

## FOCAL POINT

Rural Utah has much to offer. And the most valuable asset it possesses is the people. FOCAL POINT takes an up-close and personal look at those individuals who's success is firmly rooted in the small communities throughout rural Utah.

### Mack Wilberg: They're Playing My Song by Renee Banasky

**W**hat would it be like to command the rushing wind, a babbling brook or a mighty ship? Dr. Mack Wilberg might have a clue. He stands at the helm of hundreds of voices as he directs the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Not only is he the associate director of the choir, he arranges a majority of the music they sing. You could say that he is a captain and an architect all at once... a maestro.

Aside from his work with "America's Choir," Wilberg is famous for his classical compositions. Orchestras around the globe perform the Emery County native's original music.

Those who work closest to Wilberg have dubbed him a living legend. Craig Jessop, director of the choir, is enthusiastic in his praise. "Mack Wilberg is the single most complete musician that I have ever known or worked with in my life, bar none. And I have worked with many, many talented people from around the globe.

"It doesn't matter if he's conducting, arranging music, playing the piano or composing. He is successful at everything he touches. Mack Wilberg is a phenomenal genius in everything he does."

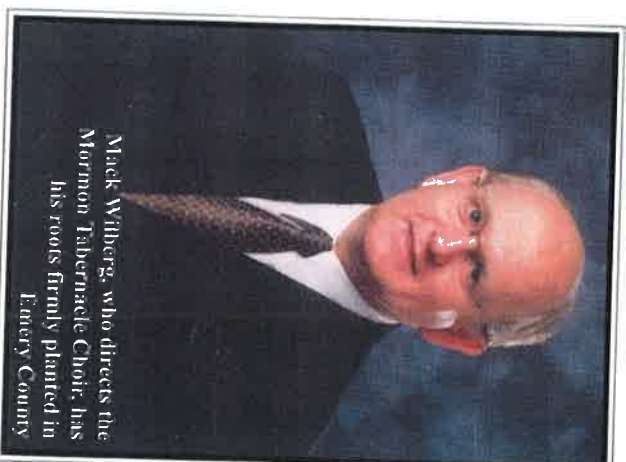
Even if the whole world knows of Wilberg's talents, Wilberg himself doesn't seem to. "He is very bashful and humble," said Mack Christensen, president of the Mormon Tabernacle

Choir. "You smile at Mack and he goes red. He doesn't order anyone around. He just quietly does it himself."

"He is the kind of man that you'd want with you in a two-man canoe."

#### Plunking on the piano

Wilberg's rise to success is rooted in his humble youth. His story begins



Mack Wilberg, who directs the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, has his roots firmly planted in Emery County

in a coal mining and farm community in Emery County, Utah. Wilberg's mother, Helen, claimed, "When he was three, Mack was playing songs for me on the piano by ear."

He continued to spend many hours plunking at the piano in his mother's front room—so many hours that he literally wore off the enamel and blackened the piano keys.

A tractor accident at the coal mine left Wilberg fatherless at 10 years of age. Helen raised him and his sister Julie alone. Helen supported the family as a second-grade teacher. Mack Wilberg's grandmother helped Helen care for the family.

Many teachers influenced Wilberg's talent but it was not an easy road. His mother nearly pulled him out of piano lessons after a year or two because to her surprise he didn't know the notes and continued to play by ear. However, his teacher, Yvonne Jorgensen, persuaded Helen to let him continue and Wilberg did learn the notes.

At 12, Wilberg enrolled with Janice Siggard in Price. "She was always sewing because she didn't think that she could do Mack's talent justice," Helen remembered. "But she taught him a very important thing... to work."

The musical education continued at Brigham Young University (BYU) during the summer school breaks. Wilberg became a trained pianist and clarinetist.

Wilberg earned a bachelor's degree at BYU and master's and doctoral

degrees from the University of Southern California.

BYU was anxious to add Wilberg to their faculty when he returned from California. During his first-year teaching at BYU, he met his wife Rebeeca. She was a graduate student and earned a doctorate in musicology. As part of the faculty at BYU, Wilberg threw himself into teaching and conducting the men's chorus.

#### Heart-Wrenching Decisions

Thinking about leaving BYU in 1999 was heart wrenching for Wilberg. "It was a very difficult decision because I was really enjoying my work at BYU," he explained. "After I decided to leave I wasn't even sure that I had made the right choice."

