

# RAISING SPARKS: JAMES MACMILLAN

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*Sir James MacMillan  
Photo: Philip Catwood*



A major anniversary seems as good a reason as any to assess the life and work of a composer, with a 60th anniversary perhaps the most auspicious celebration: it is not bound up with youth, nor early promise, nor is it the grand retrospective that comes with much later birthdays. James MacMillan, who will be 60 in July 2019 and who holds an enviable position at the forefront of British music, is one of our most successful, most recognisable and most gifted composers. It seems an appropriate time to evaluate his career, his oeuvre and his impact on the wider world.

MacMillan was born in Kilwinning, Ayrshire, in south-west Scotland on 16 July 1959 to a teacher and a carpenter, with the family moving to the larger nearby town of Cumnock in 1963. Music was always present in the MacMillan household, largely because of James's maternal grandfather, the young composer's first musical influence, who took MacMillan to brass band rehearsals and bought him his first instrument, a cornet, in 1968. There was a wide variety of music-making taking place in Cumnock which MacMillan was directly or indirectly involved with, ranging from visiting professional ensembles (such as the Berlin Octet) to local amateur operatic and oratorio societies which gave performances of Handel and Gilbert & Sullivan, amongst other standard fare. MacMillan attended St John's Roman Catholic primary school in the centre of the town before moving to Cumnock Academy for secondary education in 1973, and it was at this latter school that his musical abilities began to take shape. Under the watchful eye of the Head of Music, Bert Richardson, MacMillan began to flourish as a composer, drinking in Richardson's own interests in Renaissance church music as well as his teacher's espousal of the leading Anglican composer of the time, Kenneth Leighton (who was a friend of Richardson). It was whilst at secondary school that MacMillan's first choral work was performed, the Sanctus from the *Missa Brevis* of 1977, with a more public performance at Paisley Abbey by the choir and their legendary director of music, George McPhee, coming shortly after.

MacMillan's interest in Leighton took him to Edinburgh University in 1977 to study for a bachelor's degree, and during his study there numerous choral works began to appear. Many of these early pieces (which the composer has recently rediscovered and had published) show his commitment to the Catholic faith, one of the most significant influences on his life and works, and something that has become synonymous with him as his career has progressed. However, like many composers studying at the time, choral music was not the primary concern, and MacMillan's chamber and instrumental works of the period show the influence of Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle, then at the vanguard of British contemporary music.

Following his time in Edinburgh, MacMillan ventured south of the border to study for a PhD with John Casken at Durham University, Casken being one of the foremost composition teachers of his generation and a strong influence on MacMillan's future works.

Perhaps the most pivotal moment in MacMillan's career was in 1988 when, following PhD success and a short tenure as a part-time lecturer at Manchester University, he returned to his homeland and to married life in Glasgow. Soon after his return to Scotland some of his most exciting early

works came into being, including *Into the Ferment*, *Tryst*, *Bisquada* and *Cantos Sagrados* (one of the first mature works of MacMillan's to feature a choir). He began to form strong links with Scottish orchestras and ensembles, gaining his 'big break' from a commission from the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra for the 1990 Proms. The work which thrust him into the compositional spotlight was *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie*, a piece which is still his calling card to this day. The mix of dramatic and violent orchestral eruptions with softly unfolding modal lines, all carrying the influence of Scottish traditional music, was an instant hit with audiences, and this mixture has characterised MacMillan's music ever since. He followed *Isobel Gowdie* with other notable pieces, such as *The Berserking* (a piano concerto inspired by a Glasgow Celtic match, football being one of his great passions), *Tuireadh* (dedicated to the victims of the Piper Alpha disaster in 1988), and the percussion concerto *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel*, his most performed orchestral work. By the mid-1990s MacMillan was one of the most prominent composers in the UK, with major commission following major commission for many of the country's top orchestras and ensembles.

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It is a work from 1993 that has perhaps had the greatest impact on his future compositions and which is a rival to *Isobel Gowdie* for the composer's most significant piece: his cantata *Seven Last Words from the Cross* that was commissioned by BBC Television for Holy Week in 1994. Recognised by many to be MacMillan's masterpiece, *Seven Last Words* has long since outlived its initial broadcast to be one of the most enduring of the composer's works, constantly finding new admirers and devotees on both sides of the Atlantic, and further afield. MacMillan's combination of the traditional gospel texts that form Jesus's last words with specially chosen passages (largely from the Good Friday liturgy) to emphasise and comment is a masterstroke, and gives the work a greater depth and nuance than other settings. From the plangent opening chords to the declamatory outbursts of the second movement, to the violence of the sixth and the ultimate redemption through an instrumental threnody in the final movement, *Seven Last Words from the Cross* is MacMillan at his finest, and it is rightly lauded as one of his best pieces.

MacMillan's Catholicism has influenced all aspects of his composition from the smallest choral work to the largest orchestral statement, with the grandest potentially being the *Triduum*: three inter-connected orchestral works relating to the narrative of the Easter sequence that was written between 1995 and 1997. Maundy Thursday is expressed through a *concertante* cor anglais work, *The World's Ransoming*, where this

St John the Evangelist catholic church, Cumnock  
Photo: Fr Lawrence Lew, OP



melancholy woodwind instrument weaves its way to a forceful denouement. Good Friday is represented by a spiky cello concerto with echoes of Shostakovich, and Easter Sunday sees MacMillan embracing symphonic form for the first time in a bold and powerful end to the triptych. Further large-scale works followed, including the oratorio *Quickening* (1999, with shades of Britten's *War Requiem*), a Second Symphony (also 1999) and the dazzling tone-poem for orchestra and optional chorus *The Birds of Rhiannon* for the 2001 Proms.

