

Liturgy, Scripture and Resonance in the Operas of James MacMillan

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Abstract

The Scottish Composer James MacMillan has drawn on his Roman Catholic faith in much of his musical output, and this has been a significant influence not least on the six operatic works which he has produced to date. These operas, a number of which set libretti by the poet Michael Symmons Roberts, are richly diverse in their scale and in the stories which they present; yet they share a number of themes in common. All of them juxtapose sacred and secular topics, and all are concerned with stories that are both timeless and contemporary. Particularly striking is the fact that all of them draw on liturgy or scripture to give depth and resonance to the stories they tell. These resonances apply both to the characters in the operas and to the audience watching the works in performance. These operatic works therefore have the capacity to prompt theological as well as musical and dramatic reflections in those who experience them.

Keywords

liturgy, James MacMillan, opera, scripture, Michael Symmons Roberts

James MacMillan is one of the most popular and prolific of contemporary British composers. One influence on his music that is frequently identified is his Roman Catholicism.¹ Indeed, the most cursory scrutiny of MacMillan's output immediately reveals an oeuvre taking inspiration from this composer's religious faith. There is much liturgical music, including motets, anthems and several mass settings. There are two settings of the Passion narrative (based on those of St John and St Luke), and a version of Christ's Seven Last

¹ See, for example, Richard McGregor, "'A Metaphor for the Deeper Wintriness': Exploring James MacMillan's Musical Identity', *Tempo* vol. 65 issue 257 (2011), pp. 22–39; James MacMillan, Julian Johnson and Catherine Sutton, 'Raising Sparks: on the Music of James MacMillan', in *Tempo* New Series no. 202 (1997), pp. 1–35.

Words from the Cross. MacMillan's non-vocal music also frequently bears reference to biblical and liturgical texts and ideas: the percussion concerto *Veni, Veni Emmanuel*, the trumpet concerto *Epiclesis*, the brass and percussion piece *They saw the stone had been rolled away*.

This aim of the present article is to offer a brief survey of how liturgical themes and biblical stories have influenced just one aspect of MacMillan's output: his operas. To date, MacMillan has produced a short music-theatre piece, *Búsqueda*: three short operas, *Visitatio Sepulchri*, *Parthenogenesis* and *Clemency*; and two full-scale operatic works, *Inés de Castro* and *The Sacrifice*. Vastly different as these works are in terms of their scale, duration and subject-matter, it will be seen that liturgical and biblical texts are regularly referenced in them, and that these texts are often used by MacMillan for their striking resonances with the situations being depicted. Those who experience these works are thus offered, along with the stories being presented, striking theological reflections on them, and resonances in turn with the world which they themselves inhabit.

MacMillan has written of his belief that 'Music and spirituality are very closely entwined. . . . you could say that music is the most spiritual of the arts'.² He has even suggested 'that there's an analogy between music and the mind of God: that in music . . . we see or even feel something of the thinking of God'.³ This reflection leads him to 'a desire to look back at the ancient tradition of Christian music and especially Gregorian Chant, which I am always using in my music: I quote chant, I allude to it, I fragment it, I dissect it, I use it as the building blocks, the DNA, of larger structures'.⁴ We should not be surprised, then, to find liturgical themes and indeed liturgical texts present in MacMillan's operas. But it should immediately be added that the spirituality expressed in his work is not other-worldly: 'I see my search for the sacred as being in the here and now, rather than trying to find it in some kind of distant, unachievable place out there'.⁵ We will find this dual theme – the use of explicitly religious musical and textual material, and the relating of that material to the world we inhabit today – to run through MacMillan operatic output. However, we should also note that there is never any suggestion that this material provides 'answers' to the dilemmas faced by the characters in MacMillan's operas. It has been said of MacMillan

² James MacMillan, 'God, Theology and Music', in Stephen Darlington and Alan Kreider (eds.), *Composing Music for Worship* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), p. 36.

³ James MacMillan and Richard McGregor, 'James MacMillan: a conversation and commentary', *Musical Times* vol. 151, issue 1912 (2010), p. 99.

⁴ James MacMillan, 'God, Theology and Music', p. 36.

⁵ Quoted in Mandy Hallam, 'Conversation with James MacMillan', *Tempo* vol. 62 issue 245 (2008), p. 25.

that 'his questioning of the nature of belief has fuelled much of his creativity',⁶ and we find that the use of religious material in Macmillan's operas is more to aid reflection, or to earth emotion, than to provide 'solutions' to the situations faced by his characters.

