

## MacMillan's 'mission' and the Passion settings

Richard E. McGregor

Three important factors underlie MacMillan's turn towards a more extended involvement with choral music which have resulted in his two settings to date of the Passion narrative: one aspect relates to MacMillan's 'place' within the Scottish arts establishment and the role he has carved out for himself, while the other two are interlinked, and reflect his personal faith on the one hand, and his view of liturgical music within the Catholic church on the other.

In his 1998 article 'Cross-currents and Convergences,'<sup>1</sup> Arnold Whittall argued that a sense of place is an inescapable and unavoidable element in the analysis of some composers' work, and, mentioning James Macmillan (and Judith Weir) in passing, he asserts that MacMillan cannot 'sensibly be considered without references to [his] responses to specific locations as well as to particular stories or traditions'. In MacMillan's case the traditions are not just those of Scottish culture but his own very specific upbringing within the Irish Catholic faith and heritage. It is clear that he has an ambivalent attitude to his broader Scottish heritage for the simple reason that he puts great store on his own immediate and Irish heritage and perceives a tension between those and the Scottish context in which he works.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of his development as a composer MacMillan could not have anticipated the effect that the notorious 'Scotland's Shame' speech in 1999 would have on his work.<sup>3</sup> Aside from the upset to his family life that caused them to consider moving away from Scotland,<sup>4</sup> he began to express his Catholic faith more openly through the setting of texts which had significance within his tradition, working personally with both professional and amateur vocal groups in a wide variety of contexts.

By nonetheless choosing to remain in Scotland, MacMillan has never lost the direct connection with his homeland, and as a result, his link with his cultural identity is not refracted through nostalgia for the lost immediacy of the cultural environment.<sup>5</sup> However, by becoming more outspoken about the tensions he

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<sup>1</sup> A. Whittall, 'Cross-Currents and Convergencies: Britten, Maxwell Davies and the Sense of Place', *Tempo*, New Series, No. 204 (Apr., 1998), pp. 5-11.

<sup>2</sup> In an article written in 2006 MacMillan wrote: 'Even among older Irish descendants there is a well-meaning, bent-over-backwards, over-eager-to-please desire to be seen to disconnect from their Irish roots and be sufficiently Scottish to pass "the test"', J. MacMillan, 'Playing the same tune, singing the same song?' in J. Bradley, (ed.), *Celtic Minded 2*, (Glendaruel: Argyll Press 2006), pp. 171-7, reprinted in *An Sceal 2007*: [www.freewebs.com/ansceal/jamesmcmillanarticle.htm](http://www.freewebs.com/ansceal/jamesmcmillanarticle.htm) (accessed 28 August 2018).

<sup>3</sup> J. MacMillan, 'Scotland's Shame' in T. Devine, (ed.), *Scotland's Shame? Bigotry and Sectarianism in Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2000), pp. 13-24.

<sup>4</sup> M. Hallam, 'Conversation with James MacMillan', *Tempo*, New Series No. 245 (Jul. 2008), pp. 17-29 at p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> As for example in Thea Musgrave's case.

perceives, not just as a Catholic, but also in political and social terms, he has, from time to time, found himself at odds with the Scottish press and even with normally supportive critics such as Ken Walton who declared that 'I'd much rather listen to James MacMillan's music than his views'.<sup>6</sup> At times the music itself has been controversial, sometimes consciously so, as in *A Scotch Bestiary* (2003-4), if the 'enigmatic' character references can be worked out, or unconsciously, as when critics complain at being 'preached at' through the music. Nonetheless, MacMillan found it hard to believe the furore created by his use of *The Reproaches* in the eighth movement of the *St John Passion* where he was accused of anti-Semitism. Whereas in the Cello Concerto (1996) such a liturgical reference could go by without comment, the 'angry' Jesus's words in *The Reproaches* movement of the *St John Passion* clearly, for some, tainted the work and coloured their perception and reception of it. In the wake of such responses MacMillan may have decided that a different approach to preparation was needed to explore the theological implications of the Passion gospel he was about to set.<sup>7</sup>

## The Expression of Faith

MacMillan's affinity with, and understanding of, the theological significance of the words he sets means that his text settings and the musical contexts which frame them almost always express a balance between subjectivity and objectivity. This duality was encapsulated in his response to an interview question:

The emotional detachment that is required for liturgy has maintained itself as the most important thing throughout, but there are moments when that objectivity breaks down and subjectivity – an emotional personal reaction, as it were, to the unfolding – takes over. It's not a drama because you're just going over the same thing, but it's just the break between objectivity and subjectivity...<sup>8</sup>

Although this statement was made with reference to *Seven Last Words* it could equally well apply to the *St John Passion* which was first performed just seven months before the interview took place. It is an assertion that could also describe his relationship with Scotland and the tensions he feels there, as has frequently been revealed in his regular blogs and tweets.

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<sup>6</sup> K. Walton, 'I'd much rather listen to James MacMillan's music than his views', *The Scotsman*, 17 November 2009: [www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/i-d-much-rather-listen-to-james-macmillan-s-music-than-his-views-1-768161](http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/i-d-much-rather-listen-to-james-macmillan-s-music-than-his-views-1-768161) (accessed 28 August 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Some theologians and other commentators consider *The Reproaches* to be anti-Semitic: see H. S. Pyper, 'Crucifixion In The Concert Hall: Secular And Sacred in James MacMillan's "Passion of St John"', *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 'Breaking the Norms' (September 2009), pp. 344-355, at pp. 348-51.

