



Crawford Gates

INTERVIEW BY **ANNIE MANGELSON** | PHOTOS BY **GREG DEAKINS**

Composer and conductor Crawford Gates has written nearly 900 titles. His prolific musical career has been rewarding in many aspects, but he most values the opportunity to touch lives through art, love, and the Spirit.

What is an important element of teaching or learning music?

I started to write when I was eight. I had a year of piano music study with a wonderful teacher who was sixty-five years old, and she loved me. When I was nine, I took violin in Palo Alto where I grew up, next door to Stanford. Many of the teachers there were brilliant. My fifty-five-year-old violin teacher was part of the school system there, and I loved her. She liked my talent the same as my piano teacher.

So I had these two women, one who was sixty-five and one who was fifty-five, who influenced my musical life. They did more than just teach me how to play the piano. They taught me chords and music theory and key signatures and inversions and just all kinds of things, before I was nine years old. The violin teacher changed me to the viola at age ten because I had a longer arm than the other students, and as a violist I started playing in a string quartet. I would meet at my teacher's home on Sat-

urday afternoons for about an hour or hour and a half, for an extra lesson. I only lived two blocks from her and I thought that it was wonderful that she would do that for me. I could hardly wait to get home to practice the new techniques that she had given me. My expertise went up very quickly.

She and her husband were seriously injured in an automobile accident and they died about eight months after the accident. The death of this wonderful, brilliant teacher who loved her students was a great loss to the Palo Alto school system. I spoke to the Music Educators of Utah last summer at their annual conference, and I told these stories to them, saying we don't ever hear about love in our schools or classes or lectures, but in my experience it was one of the most fundamental things that I had at ages eight, nine, and ten. I had fabulous teachers who loved me, and they showed me by the way they taught me.

I've seen it many years as a professional music educator — one

of the most important things in music education is love. That became part of my philosophy of teaching.

When I first got the job as an orchestra conductor for Wisconsin's Beloit Janesville Symphony Orchestra, I decided that I would make the orchestra a loving family. I knew that orchestras frequently had cliques in them and that there was often animosity against the conductor. Therefore, my attitude was never autocratic. I was with that orchestra all thirty-four of my years back there, so I went through two generations of players. We were a loving family.

Before I left, I had in my last few years one of the most brilliant violinists, Norman Paulu, in the whole of Southern Wisconsin as my concertmaster. Everyone loved him. He was so brilliant and yet so sweet a man. My string section just came together under him! He would make periodic comments and demonstrations to the whole string section about a passage, and they would follow it. He gave a speech once

and said, “I’m going to retire next month. I’ve played in a lot of groups and in a lot of places. I’ve been your concertmaster for three years, and I’ve played with other orchestras over the years that were really more technically expert than this orchestra, but none of them have had the spirit of this orchestra.”

And I thought, that’s the triumph of my objective of the last thirty-four years: that he said this orchestra had the greatest spirit. We loved each other, and I thought, “That’s the most important of any human experience.”

What was the importance of your mission, with regards to your musical career?

Several things about this part of my life were important: it was my mission, and I had a musical service to perform. In addition, at age nineteen I became an established arranger for choral music and a conductor on the radio. During this time we were able to perform a wonderful missionary service via broadcasting.

My mission was in the eastern states: New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland. While I was on my mission, the missionaries would all meet at the Hill Cumorah for two weeks while we produced the pageant as cast and crew. That’s when the auditions took place that made my chorus possible. The mission president permitted all the missionaries, male and female, to be auditioned vocally and he created two choruses in the mission field — both made up of good singers.

I was the conductor of an eight-voice male chorus. Roy Darley, who was later the tabernacle organist, was both my accompanist and my companion. My baritone was the district president and he functioned as the priesthood authority; I was the musical authority. I had two tenors that could sing



a high C and I had two basses that could get to low C. I did forty-three arrangements for that choir, for broadcast.

Being in a chorus wasn’t considered the “real essence” of missionary work, but it turned out to be so, because of the number of little radio stations that were then all over that area of the United States. Each village had a radio station that would broadcast to about 5,000 in their area. The district presidents would book us two to three weeks ahead, and we would go to perform for these radio stations on Fridays and Saturdays.

