CONVERSATION WITH JAMES MACMILLAN

Mandy Hallam

I met with James MacMillan to discuss his cantata Seven Last Words from the Cross (1993). The conversation, which took place at MacMillan's home in Glasgow on 30 November 2007, ranged far beyond that particular piece and lasted for over 90 minutes. Whilst the conversation has been edited to remove repetitions, I have endeavoured to represent MacMillan's comments accurately.

MH: When you compose, do you hear chords, melodies and harmonies in your head and write them down, or do you try things out on the piano, or does the process involve a combination of these methods?

JM: It's different every time, and that is the slightly worrying thing about it because there is no standard formula, you never quite know how a piece is going to come about or what the starting blocks will be. For a long time it has been the case that, apart from the vocal music, the instrumental music had pre-musical stimuli, like a reflection on something, whether it be an event, or something from history, or a theological point, or even liturgy itself. The starting point for the Triduum pieces was liturgy, a kind of ritual that immediately draws in music – Gregorian chant and so on which was associated with those liturgies in those days – then the building blocks begin to emerge from which you then take your own ideas. More recently, I've noticed that I've been leaving the extra-musical starting points behind. I don't know if this is a new direction or not. The String Quartet, for example, was just the notes and nothing but the notes. This might come as a surprise to the people who see me as someone who has this other aspect, but I've always written abstractly. Perhaps I'm just moving into another phase now, where the theology and the pre-musical are much more subliminal, taken for granted.

MH: Has all of your music been performed?

JM: I think so, yes. There are a couple of little pieces from school which I don't think have been performed, and very recently I found a Missa Brevis which I wrote when I was 17. A lot of that hadn't been performed, but looking at it, I actually quite liked it. I gave it to Alan Tavener and eventually I gave it to Boosey, and they've just published it. Alan's recorded it with on his new 'Tenebrae' CD, and the first performances of some of that Mass

1 Triduum, composed 1995–7, is a triptych comprising The World's Ransoming for orchestra and obligato cor anglais, the Cello Concerto, and the Symphony: Vigil. It was commissioned by the London Symphony Orchestra for performances in 1996 and 1997.

2 MacMillan is referring to his String Quartet No. 3, premiered by the Takács Quartet on 21 May 2008 at the Queen Elizabeth Hall.
were last week, so I went along. I’ve heard it in my head and on the piano, and then of course I had it on CD, but to hear it live, 30 years later, was a lovely experience, like reading old letters.

**MH:** You use established genres such as the symphony, concerto and cantatas. Would you say that this is consciously adhering to traditions?

**JM:** I think it is now. I’m quite unapologetic about my interest and acknowledgement of traditions. When I was younger I suppose I wasn’t as aware, consciously, of perhaps how important those traditions were to be. I suppose my natural milieu for a long while was the contemporary music world, and I still regard that as part of my natural habitat. I’m very much aware that I’m regarded as quite a traditionalist, even a conservative, in the new music world, and that has been a bit of a surprise to me, to suddenly appear the conservative in some people’s eyes. When I was younger, I did my own bit of experimenting, and I still do to an extent, but it’s settled into an acknowledgement on the importance of tradition, musically, where these forms have always been important.

I take encouragement from looking around and seeing that it’s not just me, or indeed so-called conservative composers, that are interested in writing symphonies; there are a lot of people writing symphonies: Maxwell Davies has written eight so far, Henze ten, Schnittke nine. Lots of people use the symphony as a way to describe a piece of music, so it appears to me that the so-called traditional approach has won out, it’s part of the mainstream, but it’s also part of the avant-garde, it’s part of modernism. Modernism has acknowledged its debt to tradition, and maybe I’m prepared more than most to acknowledge it in my music. Intellectually, tradition has flowed through the 20th and 21st centuries in a way that perhaps the more hard-line modernists tried to resist. I don’t see music, and indeed many aspects of culture, in terms of radical and conservative; these are outdated analyses as far as I’m concerned. I think those who form into packs, one side and the other – into left and right, or avant-garde and conservative – are missing the point a lot of the time. You can’t stop tradition. Tradition will always make its impact in one way or another, and the great error of modernism has been that conceit that they tried to avoid tradition.

**MH:** Could you talk a little about the relationship between the commission for Seven Last Words from the Cross and the structure – did the BBC provide the visuals before you started composing?