Becoming the associate-director of the choir did not come by happenstance. Jessop had been watching Wilberg's accomplishments. "I recruited Mack," Jessop said. "In fact, we labored very hard to get him to come from BYU to work with us. There was no doubt in my mind that he had to be here! It just had to be. I learned a long time ago to surround myself with the best people and there is none better than Mack Wilberg."

Though the decision was not easy, Wilberg claims that from the moment he began working with the Tabernacle Choir he knew that he had made the right decision. He is proud to say that he has absolutely no regrets.

And why should he? The choir has made unprecedented changes—adding the Orchestra at Temple Square, expanding the selection of music, launching a record label and creating the Temple Square Chorale. Wilberg conducts the Temple Square Chorale—a training group for new members.

#### Play that one more time

Of the many talents Wilberg possesses, he is most noted as a composer and arranger. Wilberg arranges a majority of the hymns the Tabernacle Choir sings. His attention to detail is unquenchable.

"As an arranger Mack is never satisfied," explained Jessop. "I'll bet that he has rewritten his music 5 or 6 times. We'll perform a piece and leave it for a year. When we want to perform it again he will say, 'well I've rewritten it since.'"

When Wilberg arranged, "Still, Still, Still," for the choir's Christmas CD, he was unsatisfied with the string arrangement. Through rehearsals, he kept



working on it. By the time they recorded it, the piece had gone through many, many rewrites. Some were so small that only Wilberg could tell the difference. He would not rest until the music was perfect. "He's very independent and self-sufficient in his musical abilities," added Jessop with a smile.

One original composition, "Jesus, the Very Thought is Sweet," has been recorded by the choir. The lyrics are based on an ancient text. Wilberg added an original score. Jessop described the

work. "It sounds like it came down from heaven. The melody sounds familiar yet it's not. It's original. The text is very rich and filling."

For Wilberg, there are many more notes to be written both for the choir and orchestras around the world. But he isn't afraid to look back. "I'll always be a part of Emery County. Wilberg emphasized. "The people are what make the area great. They have had a profound influence on me. They and my heritage have made me who I am."





**DIRECT**

Mack Wilberg, at right, associate director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir since 1999, has been named as the choir's director. Above, he directs the choir during the April 2006 general conference.

Photo by Jason Olson / Deseret Morning News

# Choir director

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Edgar Thompson, former director of the University of Utah School of Music and a volunteer with the choir, was announced as the interim assistant to Brother Wilberg until a formal search is undertaken and completed for a new associate music director.

As music director, Brother Wilberg will oversee all musical and creative aspects of the choir, the orchestra, the Temple Square Chorale and the Bells on Temple Square, including selecting repertoire for concerts, recordings, and creative direction for the weekly Music and the Spoken Word broadcast. He is also involved with selecting and training new choir members and many other duties. He, along with the choir president, Mac Christensen, will represent the choir at receptions with scheduled performances.

Prior to this appointment, Brother Wilberg served as associate music director of the choir and conductor of the Temple Square Chorale. He was appointed to those positions in May 1999. He had been serving as interim choir director ever since Craig Jessop stepped down on March 4 as director.



Don Bassett Photo©

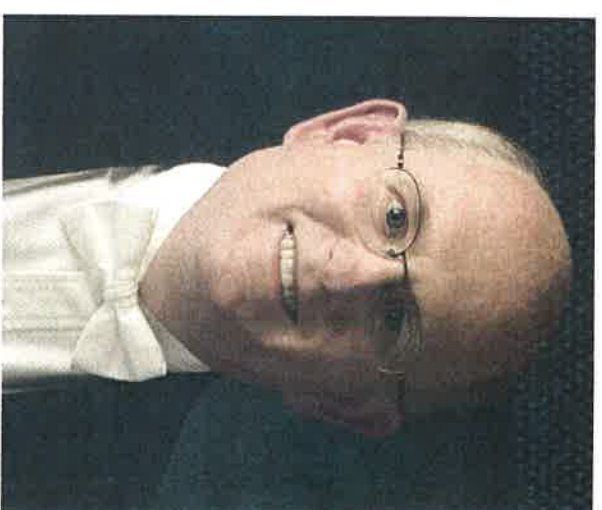
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Brother Wilberg told the *Church News*: "Craig leaves a great legacy. There are things that he was able to do during his tenure that only he could have done. Those include the beginning of the choir school, the formation of the Orchestra at Temple Square — those were done with the support of President Gordon B. Hinckley and Wendell Smoot, former president of the Choir, and, with direction of our current president, Mac Christensen, the beginning of our own highly successful recording label. Aside from being a wonderful musician, Craig is a man of compassion, vision, exuberance and goodness; all of those combined make for a great combination.