The music theatre piece *Búsqueda* ('Search') was first performed in Edinburgh in 1988.⁷ It is scored for a small ensemble, dominated by instruments of low register and including a rich range of percussion (the ensemble is that used in Berio's 'Laborintus II', alongside which *Búsqueda* received its first performance). It is a setting of texts by 'Mothers of the Disappeared' in Argentina, those whose sons and daughters have been abducted by the secret police. The texts are sung in English (the translation is by Gilbert Markus O.P.), and their words are juxtaposed with words from the Latin Mass. MacMillan has written: 'I think what I wanted to do in this piece was to bring together the timeless and the contemporary, the secular and the sacred, the religious and the political'; and he has described *Búsqueda* as being 'inspired by the basic principles of Liberation Theology'.⁸ He has also observed: 'There's something about being an artist which needs to make sense out of the chaos. It's like moulding clay. Taking something like the issue of the Argentinian 'Mothers of the Disappeared' is like taking the clay, taking the chaos and wanting to make it right. Perhaps it's futile, but it comes from a humanitarian urge' (MacMillan *et al.* 1997: 14). Here at the outset we immediately find themes that will echo through the rest of MacMillan's operatic output: the mutual interrelationships of the personal, the political, the social and the religious; and the illumination of situations faced by 'ordinary people' through those situations being juxtaposed with liturgical texts. The music (appropriately, given its subject-matter) covers a huge emotional range, described by MacMillan thus: 'The work begins as if emerging from a deep, troubled sleep, and the mood subsequently swings from serenity, through elegy, through violence and anger, through devotion and prayerfulness, through euphoria, grief and back to the oblivion of sleep'.⁹ MacMillan's juxtaposition of 'mood swings' such as those described here similarly occur throughout his operatic output.

Visitatio Sepulchri (first performed in Glasgow in 1993) is scored for a chamber orchestra and is described as a 'sacred opera'. It is in three parts: an instrumental introduction, 'which captures the violence

⁶ James Telford, 'Reconciling Opposing Forces: The Young James MacMillan – A Performance History', *Tempo* vol. 65 issue 257 (2011), p. 46.

⁷ *Búsqueda* and *Visitatio Sepulchri* are available on CD: Catalyst 09026 62669 2.

⁸ James MacMillan, 'God, Theology and Music', p. 39.

⁹ James MacMillan, 'Composer's Notes' on *Búsqueda* and *Visitatio Sepulchri*, <http://www.boosey.com/composer/james±macmillan> (accessed 18.ii.15).

of the crucifixion, the anguish and the agony at Golgotha':¹⁰ a setting of a short mediaeval Latin play (originating from Notre Dame in Paris), which consists of a conversation between the women visiting the tomb of Jesus and the angels they encounter there; and a concluding setting of the Latin hymn, the *Te Deum*. As with *Búsqueda*, a highly emotionally-charged text is selected; and again, it is placed alongside words from the liturgy. Here, though, the choice of the original Latin texts throughout over translations creates a distancing effect, which serves perhaps to underline the ritualistic nature of the piece, and to 'contain' the emotion expressed in it. (MacMillan has commented: 'There is something about liturgy that requires objectivity as a kind of ritualistic containment of [emotion] . . . if it wasn't there, it would be emotional chaos'.¹¹) Encountering the intense emotions of others is not easy: in these early music-dramatic works of MacMillan the audience is invited to do so with the aid and support of appropriate liturgical texts, a resource of the Church which generations have found efficacious in channelling such emotion. By this means, perhaps, the audience is drawn into a fuller comprehension of the emotions being expressed.

MacMillan's first full-scale opera, *Inés de Castro* (first performed at the 1996 Edinburgh Festival) is on a much vaster scale than the works which preceded it, drawing on the full forces of an opera company: orchestra, chorus, and soloists.¹² Alongside a full orchestra, the composer again uses a rich variety of percussion instruments, often employing these in original ways.¹³ MacMillan has commented, 'I can feel Wagner, Strauss, Berg and other composers in *Inés de Castro*, and I didn't shy away from allowing that tradition to be present in what I was writing'.¹⁴ The story is based on an episode in Portuguese history, first dramatized by Antonio Ferreira in the sixteenth century: MacMillan sets a text based on a modern English version of the story, written by Jo Clifford in 1989. The first act of the opera introduces the main characters with music that carefully delineates them: Inés (who is mistress to the Crown Prince, Pedro, by whom she has borne two children), Inés' nurse, the King, the King's adviser Pacheco, the Crown Prince Pedro, and Pedro's barren wife Blanca. The chorus plays a significant role in this act, singing sections of the *Stabat Mater* in Latin throughout its development.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mandy Hallam, 'Conversation with James MacMillan', p. 21.

