



James MacMillan
Choral Music

BOOSEY & HAWKES

A Practical Commentary
and Survey by **Paul Spicer**

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James MacMillan's choral music embraces sacred and secular, ancient and modern, meditative simplicity and rich ornamentation.

The guide examines 150 of James MacMillan's choral works from a practical perspective, describing the choral forces required, the level of difficulty, and the vocal character of each piece. This 2021 version is a complete update to the previous guides from 2002, 2009 and 2012.

James MacMillan An Introduction

In the programme for the UK premiere of MacMillan's *St Luke Passion*, given by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and its choruses in December 2014, the introductory paragraph proclaimed that 'James MacMillan has been called the greatest British composer since Britten, and his music is urgent, melodious, and burning to communicate'. That, in one sense, would do as the preface to this new commentary on his choral works – or indeed all his works. What we need to know from this survey is what to expect from this composer, whether our choirs will enjoy singing the music, and how our audiences will react.

One of the great characteristics of MacMillan's music is its melodious quality. This comes as much from plainsong (sometimes actual chant) as from his own incredibly fertile imagination. It also connects with his deep and abiding Christian faith which informs everything he writes. Over the years he has been deeply affected by issues surrounding political repression in various parts of the world. Here, too, his faith has informed his reaction to it, enshrining a message of hope from the abyss of despair.

In his excellent survey of MacMillan's music for the Boydell Press, composer Phillip Cooke stated in his Prologue that 'For all MacMillan's statements on faith, religion and Catholicism, he remains a composer, someone who combines notes and rhythms to create a meaningful whole'. But I would suggest that notes and rhythms are what any composer uses as their toolbox. It is rather what feeds our imagination, soul and mind which makes MacMillan's music live on a different plane from others, and that is what so often viscerally connects us with the composer's music.

In this survey the vast majority of the works I will describe have religious texts or subtexts. We must remember that a true believer is joyful in his or her faith. Bach, writing for funerals, wrote more semiquavers per square inch out of the sheer

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hurry to send the deceased off to a better life than this earthly one. Therefore, for those who relate religiously with sentimental musical meanderings (a possible response to the recent 'spiritual minimalist' movement) prepare to be converted to a music which, as that CBSO programme stated, is 'urgent' and 'burning to communicate'.

There is a swathe of shorter, unaccompanied music from which almost any choir will find a number of works to suit its current standard, works with organ and other accompanied works, leading to a section of larger-scale works with orchestra which includes the *Stabat Mater*, *St. Luke Passion*, the remarkable fifth symphony *Le grand inconnu*, and right up to date with the *Christmas Oratorio* premiered in January 2021.

MacMillan stated that 'beauty is at the heart of our Christian faith', and beauty is reflected everywhere in these works. It is not, however, a pale beauty which shies away from the grit and grumble of life, nor the impaling of the great social issues of our day on the spear of political correctness. MacMillan is an outspoken individual for all that his knighthood, conferred in 2015, might suggest him to be an establishment figure. Thus, there is truth in his beauty which may at times be uncomfortable in its directness but which is always clothed in the humanity which MacMillan demonstrates at every turn.

Paul Spicer, November 2021

Paul Spicer is a choral specialist, working as conductor, composer and producer for radio and recordings. He was one of the first conductors to design a postgraduate degree in Choral Conducting, initially at the Royal College of Music and, soon afterwards, at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. He was the founder/director of the influential Finzi Singers and, more recently, conductor of the Chamber Choir at RBC, Birmingham Bach Choir, and has been a regular guest conductor with the BBC Singers. He leads choral workshops, singing and conducting courses throughout the UK and abroad, notably with his English Choral Experience foundation.

Note: The level of difficulty given to each work is on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being the easiest and 5 the most complex.

In assessing the level of difficulty I have not only taken into account the challenges (or otherwise) facing the choir from the notes on the page but also, and especially with the choral/orchestral works, the scale of the undertaking overall, and the level of difficulty of the choral parts which sometimes may not in themselves be so challenging, but may be made more so by their context.

Unaccompanied Choral Works

After Virtue (2006) 5'
for SSAATTBB choir a cappella
Text taken from the final paragraph (chapter 18) of the book *After Virtue*, by Alasdair MacIntyre (E)
Premiere: 18 March 2007 Oslo
Oslo Soloists Choir / Grete Pedersen

Level 4

This short, powerful work was commissioned by the Oslo International Church Music Festival in 2007. This is a remarkable setting of an unlikely text by Alasdair MacIntyre (b 1929) in which the current 'dark ages' are compared with those of the dark ages following the collapse of the Roman Empire. The existence of good people who achieved 'the moral life could be sustained' is compared with similar activities today leading to the conclusion that there is therefore 'hope'. What we are waiting for is a 'very different Saint Benedict'.

This piece has the MacMillan 'wow' factor. It is not easy, but neither is it beyond the reach of a hardworking ordinary choir. His political views, often enshrined in his choral music, are as expressive and powerful as his religious views and this piece will undoubtedly fire up the imaginations of choral directors and singers alike. The intensely rhythmic nature of the setting of this prose, the imaginative humming colours with closed and open signals as the crescendos and diminuendos bite, the ferocity of expression, the impetus given by streams of moving quavers hummed above the pounding text, and the wholly unexpected and mesmerizingly beautiful utterances of 'Saint Benedict' with which the piece ends, all of this adds up to a quite remarkable tour de force.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Alleluia (2013) 10'
for SSSSAAAATTTTBB(B) chorus a cappella
Text: (L)
Premiere: 18 March 2007 Eugene
Berwick Chorus of the Oregon Bach Festival / Matthew Halls

Level 5

This remarkable work was commissioned by the Oregon Bach Festival to celebrate Helmuth Rilling's 80th birthday in 2013



James MacMillan in Ayrshire, 2017

and his final season as conductor of the festival. It is scored for a large choir of 4 soprano, 4 altos, 4 tenor and 2 bass parts. MacMillan bases the work on the chorale, Herzlich tut mich verlangen, used several times in the St Matthew Passion (including, for instance, the Passion chorale immediately following Jesus's death). We hear it in a fragmented version, hummed, at the start while upper voices weave a mellifluous texture above. There are some extraordinary effects such as the descending phrases in semitones where there are hints of Schoenberg's Friede auf Erden and even of gentle blues. Then, eventually, the word 'Alleluia' is sung openly by the basses using a chant-like figure with some familiar MacMillan ornamentation. The piece builds up through powerful contrapuntal writing, using double choir effects and wide pitch range, to a searingly emotional climax which is quite breathtaking. The start of the final section, again in double choir formation, sees long notes in one group with punctuating outbursts in rhythmic patterns from the other group. Everyone joins together homophonically, briefly, before a firework display of demi-semiquavers (32nds) leads to a reprise of the gentle opening with the initial rising fourth of the chorale ending the piece reminding us of the inspiration both of Bach and of Rilling's inspired Bach interpretations.

This is a work for expert choirs, and at a thirteen minute duration, is a tour de force of a cappella singing over a large timespan. As always, choirs need to be able to respond to the demands of colour and texture demanded by the composer which bring the music alive. It is notable that this work uses only one word (besides humming), and it is a testament to MacMillan's imagination that interest is not only maintained but positively demanded throughout. This is an outstanding work which should be widely used by choirs equal to its demands and would obviously be effectively programmed with Bach motets.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Alpha and Omega (2011) 7'

for SATB choir a cappella

Text: Revelation 21: 1-6a (E)

Premiere: 4 June 2011 Chicago

Rockefeller Chapel Choir and Chicago University Motet Choir / James Kallembach

Level 4

This profoundly moving work looks more straightforward on paper than it is to perform. There is much division of parts: sopranos in three and all others in two parts. MacMillan sets those well-known verses from Revelation 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth'. Anyone used to Edgar Bainton's yearning, lyrical setting will be refreshed by MacMillan's fundamentally different approach. Here he harks back to the sound world of the second movement of his Seven Last Words from the Cross ('Woman, behold thy son!'). The block chord walls of sound in that movement have a sense of apparent angst which seems far removed from the 'Joyful' direction MacMillan gives this later work. However, in Jesus' impassioned cry to his mother there is also a cry of joy in the completion of his earthly mission and his being taken up into heaven, despite the deeply degrading manner of his execution. The massive block chords which start Alpha and Omega can be viewed as MacMillan's cri de coeur in a godless age, his own determination to stand up and be counted for his faith.

The block chords continue for nearly half the motet. At the words 'And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying...', he introduces a new quick-fire rising scale figure for the upper voices gathering momentum to the point where the men take over ('Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man'). The ending returns to the block chords of the opening.

The challenges in this work are not only having the confidence to sing these chords strongly, but to sing them beautifully blended and balanced and with real passion. The central quick-fire scales also need to be confident, accurate and managed within MacMillan's dynamic directions. Later, there are some wonderful chord progressions, but these will present some tuning problems to the less experienced choirs. Hard work and dedication will bear fruit and the end result will be truly worth the effort.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them** (2009) 5'

for triple-SATB choir a cappella

Text: Luke 2: 9-14 (E)

Premiere: 19 December 2009 Birmingham

Ex Cathedra / Jeffrey Skidmore

Level 5

This piece inhabits a wonderfully imaginative sound-world. It was commissioned by Ex Cathedra, the Birmingham-based chamber choir conducted by Jeffrey Skidmore for its 40th anniversary. The choir had also commissioned Alex Roth for a 40-part motet to partner the famous Tallis work. MacMillan, too, therefore wrote a multi-part work which at one point splits into seventeen parts. There are basically three choirs of SATB and for most of the motet choir three has two soprano parts (on separate staves). Divisi in other parts come and go. This is therefore a very challenging work and includes substantial humming passages which are always problematical for blend and balance against the other parts singing words. The textures created, however, are magical and the piece grows in volume and intensity to the beginning of the final section after a general pause and subsides to a quiet ending.

For MacMillan aficionados the music contains very familiar ingredients which will undoubtedly speed up the learning

process. For others, the chant-like ornamental melodies need care and a balance between accuracy of detail and a sense of musical line. The ornaments, grace notes and quick turns should never impede the flow of melody.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Ave Maris Stella** (2011) 3'

for SATB a cappella

Text: Vesper hymn (L)

Premiere: 3 November 2011 Truro

Truro Cathedral Choir / Christopher Gray

Level 1

A simple chordal setting of these lovely words in praise of the Virgin Mary. MacMillan gives very helpful and evocative tips about colours like 'warm' and 'misterioso' at key points. At the end the texture is enriched by the soprano line taking off on a soaring descant up to a top A before subsiding to a quiet D major chord for the end.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Be who God meant you to be** (2019) 6'

for SATB(B) chorus a cappella, with optional soprano solo

Text: St Catherine of Siena (1347-80) (E)

Premiere: 30 June 2022 London

BBC Singers

Level 1

This short motet was commissioned by St Dominic's Sixth Form College, Harrow-on-the-Hill celebrating their 40th anniversary. MacMillan chose a text by St Catherine of Siena (1347-80) which is entirely appropriate to young people about to be let loose on the world to fulfill their potential: 'Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire'. But where another composer might have made this a fanfare MacMillan writes with the gentleness of sincerity. The music is very straightforward and in wanting a solo soprano line he outlines all the ways this can be achieved: soloist, group of sopranos, or all the sopranos if the altos can be split into two. The choir repeats the mantra text above throughout the motet, while the soprano solo line is given the prayer which follows. Only at the very end do they all join together in the words 'Jesus, love, Jesus, love' and another lovely E major ending, like I am your mother.

> [More Info](#)**Behold, you are beautiful, my love** (2018) 4'

for SSAATBB a cappella

Text: The Song of Solomon, chapter 4, Revised Standard Version, Catholic edition (E)

Premiere: 18 August 2018 Glasgow

Strathclyde University Chamber Choir / Alan Tavener

Level 1

This is another imaginative offering from MacMillan who wrote it for the wedding of his son Aidan to his Albanian wife, Kleida. This anthem sets words from the Song of Solomon and was intended for the Offertory in the marriage service. It is scored for SSAATBB with soprano solo. The repeated note opening (Behold, you are beautiful, my love) emphasizes the singular, steadfast love of the couple and this goes on over the simple chordal choral entry. Eventually, the spell has to break, and passion asserts itself, winding down to those opening repeated notes being taken over by the basses in octaves (thus, the man and the woman have the 'steadfast' repeated notes). The soprano soloist takes them back, hands them to the tutti sopranos, and the piece winds its way to another of MacMillan's magical endings (he is so good at endings).

An essentially simple piece which has a programming existence far beyond the wedding ceremony and will suit choirs of even fairly modest attainment.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Benedicimus Deum Caeli** (2010) 3'

We bless the God of heaven

(The Strathclyde Motets)

Communion motet for Trinity Sunday, for SSATTB a cappella

Text: Tobias 12: 6 (Roman Breviary) (L)

Premiere: 30 May 2010 St Columba's Maryhill, Glasgow

Strathclyde University Chamber Choir / Alan Tavener

Level 2

This is a very effective and beautiful short motet in a chorale-like style with divided sopranos and tenors adding richness to the texture. The text is a simple one of praise and the setting responds with a lovely linear feel but without any of the contrapuntal complexity which MacMillan often uses.

The simple challenges here are of textural balance and voice blend to achieve the richness of vocal sound the music demands.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Benedictus Deus** (2009) 5'

for mixed voices a cappella

Text: Antiphon from a 15th century Canterbury pontifical (at the installation of an Archbishop) (L)

Premiere: 21 May 2009 Westminster Cathedral

Westminster Cathedral Choir / Martin Baker

Level 3-4

A hugely impressive motet written for the enthronement of the Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols. Another extensively contrapuntal work this time using MacMillan's fingerprint ornamental melodic line. There is a wonderfully contrasting homophonic (chordal) section at the point in the text which reads: 'Blessed be he who has appointed you to rule on the Archbishop's throne'. This comes complete with 'coronation mode' harmony and a Monteverdi-like sweep upwards at the end of the phrase before the ornamental lines resume. MacMillan writes an extraordinary repeated and ever falling series of phrases around the 'long years in this life' – so much so that one wonders if there is an element of humour in his treatment of the text. Whatever the real motivation, it is a genuine contrast to the generally high tessitura of the earlier music.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Blow the trumpet in the new moon** (2016) 5'

for SSSSAAAATTBB a cappella

Text: Ps 81: 1-4 (Geneva Bible) (English, 16th century)

Premiere: 29 June 2017 London

The Bach Choir / David Hill

Level 4

This work was a commission from The Bach Choir in celebration of their 140th anniversary in 2017. MacMillan uses words well-known in their setting by William Byrd from Psalm 81; 'Sing joyfully unto God our strength'. MacMillan writes of it that it 'evokes musical instruments and especially the trumpet. I used to be a trumpeter myself and I try here to fuse the sound of the brassy fanfare into a purely choral sound, unaccompanied and full of extrovert and bold figures and passagework'.

The motet is written for one of the most expert amateur choirs in the UK and MacMillan has certainly taken advantage of their expertise and virtuosity – especially in the singing of fast moving passagework – to create an explosion of joyful celebration. Rather as in his Alleluia, the piece is all about effect, using different textures, counterpoint, chordal outbursts, and the musical inspiration taken from text to produce what can only be described as a riot of sound at points. It divides into eleven parts occasionally with four soprano and four alto parts making the point that this motet is not intended for a small choir.

This is a challenging piece, but for those up to that challenge it will be an exercise in expressing pure, unalloyed joy!

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Bring us, O Lord God** (2009) 6'

for SATB choir a cappella

Text: John Donne (E)

Premiere: 12 May 2012 St Peter's Church, Eaton Square, London

Choir of the 21st Century / Howard Williams

Level 4

William Harris's setting of these wonderful words, together with his extraordinary anthem Faire is the Heaven, represent a pinnacle of 20th century a cappella writing. It is a tribute to James MacMillan's strength of musical personality that he can so completely put aside any remnant of aural reminiscence in his own setting. This is a deeply fervent and moving representation of Donne's powerful words. There is something of the musical mantra which forms the basis of the first movement of The Seven Last Words from the Cross in the opening musical gesture of this motet. Both are falling cadential figures and the effect in both cases is mesmerizing. In this work the figure is used at key moments in different keys and pitches and, ultimately fragmented, in the series of Amens which bring us back to the original key of E flat but in a magical and unexpected progression.

This setting is far from easy and was written for the Schola Cantorum of Oxford, an expert chamber choir of outstanding singers. In writing to their level MacMillan has written a work which will really only be performable by expert amateurs and professional choirs. The tuning is difficult and notes at key points are hard to find for the less experienced singer. This is a work, therefore, which should always be given the most serious treatment and preparation.