<sup>8</sup> Hallam, 'Conversation with James MacMillan', *ibid.* pp. 20-1.



The clash of cultural ideals came to a head for him in 2010 in relation to music of the Catholic church in Scotland. MacMillan has always been critical of what he has described as ‘puerile’ music written for, and used in, many Catholic services. His is, of course, hardly a unique view on the quality, or otherwise, of certain styles of music utilised in worship, particularly the kind of music that is over-repetitive, and which can be encountered in many of the Christian denominations. The fallout came with respect to the Mass which he wrote for the visit of Pope Benedict to the United Kingdom in 2010 which ‘the liturgists’ declared ‘unsingable’ (as the composer recounts it). Apparently only an appeal to the Bishops resolved the problem but it was a damaging time for him and it is more than likely that one result of the fallout from this debacle caused him to declare that he would stop writing [specifically] congregational music for the Catholic Church, as a protest against the ‘willful’ forgetting of the ‘vast repertory of tradition’, in favour of music which is ‘stodgy and sentimental, tonally and rhythmically stilted, melodically inane and adored by Catholic clergy “of a certain age”’. This statement was made in November 2013 and the remembrance of some reactions to the use of *The Reproaches* in *St John Passion*, and the actions of the ‘liturgists’ must surely have been in his mind while writing the *St Luke Passion* in 2012-13. This may explain, in part, the much simpler approach adopted in this second Passion setting, and the act of writing it seems likely to have fed into his subsequent decision to declare publicly that he would no longer write congregational music for the Catholic Church.<sup>9</sup>

What was, perhaps, most disappointing for MacMillan in the circumstances was that his ‘mission’ as a profoundly-religious composer is, at heart a simple yet profoundly-spiritual one, and one which has nothing to do with proselytizing or promoting religious discord:

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<sup>9</sup> The blog which he kept between 2010 and 2012 also makes quite frequent and extended reference to this issue so it was clearly occupying his thoughts to a degree: J. MacMillan, blog 2010-12, <https://jamesmacmillaninscotland.wordpress.com/blog/> (accessed 11 September 2018). His public statement about the intervention of the ‘liturgists’ and his appeal to the bishops is at J. MacMillan, ‘Scottish bishops saved my Papal Mass’, *Scottish Catholic Observer*, October 28, 2010: <http://sconews.co.uk/news/3829/scottish-bishops-saved-my-papal-mass-says-macmillan> (accessed 13 September 2018). This ‘revelation’ was originally put out on the composer’s *Daily Telegraph* blog, as was his assertion that he will not write any more congregational music, but these are not now available publicly on the paper’s website. Both statements provoked strong reactions, frequently quoting MacMillan’s words directly, and some of these ‘commentaries’ are still in the public domain. One of the more interesting is T. Way, ‘Hippies and Holy Joes?’, *Australian Journal of Liturgy*, Vol. 14 No. 2 (2014), pp. 51-61. Monsignor Gerry Fitzpatrick denied he ever called the work ‘unsingable’ but in almost the same breath declared that it ‘wasn’t fit for purpose’: No author given, ‘Revealed: discord over music for the papal visit’, *The Scotsman*, 27 October 2010, [www.scotsman.com/news/revealed-discord-over-music-for-the-papal-visit-1-826541](http://www.scotsman.com/news/revealed-discord-over-music-for-the-papal-visit-1-826541) (accessed 29 December 2018).



The responsibilities on the Christian composer are to open up windows on the divine, windows on the things hidden to normal everyday experience for most listeners, for most music lovers.<sup>10</sup>

It is a bold and rather uncompromising statement that marks out the role that MacMillan saw and presumably, two decades on, still sees, as his primary motivation for composing. Even before he had given any serious thought to undertaking a Passion setting he was able to point to numerous places in his music where he 'traced the territory' of the crucifixion narrative in works where 'the political comes together with the religious, the sacred with the secular, the timeless and the contemporary progressing in parallel lines which sometimes bend towards each other and intersect'.<sup>11</sup> As Dominic Wells has shown, this statement could similarly apply to MacMillan's compositional ethos which includes use of self-quotation and other 'acts of remembrance' which, while recalling previous works, become mirrors through which to ascribe meaning to the new work.<sup>12</sup>

### Characteristic MacMillanisms in the two Passions

Despite the fact that both the *St John Passion* and the *St Luke Passion* were written for the concert hall rather than church performance, and they have very different emphases, it is important to recognize that, as for every other composer who has written a Passion, and not least Bach, MacMillan's interpretations embody profound spiritual truths which he wants his audience to understand, even if they do not share his specific faith perspective. In the *St John Passion* it was the humanity and suffering of Jesus, and the essential drama of the Gospel narrative which MacMillan focused on, whereas in the *St Luke Passion* it was the gospel writer's concentration on the 'Christ's life and teachings' and his concern with 'the idea of the Kingdom of God' which led MacMillan towards 'a more spiritual, inward, and pared-back approach' in the new setting.<sup>13</sup>

Although the *St Luke Passion* was generally well received – especially by those sympathetic to MacMillan's theological interpretations, at least one reviewer felt that

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<sup>10</sup> [T. Hone], 'Creation and the Composer: An Interview with James MacMillan' (although not credited in the main text a later comment reveals that the interviewer was Timothy Hone) in J. Astley, T. Hone, and M. Savage, (eds), *Creative Chords: Studies in Music, Theology and Christian Formation*, (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), pp. 3-19 at p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> J. MacMillan, 'Parthenogenesis', in J. Begbie., (ed.) *Sounding the Depths*, (London: SCM Press, 2002), pp. 33-8, at p. 35. The works he mentions are *The Seven Last Words* (1993), *Visitatio Sepulchri* (1992-3), *Triduum* (1995-7), and, 'obliquely' *Búsqueda* (and *Ines de Castro*).

