



Introduction

GEORGE PARSONS AND ROBERT SHOLL

Writing in Sir James MacMillan's 60th birthday year, it is fitting to present the first collection of essays devoted to his music. MacMillan first attracted international attention with the orchestral work *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie*, given its premiere at the 1990 Proms by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under Jerzy Maksimiuk. This was followed by the 1992 percussion concerto *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel*, commissioned for the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, and given its premiere by Evelyn Glennie at the 1992 Proms. Other major works followed these two initial successes through the 1990s and included three works commissioned by Mstislav Rostropovich and the London Symphony Orchestra (*The World's Ransoming*, the *Cello Concerto* and the *Symphony, 'Vigil'*); the cantata *Seven Last Words from the Cross* (1993), which was screened on BBC TV during Holy Week in 1994; concertos for Clarinet (*Ninian*) and Trumpet (*Epiclesis*); Piano (*The Beserking*); and *Quickening* for chorus and orchestra, receiving its premiere at the 1999 Proms by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, and The Hilliard Ensemble, conducted by Andrew Davis. Since the year 2000 MacMillan has produced a string of concertos written for major international soloists, including Jean-Yves Thibaudet (*Piano Concerto No. 3*); the organist Wayne Marshall (*A Scotch Bestiary*); violinist Vadim Repin; oboist Nicholas Daniel; violist Lawrence Power; percussionist Colin Currie (*Percussion Concerto No. 2*); and trombonist Jörgen van Rijen.

MacMillan has established himself as one of the leading choral composers of our day, and he joins a long line of British composers working in the twentieth century including Charles Villiers Stanford, Hubert Parry, Herbert Howells, Edmund Rubbra, William Walton, Benjamin Britten, William Matthias, Kenneth Leighton, and Michael Tippett, who have all written for the English Choral Tradition. His choral music has been premiered by many of the major choirs around in the UK and throughout the world, including Bath Camerata; the Hilliard Ensemble; the Oslo Soloists Choir; Ex Cathedra; the choir of St George's Chapel, Windsor; Schola Cantorum, Oxford; the BBC Singers; King's College, Cambridge; The Sixteen; and the choirs of the Chapel Royal, St Paul's Cathedral, Wells Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, and Westminster Cathedral.

MacMillan has secured an international reputation as Scotland's chief contemporary composer, notable for the breadth of work across many genres. In addition, his music has been given prominent exposure. A documentary film portrait of MacMillan was given on ITV's *The South Bank Show* in 2003, and *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel* has been given over 500 performances worldwide. His music has been given airings at many festivals around the world: the Edinburgh Festival in 1993; the Bergen Festival in 1997; the South Bank Centre in 1997 (*Raising Sparks* festival); the Queensland biennial in 1999; the BBC Barbican Composer Weekend in 2005; and the Grafenegg Festival in 2012.

He is also active in other musical fields, as a conductor, administrator, and educator. MacMillan has already been associated with a number of international festivals and orchestras. Between 1992 and 2002 he was Artistic Director of the Philharmonia's *Music of Today* series; he was the composer/conductor with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra between 2000 and 2009, and he has been Principal Guest Conductor of the Netherlands Radio Chamber Philharmonic from 2010. MacMillan also established *The Cumnock Tryst* music festival in 2014, in his home-town.

MacMillan was awarded a CBE in January 2004, cementing his place in the musical establishment, and then a Knighthood in the 2015 Queen's Birthday honours.

Context of *James MacMillan Studies*

Given MacMillan's stature in the global musical world, it is striking that academic research on MacMillan has lagged behind this profile. From his earliest exposure at the BBC Proms, MacMillan's music has generated a large body of reviews and interviews. These have extended into articles in *Tempo* and *The Musical Times*, giving both biographical background and scholarly depth.¹ Initial journal coverage in the 1990s was limited to more general, biographical pieces,² review-articles of CDs and concert performances,³

¹ Anthony Bye, 'Untitled Review of *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie*', *Tempo*, New Series, No. 182, Russian Issue (September 1992), pp. 56–57; Stephen Johnson, 'Veni, Veni, Emmanuel', *Tempo*, New Series, No. 183 (December 1992), pp. 34–35.