**JM:** No. This is a very interesting thing because, in a sense, the televised version has been left behind. In my mind, *Seven Last Words* always was a singular piece in seven movements, which have to be encountered as a unity, a completeness, but the way that the BBC decided to broadcast it – and I was aware of this right from the beginning – was they would put one movement per night on BBC2 during Holy Week. It started on Palm Sunday and finished on the Saturday; it was still all within Lent. So actually, that did have a bearing on the first piece; because as I knew it was going

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4 *Seven Last Words* was commissioned by BBC television and screened in seven nightly episodes in Holy Week 1994 on BBC2. It received its concert premiere in St Aloysius Church, Glasgow on 30 March 1994. Both the television broadcast and the concert were performed by Cappella Nova and the BT Scottish Ensemble, directed by Alan Tavener.
out on Palm Sunday, I used the Palm Sunday text in number one, 'Hosanna to the Son of David'. But, I was very aware that it was a very incomplete and unsatisfactory way of presenting the piece: it amounted to little five-to-seven-minute programmes between the news and the cricket or something.\(^5\)

**MH:** *Did the BBC give you a certain time limit for each movement?*

**JM:** Roughly. They didn’t restrict me. If I’d wanted to make each movement ten minutes that would have been fine, but they just seemed to take their natural course. Some are shorter than others. It was a lovely way to present the piece in ‘postcard’ form, as it were, to the audience and, in fact, I was insistent that although this was going out over the seven days, there would be a live performance of it that week. Sure enough on the Friday, Cappella Nova and the Scottish Ensemble performed it in St. Aloysius, but because the week had built up a momentum, people were aware of it, especially in Scotland. It was being announced on the telly and in the papers that the entire work was going to get its first live performance. The place was absolutely packed, which amazed me, but I think it was the television that drew that audience, they were aware of it happening, had seen little bits of it, and came to see it in its first complete performance. It must have been a slightly bizarre interlude in the evening viewing, but it did get big audiences because it was stuck between two popular programmes, so lots of people watched it. What they made of it was another matter; the visuals were very striking, maybe even over-striking. It was very ‘purple rich’. I find it a bit camp, to be honest. It looks like a house of horror to me: the choir are all dressed in these flowing robes and it’s filmed in a ruined church with cobwebs and bats almost. It just looked kind of crazy, overdone. And then they had scenes of the crucifixion specially filmed, which were very highly wrought – good actors and actresses involved in it, but lots of blood!\(^6\)

**MH:** *Do you think there was a difference in your approach to the vocal and instrumental writing in Seven Last Words?*

**JM:** Yes and no. I was presented with two very distinct groups who were to perform it initially; they hadn’t worked together at all before. Cappella Nova are like The Sixteen or Polyphony, groups that operate first and foremost as an unaccompanied singing group. They will sing early music principally, but they have an instinct for new unaccompanied music as well. Cappella Nova have been around here for about 25 years, and a Scottish-based group seemed the best choice for me. The other group of course was the Scottish Ensemble – a group of 13 string players who don’t normally work with choirs. In bringing them together I was very aware of the two different worlds. Nevertheless, both groups can produce a sustained sound, and have the facility for purity of sound. There was a kind of intersection area, I suppose, aesthetically, in the way that the music was imagined, so that there could be certain blends of sound, brought about subconsciously perhaps, more than simply juxtaposing one sound against the other so that the differences were heard.

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\(^5\) Christ’s Seven Last Words are supplemented by extra text from the Palm Sunday Exclamation, the Good Friday Responsories for Tenebrae and the Good Friday Versicle.

\(^6\) In the second movement ‘Woman, Behold thy Son! … Behold, thy Mother’, MacMillan’s chromatic and frenzied string writing is accompanied, visually, by the hammering of nails into Christ’s ankles. Mary weeps at Christ’s feet and blood sprays over her face (bb.41–59).
MH: *What is the function of the string section in the third movement? You used the liturgical model of rising pitch and the unveiling of the cross for the first three sections – how does the string section fit into this?*

JM: Well, let’s just trace it through. It begins as a drone, a fundamental, combined with two bass soloists. There’s a sense of travelling in the voices and the instruments, as indeed, that’s what happens in the liturgy: the cross is brought in at the back of the church and it’s brought forward, forward rather than upwards. But, I suppose there is a kind of moving upwards towards the high altar as the cross is carried in and unveiled. It starts off with the fundamental, there is nothing seen, and then gradually, with the unveiling of the cross, the taking away of the cover, more of what’s there is unveiled. I think that’s what is happening in the music, unveiling more of the ensemble and gradually adding to the ensemble. But there’s also a sense of travelling, starting low in the tessitura of the ensemble and choir and rising, through the basses, the tenors, the altos, and then the sopranos at the end. The strings mirror that by taking one of the lowest notes in the basses, going through the ensemble, and at the end you’re left with the very high violin sound. There’s a kind of directional thing going on too in that movement, which is underpinned by what is happening in the ensemble.