<sup>12</sup> D. P. Wells, 'James MacMillan: Retrospective Modernist', unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Durham University. (2012). Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/5932/>. This is an illuminating and intelligent analysis of MacMillan's debt to the music of the past, including his own previous works. The term MacMillanisms was first coined by Wells in 'James MacMillan: Retrospective Modernist', p. 167ff.

<sup>13</sup> James MacMillan interview, [www.boosey.com/cr/news/James-MacMillan-interview-about-new-St-Luke-Passion/100345](http://www.boosey.com/cr/news/James-MacMillan-interview-about-new-St-Luke-Passion/100345) (accessed 3 September 2018).

'its innate didacticism keeps us at arm's length from any sense of individual suffering'.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps there was a certain inevitability that a work which set out to explore the 'otherness, sanctity and mystery'<sup>15</sup> of Christ and did not embody Jesus in human form as a male soloist, was always going to be less immediate for an audience and more reflective in its effect.

On the other hand, the portrayal of the humanity of Christ and the dramatic nature of the *St John Passion* was, as MacMillan himself admitted, much influenced by the fact that he was rehearsing and performing his opera *The Sacrifice* while writing the Passion and that the opera had a profound effect on the composition. However, in the same blog he suggested that the melismatic writing which dominates many of the Christus solo lines (see Example 1) was more Eastern in feel than derived from Scottish folk/pibroch decoration as is implied by a number of commentators:

His [Christus] music has an eastern, Semitic feel - lots of melismas and *glissandi*. I do a lot of embellished liturgical chanting myself and that's fed directly into how I've treated Christus.<sup>16</sup>

Christus

484

there- fore he who de - li-ver'd me to -

- you has the great - er sin

*p*

Ex. 1: Melismas and *glissando* in the Christus line – *St John Passion* bar 484ff

Such very elaborate acciaccatura-based decoration is not generally found in MacMillan's vocal writing, and not at all in the vocal parts of the *St Luke Passion*, but there is a reflection of them in the instrumental line which accompanies the concluding choral hummed chords in the *St Luke Passion* (Example 2):

<sup>14</sup> T. Ashley, 'St Luke Passion/MacMillan review – impressive, but not always moving', *The Guardian* 6 Apr 2015, [www.theguardian.com/music/2015/apr/06/st-luke-passion-james-macmillan-britten-sinfonia-review](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/apr/06/st-luke-passion-james-macmillan-britten-sinfonia-review) (accessed 3 September 2018).

<sup>15</sup> MacMillan, *St Luke Passion* interview, *ibid*.

<sup>16</sup> R. Smith, 'Conceived in Silence', [www.theguardian.com/music/2008/apr/25/classicalmusicandopera](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/apr/25/classicalmusicandopera) (accessed 3 September 2018). MacMillan revisited the 'eastern, Semitic feel' in *Clemency* (2009-10): Abraham's opening unaccompanied solo is very similar in effect to Example 1.

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solo vln 1, 2 vla, vc. ob. + clar. - clar. and solo vc solo vln 1, 2 vla, ob. + clar. and tutti vln 1 + fl.

pp f cresc.

pp ff

pp f ff

Ex. 2: upper instruments melodic line underneath choral humming, leading to the end of the *St Luke Passion*

It is a characteristic textural feature of MacMillan's writing that a strongly tonal theme is encased in a texture which is dissonant. I have, elsewhere, explored the idea that in the composer's usage this represents the dualities of heaven and earth, the sacred and the secular. The first large-scale work where this occurs with a religious connotation is in *Veni Veni Emmanuel* where the harmonized hymn emerges out of the dissonant texture on the brass.<sup>17</sup> The equivalent effect in the *St John Passion* occurs in the final movement 'Sanctus Immortalis' where the composer quotes his own *Tryst* melody – apparently written for his wife-to-be in 1983 but which he now describes as a 'love song for the church'.<sup>18</sup> In the *St Luke Passion* it is the Passion Chorale at the end of Part 2 that similarly emerges out of the 'wailing' of the Daughters of Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup> Where Jesus addresses the Daughters of Jerusalem the children's Christus choir split in three parts and have their most elaborate melismatic and imitative setting. Underlying both of these examples is the falling tone or semitone identified as a MacMillan characteristic – Scottish 'keening': as a

<sup>17</sup> R. E. McGregor, "Transubstantiated into the musical: an critical exegesis on James MacMillan's *Veni Veni Emmanuel*", (2007) in G. Hair (ed.), *A Companion to Recent Scottish Music: 1950 to the present* (Glasgow: Musica Scotica Trust 2007) p. 30ff and, J. MacMillan and R. McGregor, 'James MacMillan: a conversation and commentary', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 151, No. 1912 (Autumn 2010), pp. 69-100, at pp. 80, 82 and 83.

<sup>18</sup> Wells, 'James MacMillan: Retrospective Modernist', *ibid.* p. 195.