² Stephen Johnson, 'James MacMillan', *Tempo*, New Series, No. 185 (June 1993), pp. 2–5.

³ Ronald Weitzman, 'MacMillan's "Inés de Castro" at the Edinburgh Festival', *Tempo*, New Series (January 1997), pp. 29–32; Stephen Johnson, 'Untitled review of *Triduum*', *Tempo*, New Series, No. 209 (July 1999), pp. 44–45; Richard Drakeford, 'Untitled Review of *Seven Last Words from the Cross*', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 136, No. 1832 (October 1995), p. 556.

or more focussed essays on selected works, but lacking great analytical richness.⁴ It is time for him to be given a profile in the academy that begins to match his profile in the musical establishment.

The 2000s have seen a growing number of musicological articles engaging with MacMillan's works, from a variety of angles, including articles on the early works,⁵ on MacMillan's engagement with Scotland,⁶ and two significant interviews with the composer.⁷ Richard E. McGregor has produced much writing of interest, including an important article on *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel* that highlighted metaphor as a key strategy in MacMillan's aesthetic.⁸ At the same time, the appearance of the *St John Passion* (2007) generated its own corpus of research.⁹ In the UK, Dominic Wells wrote the first PhD thesis on MacMillan (2012), focussing on the element of musical borrowing, in the process uncovering the importance of borrowing to MacMillan's compositional style, and so linking it to a burgeoning area of musicology.¹⁰ Wells's thesis also serves as a useful overview of MacMillan's output. More detailed analytical work was provided by George Parsons's thesis on MacMillan (2016), a detailed analytical study of the *Triduum* triptych.¹¹ More recently, MacMillan's music has received attention from Arnold Whittall,¹² and

⁴ Nicholas Williams, 'Acts of Grace', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 140, No. 1866 (Spring 1999), pp. 44–46.

⁵ James Telford, 'Reconciling Opposing Forces: The Young James MacMillan – A Performing History', *Tempo*, Vol. 65, No. 257 (July 2011), pp. 40–51.

⁶ Richard E. McGregor, '"A Metaphor for the Deeper Wintriness . . .": Exploring James MacMillan's Musical Identity', *Tempo*, Vol. 65, No. 257 (July 2011), pp. 22–39.

⁷ Richard E. McGregor, 'James MacMillan: A conversation and commentary', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 151, No. 1912 (Autumn 2010), 69–100; Mandy Hallam, 'Conversation with James MacMillan', *Tempo*, Vol. 62, No. 245 (July 2008), pp. 17–29.

⁸ Richard E. McGregor, '"Transubstantiated into the musical . . .": A critical exegesis on James MacMillan's *Veni Veni Emmanuel*', in Graham Hair (ed.), *A Companion to Recent Scottish Music: 1950 to the Present* (Glasgow: Musica Scotica Trust, 2007), pp. 21–42.

⁹ Dominic P. Wells, 'In the Footsteps of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*: The Passion Settings of David Lang and James MacMillan', *Tempo*, Vol. 67, No. 264 (April 2013), pp. 40–51; Hugh 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 (September 2009), pp. 344–355.

¹⁰ Dominic P. Wells, 'James MacMillan: Retrospective Modernist', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Durham (2012). See also J. Peter Burkholder, 'Musical Borrowing or Curious Coincidence? Testing the Evidence', *Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 35 (2018), pp. 223–266.

¹¹ W. George Parsons, 'Metaphor as a Tool for Theologically-Informed Musical Analysis of Sir James MacMillan's *Triduum*', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sheffield (2016).