Having outlined how MacMillan avoids any reflection of Harris's setting, there is no doubt that he is writing within the continuing English choral tradition at its best. He was a composition student of Kenneth Leighton, one of the finest of the 20th century's choral contrapuntists, and it shows.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

The Canticle of Zachariah (2007) 3'

(The Strathclyde Motets)

for SATB choir a cappella

Text: Luke 1: 68-79 (E)

Premiere: 2 December 2007 St Columba's Maryhill, Glasgow Strathclyde University Chamber Choir

Level 1

The effect of The Canticle of Zachariah is that of harmonized chant. The motet needs that kind of rhythmic freedom which is underlined by the composer who writes constantly shifting bar lengths. As often with MacMillan's choral music there is a single line of melody with words (in the bass part here) accompanied by the ebb and flow of the other voices singing in support. The Doxology is unusually set to unison chant for all voices.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Cecilia Virgo** (2012) 5'

for double SATB chorus a cappella

Text: (L)

Premiere: 24 November 2012 Surrey

Choir of Royal Holloway, University of London / Rupert Gough

Level 4

This striking motet for double SATB chorus was commissioned by the choir of Royal Holloway (University of London) for their annual St Cecilia's Day concert in 2012. St Cecilia is the Patron Saint of Musicians and the text (Anon, medieval in Latin) asks, at its central point, that 'you may be worthy of turning the mourning of the world into the glory of paradise'. The setting is made particularly arresting by the two choirs singing in the directly opposing keys of C and D major. It is an extraordinary effect and in its moments of resolution has the effect of a choir singing in a highly reverberant acoustic where the texture builds exponentially allowing only the last sounding chord to settle in the building. It is a joyful, celebratory motet with fanfares and exuberant semiquaver runs; long-held quiet chords punctuated by dramatic gestures from the other choir, and beautifully linear eight-part counterpoint. The final 'Sancta Cecilia, ora pro nobis' ('St. Cecilia, pray for us') has the confident certainty of the truly faithful.

The motet also needs a choir of some confident certainty. The notes are not especially difficult, and rehearsing the choirs separately will show how each choir's lines are both melodic, and sit within a recognizable chordal or melodic sequence. It is the polychoral effects in directly opposing keys which makes the motet challenging and choirs need to hold their nerve when being pulled like magnetic north to the key of the other choir. But the motet is eminently manageable by good amateur choirs who should relish the challenge and enjoy its dramatic results.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**A Child's Prayer** (1996) 5'

for SATB choir a cappella, with two treble/soprano solos

Dedicated to the dead of the Dunblane tragedy, March 1996

Traditional text, remembered by composer from childhood (E)

Premiere: 4 July 1996 Westminster Abbey, London

Choir of Westminster Abbey / Martin Neary

Level 2

This is an extremely touching tribute piece composed following the horrific slaughter of primary school children at Dunblane in Scotland. The words (traditional) are direct in their simplicity and MacMillan includes an alternative final line for more general use than the Communion service to which the original text refers.

The lament-like chords of the first section with low bass notes underpinning them seem to carry the weight of the heart's sorrow. Gradually the high-voiced duet of children's voices takes off and soars and builds to a climax before winding down to a quiet ending for the two soloists alone.

As a gentle introduction to the distinctive world of MacMillan's music this is a good starting point for most choirs (basses need low Es).

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Children are a heritage of the Lord** (2011) 3'

for SSATB a cappella

Text: Psalm 127 (King James version) (E)

Premiere: 11 September 2011 Hatfield House, Hertfordshire

The Sixteen / Harry Christophers

Level 2

This is a fairly straightforward setting of verses from Psalm 127 about the blessing of children, written for the Marquess and Marchioness of Salisbury to mark the 400th anniversary of Hatfield House, where the issue of the succession through the generations is obviously of great significance.

MacMillan here writes an essentially chordal setting with double sopranos giving an added richness to the texture. When the text reaches the words 'Lo, children are a heritage of the Lord' the soprano parts diverge and the upper line goes its own way with a wholly separate part which feels ornamental over the top of a continuing chorale-like progression for the rest of the choir. The importance of this separate part is taken all the way to the end where it finishes alone. The final nine bars require some agility from these sopranos – agility as a reflection perhaps of the energy of youth.

The challenges in the work are the usual ones of blend and balance in the chordal parts, and the clarity, accuracy and sufficient technique to deal with the upper soprano line's leaps and bounds.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Christus Vincit** (1994) 6'

for double choir (SSAATTBB) a cappella, with treble/soprano solo

Text from the Worcester Acclamations (tenth century) (L)

Premiere: 23 November 1994 St Paul's Cathedral, London

Joint choirs of Westminster Abbey, Westminster Cathedral and St Paul's Cathedral / John Scott

Level 3

This imaginative short anthem makes creative use of double choir forces. It starts from the sopranos and works its way to the basses in plainsong-like phrases that are punctuated by moments of silence – or time for a period of reverberation to subside. It contrasts counterpoint with moments of chordal simplicity that are beguilingly beautiful. MacMillan's love of the vocal cadenza with its melismatic freedom and characteristic ornamentation is here given to a soprano (or treble) solo. The final Alleluias are wonderfully rich, linearly interacting between the voices. This gives way to a soprano solo who ends the anthem on a top B (piano!).

Though posing some challenges, this anthem is worth the necessary effort put into the learning process. As with all MacMillan's choral music, it will get under the skin of those performing it.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**The Culham Motets** (2015) 21'

for chorus a cappella

Text: liturgical (E)

Premiere: 9 December 2015 Culham

Culham Chapel Trust

Level 4-5

Five motets scored for SATB with soprano and tenor solos form this remarkable work which, once again, show how we might recognize traits from previous works of MacMillan but find the approach to be always fresh and new.

The chapel of Christ the Redeemer at Culham Court near Henley-on-Thames is a beautiful, award-winning new Catholic chapel designed by Craig Hamilton architects and built in 2010. It is inspired by Greek temple outlines and is an outstanding example of contemporary architecture perfectly situated and inspiring to those visiting and using it for worship. MacMillan responds to the lofty ideals of the architects with a series of motets which have chant at their heart, are deeply involving in their musical text setting, and which carry the listener on a powerful journey.

Lift High the Ancient Portals with which the work begins has a strongly emotive refrain (with which it starts) interspersed by MacMillan's ornamented form of chant sung by a tenor and two soprano soloists. The first part of I saw water flowing has completely free moving upper voice parts given 'chant' phrases to be sung in each singer's own time with tenors and basses later punctuating this haze of sound with the motet's text. Everyone joins together in an extended and beautiful Alleluia before the chanting resumes. See the place where God lives has a strong chorale-like homophonic opening reminiscent of the choral outbursts in Seven Last Words. In the fifth motet, the drama is in the silences between phrases as its opening and the following misterioso eight-part setting which moves into different textures as the music moves to its moving ending at which we marvel at the journey we have undertaken through these original pieces.

This is not a work for the faint-hearted, and while the notes may not in themselves be particularly challenging the confidence required to sing the chant sections so that the listener is not aware of the skill required to achieve the necessary level of performance is likely only to be found amongst really experienced or professional singers. The free chanting in the second motet referred to above will also be something which some choirs may find daunting and not easy to blend and balance. There are also some extremes of pitch needing a particular type of high soprano (top A for nine beats, and top B for ten beats) in the fourth motet.

There are many small expert choral groups working today around the world who will positively relish the demands of this work and whether it is for a liturgical situation or a concert performance these motets will not only give great pleasure to the listener but real joy to the singers.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Cum vidisset Jesus** (2012) 7'

for chorus a cappella

Text: Antiphon on the Feast of the Seven Dolours of the Blessed Virgin Mary (L)

Premiere: 15 September 2012 Notre Dame, Indiana

Notre Dame Festival Chorus / Carmen-Helena Téllez

Level 2

This motet was commissioned by Sacred Music at Notre Dame (university) in 2012 to honour the Sisters of the Holy Cross at Notre Dame in the USA and premiered by the Notre Dame Festival Chorus. MacMillan took as his text (in Latin) the

Antiphon on the Feast of the Seven Dolours of the Blessed Virgin Mary in which Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing by the cross and said 'Woman, behold your son' and to the disciple, 'Behold your mother'.

It is scored for four sopranos and two alto, tenor and bass parts – ten parts in all. It is an extremely touching motet in which the altos sing the chant melody almost throughout the entire work and around them the other parts weave a tapestry of beautifully linear writing. As so often in MacMillan's work there is a mixture of humming and open singing to words as well as a range of textures which add to the aural variety. The section in which Jesus tells his mother to look at him is emotionally very powerful. A constantly repeated figure for sopranos, tenors and basses surrounds the ongoing chant from the altos which eventually breaks down into a contrapuntal presentation of his beloved disciple to his mother, and the motet ends dramatically as Jesus presents him to his mother as her new son.

This motet is particularly suitable for Passiontide and will be perfectly accessible to many choirs. Whilst, like most of MacMillan's choral music, there are more challenging elements (the top soprano part having to hum a long, quiet top G, for instance) this work will be well within the grasp of most choirs of reasonable attainment and will be richly enjoyed.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Data est mihi omnis potestas** (2007) 4'

It has been given to me

(The Strathclyde Motets)

Communion motet for Ascension Day, for SATB choir a cappella

Text: Roman Breviary, Matthew 28: 18,19 (L)

Premiere: 14 May 2007 St Columba's Maryhill, Glasgow Strathclyde University Chamber Choir / Alan Tavener

Level 2

Data est mihi omnis potestas is a richly scored, uplifting, celebratory motet for one of the major feast days of the Christian year. The opening rising interval (a 9th in the first soprano and first tenor, and 7ths and 5ths in the other parts) launches the piece in a heavenward trajectory and the double choir scoring gives it a surround-sound blaze of musical light. It creates a memorable impression.

A second section gives the ATB an accompanying role whilst the sopranos sing Monteverdi-like cadenza passages in falling thirds. Roles are reversed at the end with these passages being given to the T/Bs. A final outburst of three sky-rocketing Alleluias ends the motet. Slightly more challenging than the other motets in the Strathclyde Motets series but still very straightforward in terms of MacMillan's output. Issues of blend and balance highlighted by the double choir scoring will probably use more rehearsal time than note-learning.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Divo Aloysio Sacrum (1991) 7'

for SATTB choir and optional organ accompaniment
Text from a church inscription (E/L)
Dedicated to Dan Divers and the Choir of Saint Aloysius' Church, Garnethill, Glasgow
Premiere: 27 August 1993 St Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh
Royal Scottish National Orchestra Chorus / Christopher Bell

Level 1

A highly effective and extremely straightforward setting of a text from an inscription over the door into a Jesuit church in Glasgow. The piece begins with a forceful SATB prayer in English (perhaps inspired by the stone on which the inscription was carved) calling for Saint Aloysius to 'pray for us'. The second, more reflective section (with tenors divided but in the same rhythm), repeats the prayer in Latin, and the final section is an exact repeat of the first. In its very simplicity lies its spiritual directness and success. The optional organ accompaniment merely doubles the vocal parts if pitch needs to be supported.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Dominus dabit benignitatem (2006) 5'

The Lord will bestow his loving kindness
(The Strathclyde Motets)
Communion motet for the 1st Sunday in Advent, for SATB choir a cappella
Text: Roman Breviary, Psalm 84: 13 (L)
Premiere: 3 December 2006 St Columba's Maryhill, Glasgow
Strathclyde University Chamber Choir / Alan Tavener

Level 2

Dominus dabit benignitatem is a hugely impressive motet starting from the simplest of means and often ending phrases with easily managed clusters. As with all these motets a solo line often predominates which is echoed in other parts. The final Amens are as beautiful as they are unexpected (Basses need a low E flat).

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Domus infelix est (2013) 6'

for SATB chorus and violin
Text: (L)
Premiere: 5 October 2014 Cumnock
Nicola Benedetti / The Sixteen

Level 1-2

This lovely piece was written for the first Cumnock Tryst (James MacMillan's own festival at Cumnock in East Ayrshire, Scotland, in 2014. It is scored for SATB choir (no divisions) and solo violin. From its Latin title it might be assumed that this was another religious motet but in fact it is a setting of a Jacobite folksong attributed to the 18th century poet, William Mickle, writing of the general sense of despair at the flight of Bonnie Prince Charlie following the disastrous battle of Culloden.

The choral parts of this song are straightforward, chordal and, in essence, hymn-like. The violin solo part needs the services of a skilled violinist whose ability to produce beautiful false harmonics for the first twenty bars and an increasingly important role (via a beguiling quasi bagpipe jig) leading to a solo 'cadenza' will need to be taken into account. The extraordinary (and imaginative) ending sees the violinist given the task of making the special effect of 'little glissandi, like a dove cooing', as MacMillan directs, and finally taking off 'into the stratosphere'. A truly magical effect.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Emitte lucem tuam (2014) 4'

motet for SSAATTBB a cappella
Text: Psalm 43 & Gloria Patri (L)
Premiere: 19 September 2014 London
Choir of Cardinal Vaughan School

Level 3-4

The Schola Cantorum of Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School in London is a remarkable choral group by the standards of any school and this motet was commissioned to mark the school's centenary in 2014 and dedicated to the choir's director, Scott Price. They had taken part in MacMillan's St Luke Passion, so he knew the standard of the group for which he was writing.

MacMillan chose words from Psalm 42 (in Latin) which, in Edward Tamberling's translation, begin 'Send out your light and your truth; these themselves led me forth, and they brought me to your holy mountain and to your holy place'. The scoring is for up to eight voice parts and is an inspired setting of these words starting with three repetitions of the word 'Emitte' almost as an imperative. As so often in MacMillan's choral works there is a heady mix of beautiful linear counterpoint and powerful chordal outbursts. One such here is at the words 'Et introibo ad altare Dei, qui laetificat juvenum meam'. The translation of which reads 'And I will come to the altar of God who gives delight to my youthfulness' – surely an appropriate sentiment for a school choir.

This motet has some issues which will challenge choirs, perhaps notably textural clusters in which balance between parts, and the courage to hold notes so close to others will require confidence and rehearsal. But this is a heartfelt work which many choirs will enjoy programming.

> [More Info](#)

Factus est repente (2005) 2'

Suddenly, a sound came
(The Strathclyde Motets)
Communion motet for Pentecost, for SATB choir a cappella
Text: Roman Breviary, Acts 2: 2,4 (L)
Premiere: 15 May 2005 Strathclyde University Chaplaincy, Glasgow
Strathclyde University Chamber Choir / Alan Tavener

Level 2

The opening of Factus est repente is set up to sound like an outburst of bagpipe music with drone and highly decorated melody which is much in the style of the other motets in this series. The decorated melismatic writing which follows in other parts needs some careful handling. These moments of choral outburst are beautifully interspersed by more straightforward, gentle music, and the whole motet ends with a sublime 'alleluia'.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

...fiat mihi... (2007) 5'

for double choir (SSAATTBB) a cappella
Text: Stabat Mater (L) with additional text by the composer (E)
Premiere: 21 March 2008 Wells Cathedral
Bath Camerata / Nigel Perrin

Level 4

This work is related to the 7th movement (Jesus and his Mother) of MacMillan's St John Passion. He lifts the choral parts out of their original orchestral context to make a starkly moving unaccompanied lament. The piece is structured so that the altos and tenors have interlocking, rhythmically interesting lines whilst the sopranos and basses have longer lines which envelop these swirling motifs. It is not easy, but the

challenge is infinitely worthwhile for a disciplined and able choir. One of the challenges for the basses at one point is attempting to produce overtones in the harmonic series from a long pedal point. The final phrase 'your sacred head is wounded' quotes the first phrase of Bach's Passion chorale.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

For a thousand years (2019) 3'

for SSAATTBB a cappella
Text: Psalm 90: 4 (E)
Premiere: 10 October 2021 Cambridge
combined choirs of St Benet's Church and Corpus Christi College / Ralph Woodward

Level 2-3

The text of this motet from Psalm 90 was a perfect choice for the millennial celebrations of St Benet's Church in Cambridge in 2020. Set for unaccompanied SATB choir dividing at points into eight parts it is a moving and imaginative interpretation of these beautiful words where MacMillan emphasizes the very timelessness of 'a thousand years' which he repeats in an almost mantra-like way. He treats the word 'yesterday' similarly, and then 'when it is past' – and so on, so that the endless repetitions of ensuing generations seem to underline the simple steadfastness of God.

This is a fairly straightforward setting with the challenges being, as so often, the successful clustering of chords, but more, the interpretation which treats the many repetitions with an imaginative interpretation which draws us into MacMillan's own sound world and feeling for the imagery.