MH: *The string section is a juxtaposition with what has happened before, and also what happens afterwards, in the third movement.*

JM: Yes, let’s think. Well, there is a kind of node point there in the text, because I’ve used the words, music and direction of the ‘Ecce Lignum Crucis’ Versicle. In a sense, that is complete, but I haven’t set the words I was supposed to set.

MH: *The ‘last word’, as it were?*

JM: Yes, that’s right – ‘Verily’ et cetera – there was a natural hiatus in the drama that had been set up, so that there could have been a reflection on what has happened so far before getting to the whole point of the piece. I think that was the reason why, suddenly, the direction has been interrupted. The direction is still going on towards the final statement, the Versicle is complete, so there’s a vacuum that could be filled with something else before moving on, hence the quite emotional string interlude, compared to the detachment of what comes before and after. There’s a liturgical detachment from the three statements previous to it and the last one, and there’s a subjectivity that fills the gap. It moves into a kind of mental space for that string interlude.

MH: *So, what is the plot there, in terms of narration?*

JM: Well, there are moments throughout where the subject stands back from the objective liturgy. At the very end of the piece, the long postlude is giving way to the subjective. 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

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7 The third movement, ‘Verily, I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in Paradise’ uses the Good Friday Versicle ‘Ecce Lignum Crucis’. MacMillan emulates the liturgical tradition of singing the versicle three times, at a higher pitch each time, whilst the cross is unveiled. This is represented by bass, tenor and alto duets, respectively. An instrumental section follows, and the movement concludes with Christ’s last words sung by two sopranos.

8 The last movement concludes with ‘sighing’ in the violins, perhaps ‘objectively’ representative of Christ’s final breaths, but ‘subjectively’ representative of weeping.
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, and that moment you’re talking about is a moment that becomes purely subjective, as indeed is the final postlude. Maybe there are other moments like that, but certainly, I can identify those two as moments where the personal breaks through, and I suppose the question is ‘why would you want to maintain an objectivity anyway?’

There is something about liturgy that requires objectivity as a kind of ritualistic containment of, in this case, grief, which, if it wasn’t there, it would be emotional chaos, and that’s not what the liturgy should be. I think it is a commemoration, but it is more than just a memorial service for an individual: it is a kind of re-living of the most important moment in history, and I think there needs to be an intellectual detachment from that in order to reflect it, but it doesn’t stop the subjective emotional breaking through. You sometimes go to these rituals and liturgies and you’re very aware of the subjective emotional breaking through. Sometimes we see some people crying at Good Friday services, and that’s an amazing thing, an acknowledgement of that fact in our culture that I wanted to make by allowing music to become like that at these points.

MH: You often speak of the inspirational orchestral palette. I wonder if you could elaborate on the colours in Seven Last Words, particularly between the vocal and instrumental writing, and how the colours differ when you are limited to a string orchestra?

JM: I think composers can be inspired by the limitless array of sound possibilities that you get from an orchestra, especially when you add percussion. It’s a bit like being a child in a toyshop, being given all these things to play with. If you love colour, instrumental colour, and the potential of painting of colours, as I do, it is a great feeling, a great luxury. But there is also something to be said about music being made in a way where the composer is limited and the options are cut down. If you don’t have access to the more outrageously colouristic instruments like the percussion section, brass, and so on, you bring it down to the comparatively, almost monochrome, unified sound that the strings have, and the equally monochrome use of voices. There’s something about the restriction of palette that forces you into a kind of groove where you rethink your options. You achieve your expression through different means. So, limitation can be a great thing for composers; it provokes you into working harder to produce the expression.

