I want to respond to a question that I face with some frequency. It has many variations, but the theme is this: Why do we not have more inspired and inspiring music in the Church? Or why do we have so few great paintings or sculptures depicting the Restoration? Why is it when we need a new painting for a bureau of information, or perhaps for a temple, frequently nonmember painters receive the commission? The same questions have an application to poetry, to drama, to dance, to creative writing, to all the fine arts.

Now, I am sure there are those who will say, “Why does he presume to talk about that? He is uninformed. He is just out of his province.” It may comfort them to know that I know that. My credentials to speak do not come from being a musician, for I'm not. I am not a composer nor a conductor, and certainly I am not a vocalist. I cannot, for example, play the piano. I would be very unwilling to do so. However, should I be pressed to it, I could without much difficulty, prove my point. I am not adequate as an artist nor as a sculptor, a poet, or a writer. But then I do not intend to train you in any of those fields. My credentials, if I have any (some of them should be obvious), relate to spiritual things.

I hope for sufficient inspiration to comment on how the Spirit of the Lord influences or is influenced by the art forms that I have mentioned. Since I have been interested in these matters, I have, over the years, listened very carefully when they have been discussed by the Brethren. I have studied expressions of my Brethren and those who have led us in times past in order to determine how those questions should be answered.

The reason why we have not yet produced a greater heritage in art and literature and music and drama is not, I am very certain, because we have not had talented people. For over the years we have had not only good ones but great ones. Some have reached great heights in their chosen fields. But few have captured the spirit of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the restoration of it in music, in art, in literature. They have not, therefore, even though they were gifted, made a lasting contribution to the on dispensation of the fulness of times. They have therefore missed doing what they might have done, and they have missed being what they might have become. I am reminded of the statement: “There are many who struggle and climb and finally reach the top of the ladder only to find that it is leaning against the wrong wall.”

I would like to express some concerns I have had over these matters and describe to you some disappointments I have heard expressed among the leaders of the Church. Because I intend to be quite direct in my comments, I am a bit concerned. For I know when we touch this subject we must remember to give them more careful liberties. Something spiritual was lost from our meetings because the music was not what it should have been. Next time we must remember to give them more careful instructions.
Why is it that the president of the Church, or the president of the stake, or the bishop of the ward must be so attentive in arranging music for worship services and conference meetings? Why should the anxiety persist that if the musicians are left to do what they want to do, the result will not invite the Spirit of the Lord?

I have in the past made not altogether successful attempts to set a mood of devotion on a very sacred subject, having been invited to the pulpit immediately after a choir or choral number which was well performed but did nothing to inspire the spirit of devotion; or after a brass ensemble has rendered music that has nothing to do with spiritual inspiration.

The selections, which for other purposes might have been admirable, even impressive, failed in their inspiration simply because they were not appropriate. For some other gathering, some other time, some other place, yes — but they did not do what they hymns of the Restoration could have done. How sad when a gifted person has no real sense of propriety!

Let me illustrate this matter of propriety. Suppose you sponsor a pep rally in the stadium with the purpose of exciting the student body to a high point of enthusiasm. Suppose you invite someone to present a musical number with the expectation that the music would contribute to your purpose. Imagine him playing a sonata on an organ in subdued tones that lulls everyone into a contemplative and reflective mood. However well composed the music, or however well performed, it would not be appropriate for the occasion.

This example, of course, is obvious. It makes me wonder, therefore, why we must be constantly alert to have appropriate music in our sacrament meetings, conference sessions, and other worship services. Music and art and dance and literature can be very appropriate in one place and in one setting and for one purpose and be very wrong in another. That can be true of instruments as well.

We have, in our instruction to the musicians of the Church, this suggestion: “Organs and pianos are the standard musical instruments used in sacrament meetings. Other instruments, such as orchestral strings, may be used when appropriate, but the music presented must be in keeping with the reverence and spirituality of the meeting. Brass and percussion instruments are generally not appropriate.” (General Handbook of Instructions [SLC: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1976], p. 23.)

We are under resistance from some highly trained musicians who insist that they can get as much inspiration from brass instruments or a guitar solo as from a choir. I believe that an organ perhaps could be played at a pep rally in a way to incite great enthusiasm. And I think a brass section could play hymn in such a way as to be reverent and fitting in a worship service. But if it should happen, it would have to be an exception. We cannot convey a sacred message in an art form that is not appropriate and have anything spiritual happen. But there is a constant attempt to do it.

Several years ago one of the organizations of the Church produced a filmstrip. The subject matter was very serious and the script was well written. The producer provided a story board. A story board is a series of loose, almost scribbled sketches, sometimes with a little color brushed across them, to roughly illustrate each frame of the filmstrip. Very little work is invested in a story board. It is merely to give an idea and is always subject to revision.

Some members of the committee were amused by the story board itself. It had a loose comical air about it. They decided to photograph the illustrations on the story board and use them in the filmstrip. They thought they would be quite amusing and entertaining.

When the filmstrip was reviewed by four members of the Council of the Twelve, it was rejected. It had to be made over again. Why? Because the art form used simply was not appropriate to the message. You just don’t teach sacred, serious subjects with careless, scribbled illustrations.

Now, again to music. There have been a number of efforts to take sacred gospel themes and tie them to modern music in the hope of attracting our young people to the message. Few events in all of human history surpass the spiritual majesty of the First Vision. We would be ill advised to describe that event, the visit of Elohim and Jehovah, in company with rock music, even soft rock music, or to take equally sacred themes and set them to a modern beat. I do not know how that can be done and result in increased spirituality. I think it cannot be done.