> [More Info](#)

The Gallant Weaver (1997) 7'

for SATB choir (with divisi) a cappella
Text by Robert Burns (Scots) Commissioned by the University of Paisley on the occasion of its centenary in 1997
Premiere: 14 April 1997 Paisley
Paisley Abbey Choir / George McPhee

Level 2

This ideal introduction to MacMillan's secular choral music is rich in Scottish flavour, appropriate to its Robert Burns text. Characteristic vocal elements are the ornamental inflections drawn from Scottish folk music and Gaelic Psalmody, and the overall mood is one of tranquility. Distinctive colourings of the voice parts are explored through triple divisions of the sopranos and double divisions in the other parts.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Give me Justice (2003) 3'

Introit for the 5th Sunday of Lent, for SATB choir a cappella
Text: Psalm 42 (43) (E-L)

Level 1

A straightforward refrain and verse structure with the refrain built on a pedal point C for the basses (the idea of the 'drone' is rarely far from MacMillan's writing in this style). The verses are beautifully free and set as chant. The moving away from the pedal point also gives them a harmonic freedom which is remarkable given the simplicity of the writing. The clarity of expression gives the words a real prominence. This would make a good starting point for a choir of limited attainment looking to broaden its repertoire.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

...here in hiding... (1993) 13'

Motet for mixed choir (ATTB) or four male voices with tenor solo
Words from 'Adoro te devote' by St Thomas Aquinas and from its English translation by Gerard Manley Hopkins (L/E)
Premiere: 10 August 1993 Stevenson Hall, Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, Glasgow
The Hilliard Ensemble

Level 5

This is one of MacMillan's most ambitious unaccompanied works. It is challenging, as always, but well within the grasp of a good choral group who have good ears, an ability to pitch slightly awkward intervals and to sing fast chromatic passages with the characteristic 'quick-turn' MacMillan ornamentation. The sheer scale of this motet makes it a major undertaking, especially if sung by solo voices.

The work has a medieval feel and sound, with the plainsong melody 'Adoro te devote' being woven into the texture unobtrusively. It is essentially simple in structure and is very atmospheric. There is a major cadenza for tenor solo some two thirds of the way through the work that ends with warmly expressive music and a fade-out which is highly effective.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

The Highgate Motet (2017) 5'

for SSAATTBB a cappella
Text: Private Preces, by Lancelot Andrewes (E)
Premiere: 13 May 2018 London
Choir of the Grosvenor Chapel / Richard Hobson

Level 2-3

This was a privately commissioned motet by Mrs Gina Goldhammer in loving memory of her husband and sets part of Private Preces by the 16th century poet Lancelot Andrewes. Set for unaccompanied choir with two soprano parts and divided basses towards the end, it starts in a deeply reflective way with short phrases leading to pauses followed by a bar of rest. This remains a feature of the progress of the first half of the motet. After the commendation ('Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit') Andrewes moves into a more extended prayer of thanksgiving and praise. MacMillan now allows his music to bubble up using versions of his familiar ornamentation which lead to an impassioned climax through repetitions of 'the lifting up' with heady rising scales to 'the evening sacrifice'. A strongly dedicatory "blessed are Thou" makes us sink to our knees with a quiet 'O Lord our God' with which the motet comes to its gentle conclusion with the first sopranos clinging quietly to their final F sharp alone.

A fairly straightforward work which will appeal widely and be within the reach of many choirs who ought to be moved by its gently dedicatory mood which, besides memorial services would suit any remembrance occasion as well as being a highly effective concert work.

> [More Info](#)

I Am Your Mother (2011) 4'

for SATB chorus a cappella

Text: Words of Our Lady of Guadalupe (E), Sancta Maria, virginum piissima (L)

Premiere: 17 September 2011 Oxford
Choir of Blackfriars / James MacMillan

Level 3

This beautiful, heartfelt motet was written for the ordination of a friend of MacMillan's in Oxford in 2011. Setting words of Our Lady of Guadalupe the work seeks to reassure the new ordinand of protection by his 'mother'. Underpinning the whole motet in this macaronic setting is long note chanting by the basses singing a 14th century antiphon from the Dominican Gradual for Vespers on the octave day of the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. One senses the affection in this music written as a gift for this special occasion. There is much here with which we are already familiar in other MacMillan choral pieces but that does not mean that the outcome is predictable. Far from it. It flows with a sense of natural progression, of happiness in a shared depth of faith and a memorable ending.

A straightforward piece which many choirs will easily master and would sit, perhaps with contrasting MacMillan pieces, in a concert programme or as an anthem in a liturgical setting.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**I will take you from the nations** (2014) 3'

for SSAATTBB chorus a cappella

Text: Ezekiel 36: 24-26, 28 (E)

Premiere: 8 June 2014 Oxford
Merton College Choir

Level 2-3

Merton College, Oxford commissioned a series of contemporary composers to write a Merton Choirbook in the shadow of the 15th century Eton Choirbook to celebrate the College's 750th anniversary in 2014. MacMillan's contribution was this motet for unaccompanied SATB with divisions to SSAATTBB. The text is from Ezekiel and is perhaps appropriate in the sense of students coming to study at the college from all over the world and having their minds honed so that 'I will...gather you from all the countries. A new heart I will give you and put a new spirit within you'.

The principal characteristic of this setting is short phrases of staccato chords separated by a bar's rest. In the third repetition of the opening words a moment of glue gives respite from these chordal progressions and thereafter there is a mix of staccato and legato in each phrase until we reach the climax of the piece at 'and put a new spirit within you'. The wonderful contrast of a section of flowing counterpoint leading away from a rising fourth in all voice parts shows the heart of flesh to be so much more beautiful a thing than the heavily discordant heart of stone preceding this it. The ending has a magical cadence.

This is not a difficult piece to master and its rehearsal issues will focus on ensemble in the staccato chords, tuning in some key passages and careful adherence to MacMillan's dynamic scheme.

> [More Info](#)**If ye love me** (2013) 5'

for SATB chorus a cappella

Text: John 14:15-17 (King James Version)

Premiere: 18 June 2018 Birmingham
Royal Birmingham Conservatoire Chamber Choir / Paul Spicer

Level 2

This short motet was commissioned by The Elders to mark the retirement of Desmond Tutu. The Elders is a group of international senior statesmen and women founded by Nelson Mandela in 2007 whose mission is to work together for peace and human rights. Commissioning a composer like MacMillan was a perfect 'fit' given his public record of support for these issues and his outspokenness on issues such as political repression, so vividly captured in a much earlier work, Cantos Sagrados (1990).

The text of this motet (well-known from Tallis's beautiful setting) is from St John which highlights the overriding need to abide by Jesus's commandments to receive the comfort and support of God. Perhaps the key phrase is 'Even the spirit of Truth whom the world cannot receive because it seeeth him not'. This is at the heart of the work of the Elders and, of course, of Archbishop Tutu himself.

The music is a beautifully straightforward setting in four parts which in its directness makes its message more powerful. It is almost hymn-like in its simplicity though is not as apparently simple as MacMillan's much-performed O Radiant Dawn. Whilst there is lovely movement of parts there is no imitative counterpoint. Perhaps the most telling moment is the fortissimo statement of 'keep my commandments' just before the end. It is as if MacMillan wants to take the sentiment out of 'love me' and remind us that Jesus really means 'if you believe in me you will keep my commandments'. He wants to make it an imperative.

A motet well within the reach of most choirs of modest attainment upwards.

> [More Info](#)**In splendoribus sanctorum** (2005) 8'

Amidst the splendours of the heavenly sanctuary

(The Strathclyde Motets)

Communion motet for Nativity Midnight Mass, for SATB choir and obbligato trumpet or organ

Text : Roman Breviary, Psalm 109: 3 (L)

Premiere: 24 December 2006 St Columba's Maryhill, Glasgow
St Columba's Church Choir

Level 1

In splendoribus sanctorum is a motet of pure simplicity written in short sections which are interspersed with trumpet (or organ) obbligato passages. As the piece progresses through a number of repetitions the trumpet uses its part more freely which creates a feeling of development and progression even though the choral parts remain unvaried. It is hugely effective writing and demonstrates the fact that simple means can often deliver the strongest message. Basses with an easily produced low F are needed.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Invocation** (2006) 6'

for double SATB choir a cappella

Text: Karol Wojtyła, trans Jerzy Peterkiewicz (E)

Premiere: 11 July 2006 Tewkesbury Abbey
Oriol Singers / Tim Morris

Level 3

This is beautifully written for absolute clarity of words and a reflection of their obvious power for the composer. It is richly scored for double SATB and begins recitative-like, hesitantly, with hummed 'accompaniment' to the words when altos introduce them. The double choir resource is used both for antiphonal drama and for its sonorous possibilities. This is a short, passionate work and MacMillan takes us on a far greater journey than its mere six minute duration would imply.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Lassie, wad ye loe me?** (2010) 4'

for mixed voices unaccompanied

Text: Anon (Scots)

Premiere: 8 May 2010 St John's Dunoon
Strathclyde University Chamber Choir / Alan Tavener

Level 2

This is a beautiful, moving setting of an anonymous Scots poem which really needs to be sung in dialect for best effect. MacMillan has written a folk-song-like melody which he gives to an optional soprano solo (it can be tutti) supported by vocal clusters or simply in harmony. While essentially set simply, there are many divisions of parts – the sopranos into four, and ATB into three parts each.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Laudi alla Vergine Maria** (2004) 9'

for SSAATTBB choir a cappella

Text: Dante (I)

Premiere: 6 October 2004 St Janskerk, Gouda
Netherlands Chamber Choir / Stephen Layton

Level 4

A dramatic, challenging, and ultimately beautiful unaccompanied choral work aimed at top level choirs (it was commissioned by the Netherlands Chamber Choir and Winchester Cathedral). A refrain begins the work and returns at key moments, reminiscent of the outbursts which characterise the second movement of MacMillan's extraordinary Seven Last Words from the Cross. For those who are familiar with MacMillan's choral writing there will be no surprises here. Solo voices taking highly decorated phrases, big contrasts, beautifully lyrical passages, richly scored divisi writing, and phrases to be sung freely and independently of other singers within a certain time frame, all characterise this work. The ending brings into focus another MacMillan fingerprint which he seems to be developing more recently, the unexpectedly beautiful cadential resolution which is a curiously British trait. This is an exciting and enormously worthwhile work for the high achievers amongst choirs.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Lux æterna** (2009) 4'

Eternal Light

(The Strathclyde Motets)

Communion motet for SATB unaccompanied

Text: from the Requiem Mass (L)

Premiere: 2 November 2008 St Columba's Maryhill, Glasgow
Strathclyde University Chamber Choir / Alan Tavener

Level 3

This is a prime example of MacMillan's outstanding contrapuntal writing. Not difficult – again writing for an average choir but writing a piece which when sung by the best can become positively luminous. The music is a seemingly unending flow of interacting lines which, at points, momentarily look over the shoulder at his familiar ornamental melodies – like a fleeting smile of recognition. The whole piece is built on a cantus firmus which the altos sing throughout and the other lines move in and around.

Beautiful timeless music which simply needs to be sung with sensitivity and musicality.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Màiri** (1994) 11'

for 16-part a cappella choir

Words by Evan Maccoll (tr. James MacMillan) (E)

Commissioned by the BBC for the 70th anniversary of the BBC Singers

Premiere: 19 May 1995 St John's Smith Square, London
BBC Singers / Bo Holten

Level 5

This beautiful unaccompanied work adapts the translated text of a Gaelic elegy by the 19th century poet Evan Maccoll. The words 'She has gone' dominate the piece (they begin each verse) and underline its sense of desolation. MacMillan stretches his vocal forces to their limits with basses droning pedal points as low as C sharp and sopranos being led up to top E flats which diminuendo! The piece ends with a piano top C sharp for sopranos. This is not a work for the faint-hearted, and yet, as always, there is so much here beyond these practical challenges. It is a beautiful, mesmerizing, atmospheric work which contrasts the stillness of slow-moving voices interspersed with bouts of frenetic activity generated by florid ornamentation. The composer points to 'pentatonic harmonies and a certain shaping of melodic line (which) suggests a perceptible influence of ancient Celtic music'. It is the almost atavistic nature of this music that draws one into its world and induces a kind of trance-like state. Excellent choirs with a sense of ambition and professional groups will want to explore this work. Having done so it will stay with them.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Miserere (2009) 10'

for mixed voices unaccompanied

Text: Psalm 51 vv 3-21 (L)

Premiere: 29 August 2009 Carolus-Borromeuskerk Antwerp
The Sixteen / Harry Christophers

Level 4

This is a big piece and intended for a high achieving group (the premiere was given by The Sixteen). The psalm MacMillan sets in Latin is the same as that set by Allegri which has become so popular: 'Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy great mercy'.

MacMillan's beautiful setting mirrors the words in all their variety and colour with great drama at one end and melting beauty at the other. He also has a section of free chant (in harmony) which divides the work in two and provides an extraordinary aural shift before bringing back the opening material in a different key and different voices but with the same 'desolate and cold' expression marking. The ending, coming out of more chant but this time with 'wistful' soprano, alto and bass solos seemingly ruminating on what has just been sung, is wonderfully effective, building to a huge slow climax and winding its way down again to a beautiful E major cadence.

The notes are not particularly difficult to master in this work, but the overall conception needs a sophisticated approach, expert handling of the chant sections, good soloists, choirs capable of divisi work with good blend and balance, and a real mastery of MacMillan's trademark melodic approach.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Missa Brevis (1977) 16'

Kyrie; Gloria; Sanctus; Agnus Dei; At the conclusion for SATB choir a cappella

Text: Latin Mass

Premiere (complete): 22 November 2007 Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh

Cappella Nova / Alan Tavener

Level 3

This short Mass setting was written when the composer was aged 17 and released for publication thirty years later in 2007. The style is imbued with the Renaissance and Baroque choral works that MacMillan was discovering with his school choir, as well as music by Britten and Kenneth Leighton with whom he started composition lessons around this time. The Kyrie seems to grow out of the world of the Byrd Four Part Mass, with beautifully interweaving parts creating that same sense of peaceful flow. The Gloria is slightly more challenging. More chordal in texture with Gabrieli-like antiphonal writing throwing the phrases between upper and lower voices. The harmony is quite rich, and reminds one strongly of Frank Martin's glorious double choir Mass.

The whole effect of this Mass is music to aid contemplation and devotion. In its simplicity of means it speaks very directly to the listener. Vocally, it is not as simple as all that. There are some hurdles to leap in terms of reading, but the real challenge is in achieving the music line which so much of this music demands. This beautiful work should be very widely used.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Missa Dunelmi (2010) 16'

Kyrie; Gloria; Sanctus/Benedictus; Agnus Dei

for SSAATTBB choir unaccompanied

Text: Liturgical (L)

Premiere: 27 February 2011 Durham Cathedral
Durham Cathedral Choir / James Lancelot

Level 4-5

This is a major, serious work with some very challenging music for a choir to master. Big cluster chords (the first chord of the Agnus Dei is a challenge in itself), complex progressions and familiar ornamental details in melodic lines which are still difficult to sing accurately, rhythmically and with good ensemble, blend and balance. Some of the music is 'borrowed' from earlier works. The Sanctus, for instance, uses material from one of the early Strathclyde Motets, Data est mihi omnium potestas to great effect. Such borrowing was commonplace in the Baroque period (Bach and Handel recycled constantly) and this seems to reinforce the feeling that MacMillan's music is a true continuation of a choral tradition which stems back centuries. He is inspired by Palestrina and Monteverdi, by Bach and Handel, even by Parry and Elgar in his vocal textures and interactions, and more recently by Britten, Tippett and his own teacher, Kenneth Leighton. There are many others of course, and not least those who have inspired his use of ornament. But the essential point here is that all these inspirational composers have given him the multi-faceted language to create his own personal style which is instantly recognizable.

The Missa Dunelmi is a complex, difficult work which will be approached by expert cathedral/collegiate choirs, professional ensembles and a few top-end amateur groups. It is important that MacMillan feels free to write music which is only attainable by such groups but, unlike many other contemporary composers, he has also written highly effective music for every other level of choir.

