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Those with reasonably long memories, or some geographical connection with Scotland, may recall the “stushie” to use an old Scots dialectical word, the *furore*, created by James MacMillan’s assertion that Scotland was a land of “sleepwalking bigotry” – in brief, asserting that anti-catholicism was still a major fact of Scottish life, albeit hidden under the surface, quietly dormant, until roused. Since what I intend to say about MacMillan relies somewhat on an understanding of historical background to contemporary views of religious practice in Scotland, as well as some understanding of the Scottish mindset in artistic terms, I want to begin with by contextualising both in relation to MacMillan as composer. There is no time here to go into the complex area of identity narratives, of which there are many, so certain assumptions are made which will be expanded in another context.

There is a strong view, which is evidenced in the discourses of a significant number of Scottish writers, that the Reformation in Scotland, led by the order-seeking Calvinists, created an artistic blight, not just in music but in the Arts in general, contributing to what Edwin Muir described as a ‘dead weight on the imagination’ that affects the Scottish psyche to this day, as it is claimed.

It is clear that MacMillan himself has been influenced by this view of Scottish culture and as is shown for example when he uses the metaphor ‘the wintriness of the Scottish landscape’, borrowed from contemporary Scottish poetical usage, to capture some of the essential elements of his compositional imperative as I will discuss further in a moment. Here is a short clip from the 2003 South Bank Show portrait where he contextualises this:

Clip 1 (video 9)

A statement such as this gives a clear pointer towards those aspects of the Scottish outlook and musical traditions which he views as culturally significant, not only because they hark back to a pre-Reformation Golden Age (a catholic past, of course), but also because they constitute key ingredients in his compositional style at the present:

READ

‘All we have left’ he declared in his Edinburgh Festival Speech ‘from distinctively Scottish music are the remnants of plainsong, such works of the Scottish Renaissance which survived the 1560 cultural revolution, Gaelic psalm singing from the Western Isles and folk singing from the Lowland peasantry’.

Although he has a high regard in particular for the work of Messiaen, Maxwell Davies, Gubaidulina and the other religious Russians, and the Holy Minimalists, in his own work the overriding concern is to recover what was ‘lost’ from the Scottish past by incorporating these elements into his personal compositional dialectic. In reflecting on his compositional identity in interviews he uses phrases such as ‘reconnecting with the past’, ‘acts of remembrance, or recollection, of rediscovery of the past’, and perhaps even more decisively ‘re-animation of our heritage’ and ‘reawakening of our culture’. By which he means Scottish culture.

It is perhaps paradoxical that this deliberate cast back to former times should inform the present Scottish compositional mindset but the evidence for it is not just in MacMillan’s work but in some of his slightly older contemporaries too, in composers such as Edward McGuire and John Maxwell Geddes for example. It is, in part, a search for something musical that can be characterised as specifically Scottish within the High Art music of that country.

For MacMillan, seeking after a specifically catholic heritage from the country of his birth (though by ancestry he is Irish) is just one part of the religious identity which informs his music. It is not simply that he is a proponent of catholic liberation theology but that what he writes is motivated by a religious understanding that considers, as he puts it 'music which emphasises a sense of conflict, a sense of unease, a sense of the dirty as it were, a sense of the physical, the corporeal'.

This view, which marks out the world as in need of redemption, harking back, though not explicitly, to concepts of Original Sin, is a marker of catholic theology, given perhaps greater emphasis in the Scottish context where it contrasts strongly with the Calvinist emphasis on the individual saved by grace. MacMillan's religious roots therefore translate into aspiration towards a higher plane, the need for spiritual change, which informs comments like this:

Clip 2 (video no 6)

This is the fundamental theological perspective which underpins works like *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* and *Cantos Sagrados* as we will see.

It is significant that a number of composers have experienced a turning point in their musical thinking in their late 20s or early 30s. For example, Maxwell Davies at 30 turned his mind to symphonic form, Rihm sought a new means of expression in the works written around his 30th year. MacMillan's epiphany at the same age was to realise that the different parts of his experience were mutually dependent, and drawing together. He says this:

'With greater maturity I began more naturally to see ... potential to use my interest in folk culture in an artistic or high art ...way. I began to see the potential to unembarrassedly and unselfconsciously express the religious dimension and the political dimension in the so-called serious business of composing'.

As a result, it was not through the Scottish culture and its political agendas that he made this first expression of the religious and political dimensions, but in the music theatre work *Búsqueda* written in 1988 which intermingles the prayers of the Argentinian Mothers of the Disappeared with the Liturgy of the Mass.

Of course in the late 80s the world was particularly open to hearing and responding to the cries of the dispossessed, the alienated and the disempowered. MacMillan (therefore?) adopted the same juxtaposition of secular text and liturgy for *Cantos Sagrados* of 1989, and again, this time juxtaposing Biblical texts with liturgy, in *Seven Last Words* of 1994. These works have nothing to do with Scottish cultural identity – they are MacMillan's attempt to seek a universality of message. The musical equivalent to this textural juxtaposition is the juxtaposition of different musical elements at the same time – this is the effect delivered in the opening and closing section of *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* which contains (quote) 'a multitude of chants, songs, and litanies coming together in a reflective outpouring – a prayer for the murdered woman'.