Over a period of about ten months we covered one hundred radio broadcasts within about 150 to 200 miles around Philadelphia, into New Jersey and Delaware. We would go out Friday at noon,

having tracted our heads off the first four-and-a-half days in the week — enough to equal all the other missionaries in the mission field so we wouldn’t be looked upon as “gold bricks.” On Friday we would do about three broadcasts in the afternoon and one in the evening, and then between four and six on Saturday. In total, we would have about eight broadcasts: fifteen minutes each, with twelve minutes of music and a three-minute gospel message written by Marsden Durham. Our messages were very direct and addressed the apostasy, the restoration and the Book of Mormon. These messages were the real point, not the singing; the singing got us accepted.

The broadcasts were very successful. We became known throughout that area. Eventually



the word got up to the big station. The biggest station in Philadelphia had an audience of five million as opposed to five thousand. They heard about this small, cracker-jack Mormon chorus that was wonderfully blended, wonderfully produced, and that memorized everything. They asked us to come up to their station, and they liked us so much that they put us on prime time for four months — the last four months of my mission. We had sixteen broadcasts in four months on this big station with its huge audience.

Tell us about *Promised Valley*, the Hill Cumorah Pageant, and *Joseph! Joseph!*

They were wonderful. You've hit on the top three of my career. I have a total of 874 works, and I keep

track of them. My wife calls me an arithmomaniac; I give numbers to each of them. I'm working on #875 right now. But of the three you mentioned, *Promised Valley* was my first big monolith. The Hill Cumorah Pageant has been going for seventy-two years now, and not many pieces get played every year, particularly in the Church. But the newest one is *Joseph! Joseph!*

All 874 of my pieces have been successes in the sense that they got published, recorded or performed — those are the things that can happen to pieces. And those three have had tremendous performance records. That's what makes them important. The one that sits on a shelf at BYU, that gets premiered and then not looked at for months, isn't, because it hasn't affected anybody; or at least not

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many. These three are my most valuable works because they have value to someone else and they are valued by the Church.

Why do you think music is a valuable way to tell Church history?

Because it's so popular to the people. It's a vehicle.

Opera was invented by two or three men in Italy around 1600, and it immediately caught on. It's

still very popular today. Musical plays are like operas, but with dialogue.

The American musical play is one of the most valuable contributions to music history that's ever existed.

Promised Valley was patterned after the style of *Oklahoma!*, an American musical play. The Hill Cumorah Pageant was a pageant, which is a different kind of vehicle.

A pageant is a drama with vocal text that is sung, and with an orchestral underpinning like a movie.

What was it like composing *Promised Valley*?

Promised Valley had immediate importance because it was the vehicle to celebrate the centennial of the state of Utah. *Oklahoma!* came out in 1943, so in 1946 the state of Utah was planning for 1947, and they said, "We want something for Utah that would do the same for Utah as *Oklahoma!* did for Oklahoma." And that was their image: a Broadway kind of show.

We had interesting experiences happen in the middle of that creative period. I got the contract for it in January of '47, and the contract called for it to be completed by opening night, the 22nd of July. (July 24th was the third performance.) *Promised Valley* was produced in the University of Utah stadium, which at the time had two sides to it, but no north bowl. The *Promised Valley* money put a cement bowl on the north side of the stadium. You can imagine what that would cost. That bowl held 12,500 every night.

Well, in the contract, the question came up, "What about the orchestration of this?" Broadway theater pits couldn't hold more than a twenty-four piece orchestra, and they didn't think that a twenty-four piece orchestra in the stadium would sound like anything — not outdoors and in a stadium. So, they wanted to hire the Utah Symphony for six weeks: three weeks of rehearsals and three weeks of performances. The Symphony was about sixty-five pieces at the time; a big orchestra.

Now on Broadway, almost no composer would ever orchestrate his own score; the producers would bring in four or five top Broadway orchestrators. And that was only for a twenty-four piece orchestra.



This issue came up early on as we discussed the contract. “We want the Utah Symphony and you’ll become the conductor of the Utah Symphony for this event.”

That was the issue: this score would have to be for a symphony. “We want a Broadway-style presentation like *Oklahoma!*, but we want it to be arranged for a symphony. And you are going to conduct it.” That was to be in my contract.

What I didn’t know was that it would become a two-hour show, and that I would be writing a two-hour score, so certainly pretty big. I was only twenty-four when I signed the contract, twenty-five when I wrote the score, and I thought, “Well, I’m a big boy; I can write the full orchestration myself.”