The Kyrie is essentially straightforward. The opening figure for divided sopranos works its way, slightly changed, gradually through the altos and then the tenors for Kyrie/Christe/Kyrie working towards a hummed cluster chord at the end which reduces and hangs in the air. The Gloria straight away introduces MacMillan's trademark ornamental chant-like melodic lines which form the basis of the whole movement. The texture moves between four and eight part choir always as SSAATTBB and not antiphonal double choir. The Sanctus opens with a quiet cluster like the resonance of a dying bell and builds into rich harmony. There is big-scale, strong and characterful setting of these words here with further ornamental writing. The Pleni is quietly reminiscent of (but not the same as) the opening, and the Hosanna bursts out with the remembered music from Data est mihi. The Benedictus follows as part of the movement – a soprano line in octaves over ATB in thick clusters, and its Hosanna recalls the previous one. The Agnus Dei is a very slow, reflective and beautiful movement with long spaces between phrases. This movement is difficult and has to sound easy. The Dona nobis pacem is ravishing and highly effective.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Mitte manum tuam (2006) 3'

Stretch forth your hand

(The Strathclyde Motets)

Communion motet for the 2nd Sunday of Easter, for SATB choir a cappella

Text: Roman Breviary, John 20: 27 (L)

Premiere: 23 April 2006 St Columba's Maryhill, Glasgow
Strathclyde University Chamber Choir / Alan Tavener

Level 2

MacMillan himself described the mood of these pieces as 'having a kind of suspended animation about them.' Mitte manum tuam has that timeless beauty which connects it with a distant musical past through the chant-like opening bass melody, the later floating triads, and the haunting alleluia. This is a special, atmospheric piece which will move singers and audiences alike.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Nemo te condemnavit (2005) 5'

for SATB choir a cappella

Text: Gospel according to St John, chapter 8, verses 10-11 (L)

Premiere: 18 November 2005 Woolsey Hall, Yale University
Yale Glee Club / Jeffrey Douma

Level 2

Written for the Yale Glee Club, the opening tenor and bass section is unusually based on the actual plainsong melody to which these words were sung. An extended soprano and alto duet frees the voices from any such straightjacket as they play on rising intervals and ornamental devices familiar from other MacMillan works. The plainsong returns with the lower voices. The piece then develops towards another sublimely peaceful end.

As with other such MacMillan works, the biggest challenge in this piece is getting the ornamental, quasi-improvisatory music together. The rhythms, whilst not difficult, will need real choral discipline so that all the voices in one part sound as one.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Nova! Nova! Ave fit ex Eva (2012) 5'

for SSA chorus a cappella

Text: 15th Century (E-L)

Premiere: 21 December 2012 Dundee
RSNO Junior Chorus / Christopher Bell

Level 3

This attractive carol for upper voices (SSA) sets a traditional English 15th century Christmas text about the Angel Gabriel visiting Mary to tell her that she is carrying Jesus. The wonderful artistry of the poem which sees Mary 'sore abashed lest she had done amiss' has Gabriel reassuring her and trying to explain when she claims 'I know not of a man's carnality'. All is then rejoicing.

MacMillan's setting was commissioned by the Hope Scott Trust (supporting music and the visual arts in Scotland) to celebrate its 40th anniversary in 2012. He follows the verse pattern of the poem with each verse starting in a similar, but by no means always the same, way but then developing into something different with each verse. This is a joyful and wonderfully imaginative carol which will be thoroughly enjoyed by choirs of children or adults.

The challenges are in the constantly changing meter which requires both a confident conductor as well as attentive singers. The notes are not difficult but the shifting moods of the verses need to be carefully realized (the carol is some six minutes in duration and needs this variety and colour). The

semiquavers in all parts at the end need serious work for clarity and accuracy.

This is a carol which would be an excellent foil to all the SATB material we are used to in Christmas concerts and carol services.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

O bone Jesu (2002) 10'

for SS (with occasional divisi a 3) AATTBB choir a cappella

Text identical to Robert Carver's 19-part motet of the same name (L)

Premiere: 10 October 2002 Southwark Cathedral, London
The Sixteen / Harry Christophers

Level 5

This reflective work has the challenging nature relished by professional choirs, but is without the extreme demands of a score like Mairi. The emphasis here is on textures. These are solo lines, duets and more developed contrapuntal textures interspersed by rich, quiet chordal phrases emphasizing the spiritually ecstatic nature of the text. MacMillan has an uncanny ability to extract the essence of words and translate this into musical terms that both clarify and amplify the text. Right from the start the lyrical lines in this work possess an ancient feel which summons memories of chant, of medieval secular music, of renaissance polyphony and other sources which well up through the music. This is a grateful score for singers and audiences alike and the composer's religious conviction adds a commanding weight to the work.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

O, chì, chì mi na mòrbheanna (2019) 3'

for vocal ensemble acappella 2CTen,T,2Ba,B

Text: trad. Gaelic

Premiere: 13 October 2019 Prishtina, Kosovo
Kings Singers

Level 3

Here is another Scottish song, like Domus infelix est, but with words here by John Cameron, borne out of Scottish struggles. In this case the 18th – 19th century Highland clearances where people were dispossessed in favour of providing extensive land for sheep pasture. Underlying it, however, was the political motivation by the English trying to destroy the powerful and militaristic Scottish clan system. So this song, in native Gaelic, is essentially a folksong in MacMillan's hands where the melody is handed around through the group with changing textures which make a powerfully emotional statement. His Cumnock Tryst festival aims to bring people together from all over Scotland (and beyond, of course) and these songs emphasise its purpose even in these contemporary times.

The song was commissioned by the King's Singers and is thus scored for two counter tenors, tenor and two basses but which, of course, can be sung by two mezzo sopranos, or a choir of different formation: SATBB, for instance. This is not a difficult piece to learn and many choirs will enjoy its haunting melody and MacMillan's skillful arrangement. Its difficulty level largely reflects some challenges with the Gaelic language.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

O dignissima Christi sponsa (2014) 5'
for vocal ensemble acappella 2CTen,T,2Ba,B
Text: Magnificat Antiphon (L)
Premiere: 18 June 2018 Birmingham
Royal Birmingham Conservatoire Chamber Choir / Paul Spicer

Level 3

The English Province of the Order of Preachers (the Dominicans) has a history stretching back 800 years and this motet was written to celebrate the anniversary milestone in 2016. As always MacMillan found a celebratory text in which 'the light of prophecy illumined you, apostolic zeal inflamed you...and the fire of divine love consumed you'. The motet opens with what becomes a powerful, rhetorical refrain. In between these statements comes a lengthy soprano solo (which can be taken by all sopranos) over a long supporting pedal from the rest of the choir. There are two big polyphonic sections which have intricate part writing using some of his familiar ornamental shapes. The second of these is a final Alleluia, the ending of which draws on the initial imitative point from the first polyphonic section. A nice drawing together of thematic strands.

This piece has some challenges but nothing which a choir of fair attainment cannot master with a run of rehearsals. Attention to detail, especially in the polyphonic sections, is crucial as they could easily become rather a blur of notes. So, articulation on semiquavers (16ths), and demi-semiquavers (32nds) as well as the characteristic triplet semiquaver figure which appears often in MacMillan's choral music. But care needs to be taken over the balance between that clarity and the need for balancing legato and phrase development where that is possible in the texture.

> [More Info](#)

O Radiant Dawn (2007) 3'
(The Strathclyde Motets)
Advent antiphon for 21 December, for SATB choir a cappella
Text: (E)
Premiere: 2 December 2007 St Columba's Maryhill, Glasgow
St Columba's Church Choir

Level 1

O Radiant Dawn is built from simple separated phrases, and is particularly effective because of its straightforward nature which delivers its message unambiguously. A beautiful, rocking Amen concludes this lovely piece. Another entry level piece which will make an effective communion motet or short concert item.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

O Virgo prudentissima (2017) 13'
for SATB chorus a cappella
Text: Poliziano (Angelo Ambrogini) (1454-1494) (L)
Premiere: 22 May 2018 Eton
The Sixteen / Harry Christophers

Level 4

Another large-scale unaccompanied motet (some 13 minutes) like the Alleluia but this time a Marian motet setting a text attributed to the 15th century poet Poliziano. Commissioned by the Genesis Foundation for The Sixteen this motet is extraordinarily effective but equally demanding – demanding even for such a highly professional group like The Sixteen. But we now have a plethora of professional choirs in the UK and, of course, there are many such in Europe and further afield. Any of these whose repertoire is broad and includes contemporary music should investigate this wonderful music which will repay rehearsal time in spades.

The motet is heavily divided with three soprano parts, four altos, four tenors and four basses with a soprano solo part, too. As so often there are some high hummed parts and elsewhere, free-flowing, individual senza misura sections for sopranos and altos creating what MacMillan describes as a 'heterophonic texture'. These are hummed too while the tenors and basses interject with powerful chordal material. There is a beautiful polyphonic section at 'Tu stella maris diceris' ('You are called the star of the sea') which flows like the water it relates to and reminds me of an equally beautiful polyphonic section in a much earlier motet The Song of the Lamb (2008). Carefully balanced parts are needed for the movement between voice parts where one takes over from another which should be a seamless transition.

This is undoubtedly one of MacMillan's finest achievements of recent years in this genre.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

One Equal Music (2016) 5'
for SATB chorus a cappella
Text: John Donne (1572-1631) (E)
Premiere: 21 May 2017 Cambridge
Choir of Selwyn College Cambridge

Level 3

One of the fascinating aspects of MacMillan's word setting is his wholly fresh approach to the setting of words which already have what might be considered an iconic setting. Sir William Harris's motet using these words ('Bring us, O Lord God') is so well-known in church music circles that it is difficult to divorce oneself from the familiarity of his outstanding double choir writing. And yet here we have an absolutely remarkable, inspired and entirely new approach to Donne's beautiful poetry. This is MacMillan's second setting of the same text, the earlier being Bring us, O Lord God dating from 2009.

The motet was commissioned by Professor John Morrill of Selwyn College, Cambridge in memory of his wife and in gratitude to his college. The words are highly appropriate for such a memorial and the work would be suitable for any kind of remembrance service.

On the face of it the music looks straightforward enough, and there is nothing in the notation to scare the average choir. It is scored for three sopranos, alto, tenor and bass with divisions in all lower voice parts. There are parts, too, for alto and soprano soloists. The challenges lie in realizing the composer's intentions for effective humming (some mouth closed and some mouth open) and the blend and balance to be achieved so that an 'other-worldly' soundscape is realized. A low bass part asks for a D below the staff, though MacMillan marks it 'if possible'. The final low D of the piece is not optional, however. The key to the successful performance is in everyone understanding the intention of this music – especially, perhaps, the silences, the short, fragmentary alto and soprano figures around bars 49-58 and the wonderful textural effects which bring the music to its close. The extraordinary effect of the eight-part 'ah-'mm' with cresc/dim backing a soprano solo shows just how vivid MacMillan's imagination is. The responsibility of the choir director and singers to realize this soundscape is paramount.

This is a wonderful motet which will be relished by many choirs.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Pascha nostrum immolatus est (2008) 3'
Our passover is sacrificed
(The Strathclyde Motets)
Communion motet for Easter Day, for SATB choir a cappella
Text : Liturgical (L)
Premiere: 23 March 2008 St Columba's Maryhill, Glasgow
Strathclyde University Chamber Choir / Alan Tavener

Level 2

Pascha nostrum immolatus est is a joyful, celebratory motet for one of the church's great Feasts. I sometimes wonder if James MacMillan has set the word 'alleluia' more than any other composer! Here, too, after the initial paeon of praise, floating alleluias pass between all parts in a kind of spiritual ecstasy. A solo soprano furthers the idea of hovering angels a little later and of a sense of improvisation over a static accompaniment. Beautiful, timeless music.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Qui meditabitur (2010) 6'
Those who meditate
(The Strathclyde Motets)
Communion antiphon for Ash Wednesday for SSATTBB
unaccompanied
Text: Psalm 1: 2b, 3b (L)
Premiere: 27 February 2010 St Mary's Cathedral Edinburgh
Cappella Nova / Alan Tavener

Level 2

This is a much bigger-scale motet than many of the other Strathclyde Motets. Like Lux aeterna it is built on a cantus firmus begun by the basses and continued for the last part of the motet by the altos. The tenors enter in the fourth bar with the imitative dotted figure which is used extensively. After the dotted rhythms there is a short passage of even notes which are picked up and developed as the piece progresses. The short extract from Psalm 1 says simply: 'He who meditates day and night on the law of the Lord shall bring forth his fruit in due season'. The ending grows around the continuing cantus firmus and has strongly repetitious chords ('in due season') which die away to a serene A major cadence.

The issues for the choir in this motet are the evenness of the bass and alto cantus firmus and its balance against the rest of the choir, and MacMillan's leggiero direction for the dotted rhythms which will be a challenge to some choirs. Be careful not to make the semiquaver (16th note) lumpy and always feel the forward direction of the phrase, being careful that this does not lead to speeding up and a resulting untidiness between parts singing the same rhythm.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

A Rumoured Seed (2013) 15'
for chorus a cappella
Text: Michael Symmons Roberts (E)
Premiere: 2 April 2014 Perth, UK
The Kings Singers

Level 3-4

This substantial (15 minute) work was commissioned by the King's Singers and premiered in Perth, Scotland, in April 2014. It sets a series of fascinating poems by Michael Symmons Roberts, a favourite collaborator of MacMillan's. These pieces are as one would expect when written for such an expert, polished group as the King's Singers and there is great variety within the set. The third movement, for instance, 'In the Blue Lobster Café backyard, the head chef, arms outstretched, bears what looks like a body,..' etc) is set with a jazzy 'do-be-do' accompaniment. In the second movement there is a section of free chanting on a single pitch which MacMillan says should have the effect of 'glossolalia' or 'speaking (singing) in tongues'. But there is little in these movements to frighten the reasonably ambitious group looking for a substantial concert piece which will appeal to audiences. It is entirely possible, too, for the top counter-tenor part to be taken by a soprano or a mezzo and the second counter-tenor part by a female alto opening the piece up to a much larger performance base than its original line-up might indicate. The bass part needs a singer who is comfortable with a low D and quite a lot of work in the region just below the staff.

Music from A Rumoured Seed is incorporated into MacMillan's cantata Quickening, in the 2018 version premiered with the King's Singers at the Edinburgh International Festival in the composer's 60th birthday year.

> [More Info](#)

Sedebit Dominus Rex (2005) 4'
The Lord will sit on his throne
(The Strathclyde Motets)
Communion motet for the feast of Christ the King, for SATB choir a cappella
Text: Roman Breviary, Psalm 28: 10b,11b (L-E)
Premiere: 20 November 2005 Strathclyde University
Chaplaincy
Strathclyde University Chamber Choir / Alan Tavener

Level 1

MacMillan's use of simple means in these Strathclyde Motets accentuates the atmospheres or moods he sets up. These in turn wonderfully highlight the words he is setting. In Sedebit Dominus Rex, a motet for a major Feast Day, the joy of the opening is achieved principally through the 'decorated' soprano line which, as so often in his music, harks back to the influence of ancient Celtic music. It is the marriage of ancient and modern in MacMillan's music which is part of what makes it so irresistible. The quite end before the da capo is simply magical and a choir master's energies are going to be focused much more on quality of sound than problems of note-learning.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)



The Short Service (2019) 7'
for SATB & optional organ
Text: English (Book of Common Prayer, 1662)
Premiere: 8 May 2019 York
Choir of York Minster / Robert Sharpe

Level 2

Commissioned by the Cathedral Organists' Association in 2019 in celebration of their centenary and premiered by the choir of York Minster under Robert Sharpe. It was Sharpe's idea to have a contemporary Short Service which could sit alongside the Tudor canon of Weelkes, Byrd etc and be sung on a Friday (which is the traditional unaccompanied Evensong day of the week) or any other day with either a complimentary or contrasting anthem. This simple setting is designed for any choir of reasonable attainment and may be accompanied by organ or left unaccompanied as primarily intended. There are no divisions and the only mildly challenging moment is the soprano/treble ornamented phrase at 'He hath filled the hungry with good things'. The Glorias are the same except for the more extended and repeated final Amens in the Nunc Dimittis. A fine example of MacMillan's ability to write at any level appropriate for its purpose and yet express himself without compromise.

In performance it is important to be particularly meticulous about the dynamics and the tempi which are quite detailed.

> [More Info](#)

Sicut Cervus (2017) 5'
for SATB double choir
Text: Psalm 42, verse 1 (E,L)
Premiere: 12 November 2017 Bristol
Exultate Singers

Level 4

This motet was commissioned in 2016 as a memorial to three members of the Nickson family and premiered by the Exultate Singers conducted by David Ogden. MacMillan chose another well-known text set in Latin by Palestrina and English by Herbert Howells: 'Like as the deer (hart) longs for the springs of flowing water, so longs my soul for you, O God'. His setting is for double choir where one choir sings the text in Latin and the other in English (translated by Susan Pontin). The beauty of this macaronic approach is the clarity it brings to the text as well as the completely different sounds of the words in each language which brings additional colour.

MacMillan's starting point is the 'flow' of the water. He creates an almost seamless flow of quavers (eighths) and some beautiful textural subtleties. Effective, too, is a section where the first choir repeats the word 'water' three times almost as if the parched soul is crying out for refreshment. Soon after this, 'ita desiderat (anima mea) – so longs my soul' has a powerfully passionate build up. The final pages, marked ecstatic, sees the choirs flinging demi-semiquaver (32nds) runs around before coming to an almost exhausted conclusion.

This is not an easy work to perform and will probably be best undertaken by high-achieving amateur choirs, small chamber choirs and, of course, professionals. It is a work which will live in the memory after it has been mastered and is eminently worth the hard work which may be needed to perfect it.