<sup>19</sup> David Hayes discusses the *St Luke Passion* in a lecture, interpreting the use of the Passion Chorale here as a statement of faith. He also points out that Part 2 ends with a repeat of the 'do not be afraid' motif, asking the question "who is MacMillan telling not to be afraid". In his exposition of the Luke narrative which follows Hayes's lecture, Father Richard Dillon explores the nature of Luke's commentaries on events during the gospel narrative, and although he does not make direct connections with MacMillan's musical commentaries these can be implied based on Hayes's previous presentation. "A Conversation about James MacMillan's *St Luke Passion*" (Sunday April 2, 2017):

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRVq0tRv4LM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRVq0tRv4LM) (accessed 12 October 2018). The relevant sections of the video are 47'30' *et seq.* and 54'08' *et seq.* The "Daughters of Jerusalem" section and MacMillan's use of children's choir for the voice of Jesus are discussed further later in this article.



'MacMillanism'<sup>20</sup> in the *St Luke Passion* it is ubiquitous, beginning with the three-times repeated choral 'Maria' at the beginning of the work (Example 3):

**Larghetto**  
**fff**  
 Soprano: Ma - ri - - a  
 Alto: Ma - ri - - a  
 Tenor: Ma - ri - - a  
 Bass: Ma - ri - - a  
**Larghetto**  
 Organ: Accompaniment with sustained chords.

Ex. 3: Opening of *St Luke Passion*: 'Maria'

This chordal setting with the soprano falling from F# to F $\natural$  is reminiscent of the 'Jesu' chording in *O Bone Jesu* (2002) (Example 4a), F# seems to be a particular pitch which MacMillan associates with Jesus: it is the solitary pitch held by the Christus choir at the end of the *St Luke Passion*, and spelt as G $\flat$  it begins the final 'answer me' outburst (and is used at other significant places including 'raised me high' at bar 164) in *The Reproaches* in the Eighth movement of the *St John Passion* (Example 4b):

**pp**  
 Soprano: Je - - su  
 Alto: Je - - su  
 Tenor: Je - - su  
 Bass: Je - - su

Ex. 4a: First 'Jesu' bars 4-5 of *O Bone Jesus*

**f** **lunga** **ffff**  
 Christus: An - - - - - swer me

<sup>20</sup> Wells, 'James MacMillan: Retrospective Modernist' *ibid.* p. 167ff.

Ex. 4b: final bars (182-5) Movement VIII, 'The Reproaches', *St John. Passion*

A falling two-chord figure based on chords a semitone apart is first heard orchestrally at Figure 18 (G minor 1<sup>st</sup> inversion falling to A major root) and is used frequently thereafter in the *St Luke Passion*, in various recognisable variants, as a punctuation point to divide up the narrative. This sighing lament gesture is typically found throughout MacMillan's mature works, and he himself recognizes that as a signifier it is by no means exclusive to Ireland and northern Scotland, but it has been part of his overt musical vocabulary since at least the orchestral work *The Keening* written in 1986, only performed for the first time in 2014 (Example 5):



Ex. 5: *The Keening* bars 40-2

*The Keening* is based on 'The Lament for Glencoe' (Murt Ghlinne Comhann/ 'Great is my sorrow') and it is not so much the actual musical gesture that is significant as the fact that it is an obvious expression of lament (although of course in essence just an adaptation of the 'sighing' *appoggiatura*). MacMillan has elaborated it in various ways in different works, from expressing the anger inherent in the response to injustice as in *Búsqueda* or being allied to the notion of seeking forgiveness which underpins *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie*: both of these works focus on the victim (as in its own way does *Tuireadh*) and it is only a small step from these to an association with Christ as the supreme victim in works which explicitly reference the crucifixion.

Mention has already been made of the link between the Cello Concerto and the *St John Passion*. A specific and characteristic musical feature that actually ties *The Reproaches* movement of the Cello Concerto to its counterpart in the *St John Passion* is the use of rising fast scalar, and often canonic, passages in the orchestra which occur in nonuplets from bars 1 of *The Reproaches* in the *St John Passion* and in semiquavers (10 in the time of 8) at bar 44 (letter E) in the second movement of the Cello Concerto (C#D#E F#G# A Bb/A#), and, furthermore, the canonic sequence in bars 2-3 (in lower strings and bassoon) of the *St John Passion* is related to Figure A of the Cello Concerto, both beginning C# E F G in semiquaver movement before diverging. In a footnote to his discussion of MacMillan's reuse of the Executioner's Song from *Inés de Castro* in the first movement of the Cello Concerto, George Parsons suggests that 'the result of this is suggestive: to place the protagonist of the Concerto's narrative as



one of those who crucified Christ'.<sup>21</sup> While this may be true of the first movement of the concerto, the use of *The Reproaches* plainchants suggest that the protagonist of the second movement is Christ himself and the fleeting references to the earlier work noted in this movement of the *St John Passion* may support such an association.

What these brief aforementioned examples show is that MacMillan is especially adept at taking a very small idea and investing it with not only motivic significance but also with spiritual meaning. Because many of these motifs have either historical musical connotations, or relate directly to a text, often religious, meaning can be inferred at different points in a composition, and this will now be discussed further in relation to the *St Luke Passion* which has not been explored by commentators in anything like the detail that has been applied to the earlier Passion setting.