I was thinking of this recently in the writing of the St. John Passion* because I do have quite an array of instruments and voices: there’s a large chorus – the London Symphony Orchestra Chorus – and there’s a smaller chamber choir that acts as a kind of narrator’s choir. But I decided to limit things. I could have written for triple woodwind, huge percussion section etc., but I decided not to. There is just one percussionist, bass drum, bells and a few other things, and the reason for this (there’s no harp, for example, so there’s not that colour there) is that I think that the subject matter required a kind of austerity. A lavish, rich

* MacMillan’s St John Passion was premiered by the London Symphony Orchestra and Sir Colin Davis on 27 April 2008 at the Barbican. The work was co-commissioned by the Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Berliner Rundfunkchor.
score would have seemed out of place for a passion story, a story of anguish and torture and sacrifice. Lent and Holy Week are a time in Christian tradition when you starve the senses; there is a tradition of fasting and abstinence, and I think there's a kind of subliminal aesthetic going on in the choice of instruments in the percussion here, and even in Seven Last Words. I also decided to use just one soloist in the Passion, rather than an array of soloists. I'm just thinking ahead; I hope every piece of mine has a life, but I know there are limitations, as soon as you start using vast percussion sections and lots of soloists.

There's a piece of mine called Visitatio Sepulchri\(^\text{10}\) which doesn't get done because there are seven vocal soloists in it, which is a huge financial burden, paying seven soloists' fees. So I've decided to re-write or re-present that piece as a choral work now: those seven parts are taken, more or less, by the choir. Choirs operate much more easily in a financial sense – so, sorry to talk about filthy lucre, but that can sometimes be a consideration. I don't think it was the case with Seven Last Words though; I chose Cappella Nova because of that pure, early music sound, rather than the fruitier sound that you can get from some choirs. I've written for the likes of the BBC Singers in a very different way because of that. I suppose having chosen these voices, usually 16 voices, a small ensemble of sorts would suit them more than a bigger one.

**MH:** Messiaen describes his timbral colours very specifically as the Tristan myth, birdsong and Catholicism. How easy is it to be that specific with your own music, with regard to the influences on the choices for tone 'colours'?

**JM:** Well, I don't do birdsong, maybe now and again I've attempted it, but you can't avoid sounding like Messiaen; he's cornered the market with birds. I've written a piece called *The Birds of Rhiannon*,\(^\text{11}\) but I've specifically avoided birdsong as such, because you get straight into that kind of territory that Messiaen has colonized. I'm fascinated by his interest in Tristan, I have an interest in Tristan as well, and it's something to do with love, I suppose. Messiaen sees Tristan and Isolde as a kind of carnal, physical expression of a divine love.

There is a fantastic book, actually, that I've drawn on for some of my talks, but it is having an influence, I think, in my music. It's called *Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and The Sacred in Wagner's Tristan and Isolde* by Roger Scruton\(^\text{12}\) – he's a philosopher, quite a controversial figure. People on the left tend to throw their hands up as soon as they hear his name. He is a kind of agent provocateur and a journalist, and he likes to stereotype, but actually he's a very fine philosopher who reflects a lot on music. Scruton sees Tristan as a seminal work, not just for the development of modern music, but for modernism generally. His line – which I think backed up my instinct – is that Tristan inspired a search for the sacred in modernism which secularists have tried to avoid talking about in the development of the arts. He draws attention to Tristan having this huge impact on a whole range of artists who have been characterized by their search for the numinous in their work,

\(^{10}\) *Visitatio Sepulchri* is a music-theatre piece for seven singers and chamber orchestra, composed 1992–3.

\(^{11}\) *The Birds of Rhiannon* is a tone-poem for orchestra with optional chorus, composed 2001.

and he says that is certainly what is going on in Tristan. He draws attention to what he describes as a kind of ‘Eucharistic’ scene in Act I of Tristan, which surprises lots of people, where they share this cup, a loving cup, a draft or potion which makes them lose their minds and memory: they fall in love at first sight straight after they drink this potion. There is a kind of communion aspect to this as well, they lose themselves to themselves, and they lose themselves to love itself, which is what the Eucharist is about. It’s a body and soul commitment to the living presence; you are taking in a divine essence in the Eucharist. And Scruton – in much more focused and developed ways than I can do – has teased this out of Tristan.