> [More Info](#)

So Deep (1992)
for SSAATTBB choir and optional oboe and viola solos
see *Choral works with piano, instruments or ensemble* on page 33

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Sonnet (2010) 3'
for 2-part upper voices or SS soli, unaccompanied
Text: Shakespeare Sonnet 116 (E)
Premiere: 5 June 2010 The Drummond Hotel Perthshire
Catherine and Clare MacMillan

Level 1

Written for the wedding of friend and first sung by the composer's daughters this effective short piece for upper voices is very straightforward providing that perfect fifths can be sung in tune!

Very bare-looking on the printed page, this song packs a far greater emotional punch than might at first be apparent. This is a perfect antidote to greater complexities elsewhere and would act as a beautifully contrasting concert item.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

St Patrick's Magnificat (2011) 5'
for SATB unaccompanied
Text: Liturgical (L)
Premiere: 31 May 2011 St Patrick's Church Soho, London
Choir of St Patrick's Church, Soho

Level 2

This work was commissioned for the re-opening of St. Patrick's Roman Catholic church in Soho, London in May 2011. It sets the Latin text of these familiar words. The work holds few terrors for a competent choir and displays all the familiar grace notes and ornamental melodic lines which MacMillan has made his own. It is an effective and economical setting which many choirs could programme as a concert item.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

The Strathclyde Motets
In writing the Strathclyde Motets MacMillan set out to create a series of communion motets of only moderate difficulty, which would be of real and lasting use for average church or concert choirs. Aware that much of his choral music to date could be too challenging for average use, these new motets provide a very welcome opportunity for almost any choir of reasonable attainment and ambition to sing some contemporary music of real value.

See individual titles:

Benedicimus Deum Caeli 5
The Canticle of Zachariah 6
Data est mihi omnis potestas 7
Dominus dabit benignitatem 8
Factus est repente 8
In splendoribus sanctorum 10
Lux aeterna 11
Mitte manum tuam 13
O Radiant Dawn 14
Os Mutorum 32
Pascha nostrum immolatus est 15
Qui meditabitur 15
Sedebit Dominus Rex 15
Videns Dominus 18

Success (2006) 2'
for SATB choir a cappella
Text: Bessie Stanley (E)

Level 1

This straightforward piece dedicated to Helen Millar on her 75th birthday was written as a tribute to a close friend of the composer. It is a text of appreciation of someone wonderful, intended to cross the generations. A list of attributes concludes "This is to have succeeded" which is repeated four times at the end starting fortissimo, reducing to piano and growing to the final fortissimo phrase. MacMillan is full of surprises. Who would have thought that a setting of these words would feature in his oeuvre? But on reflection, this is precisely what his faith and obvious humanity leads him to celebrate. The music here is easy, and so anyone can present this piece in honour of someone they love, respect or simply appreciate.

> [More Info](#)

Sun-Dogs (2006) 18'
for SATB choir a cappella (with multiple divisi)
Text: Michael Symmons Roberts 'Sun Dogs' (E); Latin from the Roman Missal; English trad.
Premiere: 6 August 2006 Auer Hall, Bloomington, Indiana
Indiana University Contemporary Vocal Ensemble / Carmen Téllez

Level 5

Sun-Dogs is a major concert work in five movements lasting some 18 minutes. It is certainly not for the faint-hearted and needs not only a choir of extensive resources but a conductor with confidence and ability. The singers are divided into a main choir and a chamber choir. There are multiple solos and a group of whistlers in the last two movements who have an important role (the effect feels similar to that in Britten's Spring Symphony at first). The music involves singing in free rhythm often within an overall pulse structure. In the 4th movement (a strongly effective and affecting movement), however, the free Latin chanting is continuous under a chamber choir singing harmonised chant and whistlers whistling metrically. The fade-out at the end of the work has to be carefully managed as some twelve soloists (MacMillan does not state an exact number) freely wind down using a familiar melismatic, ornamented figure, and the whistlers use an echo of the music they had sung in the previous movement.

MacMillan sets a remarkable and highly unusual text where feral 'sun' dogs become the unlikely metaphor for outcasts whose bread 'part chewed with soft saliva', and punctured orange, 'sweet spittle matting on the soft hair round its muzzle' become our 'manna' and 'nectar'. Another powerfully religious message made more powerful by its unlikely subject matter.

This is an inspired work well worth the effort of surmounting its challenges by a skilful and ambitious choir.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Tenebrae Responsories (2006) 20'
for SATB choir a cappella (divisi up to SSAATTBB)
Text: from the Roman Breviary (L)
Premiere: 4 April 2007 St. Andrews in the Square, Glasgow
Cappella Nova / Alan Tavener

Level 5

Written in 2006 for Cappella Nova (who have recorded the work, a number of the Strathclyde Motets and the Missa Brevis on the CD listed below). In three movements, all of which represent different challenges. This is certainly a work

for a professional choir, and one with a very secure sense of pitch. The first movement provides the ultimate challenge of multiple chromatic scales – often a nightmare for accurate tuning. But here is another work which is so deeply moving, so effective and affecting through a strong and committed sense of performance that these heights are beyond doubt worth scaling. MacMillan acknowledges a debt to the great Renaissance masters, Gesualdo and Victoria who set these texts. Gesualdo, in particular, is an obvious influence, as, curiously, is Wagner in the chromatic working out of the initial phrase in the first movement which returns at key points.

MacMillan loves his choral outbursts as we see in a number of his works, and both the second and third movements begin with three such declamatory figures. The third movement is also characterised by long pedal points.

There is a great deal of ornamentation which is a fundamental characteristic of his style and which needs singers of confidence to put across clearly. There are challenging new notes to find across silences in wholly different chords from previous ones. These are issues professionals are used to dealing with, and yet I would hope that there would be many outstanding amateur choirs out there who would try these wonderful pieces. Rehearsal over a longer period of time would add depth and substance to the understanding and interpretation of what are remarkable representations of textual imagery in music.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Think of how God loves you (2011) 3'
for SATB unaccompanied
Text: Baptismal song: 1 John 3: 1 from the Baptismal rite (E)
Premiere: 22 August 2010 St Columba's Maryhill, Glasgow
Choir of St Columba's Maryhill, Glasgow / James MacMillan

Level 1

Written for MacMillan's grand-daughter's baptism service. Very simple, beautifully effective and easily translatable into other liturgical and non-liturgical musical contexts.

> [More Info](#)

To My Successor (2002) 3'
for SATB choir a cappella
Text: George Herbert (E)
Premiere: 27 February 2003 Canterbury Cathedral
Choir of Canterbury Cathedral / David Flood

Level 2

Written for the enthronement of Rowan Williams as Archbishop of Canterbury in 2003. A straightforward, lyrical motet beginning with overlapping Alleluias, building to a passionate climax for the third repetition of 'be good to the poor' and ending with a single alto line of quietly fading Alleluias. Easily manageable by most choirs. The basses need to be able to sing warmly and quietly low Fs and Es at the beginning and end.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Tremunt videntes angeli (2002) 8'

for SSAATTBB choir a cappella

Text from the 5th century hymn 'Aeterne rex altissime' (L)
Commissioned for the dedication service of the Millennium window by Sir Eduardo Paolozzi in the Resurrection Chapel of St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, Edinburgh
Premiere: 9 May 2002 St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh
Choir of St Mary's Cathedral / Matthew Owens

Level 3

This short meditative motet is in a style that will be familiar to MacMillan devotees. Bases with low Ds are required and reasonably fleet-footed singers whose sense of ensemble is good for the rhythmic elements of the melismatic phrases which characterize the piece. These almost improvisatory elements turn into actual improvisation in the second half where the altos, tenors and basses make their own, individual ways to an Alleluia (with a suggested template) whilst two soprano parts carry the text forward with notated parts. The whole work ends with rich chords that fade away to a single upper voice minor third.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Two Motets for St Thomas of Hereford** (2020) 6'

for SSAATTBB a cappella

Text: attrib. Robert of Gloucester (14th century) (E)
Premiere: 4 October 2020 Hereford
Hereford Cathedral Choir / Geraint Bowen

Level 2-3

Given the closeness of Hereford Cathedral to its neighbour at Gloucester in musical connection through the Three Choirs Festival (with Worcester) if nothing else, it is heart-warming to see the 14th century Robert of Gloucester writing two prayers in praise of the 13th century St Thomas Cantilupe, Bishop of Hereford from 1275. These two texts chosen by MacMillan celebrating the 700th anniversary of his canonization in 2020 show clearly the deep affection and respect in which he was held. They were first performed at a Hereford Cathedral Eucharist on 4 October 2020.

The first motet is highly demonstrative with almost jazzy rhythms and fragmentary phrases assuring absolute clarity of text. There is considerable word repetition – a feature we have noted in various recent works, and absolutely no counterpoint. The gentle pianissimo ending, very low, to the words, 'a light blazes forth from England' makes me wonder if this had been Scotland whether the light might have blazed rather more forte!

The second motet uses another device we have seen before where the sopranos and altos take the 'Hail Thomas' figure at the start with the tenors and basses singing a long pedal point, and the roles being reversed later in the motet. Colour and contrast is assured through the variety of textures, speeds and simple polyphony. These are attractive, highly effective motets which, despite their obvious Hereford connection, make them relevant to All Saints, for use as intros or, of course, in concert programmes.

> [More Info](#)**Ut omnes unum sint** (2015) 5'

for SSAATTBB chorus a cappella

Text: John 17: 20-23 (Vulgate) (L)
Premiere: 21 November 2015 Edinburgh
Cappella Caeciliana / James MacMillan

Level 4

Commissioned by Cappella Caeciliana of Belfast in celebration of the group's twentieth anniversary in 2015. Its three founding 'Fathers' (all Catholic Priests) lie at the heart of MacMillan's setting which features two tenors and a bass soloist as well as a trio of high soprano soloists at two points. The text is from St John and is set in Latin. The title ('That they all may be one') is beautifully realized in the opening phrase where MacMillan opens with rich eight-part chords leading from D major into the all-enveloping warmth of F major as a truly comforting resolution.

As with all MacMillan's choral works it is fascinating to see his imagination take flight from the text and to hear the passion with which it is conceived flow from the music – and flow is what he does so expertly. It is part of what marks his music out from so many others – his ability with counterpoint, connecting him with a long distant past and informing his music with classic procedures used in new ways which are entirely personal to him.

This is another work which needs a confident approach and will probably be best tackled by a choir enjoying more challenging repertoire. The three soloists will need to be both confident and have voices which will mark them out as soloists in the ensemble. They are distinct roles. The top solo soprano of the trio mentioned needs to be able to sing a long nine-beat top A piano.

> [More Info](#)**Videns Dominus** (2005) 5'

When the Lord saw

(The Strathclyde Motets)

Communion motet for the 5th Sunday in Lent, for SATB choir a cappella

Text: Roman Breviary, John II: 33,35,43,44,39 (L)

Premiere: 13 March 2005 Strathclyde University Chaplaincy, Glasgow

Strathclyde University Chamber Choir / Alan Tavener

Level 1

Videns Dominus is scored for SATB voices with divided tenors and basses at one point. Starting canonically with the decorated melody between sopranos and tenors the motet continues in a fragmented progress of short statements which includes one short tenor solo. The motet continues the general theme of these atmospheric works.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Vidi aquam** (2019) 10'

for 40-part chorus a cappella

Text: liturgical (L)

Premiere: 16 September 2020 London
ORA Singers / Suzi Digby

Level 4-5

This is the most extraordinary conception and really one of the most beautiful choral works I have encountered in recent years. To write a 40 part motet in the shadow of Tallis's masterpiece Spem in Alium (eight five-part choirs) is a challenge of the first order by anyone's calculation, but to write one which not only mirrors Tallis but positively enhances the experience of that earlier work is surely a mark of real genius and that is not a word to be bandied around lightly. It was commissioned by Suzi Digby's professional choir ORA to celebrate the 450th anniversary of the composition of Tallis's motet in 2020. It was enterprisingly sponsored by a large group of people supporting one or two vocal parts each. And what a rich reward, as heard in a striking first public performance, COVID distanced, in the epic space of Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. MacMillan takes the shapes of the Tallis in building his textures and managing the clarity which is one of the most impressive aspects of the work along with the contrapuntal skill of the interweaving of so many parts. He mirrors Tallis, too, in the great silences followed by a wall of 40-part choral sound, and occasionally bursts into a short section of frenetic activity. There are one or two harmonic surprises to keep us on our aural toes (mixing metaphors), and there are some heart-melting moments of such pure beauty that it quite takes the breath away.

This is not a work to be undertaken lightly. It is not easy and, as in the Tallis, it is easy for a singer to lose their way if counting fails or they simply lose confidence. But this is a work which should be widely known, performed and marvelled at and which underlines the stature of this remarkable composer.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**When you see the millions of the mouthless dead** (2015) 3'

for SATB chorus a cappella

Text: Charles Hamilton Sorley (E)

Premiere: 3 October 2015 Cumnock

Genesis Sixteen

Level 2

Charles Hamilton Sorley was killed at the battle of Loos on 13 October 1915 aged twenty. Some strange coincidence found me writing this on 13 October 2021 and wondering at his remarkable maturity in the sentiments expressed in his powerful poem about the devastating waste of young life in war, including, all too soon, his own. MacMillan has raged against such waste and against injustices, criminal political regimes and abuses of human rights all his life. This setting, written for his second Cumnock Tryst festival in 2015 (the centenary of Sorley's death) reminds me in its essence of Elgar's We will remember them. MacMillan mirrors Elgar's setting in the deep, touching simplicity of his response to Sorley's words. One comes out of the experience feeling a harrowing sense of the futility of such conflicts – which still go on – and a feeling of such loss in reflecting on what Sorley himself might have become given a normal lifespan.

This short motet is not difficult for choirs and will make a powerful impact in liturgical or concert situation. Just be sure that the words can be heard clearly.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

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Dedicated to Harry Christophers

MISERERE
for mixed voices a cappella

Psalm 51 (50): 3-21

JAMES MACMILLAN
(b. 1959)

Larghetto ♩ = c60-63

SOPRANO
I
II

ALTO
I
II

TENOR
I
II

BASS
I
II

PIANO
(for rehearsal only)

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Choral

Works with organ

Advent Antiphons (2011) 5'

for Cantor, unison voices (congregation), TB choir and organ
Text: Liturgical (E-L)

Level 1 (choir/congregation); Level 2 (Cantor)

James MacMillan is a standard-bearer for a resurgence in standards of church music in the Catholic church. He is a very hands-on composer who directed the music at his local church in Glasgow. He understands the problems but despairs at some of the church's attitudes and what he has described as the 'liturgical police force... watching your every move'.

Here, in the Advent Antiphons he provides the congregation with a simple but memorable melody to sing as their opening chant and response to the cantor's more florid style.

The tenors and basses sing a long pedal point unusually reminiscent of John Tavener's characteristic deep long-held bass notes. What MacMillan does over his pedal point is very different however, and the whole work is entirely reflective of MacMillan's idiom. Easy, approachable and practical.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Ave Maria (2010) 4'

for mixed voices and organ
Text: Traditional Catholic Prayer (L)

Premiere: 27 July 2010 St George's Chapel, Windsor Boys, Girls and Men of All Saints Northampton / Lee Dunleavy

Level 2 (organ: Level 3)

One of the most telling characteristics of James MacMillan's music when setting a very well-known text is his ability to free himself from the shackles of other composers' musical ideas. This text is so familiar and could be easy prey for our new-age 'spiritual sentimentalists'. MacMillan could do that with the best of them if he wanted: there are good examples in other works of his ability to draw a super-charged emotional sound picture. No, here the organ is once again used as an agent of flow whilst the choir sings a chorale-like four-part setting which is beautifully linear but essentially very straightforward. At the words 'gratia plena' ('full of grace') he introduces a new dotted rhythm idea initially for the altos. This creates a feeling of 6/8 (grazioso) while the other parts continue their chorale-like progress. The ideas mix from then onwards and the organ has fast, swirling figures to play. A return to the opening, slower organ figure gives the organist a couple of pages of increasingly dramatic solo leading to the choir's final Amens

The motet was commissioned by the Friends of All Saints' Music, Northampton in thanksgiving for the stewardship of its choral tradition by its incumbent priest, The Reverend Canon Simon Godfrey, and first performed by the choir in St. George's Chapel, Windsor Castle in July 2010.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Ave verum corpus (2014) 4'

for treble voices and organ

Text: (L)

Premiere: 18 June 2018 Birmingham
Royal Birmingham Conservatoire Chamber Choir / Paul Spicer

Level 3

This beautiful motet for treble (soprano) voices and organ was composed to mark the 400th anniversary of the martyrdom of St John Ogilvie at Glasgow Cross in 1615 and premiered by pupils from six Jesuit Junior Schools in St Aloysius Church in Glasgow. Ogilvie served a dwindling Catholic community in Scotland in the time of the Reformation when services had to be held in secret. He was discovered in Glasgow and hanged.

