

McGregor, Richard (2007) James MacMillan: O Bone Jesu. In: Musica Scotica Conference, 28 April 2007, University of Glasgow, UK. (Unpublished)

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MacMillan first became aware of the original Carver motet while in Manchester in the 1980s. There, under David Fallows he arranged for a performance of it. In his programme note for the CD he speaks of wanting to find an opportunity to use the text himself, an opportunity presented by the commission from The Sixteen for performance in a programme which would include the original Carver. Although he asserts that no reference is made to the original, well, not consciously one might add, it is significant that MacMillan dedicated this work to his twins on the occasion of their First Communion, because the text speaks of ‘the most precious blood of Jesus’ which will ‘wash way ...sin’, clearly a very appropriate text for a Catholic First Communion. However I think there is more to it than that. If you were here last year you may remember that MacMillan speaks of the starting point for a work being ‘transubstantiated into the musical’. Here then is perhaps the most potent of metaphors in relation to the text: the text which speaks of the power of the blood of Christ is *itself* ‘transubstantiated’ into MacMillan’s new musical setting of those very words.

I know that many of you here will be familiar with Kenneth Elliot’s edition of Carver’s ‘O Bone Jesu’ and may indeed, like James MacMillan, have participated in a performance of it, and a good number here will recall I suspect John Purser’s entertaining talk last year which included detailed reference to Carver’s use of symbolism in the motet, recently broadcast on BBC Radio Scotland. After the conference John asked me if I was familiar with MacMillan’s setting of the same words. I am now! I have to tell you that MacMillan out-Carver’s Carver in his setting by pointing up any reference the name Jesus, whether nominative, vocative, or accusative with a static rhythmic (though not static harmonic) framework of which this is the first:

Ex 1: Jesu (first time)

And just in case you should wonder how many times this IS in the course of the 10 minutes or so of the piece, it’s 20 times.

But to business. You may have come here today in the hope of learning to write vocal works in the style of James MacMillan so that you too can receive lucrative commissions to write works in an accessible and popular idiom. Not such lucrative commissions I imagine as those of Arvo Pärt who, it is said, was telephoned by Christ College Cambridge for a new choral work – however the enquirer got Mrs Pärt on the phone, who said that the composer would do it for £10,000 – o.k. they thought it’s a bit high but we could do it – then she added ‘per minute’.

So, to write like MacMillan you require first a tonal palette and second a convincing structure. First then, the tonal palette. Here is the very opening of the work:

Ex 2 opening melodic line

characterised by the initial wide leaping intervals at the ‘head’ and a descending decorated ‘tail’, the key decorations of which are [X] the upper mordent acciaccatura group, and [Y] the common-or-garden turn, both derived, it seems likely, from the ‘sound’ of the ‘follow-me’ type of Gaelic psalm singing [PRESS 4 TXT] of the N.W. of Scotland which MacMillan has acknowledged as an influence, of which this is an example and I think you will detect the similarities:

Audio example on bottom of Ex 2 (Kilmarnock Psalm)

The second phrase 'o piissime' comes out of the 'tail' of the first using sequential descending quasi melismatic scales.

Ex 3 end of 1st phrase – beginning of second (has audio example)

And of course the word setting IS melismatic, which is, I would venture, a sort of throwback to medieval polyphonic styles, highly suitable by association to the religious content. Needless to say the melismatic writing also embodies word painting, of which a little more later.

Beyond the detail of the melodic content one has also to define the tonality, particularly important as this relates to the structural integrity of the work. I guess most of us would go for A minor for the opening phrase on the basis of the opening interval (E to C) and the sound of the B as apparent supertonic. However I suggest that this is actually a deliberately ambiguous cross between transposed Aeolian mode at the 5th (on E) and E minor.

In the opening section at least MacMillan's tonal palette uses 5th related tonal centres *qua* modulation:

Ex 4

T8	F#	G#	A	B	C#	D	E	
T2	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	A	
T7	E	F#	G	A	B	C	D	
T0	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
Interval		[2	1	2	2	1	2	2]

Now we come back to consider the tonal significance of the first 'Jesu'. This needed to be strongly characterised and striking. So there are two principal elements in this first statement:

Ex 5 Jesu chord (first – again)

first the chord, F# major, is as clear a tonal entity as you could have (there's even an echo of Vaughan Williams in this contrast between white notes – the melody. and black notes – the chord, linked together by the F#), and second, a pitch based 'crown' on the top, always F#/E (except for 2 exceptions which I will come to in due course). Where E is the modal tonic, F# is therefore the major supertonic. If you look at the handout I've given out you will see that there is some significance in this – pure F# major is heard only 3 times (is this the Trinity) at the beginning, at the end bar **136/7** (alpha and omega) and on the 13th Jesu (Jesus and the 12 disciples?) at bar **87**. /// Rather more prosaically the F# as the bass note of the 1st and of the 13th 'Jesu' actually come from the simple fact of a rising chromatic bass line F#-F# which causes the repetition of the bass at the 13th occurrence. Carver's 'crown' by the way was the pause over final chord of the name Jesu.