Commentators have been quick to assign 'celtic' labels to MacMillan and his music with phrases ranging from 'a patriotic Scot asserting his regional identity' to 'ancient sounds – Celtic ancients maybe, but perhaps not unrelated'. Such pigeon-holing of the conflict-generating Scottish composer is a characteristic of the compartmentalisation of 'the Other' by non celtic writers. But it is not a compartmentalisation that MacMillan seems to discourage. The early work *Tryst* he

says is ‘rooted in a tradition, that great reservoir of Celtic traditional music’.

MacMillan is perhaps not aware of the somewhat dubious nature of the term ‘celtic’ since he happily subscribes to it as one of the underpinning elements of his style, made musically explicit by his adoption of a sort of melismatic ornamentation, often vocal but by no means exclusively, which is a kind of refracted version of the aural effect experienced when hearing Gaelic psalm singing from the Western Isles, allied to the traditional style of ornamentation applied to melodies in folk music as played on the Penny Whistle (which he plays) and pibroch (which he does not). This melismatic ornamentation overlays, in the vocal works especially, a type of vocal writing which has very strong associations with the heightened Renaissance style found in extant works of Scottish composers of that period.

Ex. 1

This is a particularly pertinent instance of what MacMillan claims as the ‘reawakening’ ‘reanimating’ and ‘rediscovering’ the musical past. Stripped of its quasi-celtic decoration this is a simple piece of 2 part Renaissance inspired vocal counterpoint over a pedal drone. Several cultural forms are being ‘reawakened’ or ‘rediscovered here’. Even the drone is referential, MacMillan prefers this term to pedal, as it is a well known feature of Scottish traditional music of the lowland and highlands (and not only the Highland bagpipe).

MacMillan’s use of drones has come in for a fair degree of critical disdain but to berate a Scot for his/her use of the drone is to misunderstand the significance of the drone as a cultural referent in the music. MacMillan says this of the drone:

It’s something about the rootedness of music that draws me to the importance of drones... The suspension of time which can bring about a cleaning of the ears, a new impetus to listening, a new way of listening to what is to come.

In MacMillan’s usage a drone is not simply as pedal note, with or without the fifth above. His usage incorporates, as in this example,

Ex 2

Ex 3

the notion of an alternating chordal structure which repeats every two bars. MacMillan returns to this as an generating mechanism frequently, often using the pitches F sharp/E: these examples show both the undecorated version of a passage from the Magnificat written in 2000, the actual passage as written.

A very similar alternating drone, based this time on the chords of F sharp major first inversion and E major underpins the first movement of *Seven Last Words* (Father forgive them), the opening of the *Nunc Dimittis*, and many other places. This suggests that the choice of pitches may not be entirely arbitrary.

One of the most often voiced criticisms of MacMillan’s early success *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* focussed on his use of drones but equally, however, and therefore missing the ‘point’ of such drones and pedals in the same work the early critics seized on the so-styled celtic elements

to pigeon-hole MacMillan's Scottish identity. But there was more to these reviews than just pointing up celtic elements in his music, there was also the tendency to express reviews utilising a clear Self/Other duality with MacMillan as the 'Other', and this duality persists to the present. The critic apparently gives voice to the English (not British) majority when he declares that *Isobel Gowdie* is about the 'martyrdom of an innocent woman at the hands of Anglo Saxon protestant imperialists' and that 'English music lovers are not used to being talked at like that'. Why should it be assumed that MacMillan's prime target is the English, I wonder.

This does, however, draw attention to another aspect of Scottish identity which is paradoxical, and is, in part, tied up with the spiritual and religious background of the country. This aspect of the Scottish artistic persona shapes current thinking even though it has rather more profound, indeed insidious origins than might be expected. Benedict Anderson proposed the term 'Imagined Communities' to explain the way in which different groups of people view and live out their commonalities. Whilst Scotland may look like a single nation from the outside, from inside it is really a collection of four 'Imagined Communities' which have very deep roots going back into the Dark Ages. The West of Scotland where Macmillan was born and grew up is one of these communities, and is characterised historically by a strong working class mentality which has been articulated through, and motivated by, distrust of the 'Other', whether that be of the English, or of Irish Catholic immigrants, or whoever.

We have already heard MacMillan refer to the wintriness of the Scottish landscape and this being a metaphor for the Scottish character. However it is not actually a pan-Scottish characteristic but it is *certainly* a West of Scotland one: MacMillan's birth locus has thus, not surprisingly, been responsible for defining aspects of his compositional persona.