The new millennium found MacMillan beginning to explore choral music in earnest for the first time since his Edinburgh days, the result of this being an outpouring of works for choir. There are some colourful and dramatic liturgical works, including a through-composed *Mass* for Westminster Cathedral choir from 2000, and a set of evening canticles that was commissioned for the first Choral Evensong of the new century. There are two books of *The Strathclyde Motets* that MacMillan composed between 2005 and 2010, which are mainly settings of communion motets for choirs of differing abilities but feature also one of his most easily achievable choral works, *O Radiant Dawn*. Much of the groundwork for the motets took place during MacMillan's time as director of music at St Columba's Church in Maryhill, Glasgow, where he worked with singers of little or no musical training to bring new and beautiful music to the weekly liturgy. His most popular works for choir are a trio of pieces from before this choral epiphany which represent some of his most successful and heartfelt offerings in the medium: *Christus Vincit* (1994), *A Child's Prayer* (1996) and *A New Song* (1997). These three works show MacMillan at his most intimate and direct, from the long, floating lines of *Christus Vincit* to the poignant memorial that is *A Child's Prayer* (it was written in memory of the victims of the Dunblane Massacre) to the unleashing of heavenly glory at the end of *A New Song*: all three works have

found a place in the repertoire of both church and chamber choirs and will no doubt remain there.

MacMillan's works for choir haven't been solely reserved for smaller-scale, unaccompanied pieces – he has also written a succession of oratorios and other grand choral works in the past 15 years. Perhaps the most celebrated are his two Passion settings, *St John* (2007) and *St Luke* (2013), which have carried on the dramatic and visceral world of *Seven Last Words* with no less energy or impact. The *St John* is more traditional and big-boned, with a baritone soloist pitted against semi-chorus, large choir and orchestra in a colourful narrative. The *St Luke* is more concise; the soloist of its predecessor is replaced with an ethereal children's choir and a reduced orchestra, reflecting the composer's desire for the work to appeal to amateur choirs and societies. It is MacMillan's intention to complete the quartet of gospels in his later years with a *St Mark* for choir and organ, and a *St Matthew* for unaccompanied voices. But his oratorios haven't been reserved for Passion settings only. A highly acclaimed *Stabat Mater*, using the same forces as *Seven Last Words* and beginning to garner some of the same praise as its predecessor, received its premiere in 2016. The piece recently had the accolade of being the first work to be 'live-streamed' from the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, in a spell-binding performance by The Sixteen and the Britten Sinfonia.

MacMillan is somewhat unusual in the British music scene for having success and respect across different genres, from intense chamber works to heartfelt songs to vivid orchestral tableaux. Recent successes, aside from those for choral forces, have included the grand opera *The Sacrifice* (a Welsh National Opera commission from 2007), the more intimate retelling of Abraham and Sarah in the chamber opera *Clemency* (2010), and a host of characterful concertos for violin, viola, oboe,



trombone, saxophone and percussion that have appeared in the past ten years. His works (all issued by MacMillan's long-term publisher, Boosey & Hawkes) range from the purely abstract to the vividly programmatic, with multiple recordings and broadcasts accompanying each one.



*Sir James MacMillan at the 2015 Cumnock Tryst  
Photo: Robin Mitchell*

Much of the composer's recent energies have been directed towards the foundation of The Cumnock Tryst, a music festival taking place in and around his home town which began in 2014. This has also led to MacMillan returning to south-west Scotland to live. The festival has brought many of the world's leading performers to this unheralded part of the country to give performances of pieces old and new, including works by composers from the area supported by MacMillan. Naturally there are concerts of MacMillan's work aplenty too, performed by, amongst others, Nicola Benedetti, The Sixteen and Westminster Cathedral choir, who have all recently given highly memorable performances.

As he reaches his 60 birthday, plaudits will no doubt appear from around the globe to celebrate MacMillan and his

continued success on the compositional stage, both at home and abroad. He is a visible presence not just as a composer but as a conductor, an educator, an artistic director and a powerful voice on the arts and faith in the wider media. Perhaps the greatest accolade that can be given to MacMillan is that he is someone who people *actually* listen to, not just as a successful composer but as an important voice in society, who holds the political classes to account and supports injustices in equal measure. In a world where contemporary classical music becomes more and more marginalised, it is important to recognise the achievements of those individuals who make a difference, and in this regard, as in so many others, James MacMillan is a composer of true importance.



**Dr Phillip Cooke is active as a composer and academic with regular performances of his work across the UK and further afield from the likes of The Sixteen, the BBC Singers and many cathedral choirs. He was the co-editor of *The Music of Herbert Howells* in 2013 and has just completed the first study of James MacMillan's work, which will be published by Boydell & Brewer in 2019. He is currently Senior Lecturer in Composition and Head of Department at the University of Aberdeen.**  
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