But wait! Bar 87 out of 137 – this sounds evocative – we need to look at this in more detail:

Ex 6 bars 85-7 with audio [turn down when finished]

This is the only point in the in the text where the exact words ‘O Bone Jesu’ recur. Is this a recapitulation – well sort of, but, it won’t surprise you to learn that bar 85 is in fact the Golden Section of which more in a moment.

Here then is an example to show how the melodic and harmonic elements fit together – from bars 36-41:

Ex 7 bars 36-41 with audio [turn down when finished]

If you look at the handout you will see that at bar 38 this is Melodic Idea (1) from bar 1 but this time a tone higher – which is dominant of the dominant – and in canonic imitation between Bass and Alto at a bar’s distance, with a freely adapted quasi canonic line in tenor which tends to run in sixths with one of the other lines. Note the change of modality on the word ‘sanguinem’ to the dominant at bar 40, and the use of the Melodic idea (2) for the flowing blood. I’ll also come back to this shortly. Finally the word setting has some theological significance – MacMillan uses the turn idea from Melodic idea (1) for the word ‘pretiosum; (precious) and subsequently to mark the words ‘peccatoribus’ ‘for sinners’, ‘ablus’ ‘wash away’ and finally, and maybe most importantly theologically ‘meam’ ‘my’ sin.

And finally, there are very few occasions when a straight triad occurs as the first chord of the ‘Jesu’ motif (apart from the F# major mentioned earlier) and this is one of them: B minor. Harmonically B minor in bar 36 is nicely ambiguous – although it’s a straightforward harmonic triad it is undoubtedly the dominant of the transposed Aeolian mode which starts the work and thus the minor dominant of E minor, the modal tonic, /// and yes, I’m going to come back to THAT too in a moment.

As a brief aside, it is worth mentioning that the tonal centring of the source material of another work was also E minor modal: that was of course *Veni Veni Emmanuel*. Thinking about that work last year I demonstrated how MacMillan constructed the events such that the music was always seeking resolution, there D major, a resolution only finally achieved at the end in the resurrected Jesus.

But there’s a parallel here in this work. In ‘O Bone Jesu’ MacMillan uses a smaller scale but analogous ‘harmonic seeking’ to give tonal structure to the work. If you look at the handout you will see that even with all the ambiguities inherent in a minor/modal tonality it is nevertheless the relationship of the other harmonic entities to the modal tonic which ultimately defines that ‘tonic’, so the use of chord II(#3) F# major, and V(minor) B minor represent the harmonic ‘seeking’ while tonic pedals at 32, 85 (inverted pedal leading to the Golden Section) and 96 represent stages in the progress towards ‘confirmation’ of the modal tonic.

And if proof were needed of the primacy of E – consider that the final build up of 8 voices in the End Section [I’ve labelled it Coda] which creates a Bmin¹¹ or minor V¹¹ chord leading towards the final E minor triad. The interjection of the F# major chord II (#3) seems to undermine this resolution, and I think this is intentional on MacMillan’s part - it is caused in part by the fact that the F# E melodic resolution, what I termed the melodic ‘crown’ is now at the bottom of the chord rather than at the top as it has been throughout – for the first time in the work we have pitches

above F# E on the word 'Jesu' and it has to be because the music must resolve itself onto a root position triad. But somehow an incomplete feeling remains. It is as though Jesus is still high above and not yet come again (I'll come back to this later too). And by the way MacMillan crowns THIS final Jesus with a pause – the crown on Jesus's head. We'll hear this at the end.

At this point it would be important to have a look in more depth at the chart for the work since it is becoming clear that there is an underlying structure in this short piece.

[Chart 1 Jesu chart]

This shows that unlike the Carver, MacMillan has 6 sections – the last being a coda leading up to the final Jesu. As we saw previously bar 36 was a varied repeat of the opening material, and as you see, bar 96 is by way of Recapitulation. The third section is at bar 60 and is not repeated – it involves *portamento* sliding and wouldn't be appropriate to repeat. There's a development section between bar 75 and bar 95 which I'll deal with in a moment, and the Coda is at 120. As I mentioned earlier, at bars 36 -8 the first melodic idea is on the dominant of the dominant and the second melodic idea on the dominant. At the recapitulation the order of these is reversed so melodic idea (2) comes first.