I started to work on the fifth of January and they wanted it by the twenty-second of July. I begged their permission to go home to California to spend Christmas with my family, and have two wisdom teeth taken out. When I got back, they had an office for me, right across from the Salt Lake Temple, on the third floor of what was an old high school building. I had a classroom, I had a piano that they tuned up for me, I had a desk and a pencil sharpener, and I had 1,000 pages of score of my own design to do the shorthand orchestration with colored pencils.

The first act of the script for *Promised Valley* was there, although it didn’t have a name at that point. They also had the contract for me to sign, and the first third of the payment. That was an important day.

I had a contract! And a check for a third of it! This was the first real full-time job I had as a composer; a composer of something important to the state of Utah, and to the Church, and to me. There aren’t very many American composers who get full-time

composing jobs for important things. So I started working daily, getting down there about eight o’clock. I’d work until noon, have lunch, get back to work about a quarter to one, and work until about six. Then I would take off about forty-five minutes for dinner, and work again until about 10:30, six days a week. I was doing the orchestration work of five on Broadway.

As time progressed, it became apparent that I couldn’t be the music director, because I wasn’t finished with the score. Because I was composing, I had no chance to go to the rehearsals for the choreography, the choral work, or the soloists, and the music director has to do that. No one blamed me; they knew I was working like mad. I got through the score two days before *Promised Valley* opened.

The last bit was the overture, a six-minute piece, which I composed in about eighteen hours. I don’t know how long it took me to orchestrate it, but the Lord blessed me with a beautiful overture. It took me maybe three or four days. The tunes were already there, but it was traumatic. And of course it had to be copied for the orchestra. They got every high school music director in the Salt Lake Valley to each take a fraction of the piece and to do their parts. Unfortunately, because of that, the overture was full of errors. Then the orchestra rehearsed it the night before, and of course half the rehearsal was spent correcting the errors. The second time the orchestra read it was opening night.

How did you become involved with the Hill Cumorah Pageant again, after your mission?

I was there as a missionary in 1941, and the pageant was in its fifth year. In the beginning, they had been using classical recordings for the music. The selections were all

appropriate, but they came from different contexts; they fit emotionally but not historically.

Now, Dr. Harold Hansen, who was the director and a dear friend of mine, knew that, and so he told many people, “Well, some day I’ve got to get my own score to this production.”

In the summer of 1953, we were back finishing up the classwork for my doctorate degree at the Eastman School of the University of Rochester, twenty miles away from Palmyra. While we were there, Harold Hansen brought over his assistant directors, about four of them, to see the opera in Rochester on a summer night.

Well, it rained out that night, so there was no opera. Harold Hansen knew where we lived, so he brought his four guys over to my home when this rain was going on, and fortunately we had some apple pie and ice cream, so we fed them dessert, and he opened up on the fact that he was disturbed that seventeen years had gone by and he didn’t have his own score. And he said, “I think that you’re the composer to write this score.”

So Harold Hansen asked me to become a composer for his score for the Hill Cumorah Pageant in the summer of ’53, and I got a letter from the First Presidency shortly after that confirming the appointment. He told me it was going to happen; he said, “I’m asking you informally now, but the real invitation will come.” He didn’t say a contract. And it wasn’t a contract. I got no money from the writing of that. It was a church assignment.

That score lasted thirty-one years. It was heralded immediately as being a wonderful thing — from the critical reviews of Rochester to the cast’s and crew’s and Church’s response to it — and that blessed my life.

It is a very satisfying thing for a composer to have a project last

thirty-one years, particularly a Church-related project. I would get letters every year from someone in the cast: “Heard the score; it’s wonderful.” You can’t beat that kind of experience.

I used to wonder, “Does that make it important to me?” Of course it does. It was important to me that the Saints themselves felt it was beautiful and wonderful and supportive to the purposes of the pageant; and the Church felt the same way.

The Hill Cumorah Pageant was evaluated by the Quorum of the Twelve and the First Presidency about every three years. In 1986, Elder Oaks made it a point to go to the pageant.

He was there for several nights. He went about an hour early, because the audience started to accumulate an hour early. He especially wanted to talk with the non-member audience. In fact, he would really prefer to talk to people who have seen it before, because they would then have an opinion about what it contained.

His later report to the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve was, “Everyone loves the spectacle. It is a gorgeous thing to look at. Not only when Christ comes out of the sky, but many of the scenes are very dramatically and beautifully portrayed and thrilling to the non-member. They are thrilled by it; they want to keep coming back. But ultimately,” he said, “the fact that the Hill Cumorah Pageant is about the Book of Mormon as a testament of Jesus Christ is something that almost none of the non-members could articulate the way a Latter-day Saint would.”