This straightforward piece is made more powerful by its very simplicity and especially when remembering the anniversary it commemorates. The lines in the text 'Hail, true body...truly suffering and slain on a cross for man...' easily refer to the depth of faith which led to Ogilvie's own death at the end of a rope. There are optional divisions into two parts at various points but this piece speaks clearly and beautifully with or without these divisions.

This is another example of a familiar text (Byrd and Mozart are prime examples) being set, but if its background were explained to a congregation or audience it could serve numerous situations, both liturgical and secular.

> [More Info](#)

Beatus Andreas (2011) 5'

for SATB and organ

Text: Versicle at Matins on the Feast of St Andrew and a prayer attributed to St Andrew (L)

Premiere: 2 June 2011 St Andrew's Cathedral, Glasgow
Choir of St Aloysius Church / Dan Divers

Level 1-2

An effective setting exuding a timeless spiritual quality which many choirs will find irresistible. Whilst it is obviously appropriate for any St Andrew's Day service, it was first performed on Ascension Day and, as always, it could find a special place in the right context outside a liturgical situation.

Any competent choir can sing this music which needs to be expressive and to observe the dynamic scheme which helps give the work its shape and contrast. The second part of the Versicle follows the prayer as an ornamented chant for soprano solo, semi-chorus or tutti before the first section is repeated.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Beatus Vir (1983) 8'

for chorus (SSATBB) and organ

Text: Psalm 112 (L)

Premiere: 2 July 1983 Norwich
Choir of Norwich Cathedral

Level 4

With this work we delve back into MacMillan's early career when he was carving out a niche for himself and entering competitions to help establish his name. In 1981 the enterprising Michael Nicholas, organist of Norwich Cathedral, had founded a Festival of Contemporary Church Music, and it was in the second of these festivals, two years later, that a composition competition was held and it was this work which was the winner. The prize money was used to pay for his honeymoon!

The text is familiar through the popular setting by Monteverdi. As ever, MacMillan ploughs his own highly original furrow and we see early appearances of traits which will be developed in later works, particularly Cantos Sagrados with its punctuating organ chords in its first movement. Here, the basses set up something of an ostinato figure which underpins a highly contrapuntal interplay of parts above, some mimicking the basses and some going in the other direction. The central, contrasting section (Jecundus homo) is gentle and chordal with a lyrical soprano solo overtopping everything. Drama returns, and we see the men shouting a rising figure in approximate pitches (the gnashing of teeth). The Gloria picks up the opening bass ostinato figure to which the whole choir responds contrapuntally. The ending is uncompromising.

The scoring is for SSATBB with soprano solo and organ. Not a piece for the faint-hearted but certainly manageable by good choirs looking for a piece which works well in concert and is not as often heard as it should be. It is certainly worth careful investigation.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Cantos Sagrados (1989, orch. 1997) 22'

for SATB choir and organ or orchestra

Poems by Ariel Dorfman (tr. Edie Grossman) and Ana Maria Mendoza (tr. Gilbert Markus o.p) with Latin sacred texts (E/L)

Premiere: 10 February 1990 Old St Paul's Church, Edinburgh
Scottish Chamber Choir, organist John Young, conducted Colin Tipple

for orchestral version see *Choral works with orchestra*

Level 4-5

As MacMillan states in his preface to the score 'the title Sacred Songs is...slightly misleading as the three poems are concerned with political repression in Latin America and are deliberately coupled with traditional religious texts to emphasise a deeper solidarity with the poor of that subcontinent'.

This is a powerfully effective work that is not very difficult for the singers (the organ part is quite virtuosic and needs an accomplished player) although there are, as usual, points in the work that present some challenges. The second movement is unaccompanied for a substantial part of the first section that could lead to pitch problems when the organ/orchestra eventually joins. The third movement (in which a political prisoner is shot and his executioner begs him for forgiveness) uses MacMillan's effective chorale-like vocal parts (with Latin words) which are interspersed by increasingly neurotic interventions from sopranos and then other voices which build to a huge climax as the shots are fired, gradually subsiding to a whispered 'forgive me compañero' at the end.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Changed (1997)

for SATB choir with accompaniment of organ, harp, string trio, or any three like instruments

see *Choral works with piano, instruments or ensemble* on page 30

A Choral Sequence from the St John Passion

(2007, arr. 2013) 17'

for mixed chorus, organ and optional percussion (Choral sequence devised by Nigel Perrin)

Text: German text by Paul Gerhardt (1607-76), based on 'Salve, caput cruentatum' (14th century), trans. Robert Bridges (1844-1930) (L,E,G)

Premiere: 18 April 2014 Somerset

Jeremy Woodhouse, organ / Bath Camerata / Nigel Perrin

Level 4

MacMillan's St John Passion is one of his major works and was written in 2007 to celebrate Sir Colin Davis' 80th birthday. Later, at the suggestion of Nigel Perrin, he sanctioned the extraction from the work of five movements which he wrote 'stand on their own and are effective as 'motets' with organ accompaniment'. The premiere was given by the Bath Camerata in Wells Cathedral April 2014.

The Passion ends with a quotation from Bach's St Matthew Passion and this Sequence opens with the Passion Chorale. The first movement after this Astiterunt reges terrae flings us into immediate drama with huge organ chords, and in the original work massive timpani strokes. This is a short virtuoso movement for the singers which needs complete confidence to do it justice. Judas, Mercator pessimus follows and we have the dramatic choral shouts of 'Judas' (the Seven Last Words has similar outbursts) in this unaccompanied movement for eight voice parts until the very end when the organ rumbles in with a quiet pedal note before the manuals spark into action with a series of demi-semiquaver runs. Peccantem me quotidie, the third movement, begins softly and contrapuntally, getting gradually quicker and then slowing into 'miserere mei Deus' which has a stupendous 'et salva me' (save me) which is repeated twice more to conclude the movement. Crucifixus etiam pro nobis proceedit in long, slow, quiet chords while the organist 'provides support for the choir while playing quasi-improvised obbligato on various string and soft reed stops'. Finally, the Stabat Mater is a moving conception where two elements combine: a canonic 'Stabat mater' with all MacMillan's familiar ornamental triplets and grace notes, and, surrounding this, a slow recitation of 'Lully lulla, My dear darling' which grows into hummed and open-mouthed singing, and finally there is a quotation from the Passion Chorale which ends the work.

This Sequence is a highly successful extraction from the large-scale Passion and makes a very moving concert piece for Holy Week. It is a very challenging undertaking and will only be attempted by accomplished choirs, but there are many of these and they would do well to investigate this moving sequence.

For St John Passion see *Choral works with orchestra* on page 40

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Chosen (2003) 7'

for SAATTB choir and organ
Text: Michael Symmons Roberts (E)
Premiere: 24 December 2003 Paisley Abbey, Glasgow
Oliver Rundell, organ / Choir of Paisley Abbey / George McPhee

Level 2

Written in 2003 for George McPhee's 40th anniversary as Director of Music at Paisley Abbey in Scotland, this piece sets another unusual text by Michael Symmons Roberts with whom MacMillan has collaborated extensively. Most of the piece is extremely simple and uses melodic and ornamental figures with which we have become familiar in other MacMillan works.

There is a turning point roughly half-way when the full choir is employed for the first time and, as so often, in his music, it appears like a moment of revelation. The fortissimo cries of 'The world is rich and full' lead to the open-ended question 'Why was my chosen one chosen?'. Both choral and organ parts are straightforward (there is a brief division of altos and tenors) and this work makes another effective entry point for choirs looking to begin their investigation of MacMillan's music.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

The Company of Heaven (1999)

for children's voices (younger and older with separate parts), organ (ad lib sections for wind band and carnyx solo)

see *Choral works with piano, instruments or ensemble* on page 30

Deus noster refugium (2013) 5'

for SSAATTBB chorus and organ
Text: Psalm 46 (L)
Premiere: 29 March 2014 Leeds
Leeds Festival Chorus / Simon Wright

Level 4

This was a Leeds Festival Chorus commission in 2014 and premiered in Leeds Town Hall conducted by Simon Wright. The text is Psalm 45 in the Vulgate with the opening statement from that verse 1: 'In finem, filii Core, pro arcanis. Psalmus'. 'Unto the end, for the sons of Korah, for confidants. A Psalm'. It is scored for up to eight voice parts (though there are only two short sections with all these voices parts singing) and organ.

Psalm 45 (God is our hope and strength, a very present help in trouble) is a wide-ranging text with plenty of opportunity for colour and drama. The waters roar, the heathen rage, the earth melted, and so on. MacMillan makes the most of all these descriptive passages which makes this an ideal short concert piece. There are dramatic unaccompanied sections followed by outburst from the organ and responding pianissimo choral sections almost shuddering in both fear and relief. The choral parts are not unduly difficult but the choir should be prepared to really enter into the drama of the piece. The organist should be highly competent.

> [More Info](#)

Divo Aloysio Sacrum (1991)

for SATTB and optional organ accompaniment

see *Unaccompanied choral works* on page 8

The Edinburgh Te Deum (1978) 8'

for SSAATB and organ
Text: Liturgical (L)
Premiere: 20 November 2011 Westminster Cathedral, London
Westminster Cathedral Choir

Level 3

This is an early work which MacMillan has only recently sanctioned for publication and it received its first performance in Westminster Cathedral in November 2011. It is a big setting but intended for liturgical use (although it would also make an excellent concert work). The whole of the first section is given to sopranos in one or two parts and often in thirds. The next section, 'Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus' is given dramatic block chords and a punctuating organ part. A lengthy organ interlude joins to an angular pp phrase which is almost fugato like in its progress from bass up to soprano. 'Tu Rex gloriae' brings more chordal drama and a feeling of the previous angular choral motif now in the organ pedals. A slow bass solo for 'Te ergo quaesumus' is maintained after the choir has joined contrapuntally, and the final part is gentle with sopranos returning by themselves as at the beginning ('Dignare, Domine') and a soprano solo brings the work to its gentle conclusion.

A fine work well within most good choirs' capabilities and fascinating to see this earlier music of MacMillan's put alongside more recent music.

> [More Info](#)

Everyone Sang (2017) 6'

for SATB chorus & organ
Text by Siegfried Sassoon (E)
Premiere: 2 July 2018 Kansas
Jan Kraybill, organ / Spire Chamber Ensemble / Ben A. Spalding

Level 3

MacMillan has written a huge portfolio of choral music and undoubtedly much more will come from his pen in the years to come. But however much we may see fingerprints, familiar ornamental devices, use of chant-like melodies, clusters, humming and so on, his imagination is so rich that no piece sounds like any other and it is his response to text which ensures this freshness and his determination to plough his own fertile furrow.

Everyone sang sets Siegfried Sassoon's famous poem 'Everyone suddenly burst out singing and I was filled with such delight as prisoned birds must find in freedom...'. It was written in response to the horrors he witnessed during World War I but, in so many ways, the lyrics are timeless and can reflect whatever we choose to read into them. The piece was commissioned by the American Guild of Organists for their Kansas City Convention in 2018 and was part of the opening celebration concert commemorating the centenary of the end of the Great War.

The piece is a virtuoso choral offering with an equally demanding organ part (suitable, of course, for an organists' convention). It is madrigalian in character and positively dances. Dividing at the end into four of each voice part, it needs a choir capable of realizing its demands which are as much in the effective performance of dynamics (some high notes demanding a poised diminuendo, for instance) as the seriously challenging hum – open – hum clusters with which the work ends ('... and the song was wordless' the almost final words – but also 'the singing will never be done' which has these clusters disappear into silence. Difficult to achieve successfully but when managed, supremely effective. The two contrapuntal sections 'My heart was shaken with tears' with

the rising figure taken up almost fugally make a deeply moving and extended central section leading to a cataclysmic discord on the word 'horror' which then literally 'drifted away' as the voices descend into silence.

This is a remarkable work which, while of course eminently suitable for any kind of remembrance, is also a celebration of the power of life and of singing which represents the highest form of expression of which mankind is capable.

> [More Info](#)

Except the Lord build the house (2020) 5'

for SSAATB & organ
Text: Psalm 127 (KJV)
Premiere: 8 October 2021 London
Eton College Chapel Choir / Tim Johnson

Level 2

One of MacMillan's great skills is finding the right text for a given commission. In this case Psalm 127 was entirely appropriate in celebrating Sir Eric Anderson's Headmastership of Eton College and his period, a few years later, as Provost. With part of that Psalm reading 'Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord; and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth'. As with the Stabat Mater the Genesis Foundation provided the commission for Eton College Chapel Choir as a memorial to Anderson who died in 2020.

The anthem is scored for SATB (with divisions in all parts except basses) and organ. There is a feeling of dance in the way MacMillan divides his 9/8 bars into 2/2/2/3. Starting gently with sopranos or trebles singing a chant-like melody of simple sustained chords, the altos eventually join and then tenors. The basses wait until bar 50 before taking up the chanting with the tenors and the organist's right hand flies up and down presaging a more substantial part. The full choir leads to the climax in the quotation above reaching fortissimo for 'the fruit of the womb is his reward'. The sopranos take up the leading role over a repeated ATB phrase and draw this imaginative piece to a strong ending.

This anthem is eminently approachable and school or youth choirs would find it well within their grasp and to be a significant addition to their repertoire either in church or concert hall. Ranges are kept within the bounds for youth voices with basses needing a top E and tenors a top A on a couple of occasions but both well prepared for. All this also makes the piece extremely attractive of course to adult choirs.

> [More Info](#)

The Galloway Mass (1996) 15'

Kyrie; Gloria; Sanctus/Benedictus; Acclamation; Agnus Dei for congregation and either cantor (if there is no choir) or SATB choir
Texts in modern translations (E)
Premiere: 25 March 1997 Good Shepherd Cathedral, Ayr
Congregation of Good Shepherd Cathedral

Level 1

The movements set are Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus and Benedictus (together), Acclamation and Agnus Dei. With the inclusion of a Gloria this is a more extended setting than the St Anne's Mass, and the cantor or choir have an integral part which alternates with the congregational part. Sometimes this involves singing the congregation's phrase before they sing it themselves. In the Gloria, MacMillan cleverly gives the congregation only one phrase to sing throughout, which is the initial one repeated at key points. It is a novel way of setting the Gloria and is certainly effective, underlining the joyful nature

of the text. The choral parts are simple (only the Kyrie and Gloria have harmony). The Sanctus and Benedictus, Acclamations and Agnus Dei are all in unison until the very end where MacMillan writes a brief choral ending for the Dona nobis pacem (which is given in English first).

> [More Info](#)

Hymn to the Blessed Sacrament (1980) 3'

for SATB chorus and organ
Text: translation of Aquinas text by James Quinn (E)
Premiere: 4 March 2012 London
Westminster Cathedral Choir

Level 2

This straightforward, attractive anthem was written for a Baptism and Confirmation service in 1980. Its accompaniment was originally for oboe and viola. MacMillan later made an alternative organ part (the instrumental parts are available if needed) which, to a great extent, reflects this in its two-part counterpoint. The choral parts are easily manageable by most choirs and with its mainly chordal approach makes the text by St. Thomas Aquinas in James Quinn's translation, even more direct. This also makes a beautiful communion motet.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Jubilate Deo (2009) 4'

for mixed voices and organ
Text: Psalm 100 (Book of Common Prayer, 1662) (E)
Premiere: 17 May 2009 Wells Cathedral
Wells Cathedral Choir / Matthew Owens

Level 4 (organ: Level 5)

This dramatic setting was written for Wells Cathedral and premiered in 2009. You need to change any preconceptions you may have about this being a joyful psalm. We are used to light-hearted or upbeat settings like Britten's C major or Stanford's B flat and many others. MacMillan's is extremely dark-hued and only reflects a sense of rugged joy through its highly virtuosic organ part which swirls from the bottom of the pedal board to the top of the manuals in a hurricane-like swirling dervish. It requires no mean organist to play this score effectively (and correctly) and the choir needs to be just as responsive to the challenges MacMillan sets.

The reason for the dark nature of the music is a man called Willie Pondexter (the dedicatee of the piece) with whom MacMillan forged a highly unusual friendship. Pondexter was convicted of killing an elderly woman during a robbery in Clerksville, Texas in 1993. MacMillan visited him on death row and even now says he has never quite got over Pondexter's execution in 2009.