It is therefore not from the visionary mysticism of Messiaen that MacMillan derives his religious symbolism, even though he describes Messiaen as the 'most vigorous pointer' to the 'sense of the sacred in music'. But rather his symbolic gestures are rooted in the essentially Irish community Catholicism of his native Ayrshire. The clue to his way of thinking may lie in his use of the word 'transubstantiated' to describe the processes whereby a pre-compositional stimulus becomes embodied in a new work. It is religious concept rather less meaningful to non Catholics but suggests that an understanding of such symbolic cross references could be essential in interpreting sonic gestures in his works. Thus the bells which are heard at the end of *Veni Veni Emmanuel* represent or more exactly embody Christ himself. As specific sound objects with meaning they are an expression of the relationship in MacMillan's spiritual philosophy between the 'dirty', (his word) the 'earthly', and the Divine. In expressing spiritual ideas in this way MacMillan may be closer to Messiaen than he thinks.

The symbolic as actual, if I could put it that way, is therefore found throughout MacMillan's output but most particularly in those works with a religious text or programme. Time will only permit two further examples here. The first is from 'O Bone Jesu' written in 2002 and related in spirit and effect to the work of the same name, known to MacMillan, by the Scottish Renaissance composer Robert Carver. Like Carver, MacMillan chooses to make a structural feature of the repetitions of the word 'Jesu'. In MacMillan's version of 'O Bone Jesu' there are 13 statements (a symbolic number in itself) of the choral outburst 'Jesu' leading up to the golden section turning point of the work. All of these utilise a descending F#-E melodic cell (a pitch pairing we have

already encountered) in soprano (as in the example shown) over a rising chromatic base:

Ex 4

There is one exception to this – the 12th statement is melodically F-E in soprano, instead of F#/E – and this is certainly a symbolic reference to Judas: thus the Judas symbol betrays the consistency of the previous statements while at the same time preserves consonance with the rising bass which has reached F natural at this point

Ex 5

This wrong melodic cell, by being consonant with the bass, deliberately obfuscates the meaning of the gesture by eschewing dissonance in favour of deliberate harmonic ambiguity. Logic would suggest that rather than being the most consonant expression of the 'Jesu' motif it should be the most dissonant. If this is indeed a musical representation of Judas, what is MacMillan saying here? A simple example but one which suggests that meaning in MacMillan's musico(theological contexts is neither obvious nor straightforward.

As a second example we return to the already quoted passage from the *Magnificat*. The slow alternations of chords – a typical large scale example is the 'Gaude Gaude' middle section of *Veni Veni Emmanuel* and this simpler example using dyads:

Ex 6 (as ex 3)

- with their chant-like quality have inevitably been compared with the works of the Holy Minimalists, but, although he admires their work he does not share their spiritual outlook. He believes that their music sets out to achieve a static transcendence at all times, and having turned their backs on the 'dialectic organic processes' of the Western classical canon they are already seeking a post apocalyptic vision. In MacMillan's usage such static harmonic movement is more about emphasising the present, humanity in the here and now. MacMillan's spiritual identity on the other hand is firmly rooted in the corporeal and much of his music expresses conflict and violence played out against a static harmonic framework. In Catholic terms this would have strong associations with sin and guilt, although MacMillan never uses these words despite the fact that his Catholic education in Scotland would certainly have laid special emphasis on them. Rather, as I suggested earlier, MacMillan's music embodies the 'dirty', the raw.. In this position he lays himself open to an ideology critique that the music **in fact** embodies the body masculine in its most obvious and blatant form and its association with the patriarchal catholic church could be construed, as Alistair Williams puts it, as a 'virile spirituality, articulated through the banishing of effeminate superficiality'.

The paradox for a Scottish catholic in this is that the very 'windows on the Divine' (his words) he wishes to open up are therefore already tainted by the patriarchal spiritual and worldly geographical background from which he comes. It is perhaps a realisation of this paradox which continually brings him back to the passion narrative (in works such as *Veni Veni Emmanuel*, *Triduum*, *Seven Last Words of Christ from the Cross* and the recent *St John Passion*) where the submission of Christ – with all its feminine associations – is paramount.

The ultimate dichotomy for MacMillan resides in being a composer who recognises the importance of his roots, both spiritual and temporal, but whose compositional aesthetic requires him to address the tensions of being Scottish and catholic at the present time. All in the garden of Scottish identity and character is not rosy> If it were, MacMillan would be another kind of composer:

Clip 11 (Scotland as home) (video no. 11)

In the year in which James MacMillan reaches his half century and Scotland celebrates the International Year of Homecoming, it seems appropriate, indeed essential, to consider whether MacMillan has succeeded in establishing an individual identity as a composer. Or is it rather that, in McCrone's words, written just at the point when he was about to make his first major impact with *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie*, he adopts a 'pick and mix' approach (e.g. Scottish composer, Catholic composer, Scottish Catholic composer, British composer, international composer), according to the needs of the moment.

In an interview for the 1998 Vancouver New Music Festival MacMillan said: 'Sometimes [through] one's local and specific groundings, whether it (*sic*) be a geographic or a specific denominational thing one can achieve a sense of identity which is then transcended'

This paper considers how far MacMillan's music is indeed grounded in the local and specific; whether he has succeeded as a composer in 'transcending' the sense of place and time which has so firmly contributed to his individual identity and how this has been shaped by the extent to which his audience expects from him a certain cultural identity. The presentation will include extracted video clips from a televised interview with the composer.

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