So, the idea of the Eucharist, or the search for the sacred being omnipresent in modern art and modern music, is an idea that fascinates me, and I’ve actually found myself quoting Wagner’s Tristan. I’ve done it before in my Symphony No. 2,13 I’ve done it in the St. John Passion as well, at the very end in the final movement. I’ve made a number of quotes: the Bach chorale O Sacred Head Sore Wounded at a couple of points; one of Victoria’s14 Responsories for Tenebrae, Judas I; and I’ve quoted from Tristan – I think they are kind of seminal things for me. So I have a different reasoning for this nod to Tristan than Messiaen, but I can understand why people are finding their way back to Tristan so much, and finding theological reasons for it. And the Catholicism, of course – I suppose it goes without saying that there’s a background there. Seven Last Words is a discovery of a form that has fallen into disuse. Nobody uses it any more liturgically, but we have it in our collective memory, through Haydn mainly.15 Haydn didn’t actually set the words; he reflected on it in an instrumental way.16

MH: Do you think that modernist contemporary composers have alienated audiences, or do you think that the quality and concentration of listeners has deteriorated?

JM: I think that there’s a bit of both actually; people have been talking about the regression of hearing ever since Adorno in the 1930s. Our society is losing its understanding of what music is. They are losing the ability to put time aside for music, and that’s not just listening to music, but giving up time to be a musician. There’s so much pressure on young people and they are finding more and more reasons not to begin a lifetime’s journey with music, and that’s what it means. They also find it much more difficult to put time aside and do nothing but listen to music. Music has got to fill the requirements of entertainment – serious music does that, of course – but it’s been easily relegated to the background. People seem to require music in the background while they do other, more important things, like talking, making the dinner, reading the paper or something, and that’s what we’re up against as far as audience engagement is concerned. With the hard-line modernists, I suppose they’ve made a decision, well, the audience are not interested; there’s no point in trying to engage them so let’s speak amongst ourselves. So they tend to write for each other, write for fellow composers and musicologists. At least it’s an audience, and maybe that’s their ideal listener.

14 MacMillan is referring to Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611).
15 MacMillan is alluding to the disparity between the Seven Last Words as a form of worship and in a performance context.
MH: In an article on Boulez, you said of IRCAM: 'It seems not to have made any huge impact on the world of music and, in spite of its many cheerleaders, it has failed to produce any significant new composer.' Do you stand by these comments?

JM: Well, that was deliberately provocative! I was writing for The Guardian and some of their journalists are cheerleaders of the whole Boulez thing. I quite like the idea of my writing articles in The Guardian because it really gets up their noses. But I do believe that IRCAM hasn’t produced any significant new composer, apart from Boulez himself.

MH: What about Jonathan Harvey?

JM: Yes. IRCAM didn’t produce Jonathan Harvey: Jonathan Harvey has sought out IRCAM for his own devices. I suppose that’s the success of IRCAM; it provides itself as a resource for composers. But there is an aesthetic at IRCAM that produces legions of acolytes that we never really hear about. The French produce legions of Boulezian composers, all sticking to the party line, all writing the same kind of music. Jonathan Harvey – maybe because he wasn’t part of that French thing – developed his own kind of aesthetic. He’s a real independently-minded composer. He sought out IRCAM, and IRCAM has a lot to offer, as soon as they get rid of the party line, as soon as it stops being ‘L’Eglise Boulezian’.

MH: Do you think that IRCAM is starting to branch out now, such as collaborating with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra?

JM: Yes, they are branching out, it’s a marvellous development, and maybe things will change. Also in that article I refer to IRCAM being Boulez’s personal Kremlin. Once it stops being under that Stalinistic thumb it will come into its own.

MH: Do you know Jonathan Harvey?

JM: Yes, he has written a fantastic book called Music and Inspiration, which is very influential. He’s involved in something called ‘New Metaphysical Art’ and he had me speak at a conference at the University of Sussex. He’s also up here a lot with the BBC Scottish; he has links with Scotland, and I’ve had some interesting conversations with him. He’s a great composer.

MH: In the South Bank Show on your music, you align your identities of Catholic and composer, speaking of the ‘continual poetic tension between peace and violence’, which you see at the centre of the ‘Christian narrative … to retreat from that would be a failure of responsibility for a religious artist’. Could you define ‘religious artist’ and ‘responsibilities’ in this context?

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18 Haydn’s Die sieben letzten Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze, composed in 1785, originally for full orchestra, was arranged by the composer for string quartet in 1787. However, using a text by Baron Gottfried van Swieten, Haydn later set the words for four soloists and chorus, adapting the original orchestral score and adding parts for clarinet, contrabassoon and trombones. The final version was first performed in Vienna in 1796 and published in 1801.