Such allusions, quotations, and adapted quotations that MacMillan uses, from both his own and other works, or from liturgical sources, are so much part and parcel of his approach to composition as to be not only principal components of his style, but also add meaning, and, at times, structure to a composition.<sup>22</sup> They are much less likely to be identified as Scottish characteristics by an international audience, but rather as non-culture specific archetypes or clichés. Even the frequently-found extended drone or pedal in MacMillan's music, which might be related to Scottish pipe music, is more likely to be identified as Stravinskian in the wider context. In that sense then the approach which he took to the *St Luke Passion* suggests that his prime concern was not so much to expunge these characteristics, which are much less evident than in other works, but rather, to deliberately simplify the basic ideas he used in order to create unity through simplicity. The final part of this article will explore this idea in some detail in relation to the *St Luke Passion*.

### **St Luke Passion: preparation, and connections**

MacMillan's choice to set the Christus part in the *St Luke Passion* as a children's choir was partly to emphasise the innocence of Jesus (perhaps there was even a hint of Britten in his decision), but also in both unison and three parts to embody both the human and the Trinitarian property of God in the Christian tradition. Another key aspect of the work which reflects the nature of Luke's gospel is the focus on Mary,

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<sup>21</sup> W. G. Parsons, 'Metaphor as a Tool for Theologically-Informed Musical Analysis of Sir James MacMillan's *Triduum*', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Sheffield (2016), p. 33 note 9 <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/15760/1/Parsons%20PhD%20Final%20Corrected%20Version.pdf> (accessed 6 September 2018)

<sup>22</sup> A particularly apposite example of this is the Fourth Symphony which critical reaction perceived as 'absolute music' but which in fact, as shown by Sean Doherty, is no less than a 'setting' of the Pauline Mass: Sean Doherty, Dublin City University, 'The Mass "Transubstantiated" into Music: Quotation and Allusion in James MacMillan's Symphony No. 4', paper presented at The Annual Meeting of Society for Christian Scholarship in Music, Southeastern Baptist Theology Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina, Friday 9 February 2018.

hence MacMillan's addition of the Annunciation in the Prelude which he explains, with the inclusion of the Ascension (taken from Acts of the Apostles) in the Postlude, was an attempt to frame the narrative in a way which more positively related to the Kingdom of God.<sup>23</sup> Interviewed by Frank La Rocca, MacMillan reflected on the preparatory process for the work's composition as one which had both a practical and a spiritual dimension:

In the preparation of my *St. Luke Passion*, Jeremy [Begbie] gathered a group of Cambridge scholars and Duke scholars that would meet – I think we met two or three times – going back and forth across the Atlantic, engaging in wide-scale conversations ... And it was a very generous thing for him and them to have done because it was all part of the process of composition for me. It allowed me to feed their expertise into my search for knowledge and, indeed, the context for writing the *St. Luke Passion*. And it seemed to work.<sup>24</sup>

On another level the Annunciation is important to MacMillan as a metaphor for the process of creation, and the creative artist as a conduit for the work of the Spirit:

There is something in the instinct of an artist or a composer, or any creative person, or any Christian for that matter, which is inexorably drawn to the idea of Mary's 'vesselship' – the notion of making oneself as a channel for the divine will.<sup>25</sup>

References to Mary and other women through MacMillan's works reminds us, as Pyper has pointed out, that in his music redemption is often achieved through the feminine, which connects with his strongly-held Marian theology.<sup>26</sup> This broader view of the place of women is what links the use of the Stabat Mater in *Ines de Castro* with the Stabat Mater in the *St John Passion*, (and on to *I am your mother* (2011) and *Cum Vidisset Jesus* (2012) both for unaccompanied choir).

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<sup>23</sup> Tradition has it that the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles were written by the same hand.

<sup>24</sup> F. La Rocca, 'Sir James MacMillan': [www.benedictinstitute.org/2018/04/sir-james-macmillan-catholic-arts-today-interview/](http://www.benedictinstitute.org/2018/04/sir-james-macmillan-catholic-arts-today-interview/) (accessed 7 September 2018). Jeremy Begbie, a theologian and musician currently based at Duke University and formerly of Cambridge University, was the editor of *Sounding the Depths*, *ibid*. An interview with Jeremy Begbie which discusses this process is included in the extended New York Choral Society video "A Conversation about James MacMillan's *St Luke Passion*", *ibid*. The relevant section of the video is 14'37" – 21'00".

<sup>25</sup> J. MacMillan 'God, Theology and Music', *New Blackfriars* 81, (2000), pp. 16–26, at p. 23. George Corbett explores MacMillan's view of the Annunciation in connection with a project that took place at St Andrew's University: George Corbett, 'TheoArtistry, and a Contemporary Perspective on Composing Sacred Choral Music', in *Religions Special Issue - Music: its Theologies and Spiritualities – a Global Perspective*, particularly p.3 ff. La Rocca claims that the project was 'modeled directly on MacMillan's *St. Luke Passion* experience'.

<sup>26</sup> Hugh S. Pyper, 'Crucifixion In The Concert Hall: Secular And Sacred in James MacMillan's "Passion of St John"', *ibid*. at p.347.