¹² Arnold Whittall, 'Expressionism revisited: Modernism beyond the twentieth century', in Erling E. Guldbrandsen and Julian Johnson (eds.), *Transformations of Musical Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 53–73.

Matthew Ward.¹³ In addition, Phillip Cooke has published the first book-length treatment of MacMillan's life and music to date.¹⁴ The 2017 *Contemporary Music and Spirituality* edited by Robert Sholl and Sander van Maas also provides part of the context for future research on MacMillan, as the chapter in that volume by Dominic Wells demonstrates, contextualising MacMillan's work on the Passions within a wider study of a Romantic aesthetic.

As *Contemporary Music and Spirituality* exemplified, more scholarly work has been produced on MacMillan's music in the field of theology, as MacMillan has served as an exemplar of a composer, in the tradition of Olivier Messiaen, who has sought to deliberately overlap musical and theological concerns. Particularly, Jeremy S. Begbie's work on theological aesthetics,¹⁵ on beauty,¹⁶ and on seeking linkage through metaphor of music and theology,¹⁷ has found a natural application in MacMillan's music.

Scope of *James MacMillan Studies*

MacMillan scholarship published thus far has demonstrated the suitability of the composer's music for analytical treatment and has provided a rich groundswell of activity as a base for the present volume. This growing body of work is opening new layers and depths to the music. *James MacMillan Studies* seeks to capitalise on this activity and to develop scholarship on this composer.

James MacMillan Studies shows that the burgeoning field of scholarship on MacMillan has engaged with a number of issues, elaborating a number of musicological themes that demonstrate the depth and reach of MacMillan's music, as well as pointing out areas for further research. This book also demonstrates that MacMillan's music is not just a British concern with authors contributing from across the world.

MacMillan's own corpus of writing is also forming a body of work that comments upon his music, providing further angles of analysis. These

¹³ Matthew Ward, 'At Mass with Sir James: MacMillan's *Symphony No. 4* and Liturgical Time', *Tempo*, Vol. 72, No. 286 (October 2018), pp. 31–41.

¹⁴ Phillip Cooke, *The Music of James MacMillan* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019).

¹⁵ Jeremy S. Begbie, 'Beauty, sentimentality and the arts', in Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin (eds.), *The Beauty of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), pp. 45–69.

¹⁶ Particularly evident in 'Beauty, sentimentality, and the arts', pp. 67–69.

¹⁷ Jeremy S. Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991); *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Shape of *James MacMillan Studies*

We also seek to demonstrate the ways in which MacMillan's music is highly receptive to rigorous analysis and critique, across the spectrum of genres, and the book seeks to open up new avenues, developing areas of thinking that are immanent to MacMillan's own thought and expanding this by using discourses that are outside this nexus of idea. This therefore sheds new light on the origins, style, and poetics of MacMillan's musical thought.

²² See Mandy Hallam, 'Conversation with James MacMillan'; Richard E. McGregor and James MacMillan, 'Interview'; also Julian Johnson, James MacMillan, and Catherine Sutton, 'Raising Sparks: On the Music of James MacMillan', *Tempo*, New Series, No. 202 (October 1997), pp. 1–35; Stephen Johnson, 'James MacMillan: Harnessing Extremes', *Gramophone* 72, No. 864 (May 1995), pp. 14–17.

The book does not attempt to deal with all of MacMillan's music, but it examines many of MacMillan's principal works. The chapters here work across a number of genres, focussing in some instances on a specific work, or group of works. The critical questions that each chapter engages in revolve in different ways around a central problem in MacMillan's music – how to understand the relationship amidst the twin spheres of the sacred and the secular. In one way or another, each essay grapples with the relationship between, and conflicts amidst, the religious and non-religious sides of MacMillan's music.