18 Jonathan Harvey was invited by Boulez to work at IRCAM in the 1980s. <http://www.fabermusic.com/serverside/composers/Details.asp?ID=Harvey%20Jonathan&View=biog&Section=composers> [accessed 02/02/2008]

19 In April 2008 IRCAM and the BBC SSO collaborated to host the UK’s first IRCAM Academy of New Music, led by Jonathan Harvey.


JM: Well, that’s an all-embracing term, I suppose it could mean many different things. When you think about the history of 20th-century music, there have been loads and loads of really religious composers. You could say that religion is part of the mainstream, that music and the development of contemporary music has been peopled by very religious men and women in one way or another, so much so that it has been part of the fabric of the story of contemporary 20th-century music. Music of the 20th and 21st centuries would be very different if the following had not been religious people: Stravinsky, Schoenberg, John Cage, Britten, Messiaen, Poulenc, Schnittke, Gubaidulina, Ustvolskaya, Kancheli, Pärt, John Tavener and Jonathan Harvey. There seems to have been a natural desire for composers to search for the sacred; they do it in very different ways, and some of them in very unconventional religious ways. Wagner himself was a religious being, although he was separated and unconventional in his religious approach. He was a very religious and spiritual person, in spite of the flaws in his character; like the rest of us, we all have flaws.

So, in that sense, you could say that a huge swathe of artists and composers over the last hundred years have been religious. I think in the quote that you use I was talking more specifically about maybe someone like me, who is quite unashamed of acknowledging a particular strand of religion that shapes me. These others that I’ve mentioned would be much coyer, perhaps, at describing themselves as religious artists and maybe even making references to religious traditions. John Cage, for example: not many people have mentioned his religious sensibilities, but he was absolutely captivated by Eastern religions. And when you think about a work like 4’33” – four minutes and 33 seconds of silence – the original title he intended for that was A Silent Prayer. I think the reason that he went to study with Schoenberg is because Schoenberg was equally interested in silence and its relationship with sound and music, and the way that music grows out of silence: its umbilical relationship with it.

Responsibilities, well, maybe I was simply talking about myself. If I ignored the poetic tension that we talked about, between violence and peace, I would be ignoring the essence of the sacrificial narrative. I suppose what I was saying is that I couldn’t justify my music, theologically, if it were simply a kind of mono-dimensional peaceful purity and nothing else. I suppose this is where I differentiate myself from those that have been – derogatorily – called ‘Holy Minimalists’. I am a fan of Pärt’s; there’s something special and serious about his music. But he, and to a much more focussed extent John Tavener, have made conscious decisions to avoid violence and turbulence, as a gesture towards what they probably regard as the iconography of music, making their music as a kind or gateway or a window to heaven. I don’t necessarily see my music in those terms; I see it as much more rooted in the earth, but no less religious or sacred. It’s a theological difference that we have, based on the East/West split, as it were. I’m much more a Western Catholic than those composers. 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.

There’s a responsibility to my own self, knowing what has shaped me, and maybe that’s a responsibility to my Catholic
background. I’d be letting myself down if I didn’t acknowledge that I’m made by other forces; my mum and dad made me, but other things made me the person that I am, including the Catholic tradition.

MH: You mentioned quite a lot of Catholic composers. Are any of them a particular inspiration to you?

JM: I suppose in many ways, whether they are Catholic or not, composers have inspired me. Messiaen, in particular, has been a great beacon for the rest of us. Schnittke’s religion is never really talked about, but I think I’m right in saying that he and Gubaidulina have had this relationship with Catholicism; maybe they converted or something, but they are very interested in Catholicism. Schnittke had this mixed background – Jewish parentage, although secular, communist parents – but he found roots back into the religious world, almost in spite of his background. So, I certainly take a lot of inspiration from the likes of Schnittke and the other Russians who held a candle for the sacred in spite of the sheer aggression of an atheistic state. I’m not saying we live in a similar situation now, but there is something in the debate about how religion in public spaces has gone in our society. The debate is much more aggressive; the attitude to religious people in public life is much more suspicious and antithetic, and it does mean that the religious-minded and people of faith are under the spotlight much more, in a much more unfriendly way than even ten years ago. I think 9/11 had something to do with it; it gave a green light to certain opportunists in our society, like Richard Dawkins and so on, to crank up the aggression in the debate.23

MH: You say that your music ‘reaches out to a Catholic place with a small “e”’,24

JM: Did I?!