"I'm very honored by this appointment and very aware, again, of the legacy and tradition that have preceded me. I know that I and everyone else involved with the choir, stand on the shoulders of those who came before us."

Brother Wilberg has a clear memory of the first time he saw and heard the Tabernacle Choir. "I grew up in a little town in central eastern Utah," he said. "Coming to Salt Lake City was a big deal. I came to Salt Lake City with my grandmother and we went to the Tabernacle one evening when the choir was rehearsing. Richard Condie was conducting and the choir was singing 'The Holy City.' I remember that sound, and I was almost not able to believe what I was hearing, and to be in the Tabernacle seemed so incredible. Now, it is almost unbelievable that I'm involved in that very activity. When I see children at choir events or rehearsals, I'm always aware of that experience that I had as a young boy, and I'm always wondering who is out there. You just never know."

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AP Photo

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**SACRED**

Mack Wilberg conducts Orchestra at Temple Square in performance of Robert Cundick's "The Redeemer." Soloists, shown on stage in biblical costumes, sang the roles of angels, prophets and the Savior.

# 'The Redeemer,' performed for Easter Tabernacle Choir, orchestra present Robert Cundick's sacred masterwork

BY R. SCOTT  
LOND  
Church News  
Staff Writer

**I**n 1977, while serving as Tabernacle organist, Robert Cundick took on a task any faithful follower of Christ would find daunting, even someone with Brother Cundick's musical credentials.

**Through an intense 10 weeks, he found that if he approached the Lord in prayer before approaching the piano, the musical notation would stream from his pen.**

Ralph Woodward, music professor at BYU, had selected scriptures as text for a musical service depicting the doctrines and Atonement of Jesus Christ. He called upon Brother Cundick to set the text to music, a formidable challenge largely because, unlike most poetry, the words of scripture have no meter.

Brother Cundick quickly found it absolutely essential to seek inspiration from the very Source of those words.

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would stream from his pen.

What resulted is the masterpiece, "The Redeemer," a work performed in identical concerts March 21-22 in the Salt Lake Taberna-

cle as this year's Easter offering of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and Orchestra at Temple Square.

Mack Wilberg conducted the choir and orchestra, with soloists Sara Thomas, soprano, in the role of Mary; sopranos Jennifer Welch-Babidge and Rebecca Wilberg and mezzo-soprano Laura Garff Lewis as angels; baritone Darrell Babidge as the Savior; and baritone Shane Warby and bass-baritone Clayton Brainerd as prophets.

The work is considered so sacred that notations in the printed program and on a television screen in the Tabernacle instructed the audience that it is intended to be performed from beginning to end without interruption or distraction, and applause should be held until the conclusion of the postlude.

Drawn from all four of the Church's Standard Works of scripture, "The Redeemer" is composed of three parts: "The Prophecy," "The Sacrifice," and "The Promise."

Part I draws upon prophecies from 1 and 2 Nephi, Mosiah, Alma and Helaman in the Book of Mormon, and from the gospel of Luke to convey the message that the Messiah would be born of Mary and be called the Son of God, the Redeemer of the world.

Part II turns to passages in the Doctrine and Covenants and the Old Testament Book of Job, as well as the Book of Mormon to tell of Christ's atoning sacrifice.

The work culminates in Part III with a glorious declaration of the hope and light to be gained from the Savior's resurrection and Atonement, as taught by Book of Mormon prophets and latter-day revelation, and the admonition to "watch, that ye may be ready" (Doctrine and Covenants 50:41-46).

During a standing ovation, the appreciative audience was treated to an appearance by the composer himself, who retired in 1991 after 27 years as Tabernacle organist and is now 81.