¹² *Inés de Castro* has yet to be recorded. References to the libretto are taken from J. Clifford, *Inés de Castro: Libretto* (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1996).

¹³ Cf. Jay Allen, 'MacMillan's Percussion', in Scottish Opera programme for *Inés de Castro* (1996), pp. 18–19.

¹⁴ Quoted in David Kettle, 'Inés de Castro', in Scottish Opera programme for *Inés de Castro* (2015), p. 12.

Regarding his choice of this hymn, MacMillan has commented: 'I draw most on the *Stabat Mater* text, as I see clear correlations between the story of Inés and that of the Passion of Christ, both the crucifixion itself and the agony of Mary at the foot of the cross'.¹⁵ Here, once again, we see the juxtaposition of the specific plight of an individual character with a liturgical text, allowing for the exploration of both theological and emotional resonances between them.

Act Two of *Inés de Castro* presents the gory dénouement of the drama: the murders of Inés and her children at the scheming Pacheco's instigation, the death of the King, and Pedro's gruesome revenge on Pacheco. Through most of this act, the chorus abandons its liturgical role, the *Stabat Mater* recurring only in the final scene of the opera as the Prince orders Inés' body to be exhumed and crowned. For most of Act Two the chorus become 'ordinary people', taunting Inés in the opening scene, and subsequently introducing a Vaudeville element to the drama (both musically and dramatically) as they lament the lack of public spectacle accompanying the deaths of Inés and of the King: 'I was disappointed! No drums, no priests!'/ 'Bloody hell! You'd think they could have given us a proper show!' The brutal world these 'ordinary people' inhabit dehumanises them to the extent that they can be indifferent to the sufferings of others, even viewing them as entertainment. But at the opera's conclusion an alternative to this inhumanity is put forward as the ghost of Inés appears, unseen by all but a young girl. To this girl Inés declares: 'They'll tell you that they have to kill, that they cannot avoid committing crimes. Do not believe them. Do not believe them. Do not believe them for a moment. Remember, remember there is another way'. The other way, the humanised and humanising way, is that which is experienced through the transcending power of love, a power transmitted in the liturgy – and, in the context of this tragedy, especially through that liturgical expression of grief and loss, the *Stabat Mater*. As MacMillan expresses it, 'There's a case to be made that when artists deal with the most unsettling aspects of evil, it's an attempt to transcend that evil, to find some kind of redemption beyond it. And in spite of the carnage and horror of an opera like this, the final scene is one of hope, with the ghost of Inés trying to impart a message of redemption and forgiveness to a new generation'.¹⁶

Referring to his orchestral piece *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie*, which relates to a woman's execution for alleged witchcraft in 1662, MacMillan has said that 'It was the universality and timelessness of the inhumanity in that story that I was interested in, because it

¹⁵ Anon., '... The Human Drama ...', in Edinburgh International Festival programme for *Inés de Castro* (1996) (no page numbers).

¹⁶ David Kettle, 'Inés de Castro', pp. 14–15.

seemed to resonate with our own times'.¹⁷ Similarly, speaking of *Inés de Castro* at the time of its première, MacMillan commented: 'What's important to me is the human drama and your engagement as a human being with that drama'.¹⁸ It is noteworthy that whilst Jonathan Moore's original stage production of the opera located it more or less in its historical period, Olivia Fuch's 2015 production for Scottish Opera offered a geographically unspecified, but clearly twenty-first century setting, thus setting up profound contemporary resonances for this opera. Here, then, we may again note the juxtaposition of the secular and the sacred, the timeless and the contemporary – those themes which we have already identified in MacMillan's operatic works.

MacMillan's next opera, *Parthenogenesis* (first performed in Cambridge in 2000) was written in collaboration with the poet Michael Symmons Roberts.¹⁹ Symmons Roberts had previously worked with MacMillan on *Quickening*, a work for chorus and orchestra, and has collaborated with him on all his subsequent operatic projects. *Parthenogenesis* was produced under the auspices of the 'Theology through the Arts' project at the University of St Andrews: this brought together not just MacMillan and Symmons Roberts, as the composer and librettist, but also Rowan Williams, as a theologian, to engage in discussions around the development of this opera. Each of them has written about their collaboration in a subsequent publication.²⁰ *Parthenogenesis* takes as its starting-point the report that a young woman in Hanover in 1944, caught in an allied bombing raid, was knocked to the ground by the force of an explosion. Subsequently she found herself to be pregnant, and nine months after the raid she gave birth to a girl. She firmly maintained that she had not had sex: that this was an instance of spontaneous human cloning, a 'virgin birth'. The opera is scored for a chamber orchestra, the 'cloned' child Anna (a speaking part), Kristel, her mother, and Bruno, described by Symmons Roberts as 'a flawed, falling, ambiguous angel; in love with the Kristel and with the world'.²¹