MH: Is this perhaps a contradiction in terms?

JM: Yes, probably. I think it was a clumsy way of saying that I write for the world, as it were; it’s not just my fellow Catholics I’m writing for. I’m very aware that I’m putting this music into a sort of multicultural, diverse world, where people who love music will come to the music from very different perspectives and spiritual realities. Therefore I write for that world, but also I’m aware that the best thing about our society is our tolerance, and that we value perspectives and experiences that are maybe different from our own. In writing open-heartedly in music, I write in the hopeful expectation that it will be embraced open-heartedly by others who are not from my way of thinking at all. And generally, in the world of music, those are the kinds of people you meet, people who love music, love it regardless of who wrote it. But

22 Gubaidulina and Schnittke have very different relationships with Catholicism, and the way that Catholicism informs their music is worthy of more investigation that this space permits. Although Schnittke’s mother was a Catholic, Schnittke maintained an affinity with the Russian Orthodox church until 1982, when he was 48; he was baptized as a Catholic. Gubaidulina grew up in a multi-faith background. In interview with Vera Lukomsky, Gubaidulina says ‘all my works are religious … I feel a great desire to realize my religious needs within art’. Vera Lukomsky, ‘The Eucharist in My Fantasy: Interview with Sofia Gubaidulina’, Tempo No. 206, (September 1998), pp. 29–35; p.31.


always there’s that deep acknowledgement that sometimes the strangest things that come forth and inspire music may not inspire you as an individual. There’s also an acknowledgement – until the likes of Dawkins came along, until the debate became much more harrowed – that our culture has been shaped by religious convictions, experiences and religious societies.

MH: When you write a liturgical work and a secular work, do you use the same musical language?

JM: I’m not aware of switching from one to the other. I’m aware of certain restrictions I place on my own writing, not to do with religious reasons, but to do with practical reasons, like the use of particular kinds of voices that are used to a certain language and aesthetic, perhaps. You can achieve something better for a church choir if you are aware of what those restrictions are, restrictions that can be thrown overboard perhaps if you end up writing for the BBC Singers or a symphony orchestra. So it’s not a religious consideration that allows different degrees of restriction to take place in the language; it’s to do with purely musical considerations.

MH: In your programme note to Isobel Gowdie, you say ‘I have tried to capture the soul of Scotland in music’. And, in an interview with Helen Jane Burrows, you say that the influence of Scottish folk music on your own compositions is subconscious. Reflecting on those comments, is it possible to further clarify the conscious and subconscious aspects of your approach to folk music?

JM: Well, when I was younger, I used to play a lot of folk music and sing a lot, and maybe I didn’t realize at the time, but there was an absorption of that style going on. I don’t do it any more and I think now the influence of folk music happens without thinking about it. It’s gone under the skin – whereas when I was younger, I was making conscious attempts to try to bring it into my language. Because it’s conscious, it can sometimes be a little more clumsy perhaps, or it can evoke pastiche, or you feel the inverted commas going up: ‘here’s the folk bit’. It’s been important to absorb that element so that it becomes second nature rather than feeling your way self-consciously into a folk world. And I think that’s what’s happened: a lot of the ornamentation and the modality that comes out of my music now happens without a second thought. It’s just there. But the practical involvement had to happen for that deeper engagement to take place.

MH: Moving onto your ‘Scotland’s Shame’ speech, did its repercussions affect your artistic process at the time?

JM: I don’t think so, no. It didn’t seem to affect anything, apart from one piece that grew out of it – it wasn’t just ‘Scotland’s Shame’,

25 MacMillan directs and composes for the St. Columba’s Chaplaincy Choir in Maryhill, Glasgow.
27 In 1999, MacMillan made a speech at the Edinburgh Festival in which he accused Scottish society of institutionalised bigotry and sectarianism. MacMillan attacked many aspects of Scottish culture, including the racial tensions surrounding sporting bodies, violence towards Catholics in Glasgow, the sectarian attitudes of the Scottish Parliament with regard to religious educational issues, and religious prejudices in the workplace.
it was a reaction to being here I suppose, and feeling certain disappointments with life here— and that's a Scotch Bestiary.