When highly trained artists insist, as they occasionally do, that they receive spiritual experience in tying a sacred gospel theme to an inappropriate art form, I must conclude that they do not know, not really, the difference between when the Spirit of the Lord is present and when it is not.

Very frequently when our musicians, particularly the more highly trained among them, are left to do what they want to do, they perform in such a way as to call attention to themselves and their ability. They do this rather than give prayerful attention as to what will inspire. I do not mean “inspire” as the music or art of the world can inspire. I mean inspire! They are not content to use the hymns and anthems of the Restoration; for such a presentation, they feel, will not demonstrate their full capacities. When pressed to do so, they may grudgingly put a hymn on the program. But it is obvious that their heart isn’t in it, for the numbers they select themselves seem to say, “Now let us show you what we really can do.”

I know there are those who think that our Church music is limited. Some with professional abilities evidently soon get very tired of it. They want to stray away from it and reach out into the world. They present the argument that many of the hymns in our hymn books were not written for the Church or by members of the Church. I know that already. And some of them are not really as compelling as they might be. Their messages are not as specific as we could have if we produced our own. But by association they have taken on a meaning that reminds members of the Church, whenever they hear them, of the restoration of the gospel, of the Lord, and of His ministry.

Sometimes, to ensure that music will be appropriate, one of the hymns or anthems of the Restoration is specifically requested. “Oh, but they sang that last conference,” our conductors will say. Indeed we did, and we preached the same gospel last conference also. The preaching of it over and over again gives it a familiar and
warm feeling. We build it into our lives. As speakers we are not trying to impress the world with how talented we are as preachers. We are simply trying to get across, by repetition if that’s the only way, the sacred message that has been entrusted to us.

Those of us who lead the Church are not constantly seeking new doctrine to introduce. We simply teach over and over again that which was in the beginning. It is with great difficulty that we try to pass on to the next generation, in some form of purity, that which was given to us. We will lose it if we are not wise.

The musicians may say, “Do you really want us to take those few familiar hymns and present them over and over again with no introduction of anything new?” No, that is not what I would want, but it is close. . . .

For the most part, we do without [new, spiritually powerful hymns] because the conductor wants to win the acclaim of the world. He does not play to the Lord, but to other musicians. The composer and the arranger want to please the world. The painter wants to be in style. And so our resources of art and music grow ever so gradually. And we find that there have marched through this grand parade of mortality men and women who were sublimely gifted, but who spent all, or most, in the world and for the world. And I repeat that they may well one day come to learn that “many men struggle to reach the top of the ladder only to find that it is leaning against the wrong wall.”

It is a mistake to assume that one can follow the ways of the world and then somehow, in a moment of intruded inspiration, compose a great anthem of the Restoration, or in a moment of singular inspiration paint the great painting. When it is done, it will be done by one who has yearned and tried and longed fervently to do it, not by one who has condescended to do it. It will take quite as much preparation and work as any masterpiece, and a different kind of inspiration.

There is a test you might apply if you are among the gifted. Ask yourself this question: When I am free to do what I really want to do, what will it be? . . .

There is the temptation for college teachers, in the Church and outside of it, to exercise their authority to give assignments and thereby introduce their students to degradation under the argument that it is part of our culture. Teachers in the field of literature are particularly vulnerable. I use the word warning. Such will not go unnoticed in the eternal scheme of things. Those who convey a degraded heritage to the next generation will reap disappointment by and by.

Teachers would do well to learn the difference between studying some things, as compared to studying about them. There is a great difference. . . .

It is sad but true that, almost as a rule, our most gifted members are drawn to the world. They who are most capable to preserve our cultural heritage and to extend it, because of the enticements of the world, seek rather to replace it. That is so easy to do because for the most part they do not have that intent. They think that what they do is to improve it. Unfortunately many of them will live to learn that indeed, “Many men struggle to climb to reach the top of the ladder only to find that it is leaning against the wrong wall.”

I mentioned earlier that the greatest hymns and anthems have not been composed, nor have the greatest illustrations been set down, nor the poems written, nor the paintings finished. When they are produced, who will produce them? Will it be the most talented and the most highly trained among us? I rather think it will not. They will be produced by those who are the most inspired among us. Inspiration can come to those whose talents are barely adequate, and their contribution will be felt for generations; and the Church and kingdom of God will move forward just a little more easily because they have been here.

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. . . .

But I am sure that He would be offended at immodesty and irreverence in music, in art, in poetry, in writing, in sculpture, in dance, or in drama. I know what He would think about music or art or literature or poetry that is purely secular being introduced into our worship services. And how do I know that? Because He has told His servants that. In what ways has He told them? He has told them by either withholding, or on occasions withdrawing His Spirit when it is done. . . .

Now, in conclusion, may I remind you what I said at the beginning. My credential to speak does not come from personal mastery of the arts. I repeat my confession. I am not gifted as a musician or as a poet, nor adequate as an artist, nor accomplished in the field of dance or writing or drama. I have a calling, one which not only permits but requires that I stay close to Him and to His Spirit. If we know nothing of the arts, we know something of the Spirit. We know that it can be drawn upon meagerly or almost to the consuming of an individual. . . .

The Spirit of the Lord can be present on His terms only.