

## James MacMillan Studies

The Scottish composer Sir James MacMillan is one of the major figures of contemporary music, with a world-wide reputation for his modernist engagement with religious images and stories. Beginning with a substantial foreword from the composer himself, this collection of scholarly essays offers analytical, musicological, and theological perspectives on a selection of MacMillan's musical works. The volume includes a study of embodiment in MacMillan's music; a theological study of his *St Luke Passion*; an examination of the importance of lament in a selection of his works; a chapter on the centrality of musical borrowing to MacMillan's practice; a discussion of his liturgical music; and detailed analyses of other works including *The World's Ransoming* and the seminal *Seven Last Words from the Cross*. The chapters provide fresh insights on MacMillan's musical world, his compositional practice, and his relationship to modernity.

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## Foreword

SIR JAMES MACMILLAN

### I

I returned home to Scotland in 1988 after spending two or three years in a lecturing job at Manchester University. During that time I did not write a lot of music, through the pressure of teaching. One of the last things I wrote before immersing myself in academic work was an orchestral piece called *The Keening*, completed in 1986. I had forgotten about this piece for various reasons. In the whirlwind of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which was an extremely busy time for me compositionally and personally (my first child was born in 1990), the composition had been abandoned on a shelf and discarded until very recently. Perhaps I had thought it too juvenile a work. The excitement for me at that time was in writing new pieces and there were organisations requesting new work all the time, or so it seemed.

In the summer of 1988 I wrote two big pieces – *Into the Ferment* and *Búsqueda*. The latter was requested by the Edinburgh Contemporary Arts Trust and devised as a companion piece for Berio's *Laborintus II*, both music-theatre works scored for large ensemble, sopranos, actors and narrator. My piece used poems by the Mothers of 'The Disappeared' in Argentina, interlaced with the Latin text of the Mass.

The other work was for two orchestras and based on a poem by Robert Burns – *Willie Brewed A Peck o' Maut*. After many years of being interested in Scottish traditional music and culture I had finally composed a piece of music which expressed this enthusiasm. In *Into the Ferment* there are jigs and reels and other allusions to folk music, following the comic narrative of the Burns original.

In the autumn of that year I settled to work on *Tryst*, a 25-minute tone poem for the Scottish Chamber Orchestra which they premiered at the St Magnus Festival in Orkney in 1989. Again, this piece explored what else I could do with the flavouring of Celtic music, even though the case in

point was limited to the slow central section of this one-movement, through-composed work.

The year 1990 was to be an important one for me – there were to be performances at the Edinburgh Festival, and my work was to be featured at Musica Nova, which was a major focus of contemporary music in Glasgow hosted by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra (RSNO) and the BBC. I was also given a commission for the BBC Proms in London, and for that I was to write *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie*. I remember at the time thinking it was quite a tight schedule and my solution was to write my Musica Nova piece first, and then settle to *The Confession*. Therefore in late 1989 I wrote my first piano concerto, *The Berserking*, which was premiered by Peter Donohoe and the RSNO, conducted by Matthias Bamert on 22 September the following year. My daughter Catherine was also born on the same day. *The Berserking* turned out to be a useful preparation for *The Confession*. Once again, in the concerto, I was able to turn to Scottish subject matter, at least in reflective inspiration.

Although the composition of *The Confession* came after *The Berserking*, it was premiered before it – a month earlier at the Royal Albert Hall in London with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Jerzy Maksimiuk. I discovered the story of Isobel Gowdie on reading *The History of The Scottish People* by Scottish historian T. C. Smout. Although there may be some conjecture about the facts and significance of her life and death, it is clear that she was a real person, who lived near Nairn in the seventeenth century. She has been the object of some fascination over the years from writers, musicians and dramatists. Looking back on my own treatment of her story, I do remember being struck by the dramatic potential of the tale, first and foremost. In fact, my first instinct was to imagine one possible treatment of the story as an opera, and I still think it would make a very exciting opera. Until only very recently, I imagined I would return to it in that form in the future.