So he suggested that the wonderful original script be rewritten for the non-member. They hired Orson Scott Card, and he rewrote it with basically the same story, but he did it with that objective.

They asked me to come back to Palmyra in 1987 so I could see the last production of the old version and then talk the next day about the new one. After the last performance (I was there for the last two performances), we all shed tears, as it was fifty years that it had been going. The next day we met all day and talked about the time schedule.

Basically, I had to write a new score, even if I used the same themes. I could maybe borrow some of it, but it had to be tapered to the time dimensions of the new script. The Church representatives told me the brethren wanted it the next year. You don’t argue with a general authority, so I said, “Okay, the Lord will have to bless me.”

And so, for nine months I booked out what my schedule would be every day. I had so many hours for each scene. I would plan so much time to conceive the scene musically and get it written concretely to the textual demands of the time of the scene.

Then I would orchestrate the scene immediately, during the next twenty hours of my time that were set apart to this project (four hours here, three hours there, and so forth).

I did all that planning of my time, and then I had to religiously live up to it. If I got behind, then I had to somehow shave the period for the next scene down so I could make it up. That was constantly my problem. Some of them I did quite quickly, and other scenes took longer. You just can’t determine that. So I never could live 100% to my time schedule, but it was a help to have it, to know that I was ahead or behind.

And of course I was on my knees before every one of those periods. All my life I have done that.

I finished it nine days early, not two days. Nine days seems like a glorious amount.

You often talk about your experience with the Cumorah Christ theme. Could you share that with us?

Oh, yes, the problem of the Christ theme. I got the invitation to write the first score in 1953, and I didn’t finish — it wasn’t complete — until 1957. The reason for the delay was that I couldn’t write a good Christ theme.

I wrote seventeen poor Christ themes. I have never written seventeen thematic problems. The Christ theme, I wrote seventeen of them. In my own judgment, none of them were right. The seventeenth was almost right. I thought, “Ah, this is close,” and I orchestrated it for full symphony orchestra and choir. I got the BYU symphony and choirs to read it, perfect it, and then record it.

We had the Smith auditorium, completely vacant except for Harold Hansen and my wife in the audience, way at the back of the hall. I could tell in the first ten seconds that number seventeen was not good enough, but I went through the motions of perfecting it so that we got a near-perfect recording of it in an hour’s time. The choir was wonderful, and the orchestra was very cooperative, so I had no complaints against anybody except myself; but I knew this wasn’t going to do it.

When we got through, I thanked the orchestra, thanked the choir, and later thanked the directors that made it possible. Then I went back to see Harold Hansen and my wife. As Harold began to come to me, I went back there and said, “Harold, you don’t have to say anything. I know already this is not good enough.”

He said, “Brother, I’m glad you said that,” or something like that. He didn’t think it was good enough either. So, I said, “You wanted this score the next summer. Three years later, no good — seventeen failures.

I think I need a blessing from one of the General Authorities.”

He said, “You know, I’m having some problems with my part of the Cumorah pageant, being the director and the artistic head of it. Let’s go up together and both of us get blessings.” So he phoned Elder George Q. Morris, and we drove up to meet him, to explain to him what our problems were, and that we were in need of a blessing. When we got up there, Elder Morris had been called within the last half-hour to an emergency death of one of his own family members. He didn’t even have time to phone us; we had already left when this happened. But he asked Elder Harold B. Lee to take his place. He was a pretty good substitute.

The Quorum of the Twelve is a busy group, but he met with us as though he had nothing else to do. He said, “Brethren, tell me what your needs are.” We explained our situation to him. It took about forty-five minutes to find out about the pageant, because he knew very little about it. But he knew about Christ, and he knew about problems of portraying Christ. He didn’t know what a composer does with that, but he knew that it was an important function.

Before he gave the blessings, he said, “I will not record these blessings. I usually do, but I don’t think I need to in this case. When you go back to Provo, you brethren are welcome to put into writing what you can remember of these blessings, and let that be your guide. Your memories will be enhanced, and I don’t need to record it.” So we accepted that. He then gave a beautiful blessing addressing Hansen’s problems, then he came to me.

When I got to Provo, I could remember ten things that he had said, and I wrote them all down; I’ve always kept them close. One statement I will never forget:

“You will hear the music in the night.”

I didn’t know how to interpret that at the time. I knew it was pretty remarkable because it was so unusual. I never hear music in the night. This time I was going to hear it in the night. The music presumably would be the Christ theme. I was moved by that statement. It was concrete — pretty specific yet ambiguous.