It would be strange, given MacMillan's tendency to refer back to previous works, if there were not a significant number of references to previous works of his associated with the Crucifixion. Perhaps the most obvious connection is to *Seven Last Words* (1993) since the form of words of Jesus that MacMillan uses in that work are mostly drawn from the gospels of John and Luke, with only the fourth movement ('My God, my God why have you forsaken me') taken from Matthew's gospel. In the *St John Passion* MacMillan only makes what might be an unintentional reference to *Seven Last Words* in the descending scalic idea of 'Woman behold your son' ('thy' in *Seven Last Words*) (Examples 6a and 6b):

Sop. *ff*  $\text{♩} = 60$   
 Wo - man be - hold thy son! 3 Wo - man be - hold thy son! 4  
*tutti sempre ff* Wo - man be - hold thy son! *tutti sempre ff* Wo - man be - hold thy son

Ex. 6a: *Seven Last Words* Movement II bars 1 – 21

Christus *p* *cresc. poco a poco*  
 21 Wo - - - - - man be -  
*f* hold your son, - - - - -

Ex. 6b: *St John Passion* Movement 7 'Jesus and His Mother' bars 21-9

However, in the *St Luke Passion*, MacMillan quotes much more directly from the earlier work. At bar 304 (Fig. 76 + 7) to Jesus's words 'Father forgive them,' MacMillan repeats precisely from the soprano line of *Seven Last Words* (Movement I, bar 12ff) at a minor third lower (now notionally in Gb major): the main difference is that whereas the canonic entries in the original were at two bars' distance, in the *St Luke Passion* the entries are at two crotchet beats' distance with the lower parts adapted, and the whole extended to cadence into C major/minor.<sup>27</sup> The words of Jesus are framed by the narration of the chanting male voices first at Fig. 76 'two others also who were criminals were led away ...' and after, at Fig. 77 'And they cast lots to divide his garments ...'. In *Seven Last Words*, Jesus's words were followed by men's chorus intoning 'Hosanna filio David' (bar 23ff). It is hard not to interpret the

<sup>27</sup> MacMillan preserves the oscillating orchestral chords of accompaniment on strings only as before.

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Prelude to Act III of *Tristan and Isolde*.<sup>28</sup> The repetition of 'Father' three times has a distant resonance with the threefold Maria at the opening of the work and is undoubtedly related to Trinitarianism.

### **St Luke Passion and its theology through musical detail**

Reference has already been made to the use of the falling semitone in the *St Luke Passion*, and it is hardly a feature unique to this work. However the fact that MacMillan engaged in theological discourse round St Luke's Gospel prior to starting composition means that his desire to make more evident the essentially positive message of the Gospel – in particular Luke's concentration on, among other things, Jesus's teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven – suggests that any analysis of the work needs to identify how MacMillan has translated these theological ideas into the musical substance.

Asked to pinpoint how the experience of discussing Luke's Gospel in preparation for writing the work had in fact prepared him, and how the influence might be perceived, MacMillan was perhaps unwilling, or unable, to be specific, saying only that he 'could hear the influence' but when writing a work it was like 'being in a dream'.<sup>29</sup> Presumably, given his later statements on the subject, at least some of those discussions focused on St Luke's emphasis on the teachings of Jesus, and in particular the Kingdom of God. These then would have influenced MacMillan's decision to include a Prelude based on the Annunciation and a Postlude on the Ascension since in both cases the quoted texts as well as Jesus's words to the thief in Chapter 23, and parts of Chapter 22 'incorporate Gospel texts where Luke explains the Kingdom of God'. The idea of a more 'spiritual' and more 'inward' approach to the setting perhaps explains the cut-back forces used, but not how he translated these ideas into purely musical terms.<sup>30</sup>

The texts used for the Prelude and Postlude are very short compared to the two chapters which they frame. The Prelude uses Luke 1:30, 42, 51-3, and 78a, and Luke 10:11d (though not in that order). Luke 1:30 and 42 are the words addressed to Maria, while 1:34 is 'how can this be'. Luke 10:11d is the specific reference to the Kingdom of God, that it 'has come near', while 1:51-53 concerns the putting down of the proud and the sending away of the rich. Finally, Luke 1:78a appears to have been used by MacMillan as if to give an answer to all the questions: 'through the tender mercy of God'. The Postlude utilises just two texts: Luke 24:38 where Christ asks

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<sup>28</sup> The *Tristan* connection is discussed at length in Wells, 'James MacMillan: Retrospective Modernist', *ibid*, and David Hayes makes a specific reference of this motif in the *St Luke Passion* to the 'pain of death': "A Conversation about James MacMillan's *St Luke Passion*", *ibid*, at 26'30". This figure is discussed further in the final section of this article.

<sup>29</sup> He explores this in answers to Professor Sarah Coakley at 'Duke Initiatives in Theology and the Arts: James MacMillan Lecture with Sarah Coakley', <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/video-james-macmillan-lecture-with-sarah-coakley/id634583912?i=1000313767094&mt=2> (12 October 2018).

<sup>30</sup> MacMillan, Interview, *ibid*. (note 13).

‘why are you troubled’ and Acts 1:9b-11, as if as an assurance ‘he will come [again] in the same way you saw him go into heaven’.

Some of the Marian aspects have been discussed earlier, including the opening chords but for ‘do not be afraid’ MacMillan adapted the falling semitone into a motif based on two semitone falls in semiquavers and consecutive 5ths. This is retranslated in the orchestral linking passage at Figure 2 *et seq.* into an extended melodic motif which treats the ‘do not be afraid’ motif in inversion’ (Example 8a/b) and then at Figure 3 into a harmonized 4-part augmentation for the text ‘How can this be?’. (Example 8c):

Example 8a shows a vocal duet for Tenor and Bass. The Tenor part is in treble clef and the Bass part is in bass clef, both in 4/4 time. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The lyrics are 'Do not be a - fraid'. The music features a motif of two semitone falls in semiquavers and consecutive 5ths, with a forte (*f*) dynamic marking.