It is quite a satirical piece, and it is worlds away from Seven Last Words, but it's not an entirely serious piece and there is a kind of conscious satire going on. I had individual people in mind when I wrote those pieces, and I suppose it was a reaction to the kind aggressive situations I found myself in after the speech, which wasn't always to do with religion. There were other political elements—like the defence of Scottish Opera—which threw me up against that kind of idiotic philistinism that pervades the political classes in Scotland.

MH: What about the 'Jackass Hackass' movement?

JM: A couple of Scottish journalists whose faces I would never tire of hitting.

MH: In England, we don't always realize the extent of the sectarian problems in Scotland.

JM: It's under the surface all the time. It was an astonishing escapade. I tried to work out whether I actually knew whether that was going to happen or not. I tried to retrace my thoughts but I remember thinking at the time that because so many people don't like talking about it, it never gets discussed very prominently, and it's always swept under the carpet. There's a lot of fear about it as well; there are a lot of Catholics who, in public life, would not choose to raise the issue in case it reflected badly on them or affected them professionally. For example, one of the Scottish judges said, 'I totally support you 110%, but of course someone in my position could never ever say these things'.

MH: How did that make you feel?

JM: I wasn't bothered. I got that a lot from teachers, academics and politicians, and I was contacted by politicians who wanted to meet me to talk about it. One politician—someone who is still sitting in parliament—invited me to contact him, but to phone the office after 5pm so that his staff didn't know that I was calling. He said, 'You are absolutely right, but I can't say these things because I've got an election to fight'. Because of the fear element and people not wanting to put their head above the parapet, I made a decision: I don't have an employer in Scotland, I don't have an academic reputation, I don't work at a Scottish university, I'm not a lawyer or a judge, so I can say these things, and if I get the flak, it doesn't matter, because life will go on, and that's happened of course.

This has divided opinion about me in Scotland severely, to the extent that some people have a severe dislike and regard me as a troublemaker rather than a composer. Maybe I didn't know that was going to happen. And for a long time, Lynne and I and the kids talked about leaving Scotland because it was unpleasant with journalists coming to the door, harassing us. So there was

28 A concertante work for organ and orchestra, composed 2003–4, commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the BBC, for the BBC Philharmonic.
29 In 2004, MacMillan became Patron of the Friends of Scottish Opera to campaign for the company's future after a restructuring plan and funding cuts brought about job losses.
30 A Scotch Bestiary is divided into two sections, entitled 'I. The menagerie caged. II. The menagerie uncaged'. The section 'Jackass Hackass' concludes the first section.
31 MacMillan is referring to the media backlash from the Scottish press that followed the 'Scotland's Shame' speech.
32 Lynne is James MacMillan's wife.
a price to pay, but nevertheless, I feel as though I’ve developed a very hard skin. I know who my friends are. I’ve made some great friends and allies: the debate was opened up and goes on. Archbishop Tutu said ‘you’ve got to open wounds in order to cleanse them’. And that’s not a very pleasant experience, opening a wound, but actually, in the long run, it cures you, and that’s what Scotland needed; it needed the wound to be opened, which is a painful experience, in order for the poison to be taken out. Maybe through that whole debate being opened up people are confronting deep prejudices, subliminal prejudices, that they didn’t even realize were there. That was an important aspect in dealing with it.

MH: *And do you think the culture is beginning to change?*

JM: I think so, yes. There are lots of people who have different views on that. Some people will disagree and say it will never change, but in a sense, I think so. You can see the way that the whole racism debate in the UK has been dealt with in different ways through the last 30–40 years. Society was profoundly racist in the 60s and 70s; people used words and insults about people almost without thinking, and that doesn’t happen any more. It’s still a racially fraught place, but we’ve given ourselves the kind of cultural and intellectual facility to deal with a problem which could be used to great benefit as we go on absorbing people from outside, from different places. The Irish Catholic immigrants were the first wave of incomers, immigrants to Scotland in the modern world, and if we as a society haven’t come to terms with our fears about that wave of immigrants, how on earth are we ever going to deal with fresh waves of immigrants that are coming from the Indian subcontinent, Poland and Lithuania? Many of them are Catholic, actually, and that has created another strain in Scotland because the Catholic schools and Catholic churches are filling up again, and it hasn’t gone unnoticed in certain quarters, much to the chagrin of some strands of society. So, it goes on, but we are giving ourselves a facility to deal with it in a much better way. Fingers crossed, anyway.

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