Nevertheless, because the story is so vivid, the music of the orchestral tone poem could not help but be shaped and guided by some sense of narrative. This gave me cause for some reflection at the time. Why? Principally, because the orchestral tone poem, in all its picture-painting, story-telling implications is a Romantic, nineteenth-century phenomenon, and it would surely be seen as odd that the form could be resurrected at the end of the twentieth century. Could it be done? And why would any ‘modern’ composer want to do it?

In 1662, Isobel Gowdie from Nairn confessed to having been baptised by the devil and joining a coven of thirteen people who met at night; she had

journeyed to the centre of the earth to feast with the King and Queen of the fairies; she could fly, or become a hare, a cat, or a crow; she used waxen images and bags of boiled toads to cause inflictions; she had killed a ploughman with elf-arrows the devil gave her; sometimes the devil beat her and raped her: ‘he would be beating us all up and down with cords and other sharp scourges like naked ghaists’; he was a stag of a bull, or ‘a very mickle, black rough man’. She was subsequently strangled at the stake and burned in pitch amid scenes of hysterical fright and sadism.

Initially I was drawn by the dramatic and programmatic potential of this terrible story but the work soon developed a far more emotional core as I attempted to draw together various strands in a single, complicated act of contrition. Rather grandiosely at the time, I imagined that, on behalf of the Scottish people, the work craved absolution and offered Isobel Gowdie the mercy and humanity that was denied her in the last days of her life. To do this I tried to capture the soul of Scotland in music, and the outer sections contain a multitude of chants, songs and litanies (real and imagined) coming together in a reflective outpouring – a prayer for the murdered woman.

So this act of solidarity, if you like, which is described here, or this retrospective act of compassion which is implied in the motivation for taking the work beyond the Romantic tone poem, and to make it something else – what could that actually mean in purely musical terms? What would ‘the soul of Scotland in music’ actually mean in concrete and abstract terms? Well, there needed to be some real Scottish musical heritage invoked here or alluded to, to point in this particular direction. And therefore the modality of the music is deliberate, as is the ornamentation, and the keening, bending, almost vocal lamenting sounds in the string counterpoint at the beginning.

In the years prior to the composition of *The Confession* I had immersed myself in Scottish and Irish folk music, joining a few bands as a whistle player, keyboardist and singer, performing around the folk clubs and pubs in the west of Scotland. I got to know traditional singers like Heather Heywood, and worked with them, but more importantly, I listened carefully to them sing, and became aware of the deep reservoir of songs that they had on tap, and of their performance techniques. I also listened attentively especially to the pipers and fiddlers I worked with. I believe that this was the central experience which shaped the mood and emotion of the outer sections in *The Confession*.

Of interest might be the opening on clarinets and bassoons, where there is an oscillation of principal pitches, outlining the mode – which soon gives

way to the strings. Of central importance here are the violas and cellos – in rehearsal they always notice how much more difficult their music is compared to the violins and basses! In vocal terms you could imagine their music being ‘led’ by expressive tenors – such as in Gaelic Psalm singing, where the Cantor leads the assembly, which follow him in a shady, heterophonous, imitative unity.

The entry at the end of bar 25 in the 2nd basses is important – it is a quotation from the *Lux Aeterna* of the *Requiem Mass* (‘Let perpetual light shine upon her’). It is quoted deliberately to focus the musical and extra-musical purpose and direction of the piece. The remainder of this section remains settled in the now-established mode; C D E F# G A B. This changes at letter D with the introduction of F and Bb – foreign notes – but the first in outlining another melodic/harmonic field. This linking passage (up to letter E) is more complex tonally as the trumpet heterophony is underpinned by very rich and dark chords – pointing forward to the violence to come.