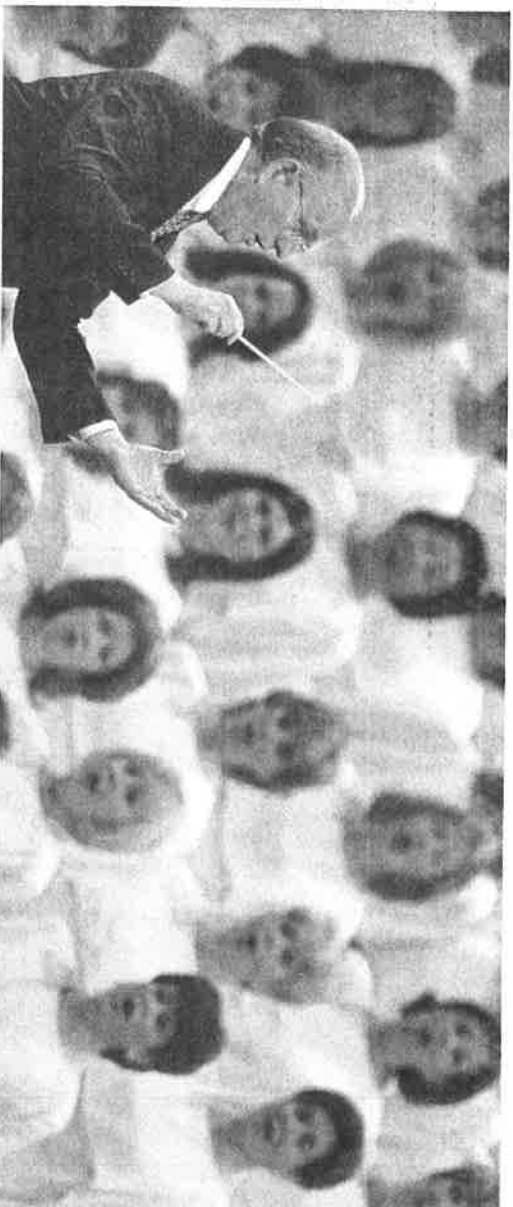
[rscoff@desnews.com](mailto:rscoff@desnews.com)

Photos by Stuart Johnson, Deseret Morning News



In their annual Easter Concert in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, Mormon Tabernacle Choir and Orchestra at Temple Square present "The Redeemer," a cantata of sacred music by Robert Cundick, retired Tabernacle organist.





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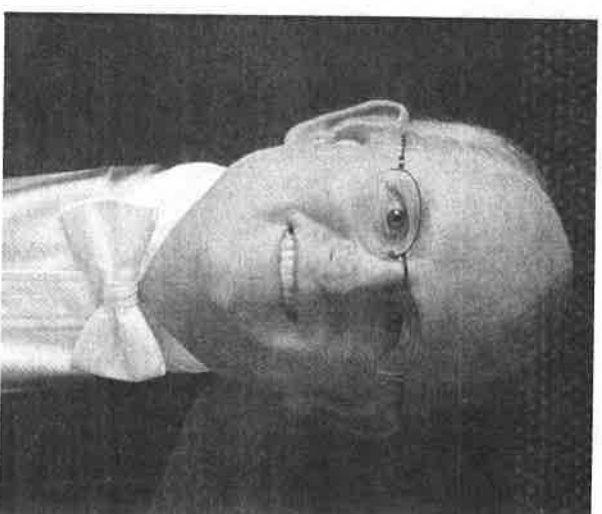
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## The Salt Lake Tribune

<http://www.sltrib.com>

### Mack the nice

Mormon Tabernacle Choir director Wilberg's musical talents are exceeded only by his humble, generous nature.

By Catherine Reese Newton

The Salt Lake Tribune  
Salt Lake Tribune

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As bishop of an LDS student ward at Brigham Young University in the 1970s, Paul Pollei once coaxed his congregants to attend choir practice by telling them, only half in jest, that they would be "singing in front of the future director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir."

Pollei's prediction came true this March, when The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints appointed Mack Wilberg to lead the 360-member choir after nine years as its associate director. Wilberg will conduct the choir and Utah Symphony in a Deer Valley Music Festival concert Aug. 15.

"I've been so impressed with the way he's stepped up," said soprano Lorraine Rowberry, a 10-year veteran of the choir. "He has moved forward in a very humble way, yet he knows his ability and goes forward with a lot of confidence."

"Mack is the single most talented musician I've ever known in my life," said his predecessor, Craig Jessop, who remains a close friend. "A Mack Wilberg comes into a community once in a century, maybe. And it's not just one area - he could have been a concert pianist, a composer, an arranger, a conductor, a scholar."