Ex. 8a: bar 12 Prologue, *St Luke Passion* – ‘Do not be afraid’

Example 8b shows an instrumental interlude in 4/4 time. The key signature has two flats. The music features a motif of two semitone falls in semiquavers and consecutive 5ths, with a forte (*f*) dynamic marking. The tempo is marked 'accel. poco a poco' and 'etc.'. The bass line is omitted, and the framing chords are also omitted.

Ex. 8b: bar 30 Prologue, *St Luke Passion* – instrumental interlude

Example 8c shows a four-part vocal setting for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The parts are in 4/4 time, with a tempo marking of *pp* and a tempo of *c.84*. The lyrics are 'How can this be?'. The music features a motif of two semitone falls in semiquavers and consecutive 5ths, with a forte (*f*) dynamic marking.

Ex. 8c: bar 40 Prologue, *St Luke Passion* – ‘How can this be?’



Both of these ideas (Examples 7a/c and 7b) recur later in the work. Some key locations will be discussed presently.



One other thematic idea is presented in the Prologue and it is subjected to various permutations throughout the course of the work (Example 9):

Ex: 9: bar 83 Fig. 6 - Prologue, *St Luke Passion* – ‘The Kingdom of God...’

This thematic germ (i.c. 1,2,2) is identifiable as being related to the *Tristan* motif, mentioned earlier, but it is also relatable to the opening pitches of the first movement of *Seven Last Words*. Although Wagner was an important influence on MacMillan from at least his mid-twenties, a decade before he wrote *Seven Last Words*, he only became fully aware of the possible semiotic significance of the *Tristan* motif from reading Roger Scruton’s work while he was writing *The Sacrifice* and *St John Passion*. In the years following the composition of these works his views on the eucharistic parallels with *Tristan* have become more embedded, reflecting a continuing engagement with the philosopher.<sup>31</sup>

In the *St Luke Passion* the first adaptation of the *Tristan* motif occurs in the orchestra following the words ‘The kingdom of God has come near’, with a pitch profile which MacMillan used subsequently in the *Passion* for some of the words of Christ (Example 10).

Ex. 10: bar 90 Prologue, *St Luke Passion* – first adaptation of ‘*Tristan*’ motif

Since one of MacMillan’s aims was to focus in this *Passion* on the teaching of Jesus, and as most of this occurs in Chapter 22 the adaptations of the main thematic idea

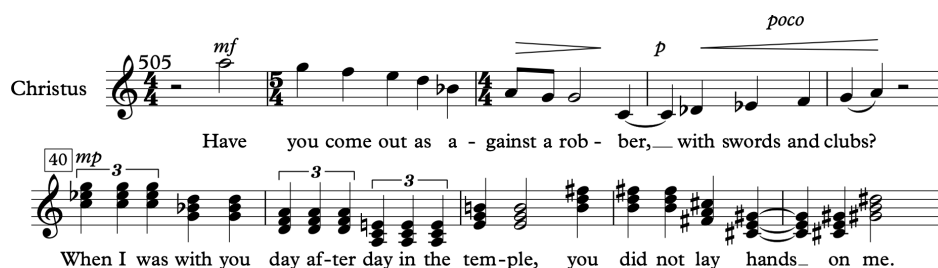
<sup>31</sup> In his thesis Wells identified that the first use of the *Tristan* motif occurred in the Piano Sonata written in 1985, later reworked into the Second Symphony [Wells, ‘James MacMillan: Retrospective Modernist’, *ibid.*, p. 91ff], but MacMillan’s understanding of the full eucharistic symbolism seems to have been considerably developed by his reading of Roger Scruton’s 2004 volume *Death Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner’s ‘Tristan and Isolde’*. (New York: Oxford University Press).

concentrate there. When Jesus teaches the disciples that the first should be last the opening phrases adapt the Tristan motif (Example 11):



Ex. 11: bar 203, bar before Fig. 19, Chapter 22 'The kings of the gentiles'

The same opening pitches recur at key points in Chapter 22, often delivered by Christus, as, for example, the concluding pitches of his declaration to Peter that 'the cock will not crow this day until you three times deny that you know me' (bars 299-310, Fig. 25), but also as the disciples question themselves about who would be the betrayer (bars 162ff, Fig. 17). MacMillan contrasts this with a descending phrase, often beginning on a high A natural, which generally characterises passages of assurance or instruction, such for the institution of the eucharistic elements, but the same phrases are also deployed when Jesus asks 'have you come out as against a robber with swords and clubs?'. It is possible that the composer's intention in utilising these contrasting melodic elements in conjunction with each other was to re-emphasise Jesus's humanity (Example 12).