The music from letter E can be analysed according to the layers of material which make up the complexity here; (a) the trombones and tuba have the *Lux Aeterna* theme, this time harmonised as a chorale; (b) the horns are like hunting horns – full of open-air, brash, and extrovert braying, with lots of ornamental flurries; (c) the drummers face each other across the orchestra, sometimes sharing in a two-note ‘heartbeat’ but then going on to a hocketing ‘conversation’ based on that rhythm; (d) an harmonic field appears in the upper strings and upper woodwind which creates a cloud effect – something ethereal floating above everything else; (e) and then underneath an ominous rumbling and surging starts growing in the cellos and basses.

The Bb/F music returns with the trumpets at letter G, but by this stage the onward momentum from the lower instruments is underway and pushing towards even greater turbulence. The climax of all this is the violent, full tutti repetition of thirteen strokes! (Isobel Gowdie confessed to being part of a coven of thirteen witches.) This is the beginning of the development section where a number of these elements are now in battle with each other. The music goes through a series of metric modulations, but when these occur there are always two of the main oppositional ‘themes’ at loggerheads with each other. One is the thirteen strokes, representative of the powers of evil, perhaps (see bar 154 onwards) and the other is the *Lux Aeterna* theme, representative of the elemental opposite, the force of goodness and grace. We see this clash again at bar 181 onwards, and then again at bar 209 onwards (etc.). The metric modulation

obviously cranks up the tempo of the music, which now becomes faster and faster. When it can become no faster and no more violent, it gives way unexpectedly to the *Lux Aeterna* theme again in the lower strings, very quietly and slowly at bar 345. This interaction between utmost violence and serene but brooding tranquillity continues, and constitutes the climax of the work – through to letter V, where a recapitulation of the opening string threnody is finally established. This repeat from here is mostly literal, but perhaps feels different because of what the intervening musical journey has involved.

## II

Twenty years after *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie*, I composed an unaccompanied choral setting of the *Miserere* for Harry Christophers and his choir, The Sixteen. It is a work which seems a universe away from the earlier orchestral work. However, I had always been interested in choral music, even from my teen years at school. In fact my music teacher at Cumnock Academy, Bert Richardson, encouraged me a lot in this regard. I sang in his school choir and at age seventeen I had composed a setting of the Sanctus for them, a movement from my *Missa Brevis* (1977).

There was something in the high modernism of the late-twentieth century which favoured instrumental music over choral, or even vocal, music. The virtuosity and complexity so sought after by modernist composers could be attained more easily with instruments. In fact, a lot of the vocal music of twentieth-century frontline modernists is deeply ‘instrumental’ in its conception, mimicking the lithe and athletic twists and turns that could be achieved by instrumental specialists. Therefore the instincts more associated with song and choir were downgraded and replaced by alternative creative priorities.

This, I think, explains my temporary drifting away from choral music in my student years, a time when I was beguiled by the pushing of boundaries associated with major modernist composers from Schoenberg to Boulez. There was also at this time, in the 1980s, a reticence on my part to show my hand as a religious composer, having been persuaded temporarily that religion had no place at ‘the cutting edge’ of modern artistic endeavour. I was wrong.

No doubt encouraged by the likes of Messiaen and later those deeply spiritual voices emerging from the shadows of Soviet state-enforced atheism, like Schnittke, Gubaidulina, Pärt, Górecki etc., I turned back to my



original instincts and slowly, but surely began building a body of work for choral forces, much of which was shaped by my liturgical and theological experiences as a Catholic. Also, it was not clear, in the 1970s and 1980s, that imminently there would be a huge resurgence of interest in choral music, which would become such a prominent feature of musical life especially in the UK, and indeed in the lives of many composers at the end of the twentieth century and into the next.

I did not foresee the intense imaginative relationship that I would eventually build with Harry Christophers, for example. And I did not foresee just how much the new brilliant British choral ensembles would feature in the work of the modern composer – The Sixteen, Tenebrae, Polyphony, the Tallis Scholars, the Hilliard Ensemble, the King's Singers, and Cappella Nova. In fact it would be for this last, Scottish group that I would write my *Seven Last Words from the Cross* in 1993. Scored for choir and string ensemble it is one of my most performed works, especially at Lent and Eastertide, around the world.