This Jubilate Deo reflects MacMillan's 'hands-on' approach to so many of the things he truly believes in. To know this story is to understand much of how to perform this extraordinary short work. The tiny moment of pure musical line in the Gloria at 'is now and ever shall be' feels like a benediction on Pondexter's hereafter and ours by reflection. You don't have to condone a heinous crime but you can still believe in redemption.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)



The Lamb has come for us from the House of David (1979) 3'

for SATB choir and organ
Text: St Ephraim (E)

Premiere: 9 June 1979 St Peter's, Edinburgh
Schola Sancti Alberti / James MacMillan

Level 1

A very straightforward setting which opens with unison voices over a flowing organ part. The climax with short choral phrases interspersed with short full organ interludes are powerful, and the piece subsides, through a short treble solo, to a quiet ending. Another beautifully effective entry-level piece.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

The Lord's Prayer (2008) 2'

for unison voices with organ accompaniment
Text: liturgical (E)

Level 1

This is a setting for unison voices and organ with an optional Doxology and Great Amen which can be sung separately or as a continuous performance by following the instructions. It is a lovely, melodic setting in a triple meter which is entirely straightforward. Even within this simple setting MacMillan writes a familiar ornamental turn at the words 'temptation' and 'evil' which gives those words a little edginess to colour them.

> [More Info](#)

Magnificat (1999) and **Nunc Dimittis** (2000) 18'-20'

for SATB choir and organ or orchestra

Texts from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer (E)

The Magnificat was commissioned by the BBC for the first Choral Evensong of the new Millennium and the Nunc Dimittis by Winchester Cathedral

Premiere (Magnificat): 5 January 2000 Wells Cathedral
BBC Philharmonic and the Choirs of Wells Cathedral and St John's College Cambridge / James MacMillan
Premiere (Nunc Dimittis): 15 July 2000 (St Swithin's Day)
Winchester Cathedral, Choir of Winchester Cathedral, organist Philip Scriven / David Hill

for scoring of orchestral version see *Choral works with orchestra* on page 38

Level 2-3

MacMillan's large-scale festival settings of the Magnificat was commissioned by the BBC for the first Choral Evensong of the new Millennium. The choral style is simple and often homophonic (unusual for the composer) as in the celebratory Gloria. Much of the elaboration of the textual imagery occurs in the introspective, Messiaen-tinged non-choral episodes, evoking evening and birdsong.

The Magnificat is a large-scale work which is genuinely straightforward to sing. It lasts some 12 minutes, although when the organ accompanied version is used liturgically this reduces to about ten minutes as MacMillan has authorized a major cut from the introduction. The contrast between the colourful orchestral/organ interludes and the simple homophonic statements from the choir is marked. As so often in MacMillan's music it all leads somewhere, however, and the build up towards the Gloria becomes intensely contrapuntal before the Gloria returns to the stark statements of earlier, but this time fortissimo. The work subsides to a meditative end.

The Nunc Dimittis, lasting eight minutes, shares some musical material with the Magnificat and starts wonderfully with very low bass notes portraying the elderly Simeon. It builds to a huge and exciting climax and ends with the basses' low notes once more.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Mass (2000) 22'-35'

Kyrie; Gloria; Sanctus; Benedictus; Agnus Dei
for SATB choir (often divisi) and organ

Text in modern translations, Acclamations from the Roman Missal (E)

Premiere: 22 June 2000 Westminster Cathedral, London
Choir of Westminster Cathedral, organist Andrew Reid / Martin Baker

Level 3 (Agnus Dei Level 4)

The Mass includes Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei. In addition there are settings only for liturgical use of the Alleluia, Sursum Corda, Preface and the Eucharistic Prayer right through to the Great Amen. The congregation may join in with the Memorial Acclamations and part of the Great Amen.

In its devotional spirit this Mass reflects MacMillan's own faith, and his conviction comes strongly off the pages of this effective and original work. MacMillan likes to create atmosphere in his music and knows how the mystical can interact with the music to make a powerful impression on the listener, especially in the context of a great religious building. His organ parts are often repeated 'filigree' figures which create a background 'wash' of sound, as in the Kyrie here (and A New Song). The contrapuntal writing in the Kyrie is wonderful and creates a true sense of forward motion. The power of the chordal passages which come later is then put in proper relief. The final Kyrie is more difficult than the earlier sections, with angular intervals for the trebles/sopranos to negotiate.

The Gloria begins with a strong statement for upper voices including a top B (MacMillan likes to use extreme range in the outer voices of his music generally). This movement makes much use of melismas which feel as if they grow out of plainsong melodies, having a similar feel of rhythmic freedom. There is a wonderful ATB section (We give you thanks...) which really needs singers who can sustain lyrical lines.

The Sanctus is a real tour de force, being a very extended crescendo which starts very low (F sharps) with basses pianissimo and builds up to a simply massive climax. The Hosanna needs an agile organist and includes more of MacMillan's vocal ornamentation referred to above. The Benedictus follows segue and is slow moving, eventually building to another huge Hosanna which subsides again into the dark abyss from which the Sanctus began.

The Agnus Dei is more difficult than the other movements and in finding its way to a kind of resolution in its 'grant us peace' MacMillan acknowledges that the music reflects 'the doubts and fears which characterize our time'. The final repetitions of the word 'peace' are punctuated by low clusters on the organ which sound like distant explosions. It is wonderfully effective music.

> [More Info](#) (original version) > [Listen](#)

> [More Info](#) (new English translation)

Mass of Blessed John Henry Newman (2010) 9'

Kyrie; Gloria; Sanctus; Acclamations; Agnus Dei for unison voices (congregation), optional SATB choir and organ

Text: Liturgical (E)

Premiere: 16 September 2010 Bellahouston Park, Glasgow
The Congregation of Bellahouston Park

Level 1

This work proved controversial when it was first written and exposed the deep divisions within the Catholic church about its music and delivery. Much has been written on this subject and people interested can access the relevant blogs. MacMillan set the new words of the English translation of the Roman Missal which were about to come into general usage. He declared himself very pleased with the changes to the text feeling it to have more beautiful language than the old.

The setting is entirely practical for any congregation to sing, has lovely melodies which, as MacMillan points out himself, are reminiscent of both chant and Protestant hymnody. Each movement has a different character: simple, short, repetitious phrases in the Kyrie; lively, upbeat and ultimately triumphant Gloria; seductive Sanctus with beautiful harmonies and a disposable ornamental organ introduction if the congregation (or priest) can't hang around waiting to sing...; Acclamations making use of the Sanctus material, and an Agnus Dei which sends everyone away in a reflective mood, happy to have been given something so grateful to sing.

The whole setting is conceived practically and the highest note the congregation is given to sing is a D.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

A New Song (1997) 4'

for SATB choir and organ

Words from Psalm 96 (E)

Commissioned by Nicholas Russell for the choir of St Bride's Episcopal Church, Glasgow in memory of his mother and to celebrate his father's 70th birthday

Premiere: 1 March 1998 St Bride's Episcopal Church, Glasgow

The Choir of St Bride's Episcopal Church / Robert Marshall

Level 2

This short and effective anthem combines a number of stylistic elements including inflections of both Scottish ballads and plainsong. It is simply constructed in ABABA form with a wonderfully positive organ postlude that ideally needs an instrument with sizeable resources to be properly effective. It has Taverneresque pedal points that are also reminiscent of bagpipe drones. The vocal parts in the imitative B sections include MacMillan's favourite kind of vocal ornamentation – a notated quick-fire turn with varying numbers of notes.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Noli Pater (2015) 5'

for SSAATTBB chorus, triplepipe and organ

Text: Anon (L)

Premiere: 15 July 2015 St Albans London

Barnaby Brown, Iona pipes / Choir of Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge / Bernhard Haas, org / Geoffrey Webber

Level 3-4

The St Alban's International Organ Festival together with Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge commissioned this work (together with two personal donors) for the Festival in 2015. It is unusually scored for triplepipe, choir and organ. The triplepipe is a re-creation of such an instrument which Barnaby Brown (to whom this work is dedicated) found on a 9th century grave slab in Chatham Priory in Argyll. It is three separate reed pipes, one of which is a drone (like the more well-known bagpipes) and the other two are melodic. The text is stated in the score as being 6-8th century Anon. Another source attributes it to Colum Cille (521-597), who was the founder of the monastic community on the island of Iona. The overall effect is, of course, incredibly aurally stimulating and dramatic - for instance, the choir has more than a whole page of shouting over massive organ clusters later in the piece after which the basses recover to sing a gentle reprise of the opening melody.

If you can obtain the services of Barnaby Brown or another rare example of the triplepipe community and you have an accomplished organist together with a choir who can deal with the extremes in the piece (quite a lot of it is very manageable) then this would be a superb concert piece to be able to offer an unsuspecting audience. This really is a fine example of MacMillan's originality of thought and approach to text.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

O Give Thanks unto the Lord (2016) 5'

for chorus and organ (with optional string accompaniment)

Text: To Music: A Song - Poem by Robert Herrick, Psalm 105:w 1-5

Premiere: 30 June 2016 Cornwall

Choir of Truro Cathedral, City of London Sinfonia / Stephen Layton

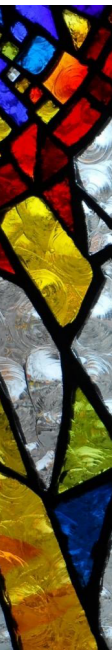
Level 3

This is another outpouring of praise using a Psalm text (105, verses 1-5) but adding to it a wonderful poem by Robert Herrick To Music. A Song. As the anthem was commissioned by the Friends of Cathedral Music to mark their Diamond Jubilee in 2016, this is appropriate indeed and ends the work by considering all the things music can do – 'Thou that tam'st tygers, and fierce storms (that rise) With thy soul-melting Lullabies'.

MacMillan has set the anthem for SATB with a very small amount of divisi for sopranos and tenors. It is accompanied either by organ or strings who have a very energetic time of it. The choral parts are straightforward and are mostly in separated phrases with no use of counterpoint. Herrick's poem is used as the contrasting central section which is soft and beguiling before the helter-skelter of the opening returns briefly and the strings or organ carry the piece to an 'obsessive' ending!

This is another anthem like Praise ye the Lord which is easily singable by many choirs but which requires more expert organ accompaniment or the use of a competent string group.

> [More Info](#)



The Offered Christ (2013) 5'
for SAATB chorus and organ
Text: 'The Altar Fire' (Armenian Liturgy), trans. Olive Wyon (E)
Premiere: 20 July 2013 Chichester
Chichester Cathedral Choir

Level 2

This anthem was a commission from Chichester Cathedral for the Southern Cathedrals Festival in 2013 and sets a section of The Altar Fire from the Armenian Liturgy translated by Olive Wyon. It is a beautiful text to which MacMillan responds with his usual sensitivity. The organ part is straightforwardly supportive with long held, quiet chords for the first 35 bars and then begins to play a more substantial and colourful role. The work ends with a strongly energetic page for solo organ.

Chorally, the work is not difficult though it has occasional issues which choirs will need to focus on, some of which are rhythmical, and some concern the accurate and tidy realization of MacMillan's habitual ornamentation. It is a piece which draws you in from the start with its chant-like melodic lines and changing textures as it proceeds. There are plentiful Alleluias which makes me wonder if he has set that word more times than any other composer!

> [More Info](#)

On Love (1984) 5'

for unison trebles or solo voice and organ
Text: from The Prophet by Khalil Gibran (E)
Premiere: 18 August 1984 Chapel of St Albert the Great,
Edinburgh
Barbara Kelly and James MacMillan

Level 1

A beautifully lyrical piece written as a wedding gift. The text is an apt homily on love, and MacMillan sets it in a style which will be familiar to all his devotees. A simple but effective organ part provides not only support but the means of intensifying the message as it progresses to its climax right at the end. A straightforward and effective anthem.

> [More Info](#)

On the Annunciation of the

Blessed Virgin (1997) 8'
for SSATB choir and organ
Text by Jeremy Taylor (E)
Premiere: 27 April 1997 Caius Chapel, Cambridge
Choir of Gonville and Caius College / Geoffrey Webber

Level 2-3

This work sets a wonderfully colourful poem (described as a 'Festival Hymn') by Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667). It is written in a simple and evocative fashion which makes it easily performable by most mixed choirs. The organ part is also less demanding than many of MacMillan's other works. A highly effective and approachable anthem, it is equally appropriate for liturgical use at the Feast of the Annunciation or more generally for concert performance.

The lovely sense of forward motion (and yet also an almost mesmerising sense of stillness) in this piece is obvious, and the grateful linear writing is rather less angular than in some of MacMillan's other choral works. Everything leads to the climax on the first Alleluia, after which the piece imaginatively winds down through a repeated figure set of three-part contrapuntal Alleluias (without basses) against which is set a giocoso organ solo part that dances its way to a quiet conclusion, long after the voices have faded out.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Padre Pio's Prayer (2008) 5'
Padre Pio prayer setting for SATB choir and organ
Text: James MacMillan version of prayer attributed to Padre Pio (E)
Premiere: 3 June 2008 Westminster Cathedral, London
The Sixteen / Harry Christophers

Level 3

Not dissimilar to The Song of the Lamb in some respects, and of a similar level of challenge both for choir and organist. The deeply felt prayer is given subtle nuance with each new phrase as MacMillan mirrors Padre Pio's nickname of 'the patron saint of stress relief' following his well-known advice to supplicants that they should 'pray, hope and don't worry'! Rather unusually MacMillan sometimes gives a phrase a character: 'ecstatic', 'anxiously', 'playfully', 'gently', 'luminoso' etc. A beautiful piece suitable for church or concert use.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Praise ye the Lord (2020) 5'

for SSAATB Chorus and organ
Text: Liturgical (E)
Premiere: 2022
St Machar Cathedral Choir

Level 2-3

A substantial anthem for choir (SSAATB) and organ commissioned to celebrate the quincentenary of Bishop Dunbar's remarkable Heraldic Ceiling in St Machar's Cathedral, Aberdeen. MacMillan set the words from Psalm 111 which is a continuous psalm of praise mirrored in its opening verse: 'Praise ye the Lord, I will praise the Lord with my whole heart, in the assembly of the upright, and in the congregation'. The organist is given a substantial part to play which will be challenging for some organists. They set the uplifting mood right from the start with strongly rising phrases. The choir is given a fairly straightforward task and this is another example of MacMillan the practical composer writing with a full knowledge of the forces for whom he is composing. There is no 'writing down' and the music is unequivocally MacMillan's and this is one of his great skills. One of the surprises in this score is the quiet ending but the feeling undoubtedly at 'his praise endureth for ever' is a fading away into the far distant future. It is very effective.

This anthem will be easily within the grasp of many choirs who have the services of a good organist.

> [More Info](#)

Quas ego non terras (2016) 5'

for SATB and organ
Text by Arthur Johnston (1587-1641) Quoted in Lives of Scottish Writers [sic], vol II, by David Irving (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1839)
Premiere: 30 October 2016 Ayr
Ayr Choral Union

Level 2

This short work for choir and organ sets a poem in Latin by the 16th century Scottish poet Arthur Johnston. It was written for the Ayr Choral Union as a gift – a touching salute to this choir with a 145 year history and with which MacMillan has been involved in recent years. The text is an extraordinary choice taken from the second volume of Lives of Scottish Writers by David Irving but shows perhaps MacMillan's breadth of vision in the telling of this tale of far-flung travel, of family, birth and loss of children and the final, almost hurled out statement that 'My name is Arthur Johnston'.

The setting is essentially straightforward and the choral parts are more often than not directly supported by the organ which joins the vocal phrases either by heavily punctuated chords, flowing pedals under sustained chords, or staccato repeated chords. There is no contrapuntal writing here and the story is told (in Latin) with absolute clarity with everything leading to that final statement, three times, of Johnston's name fortissimo, after which the organ finishes with a soft, cluster chord. It is all very effective and there is a kind of primitive energy to the piece which goes with the raw-edged emotion of the text. This is emphasized further by the use of 5/8 and 7/8 bars amongst the regular 2/4 and 4/4 etc. The feeling of raw energy is palpable and many choirs will enjoy this heady journey which hovers between mf and ff with the only pp being that final organ chord.

> [More Info](#)

Seinte Mari moder milde (1995) 6'

for SATB choir (with multiple divisions) and organ
Text from a thirteenth-century manuscript in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge (E)
Commissioned by King's College, Cambridge for the 1995 Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols
Premiere: 24 December 1995 King's College Chapel, Cambridge
Choir of King's College, Cambridge / Stephen Cleobury

Level 3

This is a dramatic carol for the famous annual service at King's College Cambridge. There is an organ accompaniment with echoes of Messiaen, choral unison outbursts, and low chords for basses in three parts. The MacMillan-ornamented alto duet in the central part leads the whole choir to take on similar figures in divisi parts (sopranos and tenors are divided into three). The final section has a huge cry of 'precantis'! accompanied on full organ out of which a tenor soloist appears. The ending has fragmented phrases for two solo sopranos (or trebles) infantis!