Ex.12: bars 505-14. Chapter 22 'Have you come out'

However, as shown by the second half of Example 11, the Christus chorus splits into three parts, and at this point MacMillan clearly wishes to draw a distinction between the humanity of Christ on the one hand and his deity of on the other, by emphasizing the Trinitarian aspect of God – here it is God that is speaking rather than the human part of Christ. The use of a triplet rhythm also supports the theological point being made here – the rejection of God by humanity. It is not entirely clear why MacMillan chose to write this entire passage and that following in constant, and undeviating, fourth up/fifth down movement, reflecting as it does the first use of the same conjunct parallel movement in Chapter 22.<sup>32</sup> unless to suggest

<sup>32</sup> The first occurrence of this fifth up/fourth down movement is in Chapter 22 at Figure 11: 'Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you': only God could predict something which would happen in the future.

the singularity of God ('one in three') and/or the constancy of God. It is also conceivable that MacMillan considered the fact that there are seven semitones in the perfect fifth, seven being the number of heaven.<sup>33</sup> The distinction between Trinitarian God and the human Jesus is drawn most clearly and simply when Jesus utters 'Judas, would you betray the Son of man with a kiss' (Example 13):



Ex. 13: bars 469-73: . Chapter 22 'Judas would you betray'

Jesus's last words at the end of this section 'No more of this!' are set to an F# minor second inversion triad – F# as suggested earlier symbolizing Jesus, embedded in the triad symbolizing God.

The essential simplicity of these thematic ideas means that MacMillan has been able to relate textual ideas together across the work in both overt and more hidden, or obscure, ways. An example of hidden or implied meaning occurs when the motifs for 'do not be afraid' and 'how can this be' are reworked as the initial pitches when Jesus tells the disciples 'But behold him who betrays me is on the table': the opening pitches Db-C-B imply the two messages of the previous settings.

A more structurally-significant motivic figure makes theological links between the questioning by Pilate (four bars before Figure 57 *et seq.*), Jesus's words to 'daughters of Jerusalem' (Figure 71 *et seq.*) and the death of Jesus (Figure 83 *et seq.*), and suggests what the composer understood as the climactic point of the work. At the open forum held at Duke University two days before the American premiere, one of the Christus choristers asked MacMillan why the 'Daughters of Jerusalem' section was the emotional climax of the work.<sup>34</sup> Without essentially denying that it was, the composer responded:

[That's a] very interesting observation ... it may very well be, it's a moment I'm very proud of ... it's certainly the saddest moment in the piece ... Because of its sheer aching sadness I think it must have had an effect on me as a composer to produce music of that degree of sadness.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Seven is a symbolic number in the Book of Revelation. MacMillan used number symbolism elsewhere, notably in *O Bone Jesu* (2002).

<sup>34</sup> Theologians usually interpret this passage as referring to the Fall of Jerusalem in AD70.

<sup>35</sup> Duke Initiatives in Theology and the Arts, "Sounding the Passion": Public Panel Discussion, April 10, 2014, at 1.09'20"-1.10'43" <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/video-sounding-the-passion-public-panel-discussion/d634583912?i=1000313767075&mt=2> (accessed 12 October 2018).

Sad perhaps, but not the climax. MacMillan brings back the orchestral motif, slightly adapted, from the introduction to 'Daughters of Jerusalem', at T10 (hence a tone lower) to fall onto the first inversion of F# minor (Example 14), which leads into the last moments of the crucifixion and it is repeated finally at Figure 83 'And having said this he breathed his last'.

**Adagio** ♩ = c72  
345 Bns, Hns

f

Timp

Cbn

Ex. 14: 'daughters' motif Chapter 23, bars 345-6

Between these statements of what might be termed the 'Daughters' motif MacMillan recapitulates the orchestral accompaniment which begins four bars before Figure 57 under the words 'Christ the King' sung by the male chorus, and subsequently articulated by the male chorus to the words 'We found this man perverting our nation'. The orchestral recapitulation of this figure begins with the same pitches at four bars before Figure 81 between the texts 'the sun's light failed' and 'and the curtain of the temple was torn in two'. There is therefore just a hint here that MacMillan is re-invoking the Reproaches (Example 15).

Ex. 15: orchestral recapitulation Chapter 23, four bars before Figure 81

Since he was unwilling to confirm that he considered the 'Daughters of Jerusalem' section to be the emotional climax of the work, there are two remaining possibilities: first that the quotation of the Passion Chorale inside the dissonant accompaniment at the end of Chapter 23 is the climax, but this ends with four emphatic orchestral statements of the 'do not be afraid' motif finishing on a bare F#,C# dyad. The succeeding Postlude then begins with a solitary, unaccompanied, F#. Thus in theological terms what might be thought of as the climax (that is, the end of Chapter 23) is actually not so, because it does not resolve the tensions created by the juxtaposition of the dissonant material with the chorale. Rather this juxtaposition creates a tension that has to be resolved, which only takes place at the very end of the Postlude as the 8 part wordless chorus reaches a B major chord (essentially where the work began in the Prelude) with the Christus part joining then on a solitary mid-

range F#, and holding this pitch until it is the only remaining sound in the work. Hence the Postlude encapsulates two key theological statements: Christ the first and last, and the continuity of Christ. This is therefore the climax of the work, even as it appears, an anticlimax.

Although MacMillan asserts that he is no theologian, nor that his primary aim is to proselytize, he is, like Bach, inevitably bound to express not only his faith but his understanding of the theological basis of his faith through his music. The fact that this is a developing understanding and not a static one is shown in the way his treatment of liturgical and biblical texts has developed over his mature compositional career. Each Passion then, in its own way, encapsulates MacMillan's theological understanding at a key point in time. When he comes to write the two remaining Passions it will be revealing to discover how these have been moulded by subsequent experiences, while at the same time maintaining the links with the past which have shaped the *St John Passion* and the *St Luke Passion*.