As a musical Catholic I had always taken an anguished interest in the state of music and liturgy in the modern church. I don't want to rehearse the discussions about Vatican II, but there is clearly unfinished business in the church, perhaps based on a misreading of the Council's reforms, especially as they pertain to music. The spirit of Vatican II, especially on the matter of congregational music in vernacular languages, an immediate concern for the church in the wake of the Council in the 1960s and 1970s, has spawned music of appalling and pitiful quality, all in the spurious quest for 'accessibility', pastoral comprehension and anti-elitism. I have no problems with Vatican II. The only problem is that it took place in the 1960s and was just as smitten by the *zeitgeist* as anything in the secular world.

Those of us who value the depth of Catholic tradition in our musical heritage have been unfairly caricatured as reactionaries and tridentinists, sometimes simply for advancing the notion that professionalism and good quality still have a place in the modern church, especially when it comes to liturgical practice. For a while, from about 2005 until recently, I involved myself in the campaigns to do something to improve liturgical music practice in the Catholic Church. This was not just at the 'high end' of musical activity, with the choirs and organists and so on, but in the various grass roots attempts to re-energise the use, and the sound, of chant-based music for congregational use too.

This was also the time of Pope Benedict XVI who took a great interest in the church's music and how it had become debased in recent decades. I was

struck by this quote from him, speaking in the Sistine Chapel in 2006: '[a]n authentic updating of sacred music can take place only in the lineage of the great tradition of the past, of Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony'. This galvanised me to be involved in the John Henry Newman Institute of Liturgical Music, the Latin Mass Society and in the establishment of Musica Sacra Scotland, which organised two national conferences to encourage the rejuvenation of Gregorian-type chant in English and Latin for ordinary people in the liturgy.

It also affected my compositional work too, especially when I was writing choral music specifically for the Catholic Church. I wrote a number of works for Westminster Cathedral at this time and also my *Strathclyde Motets*, many of which are based on chant, and devised with a view that ordinary church, student and amateur choirs could perform them with relative ease. All these experiences were absorbed in my choral writing and provide the basis for a lot of my thinking, technique, aesthetics and aspirations for future work.

So, by the time I came to write my *Miserere* for The Sixteen in 2009, a lot had happened and a lot had evolved in my approach to choral music, and in my reassessment of liturgical and musical traditions. I will still write choral music for the church, but mostly I will set sacred texts for secular choirs and secular contexts, and this was the case with this work, premiered in a concert in the Jesuit church, *Carolus-Borromeuskerk* in Antwerp in August of that year.

The culmination point of the *Miserere* is a harmonisation at bar 165 to the end, of my *The Tryst* melody, which has been an *idée-fixe* in a lot of my music since the setting of the William Soutar poem of the same name in the 1980s, and which has turned up melodically in various works including my *St Anne's Mass* (a simple congregational setting) and my *St John Passion*. The melody is deliberately Scottish in its flavour and outline, as if shaped on a traditional folk ballad. The piece begins with a minor version of this material on tenors and basses, and reappears, transposed for altos and tenors at bar 106.

Episodic contrasts to this material consist of the more chromatically questing music from bar 17, (and in particular the canonic soprano duet which follows at bar 25), and the quasi-instrumental, chordal humming which accompanies some of this, the nod to polyphonic traditionalism in the four-part counterpoint beginning in the basses in bar 73, and the evocation of (harmonised) 'Gregorian' chant from bar 97, as well as the more ethereal treatment of monodic chant (with static, growing chords) from bar 142.