It's possible that MacMillan deliberately linked the words by association when repeating the melodic ideas so Melodic idea (1) connects 'O good Jesus' to 'I pray to you' and 'your goodness created me' (bars 1, 38 and 98), and Melodic idea (2) connects 'holiest Jesus' to 'most precious blood' to 'do not abandon me' (bars 6, 40 and 96). I find most interesting the harmonically ambiguous Melodic Idea 3 (ambiguous because of the false relations F/F#, C/C#) which connects the words 'according to your mercy' with 'most loving Jesus'. Interesting because the false relations give a sense of insecurity to the melodic line – perhaps MacMillan here suggests unworthiness.

Now consider the tonic pedals. The first ends the first section and leads to the second, the upper tonic pedal at 85 leads to the Golden Section – the structural heart of the work, and the final tonic pedal – well 5th drone actually- starts the Recapitulation. And, the dominant minor chord B minor, at bar 36 ends the first section and heralds the second, while the return of the B minor chord at 120 ends the final section and heralds the Coda.

To return to the development section. We can think of the section between bars 75 and 95 as a sort of harmonic development where the tonality becomes chromatic and the 12th and 14th repetitions of the name 'Jesu' frame the Golden Section. I remind you that 13 would be nicely symbolic as Jesus 'above' the 12 disciples. By the way there's only one occasion when the first pitch of the Jesus chord isn't F# and that's at the 12th occurrence when it's F (F minor actually). Is this false note, what I have called the Judas Moment on the chart, for the false disciple, Judas – I bet it is.

And considering that the section from bar 75 where all the chromatic activity occurs is the section in the text about death and damnation we can probably equate the original 'modal' texture with 'order' and therefore symbolic of Jesus, and the chromaticism, as symbolic of chaos – again much as was found at, for example the opening 'chaos' section of *Veni Veni Emmanuel*. Perhaps MacMillan even thought of this Development section as symbolic of the crucifixion, which would make the Re-capitulation at bar 96 the Re-surrection through the return of the Melodic ideas.

And since I am speaking of symbolism I'd like to draw your attention to a neatly symbolic example of harmonic word painting in the middle of the recapitulated material. I haven't mentioned it yet but here Melodic Idea (1) returns again in a harmonised form between 104 and 108, BUT it's the wrong transposition – effectively this is F# major but in terms of the modal repeat, this is a semitone too low for the recapitulation of the opening.

This is undoubtedly a response to the words:

'recognosce quod tuum est /// et absterge quod alienum est'

'Recognise or grant what is yours' – that is, the melodic idea (1) and 'wash away what is alien/unworthy' – it's in the wr:

Ex 8 bars 104-109 with audio

Of course all the way through MacMillan marks up certain words for emphasis. The opening 'O' is deliberately melismatic as an invocation and that's why 'invocantem' is melismatic, and so is 'ablus' 'wash away' – downward melismatic, for obvious reasons. 'Rogo te' – rising fourth – a musical cliché and 'salvator' strongly rhythmic triple forte – for 'saviour'. I guess you get the idea.

As I mentioned earlier, up to the 13th Jesus the bass rises in semitones. After the Golden Section, each entry of the Jesu motif is underpinned by a chromatic rise in the lowest part, which is firstly in the tenor and subsequently in the female voices (whereas before it was in the bass only). What this means in practice is that the higher the lowest part gets the more circumscribed the ambit of the chord above becomes since the highest notes have to be F#-E.

I'd just like to speculate for a moment on why MacMillan chose to continue the rising chord sequence into the soprano register, rather than returning to the lower notes. Firstly it may be simply that the bass register dominated in the first 13 repetitions of 'Jesu' (and so each note of the rising bass line could be thought of as symbolic of each of the disciples – hence bass as they were men – including Judas on number 12, and the 13th, at the Golden Section, Jesus himself, as I suggested at the outset). But there is a second reason which, in the context of this work is, I think, as, if not more, important. Macmillan's theology is aspirational. It was clear in *Veni Veni Emmanuel*, as it is here, that MacMillan's overarching religious conviction centres round a belief in the resurrected Jesus, and such a belief views Jesus as the embodiment of hope for deliverance from final judgement. In these terms hope is quite simply expressed through music which is aspirational, in other words, which rises.

Thought of in these terms the distance which has to be 'travelled' from F# major to E (modal) minor is 'harmonically' great and therefore may be symbolic, in MacMillan's compositional thinking, of the 'distance' that exists between mankind and the divine.

This is as complete a guide to MacMillan's recent vocal writing as revealed in *O Bone Jesu* as I can pack into 20 minutes, so now you know how to write for voices like James MacMillan. Let's hear then the Coda and build up to the final Jesu.

Example 9 (Musical example) \\ with audio example

By way of conclusion though I'd just offer one thought. My analysis here has been based on assumptions of a thematic and structural integrity which seeks give an essential unity to the work as an expression of MacMillan's supposed spiritual programme, if I could call it that. I suppose the next stage, following Street and Korsyn's exhortations in various editions of *Music Analysis* is to deconstruct this supposed unity to find out where the tensions lie – but that, as they say, is for another time.