Williams writes of the Hanover incident that 'Confirmation of this bizarre story is lacking; it may be a kind of urban myth, or it may be a true story the records of which vanished in the chaos of the period. No one seems to have recorded whether the child survived

¹⁷ James MacMillan *et al.*, 'Raising Sparks: on the Music of James MacMillan', p. 28.

¹⁸ Anon., '... The Human Drama ...'.

¹⁹ *Parthenogenesis* has yet to be recorded. For the text of this work, see Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Libretto for *Parthenogenesis*', in Jeremy Begbie (ed.), *Sounding the Depths: Theology through the Arts* (London: SCM Press, 2002), pp. 41–46.

²⁰ Jeremy Begbie (ed.) *Sounding the Depths*.

²¹ Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Parthenogenesis', in Edinburgh International Festival programme for *Parthenogenesis* (2001) (no page numbers).

(or the mother)'.²² However, as Williams notes, 'The truth of the story is irrelevant':²³ it serves as a springboard for these artists for a consideration of issues surrounding human identity and genetic engineering. Here, rather than use a liturgical text to set alongside and illuminate his characters' plight, reference is made to the story of the Annunciation in Luke chapter 1. Williams describes the collaborators exploring 'the "myth" of what you might call a secular virginal conception. What could imaginably be "incarnate" in such an event? What is "announced" to the world?'.²⁴ MacMillan himself points out the dark side of this story:

Some might think that *Parthenogenesis* is blasphemous. There is a dark annunciation at the heart of this work. The father of the child is not God but human evil in the shape of a bomb, the explosion of which dislodged the cell in the woman that led to parthenogenesis. To cast human evil as the progenitor in our story throws a negative mirror image on the Annunciation. We have presented it like a mock annunciation where the woman is visited by an angel, a fallen angel. Their dialogue is . . . an imagined philosophical engagement between a woman and this dark, fallen angelic presence who is like a wounded prowling animal. In another dimension is a child (the clone) who comments separately and bitterly.²⁵

Parthenogenesis is short, but very dense, both musically and poetically. It may be concerned with exploring 'questions of identity and the roots of individuality' and 'some of the questions of liberty and control, life and death, utopia and dystopia, which circle around the breathtaking developments of modern genetics',²⁶ however, it is more than the academic exercise which this description might suggest. Indeed, like MacMillan's earlier operatic works it engages deeply with human suffering, reflecting on it this time not in the context of a liturgical text, but rather by juxtaposing the situation faced by contemporary figures with the biblical story of the Annunciation. *Parthenogenesis* presents no facile 'answers' to the issues it raises: it constitutes, rather, a meditation upon them, as they are perceived by those caught up in this extraordinary story.

MacMillan and Symmons Roberts subsequently collaborated on a full-scale opera, *The Sacrifice* (first performed in Cardiff in 2007),²⁷

²² Rowan Williams, 'Making it Strange: Theology in Other('s) Words', in Jeremy Begbie (ed.), *Sounding the Depths*, p. 22.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁵ James MacMillan, J. 2002. 'Parthenogenesis', in Jeremy Begbie (ed.), *Sounding the Depths*, p. 37.

²⁶ Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Parthenogenesis'.

²⁷ Welsh National Opera's original production of *The Sacrifice* may be heard on CD: Chandos CHAN 10572(2). References to the libretto are taken from the booklet accompanying this CD.

a work involving a large orchestra, chorus and soloists. It is based on the story of Branwen daughter of Llŷr in the mediaeval Welsh anthology the *Mabinogion*, updated to a modern setting. Sian, the daughter of a nameless General, is to be married to Mal in the interests of securing peace between their warring ‘tribes’. At their wedding her previous lover, Evan, stabs Mal: he is arrested and imprisoned. Several years later, Gwyn, the young son of Mal and Sian, is to be crowned King and thus unite the tribes. Evan arrives at the Investiture; Mal offers to embrace his former enemy, but Evan, seeking only to destroy all that has been achieved by this wedding, shoots Gwyn dead. As the two tribes prepare once again to fight, the General resolves to lay down his life in the interests of their reconciliation. Dressed in Evan’s clothes the General goes to meet Mal, who kills him before he can recognise him. Sian declares over the General’s body:

A great king has laid down his life
between our battle-lines. Enough.
It’s in our hands to break the feud.
Enough sacrifice. Enough blood.