## III

Since turning sixty in 2019 I have noticed that I have been repeating myself in recent years! I have written three piano concertos for example, and two settings of the Passion, and I feel that a second violin concerto and possibly a second cello concerto beckon, as does a fourth string quartet. And at the end of 2018 I completed a fifth symphony, which was premiered in August 2019. In the light of this particular piece it seems as good a time as any for me to assess where I might be going in the years ahead as a composer, and what directions I might envisage that my work could take over the next ten years and beyond.

I have been asked why composers still want to write symphonies today. Haven't all the best ones been written already? Is the form and idea not redundant in the twenty-first century? Hasn't modernism (and post-modernism) moved the 'cutting-edge' agenda away from the tried and tested? Is it not just nostalgia and conservatism to fall back on an idea from the past? Every composer has considered the possibility of writing a symphony and the questions that will be asked of him or her. Some decide it is not for them, but a surprising number in recent years and in our own time have persevered with the concept.

Hans Werner Henze wrote ten. Alfred Schnittke also wrote ten, as did Peter Maxwell Davies. Michael Tippett wrote four. It was obviously a viable form and concept for these titans of modern music. But there are many others who would never have given the question a second thought – Boulez, Birtwistle, Lachenmann. Is it just the more 'conservative' composers of our time who are interested in the symphony? No doubt there will be strident voices from the avant-garde hard-line who would maintain just that. But what makes Maxwell Davies conservative? Perhaps this leads to the impossibility of defining the word and idea. Can anything be a symphony now? Galina Ustvolskaya's Fifth Symphony is about ten minutes long, scored for only five players and involves an actor reciting the Lord's Prayer in Russian. Her Fourth Symphony is for voice, piano, trumpet and tam-tam and lasts only six minutes. Concepts of musical conservatism and radicalism have a tendency to wax and wane in our own time, so who knows how the self-proclaimed radicals of our age will be viewed decades hence?

The origin of the word symphony is from the ancient Greek (*symphonia*) meaning 'agreement or concord of sound'. It can also mean 'concert of vocal or instrumental music' or just simply 'harmonious'. In the middle ages there were instruments called symphonia which could be anything from a two-headed drum to a hurdy-gurdy or dulcimer. It begins to mean

‘sounding together’ in the work of Giovanni Gabrieli in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in his *Sacrae Symphoniae*.

It is this meaning of symphony that is attractive to many as it can open up possibilities unconstrained by Germanic, Romantic (or even Classical) origins. Stravinsky used the term a few times, most interestingly in his *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* from 1920. Note the plural. It comes from a very different place – there are no string instruments, and it is one movement which lasts only nine minutes. It has a solemn, almost funereal character, with a chorale seemingly evoking Russian Orthodox chant – an austere ritual, unfolding in short litanies. It must have baffled its original audiences. Indeed, its world première in London was greeted by laughter and derision. I have conducted this a few times and love its episodic nature. It doesn’t develop in any expected ‘symphonic’ way, but through a series of fragments, juxtaposed and expanded on each sounding.

In various twentieth-century symphonies we can detect the foreboding of the times – the fear and destruction of war and political oppression. There are some works which, in retrospect, have been regarded as barometers of their era. Elgar’s Second Symphony was written in 1911 and some detect in it the melancholy tread of civilisational collapse. Mahler’s Sixth Symphony was written a few years earlier and is known as his ‘Tragic’ Symphony, full of loss, culminating in literal hammer blows of fate. Wilhelm Furtwängler described this work as ‘the first nihilistic work in the history of music’. This is a limited analysis of a score which certainly has its fair share of darkness and hopelessness, but also has so much more. The final movement is like a stream of consciousness, astonishingly vast and unusual, with no set sonata pattern or design, strange recapitulations and no structural recapitulation at all. Like Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* it is hallucinogenic and nightmarish, but it is only at the very end that the music becomes truly despairing.

