there to support Mother after he had passed. In just forty-eight hours, ward members helped us move in. We had reached Utah in time to spend a few days with my father, who was only fifty-seven when he passed. What a sadness that was.

We were glad to be home in Utah again, and Doug worked in data processing at Utah State University for the next four years. I played on some very competitive women's city softball teams and also some talented Church teams during our four years in Logan. I also continued my

home typing business for students and professors. We were Aggie fans during that time, because we lived near the football stadium and basketball arena and never missed a game. Whenever USU played BYU, we always hoped for a BYU win, but we could not be too obvious about it.

Doug received an opportunity to work for the Church's computer division—Management Systems Corporation—in Salt Lake City, so we made the decision to move south. Since we had four children who we hoped would be going to BYU in a few years, we ended up moving to Provo, and we settled there for good. Doug commuted to Salt Lake for years while driving a van with twelve other passengers. He later worked for IRECO Chemicals, setting up a new computer system for them.

Oh, how we loved being back in Provo to cheer to our heart's content for our Cougars in all sports! We never missed a football or basketball game. I asked our stake president if they had a women's softball or volleyball league in our stake, and he said, "No, but we should!" And he called me on the spot to organize it. All the wards were enthused about it, and we had some exciting tournaments during the next several years. I also pitched for one more super competitive city team that won the regional tournament in Idaho. Doug and I also played on a great coed team from our ward, which won second place in the regional tournament at BYU.

Producing Music That Testifies of Gospel Principles

During this stage of life, when I was nearing forty, I had what I now call two lucky breaks that turned me from playing sports to writing music: I broke my ankle playing basketball, and our TV broke. While my foot was in a cast, our bishop came and asked me if I would write original music for our ward's roadshow. I protested, saying I had not written any music since my BYU days, twenty years earlier, but he felt confident I could do it. When I started to write, it was exhilarating, and I wondered why I had not thought to do it sooner. I wrote the music, got others to direct and

do costumes, and we won. I was hooked. I knew I wanted to write music!

The ward kids urged me to keep writing, so I tried writing some popular songs like the ones I had heard my parents play in the dance band. That was fun but not fulfilling, and one day I looked at the song “I Am a Child of God.”³ It was simple music with simple words, but it was so profound in its meaning!

I set two specific goals: (1) add to the simple music of the Church, and (2) write a song that Primary children would sing one day.

Around this same time, I heard Elder Boyd K. Packer’s 1976 landmark address about music and the arts at BYU. Elder Packer confirmed what I was feeling about the need for simplicity:

*Some of our most gifted people struggle to produce a work of art, hoping that it will be described by the world as masterpiece! monumental! epic! when in truth the simple, compelling theme of “I Am a Child of God” has moved and will move more souls to salvation than would such a work were they to succeed.*⁴

I began to write for Church events, Young Women theme songs, missionary farewell and homecoming songs, songs for Primary, et cetera. In 1976 I published my first song, “I’ll Follow Jesus,” and I took the sheet music door to door to Church bookstores and music stores. Only a few other people were writing music for our Church at the time, and the stores were very happy to have something new for the Saints.

When I wrote music for the roadshow again the next year, Merrill Jenson—who has scored many of the movies for the Church—was our stake roadshow director, and he helped me by producing in 1978 our first album of music, *Where Is Heaven*, which succeeded beyond our wildest dreams. Randy Boothe, the director of BYU’s Young Ambassadors, furnished singers for this first album, which included our son Steve, who was now a student at BYU and also performing with the Young Ambassadors.

Our family music business, Prime Recordings, boomed during the 1980s, and, one by one, everyone in the family became involved with it to some

extent. My husband left his work and came to join the family business full-time, and later on John joined us full-time. John has been managing every part of our operation ever since.

Early on I had sent some of my Primary songs to the Church. I was told that the Church receives too much music for them to evaluate and that I should just work at brightening my own little corner of the world and finding fulfillment there. So that is exactly what I did—and I definitely found great joy in it. In 1987, most of those first songs I had sent to the Church were published in the new *Children’s Songbook*, and that is mainly how my songs first became known worldwide. Another album that introduced the Young Women values in 1986, *I Walk By Faith*, furthered the spread of our music for youth throughout the Church.

I cannot even describe what happened during the next thirty years. As I grew in confidence and overcame my fears of speaking and singing at firesides, our family was just kind of swept up and carried to stakes, states, and other countries in a way I could never have imagined. The stories the Saints related after our programs were heart-warming and motivated me to continue producing music that testifies of gospel principles. The love of the Saints was invigorating.

Now, in 2020, I look back with such sincere gratitude for all I learned in my two years at BYU, and I marvel that it gave me such a wonderful background for what I would someday do with music. I will always be grateful to this institution and to wonderfully prepared teachers who passed on their love for and knowledge of things musical to me in such a beautiful way.

Each of my siblings attended BYU, receiving degrees in engineering, art, and music. All four of our children have attended BYU, and all four performed with BYU’s Young Ambassadors around the world while studying for their degrees. My music studio has a trophy shelf adorned by six footballs signed by coaches from LaVell Edwards to Kalani Sitake. Bronco Mendenhall even invited me to speak to the football team on my seventieth birthday, and the team honored me by singing, “Army of Helaman.”⁵ I am truly all-in as a BYU alum and rabid sports fan, and I have been a

Campus Education Week speaker for many years. I love everything this university stands for and am truly honored to receive an honorary doctorate as a culminating event in my life.

Notes

1. See number 73 in Matt Bennett, “The 100 Coolest Mormon Women Alive Today,” *UtahValley360*, 23 January 2014, utahvalley360.com/2014/01/23/100-coolest-lds-women-alive-today; see also the linked article in “The 100

Coolest Latter-day Saint Women Alive Today,” *LDSLiving*, ldsliving.com/The-100-Coolest-Latter-day-Saint-Women-Alive-Today/s/74855.

2. “We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 19.

3. See “I Am a Child of God,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 301.

4. Boyd K. Packer, “The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord,” BYU fireside address, 1 February 1976.

5. “We’ll Bring the World His Truth: Army of Helaman,” *Songbook*, 172–73.