The first issue that brings the tension between sacred and secular to light in MacMillan is his relationship to modernism. Arnold Whittall provides an analytically rich examination of MacMillan's numbered string quartets (*Visions of a November Spring*, *Why is this night different?*, *String Quartet No. 3*), and uses the quartets as test cases of the composer's relationship with certain aspects of modernism – a relationship shaped by his strong religious convictions but acknowledging the challenges these present to a composer in the predominantly secular modernist period. What does it mean for MacMillan to write works shaped by religious subject-matter in a modernist style? Whittall sees this topic as representing MacMillan's 'struggle with conviction', and showing his strong commitment to Christian faith in parallel with his modernist musical language. Comparing the quartets with other models of high modernity (Berg, Bartók), Whittall describes the forcefully expressive musical style and multivalent structures, involved as these are with both affirming and challenging basic aspects of traditional musical forms.

George Parsons approaches the question of MacMillan's relationship to modernism through an examination of the composer's dialectical treatment of modernism and tradition, asking the question of whether MacMillan's style can legitimately be called 'modernist' when it engages so positively with tradition. This is done through an analysis of *The World's Ransoming*. Parsons concludes by showing similarities between Adorno's technique of *Negative Dialectics* and MacMillan's approach, suggesting that MacMillan's compositional instinct is modernist, but ironically so – MacMillan is seeking to expose high modernism to a typically modernist hermeneutic of suspicion, exposing its blind spots to tradition, religion, and the sacred. In so doing, MacMillan is offering an expanded vision of modernity, a modernity of conflict.

Continuing the question of the composer's relationship to the ideals of modernity, Chelle Stearns explores how MacMillan's employment of the lament genre enables him to unite modernist ideals with human issues of

longing, beauty, and hope – his challenge to Adorno's 'metaphysics of mourning', rebranding David Metzger's category of the 'modernist lament' and resacralising the post-Auschwitz world. Stearns picks out three categories of lament in MacMillan – those centring on the Cross of Christ; those unfolding stories of injustice; and those memorialising personal grief, picking out a grand theme, of the engagement of art with the sacred, for hope.

MacMillan's dialectical treatment of modernism and faith constantly brings to the fore the problem of style and form, typically embedding his extra-musical religious narratives in absolute forms of music. The question of how MacMillan's personal style operates to enable this communication within a rich variety of forms is taken by Dominic Wells in a chapter that argues that musical borrowing is a central technique for realising MacMillan's desire to have non-texted music 'speak'. Underlying this technique is the already-noted concern in MacMillan's aesthetic for tradition. Wells traces the references to one source through works from 1984 to 2016, MacMillan's melody *The Tryst*. In doing so, this melody becomes a 'metaphor for [MacMillan's] determination to unite past and present, sacred and secular'.

Robert Sholl's chapter also problematises the relationship between the meaning and expression in MacMillan, and it asks how MacMillan's music can function as a theological symbol through absolute music. This paradox becomes a starting point for a comparison between MacMillan's aesthetics and Oliver Davies's 'Transformation Theology', in which the presence of Christ is embodied in the physical and secular reality of everyday life. Sholl discusses the violence and embodiment in MacMillan's discourse with reference to Caravaggio's paintings to reveal the ways in which MacMillan attempts to instantiate religious presence.

The theme of 'hiddenness' is also germane to Jeremy Begbie's account of the *St Luke Passion*. Sholl's macro-observation is explored on a smaller scale, in a single work. In this account of the *St Luke Passion*, Begbie explores how MacMillan gives voice to the theological emphases of Luke's account of the Passion, showing how the qualities of paradox find expression through the particularities of the work. MacMillan uses musical devices to bring about the 'contradictoriness' of Luke's account, his text 'liberated to be heard in all its puzzling and exacting peculiarity'. The tensions inherent in MacMillan's style are perfectly suited to Luke's theology, his blend of consonance and dissonance matching the tension and inversion typical of Luke's Gospel.