Perhaps the crucial and central point in Beethoven’s legacy (as the symphonist extraordinaire) for subsequent generations and centuries is his moral vision – a prophetic lesson which was to grab the imagination of composers over a century later. These more modern works, like their Beethovenian models, give the impression of having to be written – a compulsion even beyond the will of their creators. I am reminded of this every time I conduct Vaughan Williams’s Fourth Symphony, for example. He saw this piece as pure music, unlike his first three. It is also more severe and angular in its language, not immediately inviting like some of his other music. It is not conventionally beautiful and seems troubled. Written in 1935, two years before Shostakovich’s Fifth, it seems to detect the coming

storm in Europe. Later the composer said of it: 'I'm not at all sure if I like it myself now. All I know is that it's what I wanted to do at the time.'

My first three symphonies employed programmatic elements, whether exploring poetic imagery or literary references, but my fourth, premièred by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in 2015 under the work's dedicatee Donald Runnicles, is essentially abstract. I was interested in the interplay of different types of material, following upon a fascination with music as ritual that has stretched from Monteverdi through to Boulez and Birtwistle. There are four distinct archetypes in the symphony, which can be viewed as rituals of movement, exhortation, petition, and joy. These four ideas are juxtaposed in quick succession from the outset, over the first five minutes or so. As the work progresses these are sometimes individually developed in an organic way; at times they co-mingle, and at others they are opposed and argumentative in a dialectic manner.

The work as a whole is also a homage to Robert Carver, the most important Scottish composer of the high Renaissance, whose intricate multi-part choral music I've loved since performing it as a student. There are allusions to his ten-voice *Missa Dum Sacrum Mysterium* embedded into the work, and at a number of points it emerges across the centuries in a more discernible form. The polyphony is muted and muffled, literally in the distance, as it is played delicately by the back desks of the violas, cellos, and double basses.

The symphonic tradition, and Beethoven's monumental impact on it, is an imposing legacy which looms like a giant ghost over the shoulder of any living composer foolhardy enough to consider adding to it. Some turn away in terror and even disdain, preferring to carve out a rejectionary stance. It might be the safer option. Others can't help themselves. Perhaps not fully knowing what writing a symphony 'means' anymore, some of us are drawn towards it like moths flapping around a candle flame. We might get burned. After my fourth I felt the itch of a fifth: Dah-dah-dah-dum!

Number 5 turned out to be my choral symphony. It came on the back of my *Stabat Mater* and was commissioned from the same source and involved the same performers. The investment banker and philanthropist John Studzinski has taken a great interest in *The Sixteen* and has a great concern for sacred music. It was he who, along with Harry Christophers, suggested I write my own *Stabat Mater*. After that he began talking to me about how the concept of the Holy Spirit has been handled in music. There are, of course, many great motets from the past which set texts devoted to the Third Person of the Trinity, and from the twentieth century the one piece which sticks out is the setting of the *Veni Creator Spiritus* in the first

movement of Mahler's Eighth Symphony. But it still feels like relatively unexplored territory.

One can speculate on Mahler's inspiration; was it part of a genuine spiritual quest or not? Was his idea of the Holy Spirit orthodox and in keeping with received theological understanding? Or did it involve various intellectual and cultural threads pointing in the direction of inspired but general, spiritual creativity? In the end it doesn't matter, but it does seem strange that composers and artists generally, and especially in our own time, have not yet explored this mysterious avenue, where concepts of creativity and spirituality overlap. Perhaps now is the time to do it?

There is a genuine burgeoning interest in spirituality in our contemporary post-religious and now post-secular society, especially in relation to the arts. Music is described as the most spiritual of the arts, even by non-religious music lovers. So, there is a genuinely universal understanding that music has a reach into the human soul.