As with *Inés de Castro*, the conclusion of *The Sacrifice* sees its principle female character appealing for a new future, transcending the enmities and hatreds of the past. The moral issues faced by characters in *The Sacrifice* reflect the story’s origins in a tale of warring families: the solution to their situation – voluntary individual self-sacrifice in the interests of the community – clearly echo Christian ideals (cf. John 15:13), but here there is little explicit drawing on biblical or liturgical resources to add resonances to the story, or to underline any ‘message’ which is being presented. Only in the final act are brief excerpts from the Requiem Mass heard, sung by the chorus over the bodies of Gwyn and of the General.

MacMillan’s most recent opera, *Clemency* (first performed in London in 2011), is another short work, again with a libretto by Michael Symmons Roberts, scored for a string orchestra and five soloists.²⁸ It is a retelling of the events of Genesis chapter 18. Abraham and Sarah, aged and childless, live in an apartment near ‘the twin towns by the lake’. They are visited by three travellers, to whom they offer hospitality. The travellers tell them that Sarah will bear a son, and that their pronouncement is ‘the word of God’: Abraham and Sarah, though initially sceptical, realise that their visitors are ‘angels’. Then, however, the mood changes: the travellers change their clothes, and arm themselves for an assault on the twin towns. They detail the barbaric crimes carried out by the people

²⁸ The Boston Lyric Opera production of *Clemency* is available on CD: BIS-2129. References to the libretto are taken from the booklet accompanying this CD.

who live there against the poor, the needy, and visitors. Abraham pleads with them to spare the cities if they find there ‘fifty acts of selflessness’: they respond, ‘We hear your plea for mercy/ For fifty we will let them be’. Abraham asks for clemency if they find forty-five, forty, and finally five who are ‘good in heart and mind’: the travellers agree, and depart. In a final scena, Sarah speculates about what the future will hold for her, and for her child.

Symmons Roberts describes the story narrated in Genesis 18 as ‘rather strange’. He notes the ambiguity surrounding the travellers – ‘Are they vigilantes? Angels sent by an angry God?’ – and he describes how he and MacMillan ‘were fascinated by the idea of human beings arguing with God for clemency, and by the idea of hospitality and what happens in its absence’.²⁹ If *Parthenogenesis* represents a reflection on a contemporary story in the light of a biblical antecedent, *Clemency* may be seen as the opposite: a reflection on a biblical story in the light of present-day realities. *Clemency* may be considered to be a meditation on the biblical story of the hospitality of Abraham, rather than a straightforward retelling of it; but it is a meditation that, like that original story, raises rather more questions than it answers.

Opera may seem an unlikely medium through which to explore theological themes, and yet it is striking how many British composers have done so over the period since World War II.³⁰ In the case of James MacMillan, we have observed several themes running through his operatic output. There is frequently a juxtaposition of the secular and the sacred, the timeless and the contemporary. The use of liturgical texts and biblical stories, and the relation of these to the situations of people who are in some way *in extremis*, are common to all the works discussed in this paper. We may see in these operas also the suggestion that there is ‘another way’ to the cycles of violence in which people become trapped (*Inés de Castro*, *The Sacrifice*), and the use of biblical narratives to address complex questions in the present day and to interrogate, if not resolve, them (*Parthenogenesis*, *Clemency*). The use by MacMillan and his librettists of liturgical and biblical material in these operas means that those who encounter them in the theatre or concert-hall are enabled to reflect not only on the resonances of this material for the people in the operas, but on how it can impact upon the audience members themselves: these remarkable works can constitute a prompt to theological reflection for those who encounter them. It is to be hoped that MacMillan will

²⁹ Michael Symmons Roberts, ‘Introduction’, in Edinburgh International Festival programme for *Clemency* (2012) (no page numbers).

³⁰ Cf. Michael Fuller, ‘Spirituality in Post-War British Opera’, *New Blackfriars* vol. 75 (1994), pp. 524–533; Michael Fuller, ‘Living on the Edge: Renewal in Britten’s *The Rape of Lucretia*’, *Musical Times* vol. 141 (2000), pp. 45–49.

continue to explore the possibilities for music-dramatic expression of this kind, and to enrich the operatic repertoire thereby.

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