Richard E. McGregor widens Begbie's enquiry into the *St Luke Passion* to the *St John Passion*, comparing the two works and placing both within

the wider context of MacMillan's Scottish cultural context, as well as that of his faith. The chapter thus becomes a case study of how MacMillan's Catholicism – in its cultural as well as religious dimensions – is refracted in two very different Passion settings. Each Passion work reflects MacMillan's sense of faith and place in different ways, illuminated through detailed analysis, drawing the conclusion that the contexts of faith and nation provide a constant motivator that unites the real differences of both works.

The specificities of the Passion works, and the way they relate their theologies through both music and text, is also a concern of Andrew Shenton, evident in his analysis of another of MacMillan's specifically religious works for the concert hall, the *Seven Last Words from the Cross*. Shenton contextualises this famous and important work by MacMillan within his wider oeuvre and the historical genre to uncover the various ways that it also plays with these tensions of sacred and secular, theology and musical structure. In seeking an answer to what makes the works 'sacred' in nature, Shenton demonstrates that *Seven Last Words* reveals a 'sophisticated exegesis of the seven last words uttered by Jesus', that makes sense of the horrifying events of the crucifixion in a work that is both contemporary and relevant.

One mark of MacMillan's musical-theological engagement is a breadth of theological scope, with relatively few works tackling the more specifically Catholic doctrines of faith. This issue of theological specificity is a key factor in Peter Bannister's examination of another of MacMillan's works that deals in explicitly Catholic theological themes, the Marian work *The Sun Danced*, in which MacMillan's style is refracted through the events of 1916–1917 of Fatima, Portugal. Bannister's study of the work notes its Marian theology in relation to other works of MacMillan that feature the theology of the Virgin, such as *Cantos Sagrados*, as well as seeing musical connections with other composers such as Rautavaara and Valentin Silvestrov. Of particular interest is Bannister's valuable discussion of mysticism in *The Sun Danced*, making a fruitful comparison with the mysticism of Messiaen. This connection illuminates further MacMillan's distinctive theological concern for 'rootedness', combining a form of mysticism with something 'alive and physical', 'both rational and articulate rather than something exclusively numinous'.

MacMillan's conjoining of the sacred and the secular, evident through these four works, produces questions about genre. Like Messiaen, MacMillan's tendency has been to write works with religious backgrounds and narratives for predominantly non-liturgical contexts, resulting in issues

around categorisation. This theme is central to the final two chapters. Phillip Cooke examines the issue from the perspective of a group of pieces in a single genre, MacMillan's liturgical works. Cooke notes the interesting anomaly of MacMillan's lack of explicitly liturgical compositions, perhaps surprising given the centrality of his faith. The works that are explicitly liturgical thus open a profitable window on how MacMillan engages with liturgy on the rare occasions when he does write exclusively for it. Yet even this examination highlights how the categories of liturgical and non-liturgical, secular and sacred blend across the genres, by showing the continuity between the sacred (liturgical) and secular (non-liturgical).

This wider study across one genre is narrowed down to an examination of a single work in Lisa Colton's chapter, in which she analyses the problem of genre in MacMillan's *Visitatio Sepulchri*, exploring and critiquing its generic category in the light of its engagement with medieval tropes and material. The work reaches back into the medieval past, aspects analysed through its use of religious and historical medievalisms, such as plainchant techniques, hocketting, and quotation of medieval melodies such as *Veni Veni Emmanuel*. She concludes that the work exemplifies a merged generic category, bringing together the creative and performance spaces of church and concert hall.

All the chapters therefore grapple in one way or another with the issues, tensions, and paradoxes that arise from the importance that MacMillan places on his faith in relation to his music, and examine the various ways that the music problematizes that relationship.

We hope that this collection will prove both a fitting tribute to James MacMillan as he reaches his sixtieth year, and prove a stimulating collection for those interested in the academic possibilities that his music offers. In addition, we hope this book might prove the springboard for further work on MacMillan's music, showing a myriad of potential directions that future scholarly engagement with his work might take.