Wilberg grew up in the Emery County town of Castle Dale. When he was 9, his father was killed in an accident at the Wilberg Mine, which the family owned "when it wasn't worth anything," he said. Young Mack started playing the piano by ear at age 4; soon, his mother was driving him to nearby Price to study. By his early teens, he was taking lessons from Pollei at BYU whenever he could make the trip to Provo. "It was very obvious when he was a youngster that there was much talent there," Pollei said.

Wilberg, also an accomplished clarinetist and accordionist, enrolled at BYU for a year before serving an LDS Church mission in South Korea. He was surprised at the number of performance opportunities his mission service presented, and it was there he began dabbling in musical arranging. (He reported that his language skills have languished, but his taste for Korean food has not.)

He returned to BYU unsure whether he wanted to continue as a piano performance major, but then fate stepped in: Who should be sitting on the stand on his first Sunday back at church but Pollei, who had been on sabbatical pursuing a doctorate when Wilberg had entered BYU. Pollei wasted no time persuading his former student to stick with the piano.

"The thing I remember most about him as a student, besides his stellar talent and musical ability, was that he was always, always available to accompany other students in a vocal recital, an instrumental recital - anything," Pollei said. "It was clear to me how generous he was." There may have been an additional motive at work: Wilberg, who said he had been "bitten by the choral bug" by then, also used his musical network to assemble choirs that soon attracted a loyal following.

Wilberg earned master's and doctorate degrees in choral conducting at the University of Southern California before joining the BYU faculty in 1984. He led the university's Concert Choir and, especially, its Men's Chorus to new prominence. He also was a founding member of the American Piano Quartet along with Pollei, and arranged much of the group's two-piano, eight-hands repertoire.

"BYU was a wonderful experience," Wilberg said. "I worked with great and talented students. . . . I really thought I would be there most of my career." When he joined the Tabernacle Choir staff, "I came not knowing if I'd made the right decision, but really, from my first day on the job, I've had no regrets," Wilberg said. The



53-year-old music director now lives in Bluffdale with his wife, Rebecca, who works as a vocal coach with the Temple Square Chorale; three of their four children still live at home.

"Craig was very generous," Wilberg said. "So much of what we did was a team effort. If it hadn't been that way, I would have felt very much out of my element," especially when Jessop abruptly left the choir in March.

The new position makes it harder to find time for composing and arranging - Oxford University Press calls him "one of our most important composers" - but he hopes to get back into a composing groove within a year.

"Mack is so quiet and unassuming that he almost succeeds in masking the intensity of his musical brilliance," Utah Symphony music director Keith Lockhart said. "It speaks loud and clear, though, in the wonderful catalog of arrangements and compositions he has created over the years, as well as in his knowledgeable and incisive direction."

Wilberg's "brain works faster than anyone else's," said Rowberry, who lauded his ability to run efficient rehearsals. And he's mindful of the demands on the volunteer choir members' time, which the singers appreciate.

"It's a bit of a sacrifice, not only for the choir members but for their families," Wilberg said. He also credited the choir's army of staff and volunteers: the wardrobe department, the librarians who keep track of about 2,000 pieces of music in any given week, the "Music and the Spoken Word" lighting and sound technicians, the people who make sure chairs and music stands are in the right place.

The program this week at Deer Valley includes hymns, psalms and folk songs, many arranged by Wilberg. (A notable exception is Leonard Bernstein's "Chichester Psalms.") Folk hymns are a particular passion of Wilberg's.

"There is a treasury of material there that hasn't been tapped, but that is a perfect fit for what we do here," he said. "I just love the folk element. A lot of that has to do with my background - being from a smaller, more removed place, that element really speaks to me."

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## At Deer Valley

### **The Mormon Tabernacle Choir and Utah Symphony »**

will perform Aug. 15 at 7:30 p.m. in the outdoor amphitheater at Deer Valley Resort. Mack Wilberg, the choir's music director, will conduct.

**Tickets are »** \$30 for lawn seating, \$12 for students and youth, \$80 for families and \$60 for reserved seats.

Prices will increase \$5 the day of the performance. Tickets can be purchased by calling 801-355-ARTS or 1-888-451-2787, visiting the Abrahavanel Hall box office, or going to [www.deervalleymusicfestival.org](http://www.deervalleymusicfestival.org).

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