About two weeks later, I thought of a wonderful theme — not in the night — and I wrote it down in five minutes. It was very brief, nothing long, maybe thirty seconds at the top. Nice and tight, and very beautiful.

I thought, “This is worth orchestrating like I did the seventeenth one.” I took the time to write down the orchestration for the full symphony orchestra and for the choir. I did it very fast.

About two nights later, around five o’clock in the morning, I was quite asleep, and I had a dream, and the dream was that I was in the tabernacle and I was conducting the Utah Symphony and BYU choirs in this eighteenth version.

One statement I will never forget: “You will hear the music in the night.”





Now, I don't dream very much. I'm not a dreamer. But this was very clear. I could see the engineers in the control room. I knew what their first names were. I saw the concertmaster, Harold Wolf, a dear friend of mine, down to my left, playing his heart out. I saw Joanne Ottley, nineteen-year-old soprano, and her husband in the choir. I could see their faces very vividly. This was no fuzzy dream.

And I remember raising my baton, starting that off, and I heard that music in the night that President Lee told me I would hear. I heard it very clearly, and it was gorgeous. The dream lasted for maybe a minute — maybe less than a minute. And the Christ theme was there three times. And I knew that it was the right one; that dream confirmed it.

When I woke up, I knelt in prayer and said, "Thank you, thank you." It was one of the great spiritual experiences of my life to have the prophet of the Lord give me a blessing that came literally true and confirmed to me that I had the right theme. That's why the Hill Cumorah Pageant is very important to me: The Lord gave me two incredible blessings. He gave me the music and then he gave me a great spiritual experience of having the reality of a prophetic statement from a prophet of the Lord on my behalf and on behalf of the pageant come true in my sleep.

What inspired you to write *Joseph! Joseph!*?

My sister-in-law, Claudia Bushman, has a habit of making agendas for the whole family. And we all love her for that. We don't take offense to that at all; she is such a beloved person. But Claudia was the initiator of this. She writes family letters.

In one of her letters in the early nineties, on my copy of the letter, she said in the postscript, "Oh, by

the way, Crawford, you've done the Book of Mormon music with the Hill Cumorah, and you've done the trek with *Promised Valley*. Now you ought to write an opera on Joseph Smith."

So I'd have a musical play, a pageant, and an opera; three different kinds of musical theater, with three different subjects, all involving the gospel. She wrote two or three sentences, that's all it was.

I wrote back and said, "Claudia, writing an opera would take two or three years. I don't have two or three years. Besides, the real question is, who is going to produce it?"

I thanked her for the compliment, of course, but I said, "This is not possible." That didn't stop her at all. Over the next year, maybe every third letter, she'd say, "By the way, Crawford, I'm not giving up on that suggestion. I think it's a great idea. Your refusal is baloney," or something like that.

That went on for quite a while, and sometime, I don't know the exact sequence or the time, I finally gave in.

Since it was written, *Joseph! Joseph!* has had two wonderful pairs of performances: the first pair at the Assembly Hall in April of 2004, and the second pair in Los Angeles in November of 2005. All of these performances had wonderfully favorable responses by four full-house LDS audiences. *Joseph! Joseph!* has had some blocks, but I fully expect it will eventually be produced in many places again to favorable and enthusiastic responses. It ultimately will be one of my most important works.

How does the gospel affect you as an artist?

As a composer, with all eight hundred and seventy-four pieces, I had two prayers. I have an "empty-page prayer." I look at the page, and I've got to fill it with beautiful music.

Where is that going to come from? I don't have beautiful music within me. It's got to come from the Lord, but he is going to give it to me. So the empty-page prayer is a prayer of supplication: "Help me do something beautiful for this need." And that was certainly true with *Promised Valley*, that was certainly true with the Hill Cumorah Pageant, and that was certainly true with *Joseph! Joseph!*

Then there's the second prayer: I got a page. The Lord has given it to me. I get on my knees next

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to my piano or next to my desk. "Thank you for this beautiful music. Thank you, Heavenly Father."

Two prayers: "empty page," "full page." It's been that way all my life. And it may not be just one prayer, or two prayers; it's a week of prayers, or a month of prayers.

And so as a Latter-day Saint composer, the most important ingredient is my relationship with my Heavenly Father to write beautiful things for His children, for the kingdom, and the Lord has blessed me so abundantly with that. ■