

James MacMillan – *Seven Last Words from the Cross* (1994)

- I. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do
- II. Woman, Behold thy Son! ... Behold, thy Mother!
- III. Verily, I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in Paradise
- IV. Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?
- V. I thirst
- VI. It is finished
- VII. Father, into thy hands I commend my Spirit

James MacMillan's *Seven Last Words from the Cross* is often held up as his greatest achievement to date: a striking symbiosis of the composer's fervent religious beliefs with unabashed melodic impulse and dramatic outbursts. The word 'masterpiece' is occasionally whispered from cathedral to concert hall as the work seems to have slipped somewhat unnoticed into the repertoire and musical consciousness of the nation, a worthy addition to an already burgeoning corpus of works written in celebration of Holy Week. The work undoubtedly represents a watershed for MacMillan, it is the culminating point of a ten year period that began with the now withdrawn work *Litanies of Stone and Iron* in 1983 and finds the composer in possession of a fully-fledged mature musical language which will bear all the hallmarks of MacMillan's works to date.

The piece is placed crucially in MacMillan's oeuvre; it represents either the end of the composer's 'first' period of composing, or perhaps the beginning of his next. This distinction may seem arbitrary at first, but it goes some way to defining both MacMillan's compositional aesthetic and the quality of the music produced. If we suggest that it belongs to the former, it is the culmination of a staggering group of works that began with the brutal traditionalism of *Tryst* (1989), the politically charged *Cantos Sagrados* (1990), the beguiling modality of *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* (1990) and the now well-trodden meditations of *Veni, veni Emmanuel* (1992). It represents much of what MacMillan had been striving for in these compositions – a way of expressing his profound Catholicism in a way that was both pertinent and meaningful to a largely secular audience without having to pander to the voguish music of John Tavener and Arvo Pärt that stood (and largely still stands) for contemporary religiously-derived music. If, however, we suggest it belongs to the next period of his composing career it is perhaps a beacon of inspiration in a sea of increasing mediocrity, where the burning intensity of his earlier works is gradually being replaced by an over-reliance on gesture, mannerism and the realisation that technique may be replacing inspiration as the dominant compositional impulse.

*Seven Last Words from the Cross* was commissioned by BBC Television and was first screened in seven nightly episodes during Holy Week in 1994. It was premiered by Cappella Nova and the BT Scottish Ensemble, conducted by Alan Tavener with the first concert performance being given at St Aloysius Church, Glasgow by the same performers. The work begins with a characteristic soft, repeated cadential figure made more striking by the false relations which MacMillan will expand upon later in the work. This simple rising figure originally appeared in an earlier piece of MacMillan's, *Tuireadh* (which is a Gaelic word for 'lament') which was written in memory of the Piper Alpha Disaster in 1989, and sets the tone for this introspective first movement. The texture thickens gradually and becomes more animated as staccato tenors and basses dwarf the conjunct melodies of the sopranos and altos. As the music begins to fragment almost to the point of incomprehension the sopranos begin to deliver a soft monotone which comes increasingly to the fore before finishing the first movement almost as a whisper.

The second movement begins with unaccompanied tutti chords of elemental passion and ferocity, their power being accentuated by the imposing pauses that separate them. MacMillan brings the false relation back here in all its grandeur with dissonant intervals colliding in the middle voices. The strings build gradually as the tutti chords thin until both are fighting for prominence; the fragmented tenor and bass lines on “behold thy Mother” and the agitated fading of the violins suggest neither succeeds.

The third movement seeks to resolve much of the agitation of the previous as Jesus’s words “Verily, I say unto you, today thou shalt be with me in paradise” sets the tone for this reflective and beautiful meditation. Duets for each of the voices are followed by a striking refrain made all the more arresting by its warm consonance and arpeggio string writing. The violin solo that arises from the refrain is perhaps only just erring on the side of good taste, and is one of the few points where MacMillan nearly succumbs to Catholic kitsch.

The fourth movement reflects the questioning of the title, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The highly ornamented vocal lines and glissandos give the feeling of instability and futile grasping for something more secure; this is emphasised by the arc shaped form as the music builds from the basses into shimmering full choir polyphony before returning to the depths and the opening sonority.

The fifth movement is perhaps the bleakest and is certainly the sparsest with quick bursts of choral monotony coalescing uneasily with held string notes and tremolandi. The incredible crescendo that accompanies the first eruption of “I thirst” is matched only in emotional intensity by the weary resignation of the second. The crescendo that builds in the strings is referred to in the score by MacMillan as “like a violent shuddering” and although it fades to nothing it is undeniably a preparation for the horrific stabbing chords that open the sixth movement. Again MacMillan strays close to bad taste with his depiction of the nails being hammered into Jesus (a trick he would replicate in *The World’s Ransoming* in 1998), though the dramatic power of this gesture is countered by the softly building material in the choir. The opening motif from the first movement is expanded and varied as the sopranos and the rest of the choir uneasily sing their opposing texts; eventually it is the sopranos that emerge with their serene melody before the string stabbing returns to end the movement.

The final movement begins with tutti chords and pauses similar to the second, and again each subsequent repetition sees the texture thin and the harmony relax. The final utterance from the choir “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” begins a long section of modal string polyphony (similar in sound and design to that of *Gowdie*) that gradually ascends the register of the orchestra until a lone semitone dyad (the final appearance of that false relation from the opening) gradually fades, our ears straining to hear what is music and what is silence.