And the Christian religion even posits this 'Spirit' in the Godhead itself, as one of its principal three manifestations, or Persons. It makes sense surely that a Catholic artist might want to explore this in music, perhaps even beyond the usual hymnody and paeans of praise associated with liturgy. My fifth symphony is not a liturgical work. It is an attempt to explore the mystery discussed of how creativity and spirituality overlap in music for two choirs and orchestra. It began when John Studzinski gave me a copy of *The Holy Spirit, Fire of Divine Love* by the Belgian Carmelite Wilfred Stinissen. It was a good point of entry, theologically, but it drew to my attention some visionary poetry by St John of the Cross, and this line from the book in particular drew me in: 'Even his name reveals that the Holy Spirit is mysterious. The Hebrew word "ruah", the Greek word "pneuma" and the Latin "spiritus" mean both "wind" and "breath."'

The very first sound in the symphony then is that of the choirs breathing in and breathing out. The orchestral winds take up variations of this, and the first word sung is 'Ruah'. The work, to begin with, is less a traditional setting of text and more an exploration of elemental and primal sounds and words associated with the Spirit. The first movement is called 'Ruah', the second 'Zao' (ancient Greek for 'living water') and the third is 'Igne vel Igne' (Latin for 'fire or fire'). So, each has associations with the physical elements connected to the Holy Spirit (wind, water, fire). These became vivid sources of visual and sonic (as well as conceptual and theological) inspiration. The fifth symphony has a subtitle – '*Le grand Inconnu*' – a French term used to describe the mystery of the Holy Spirit which I cannot find replicated in the English spiritual tradition.

A stream of consciousness dominated the flow of composition, where I felt being led by sound associations and impressions rather than deliberate musical logic or textual compulsion. In fact, with each of the three movements, I had not made specific decisions about either text choice or structural cohesion until the composition was underway. The sound-painting led me from one thing to the next; which bits of St John of the Cross to use, which corresponding moment in Scripture might amplify or reflect the general direction, which sounds to use in the orchestra as well as extended vocal sounds in the choir which were not necessarily sung. As well as breathing noises, there are whisperings and murmurings, devised to paint the required element from moment to moment.

So, is the new symphony a new departure or a consolidation of what there is already? I don't know. Looking at the first few pages I see lots of quarter-tones. I've used them before but there is more of a conceptual compulsion in their deployment here. There is a clear absorption of material springing forth from various harmonic series. I can't pretend there is anything complex or sophisticated about their appearance, but I have always been fascinated by spectral sounds, ever since hearing Gérard Grisey and Tristan Murail talk about them in Darmstadt in 1980. Many of these trends were never able to offer me enough expressive potential but they hover on the periphery of my imagination from time to time.

The joy of writing for choirs persists though. I broke off the composition of the fifth symphony to write a forty-part motet, a companion piece for Tallis's *Spem in Alium*. My *Vidi Aquam* was written for Ora. Before I tackled it I was terrified of the complexity, but once I settled to it I was in a very special place. It felt like knitting! Or doing a crossword, perhaps. I enjoyed building up the contrapuntal edifice. When it was complete, I felt bereft. I had enjoyed the daily challenge of embroidering line upon line, choir upon choir. Some of that got carried over into the symphony. The two choirs in the fifth symphony are a chamber choir (The Sixteen) and a large chorus (the assembled alumni of Genesis Sixteen, the choir's rolling academy of young voices established with the invaluable support of John Studzinski.)

At the end of the second movement I divide the two choral ensembles into twenty parts (to keep the Tallis-inspired dream alive?) in an *a cappella* setting of 'In novissimo autem die magno festivitatis stabat Iesus et clamabat dicens si quis sitet veniat ad me et bibat qui credit in me sicut dixit scriptura flumina de ventre eius fluent aquae vivae!' (John 7:37-38). In English this is 'On the last day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes

in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”

Perhaps there is a combination of things here in ‘*Le grand Inconnu*’, some new, some old which point me forwards to the next stage. If I’m spared there will be two more Passions and at least a sixth symphony. There will be chamber music (including a couple of string quartets), some odd music-theatre pieces and no doubt more choral music. There may even be another old-fashioned orchestral tone poem or two. I wonder if there are any more Scottish witches I haven’t heard of yet?



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