This work shows MacMillan's instinctive feeling for vocal sonority, for the creation of atmosphere and for presenting a challenge which is perfectly surmountable by amateur groups.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Serenity (2009) 6'

for mixed voices and organ
Latin Text by St Thomas Aquinas; English text attrib. Reinhold Niebuhr

Level 1

This lovely piece was written for the 150th anniversary of St Aloysius College, Glasgow, the school which MacMillan's children attended. Both the texts are well-known: O Salutaris Hostia made especially famous by Rossini's beautiful setting, and Serenity, the well-known text: 'God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.'

The setting is entirely straightforward and is another example of MacMillan's enviable ability to write music which is approachable in every way to a less experienced group but without sacrificing any of his inimitable musical style. The first section is hymn-like and in four parts, the second (the Serenity text) is a soprano verse over a long held pedal note with simple organ chords (the piece is designed so that it can be played on the manuals alone). This includes MacMillan's characteristic ornamentation. The following section is a reprise of the first and the next another soprano verse continuing the English text. The final section has the sopranos descanting the

English words over the hymn-like harmony from the beginning and building to a strong ending.

This is a very effective and affecting piece which any choir would enjoy adding to its repertoire.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Sing joyfully to the Lord (2017-18) 5'

for SATB chorus (with divisi) and organ
Text: Psalm 33: 1-4 (New International Version (NIV))

Level 3

It is heartening that MacMillan should write substantially for school choirs and that the music he writes should reflect the obviously high quality of the music making in these schools. It is not that any of these pieces are overtly difficult, and they are always within the sensible reach of these young singers, but MacMillan always ensures that what he is writing is sensibly poised between what he wants to write in reflection of the words he is setting, and the ability of the commissioning choir. In this case it is Worth Abbey who asked him to write this anthem in memory of a Chair of Governors who was particularly supportive of the school's music.

MacMillan sets the first four verses of Psalm 33 which encourages not only singing but the playing of the harp and the ten-stringed lyre which can then be held to represent all musical activity. It has a substantial organ part which sets up a suitably litting, dancing opening. The harp is introduced by spread chords, and the lyre reflected in strong separated organ chords. Chorally, the choir needs a confident approach mirroring all this from the organ. In a section later on the sopranos are asked to take on a phrase 'one after the other, not together, at different speeds, canonically, heterophonically' while the ATB voices dance around the words 'play skillfully'. The piece ends as it began with an exuberant solo organ. This is another anthem well within reach of most choirs looking for an upbeat, exciting anthem either for church or concert purposes.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

The Song of the Lamb (2008) 5'

for SATB choir and organ
Text: Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Revelation 15: 2-4 (E)
Premiere: 9 March 2008 House of Hope Church, Minnesota
Choir of The House of Hope Presbyterian Church / Andrew Altenbach

Level 3

An atmospheric piece which is straightforward but a little more challenging than some of MacMillan's 'entry level' choral pieces (the altos divide for a short passage). The composer is a natural dramatist and this is another example of a work which will paint pictures in the mind of the attentive listener and create a lasting impression. It needs a competent organist and preferably an instrument with fair-sized resources to do the piece justice.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

A Special Appeal (2017) 5'

for SSAATTBB & organ

Text: (Archbishop) Oscar Romero of El Salvador, trans. Julian Filochowski (E), Psalm 31: 13, 14

Premiere: 23 September 2017 London

Choir of Westminster Abbey / James O'Donnell

Level 3

This work commemorates an extraordinary priest. Blessed Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, who was murdered while celebrating Mass in March 1980. He campaigned against social injustice and the violence of the Civil War in his country and this put him at odds with the right-wing Arena party who it is thought ordered his assassination. MacMillan was commissioned by Westminster Abbey for this work celebrating the centenary of Romero's birth. The text is taken from his final homily in the Basilica del Sagrado Corazón right in the centre of San Salvador where, on that morning, protesters had occupied the cathedral. It begins 'I would like to make a special appeal to the men of the army. Brothers, each one of you is one of us. We are all the same people. Before any order to kill a man may give, God's law must prevail – 'Thou shalt not kill'. And yet, kill they did.

The work is scored for up to eight voices and organ. It begins with a phrase reminiscent of the chant for the Credo sung by a tenor soloist and after a short organ continuation the tutti tenors and basses repeat the phrase fortissimo a tone apart. That MacMillan is deeply moved by this text is obvious from the emotional response in his music. There are several strepitoso (impetuous) markings which reflect the urgency and the anguish while the point in the text where he muses on the 'whispering of many...as they scheme together to take my life' moves from misterioso to battering chords from the organ and a powerful full choir singing the opening 'Credo' motif. The beautiful use of the soprano voices singing a random entry, familiarly ornamented phrase, 'In the name of God' while the lower voices intone quietly is deeply affecting. The choir stops abruptly as the organ interrupts with a violent interjection mirroring Romero's execution. The final exhausted phrase 'Stop the repression' feels like Romero's final words, and the organ pedals' open fifths at irregular intervals see the his life ebbing away to its close.

This is a powerful and very special work which will affect all who perform and hear it. It is not especially difficult for many choirs and would make a really effective concert piece or a powerful anthem for Remembrance Sunday in place of the ubiquitous 'Greater Love' by Ireland, however special that work may be.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**St Anne's Mass** (1985, rev. 1996) 5'

Kyrie; Gloria; Sanctus/Benedictus; Acclamation; Agnus Dei for unison voices (congregation) and organ with optional SATB choir

Modern translations (E)

Level 1

This is a simple setting that a congregation could be taught quickly and easily. The ever-practical MacMillan has included a transposition of the organ parts in case people find it too high. The Sanctus and Benedictus and the Acclamation (which has the same melody) have a very Scottish traditional feel to the melody including a Scotch Snap.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Te Deum** (2001) 15'

for SATB choir (multiple divisions) and organ

Text in modern translation (E)

Composed for the choir of the Chapels Royal, HM Tower of London, on the occasion of the Queen's Golden Jubilee, 2002

Premiere: 3 February 2002 HM Tower of London

Choir of the Chapel Royal / Stephen Tilton

Level 4

MacMillan approaches this well-known text in a refreshingly original way. As so often in his choral music, he requires basses with very low notes (bottom D). The work also needs an agile soprano soloist at the beginning and a group of soprano soloists later. MacMillan's predilection for melismatic writing is effectively set against syllabic word setting in the lower parts at the beginning.

The work then continues with a mixture of these elements and a marvellous contrapuntal passage leading to a climax at 'thine honourable, true and only Son'. The organ part is not difficult but requires a keen rhythmic sense and includes passages of MacMillan's often-used 'fillgree' figuration.

This is a highly effective and approachable work that would be easily performable by a competent choir looking for a fresh approach to a familiar liturgical text.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Tota pulchra es** (2010) 5'

for mixed voices and organ

Text: Antiphon at second vespers on the feast of the Immaculate Conception (L)

Premiere: 8 July 2010 Basilica of the National Shrine, Washington DC Choir of the Basilica of the National Shrine

Level 3

This piece has real 'wow' factor. It was written for the American Guild of Organists' National Convention, commissioned by the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, and dedicated to the Very Rev. Dennis Corrado on the 40th anniversary of his ordination. So the text is wholly appropriate, but its setting is far removed from the unctuous, often sentimental/emotional settings from past generations. MacMillan's setting here is incredibly rhythmic (in a way we don't often see in his shorter works), dramatic and forceful. Here is MacMillan rejoicing in the beauty of Mary and allowing his fervour its reflection in an outpouring of joy.

The scheme is a) tutti, b) soprano verse in his familiar chant-like mode, c) tutti, d) tenors singing the chant-like section and e) tutti ending with full organ. A simple scheme but not always such simple chords to sing.

The challenges here are: 1) absolute rhythmic accuracy as the tutti sections stand or fall by the incisive, edgy rhythm; 2) the notes themselves: this is another piece like Alpha and Omega which looks simpler on paper than it actually is, so be prepared to allow enough rehearsal time to master the unexpected chord progressions and the rapid leaps and bounds; 3) the demands of the 'chant' sections: absolute unanimity of grace notes (always on the beat), triplet semiquavers (16th notes) and demisemiquaver (32nd note) turns. Look, as well, at MacMillan's careful articulation markings. The more reverberant your acoustic, the more these need to be worked on.

This piece would make a great opener or closing item in a concert.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Until the Day Breathes** (2018) 2'

for soprano solo (or SATB) & organ

Text adapted by composer from The Song of Solomon, ch. 4, v 6-7 Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (E)

Level 1

A short, beautiful setting of words from the Song of Solomon written for the marriage of his son, Aidan, in 2018 and sung as the Bride processes to the altar with her father. The piece is dedicated to Aidan's new wife, Kleida. The words from that source are always appropriate for a beautiful new bride ending 'You are all fair, my love, there is no flaw in you'. Set as a soprano solo with a simple organ accompaniment there is a short section for optional full choir if one is available.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)**Wedding Song** (2019) 5'

for SAATTB chorus and organ

Text: nuptial entrance antiphon, adapted by James MacMillan (E), Gloria Patri (E), 'Lassie, wad ye loe me?' (trad Scots)

Premiere: 6 July 2019 London

Echo Choir

Level 1

This is a highly effective wedding anthem which, like Sing Joyfully, starts with a lively organ introduction. The words are taken from the Nuptial Entrance antiphon which begins 'May the God of Israel join you together' – which the choir sings with zest and joy! The second half of the piece quietens as the text reflects 'Blessed are all they that fear the Lord and walk in his ways'. But perhaps the loveliest touch of all is MacMillan's wonderful idea of bringing in 'as if far away' a lovely Scots traditional phrase 'Lassie, wad ye loe me?' before the Gloria begins and then beautifully ending the anthem. It is really touching. There is a small amount of division within the alto and tenor parts, but nothing remotely problematical for the average choir.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)James MacMillan
**CANTOS
SAGRADOS**

for SATB chorus and organ



BOOSEY & HAWKES

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CANTOS SAGRADOSJAMES MACMILLAN
(b. 1959 -)**I. Identity**

Fast $\text{♩} = c. 128-130$

SOPRANO *What did you say? What did you say?*

ALTO *They found an - oth - er*

TENOR *What did you say? What did you say?*

BASS *They found an - oth - er*

ORGAN *Full ff *sempre sim.**

*10: 32 ff *sempre sim.**

*16: 32 ff *sempre sim.**

What did you say? This morn-ing? This morn-ing?

one. They found an-oth-er one. This morn-ing.

one. They found an-oth-er one. This morn-ing.

one. They found an-oth-er one. This morn-ing.

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First publication for sale 1995, United Kingdom.

Choral

Works with piano,
instruments or
ensemble

Changed (1997) 3'

for SATB choir with accompaniment of organ, harp, string trio or any three like instruments.

Words from 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' by Wallace Stevens (E)

Premiere: 12 December 1998 Walker Hall, Kilbirnie Cunningham Chamber Choir and members of the North Ayrshire Youth Silver Band / Dorothy Howden

Level 2

A beautiful, straightforward and imaginative piece which is highly effective. The instruments sets up a ground bass that is imitated by the other instrumental parts over which the choir sings colourful phrases including 'blue' coloured chords. There is a lovely sense of stylistic cross-over in this piece.

As with so much MacMillan, the ambiguity of meaning within the words lends ambiguity to the musical style that gives it a sense of mystery way beyond the scale of a little piece. It is one of the fascinating elements of MacMillan's style that the effect, the atmosphere, the ephemeral spirit remains with the listener long after the performance has ended. This is another starter-level piece well worth investigating as an introduction to MacMillan's style.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

A Child is Born in Bethlehem (1978) 6'

for ATB (soli or choir) and oboe

Text: Dutch traditional translated by R C Trevelyan (E-L)

Premiere: 21 January 2012 St John's College, Cambridge Choir of St John's College, Cambridge / Andrew Nethsingha

Level 3

An unusual and lovely carol first performed in the St John's College Epiphany carol service. MacMillan originally wrote this carol when he was nineteen and, along with other early works (like parts of Who are these angels?), has recently been rediscovering what he might call into service for his more recent works.

The atmosphere set up by the opening oboe soliloquy is magical and it could almost be singing the opening words as the first two phrases fit them beautifully. A tenor voice takes over the melodic line seamlessly. The trio of voices then sings a short contrapuntal passage and is joined by the oboe. Varied scoring, contrasting dynamics, and a mixture of counterpoint and chordal writing leading to a revisiting of the opening material at the end makes for an effective and memorable experience. The challenge here is taking up the oboe's lyricism in the vocal parts and matching its expressiveness.

> [More Info](#)

The Company of Heaven (1999, rev.2016) 30'

for children's voices (younger and older with separate parts), organ, and with ad lib sections for wind band and carnyx solo
Text by John Bell (with part from the Book of Revelation) (E)
Premiere: 12 September 2000 Vale of Glamorgan Festival Children from Vale of Glamorgan schools / John Kenny

Level 1-2

This is another example of MacMillan responding imaginatively to the needs of the community. This gebrauchsmusik element in MacMillan's output is critical to his function as a composer and is part of what makes him so valuable, and such a particular asset to his community in Scotland. The ability to write well for young people – not to 'write down' or patronize them, is a rare one. Britten had a genius for it and MacMillan also demonstrates intuitive skill. Company of Heaven is fun for the performers with the additional colours of wind instruments and the carnyx who all enter after the piece has started and gradually take over the central part of the work. The voices re-emerge and all join together for loud Hosannas. Soon afterwards, the band and carnyx leave the hall again and the work ends by the older voices singing a text based on the title words and then the serene singing of an Alleluia by the younger voices.

An ideal, straightforward project for a community group looking for something slightly unusual but with drama and newsworthiness.

> [More Info](#)

Domine non secundum peccata nostra (2010) 6'

for SSATTBB and violin

Text: Tract for Ash Wednesday: Psalm 102 vv 10, 78, 8, 9 (L)

Premiere: 9 March 2011 St John's College, Cambridge Margaret Faultless / Choir of St John's College, Cambridge / Andrew Nethsingha

Level 2 (violin Level 3-4)

Another unusual combination of solo instrument with choir as with A child is born also written for (or first performed by) St John's Cambridge. The mood is perfect for the start of Lent, serious, thoughtful and thought-provoking. The violin's strong pizzicato chords and longer solo leading into the final repeat of the first section gives the piece a sense of development through its rondo shape but ultimately leaving the choir with the last word.

The choral writing here is undemanding although the singers need to be well-prepared for the start of the final reprise following the violin's solo. But ending on a D and the first chord being an open D-A-D chord the problems are more of confidence than of a lack of aural information.

Stylistically, there are no surprises here and devotees of MacMillan's music will recognize the familiar fingerprints (grace notes, chant, ornamentation) and know how they are dealt with.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Dutch Carol (2001) 4'

for unison upper voices (children) and piano

Traditional text of 'A child is born in Bethlehem' (E/L)

Written for the choir of St Aloysius' Junior School, Glasgow

Level 1

This is a simple carol which is given a colourful piano part to enhance its sense of progress. Easy for children to pick up and attractive to listen to. It would obviously also work well for adult sopranos in a Christmas carol concert where a piano was being used.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Ecce Sacerdos Magnus (2011) 3'

for unison voices, two trumpets and organ

Text: Antiphon for a Bishop (L)

Premiere: 15 August 2011 Aberdeen

Aberdeen Cathedral Choir

Level 1

This impressive piece, dancing and upbeat, was written for the consecration of the Bishop Hugh Gilbert as Catholic Bishop of Aberdeen. The text (in Latin) is highly appropriate: 'Behold the great priest who in his days pleased God.' The vocal lines are chant-like and are almost exclusively on repeated As and Ds. A simple chordal organ part supports and the trumpets play delicious duets as an interlude in the three verses. The dance is emphasised by the 3/4 and 3/8 alternating bars. In its very simplicity it is direct and celebratory. There are three verses, all the same except for the slight alteration which the different word underlay necessitates. The piece ends with a Gloria Patri.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

The Halie Speerit's Dauncers (1996) 6'

for unison voices and piano or harp accompaniment

Text by James McGonigal (Scots)

Premiere: 28 April 1997 Corpus Christi Primary School,

Glasgow

Children of Corpus Christi Primary School / James MacMillan

Level 1

This is another work that demonstrates James MacMillan's commitment to being 'useful' as a composer. Not for him the 'ivory tower' from which his music would be destined just for professional choirs and orchestras. MacMillan's music is to be sung by church choirs, choral societies, yes, professional forces, but also, as here, children's voices in unison.

A wonderful Scottish poem (so Scottish, most English-language performers would regard it as foreign!) by James McGonigal is given a romping dance-like treatment by MacMillan. It's irresistible and it's huge fun for the children.

> [More Info](#)

Heyoka Te Deum (1999) 5'

for unison (beginners) voices, three part treble voices, flute, tubular bells and piano

Text taken from the Latin Te Deum and a traditional Lakota Chant (E)

Premiere: 16 June 2000 Brooklyn

Brooklyn Youth Choir / Doreen Rao

Level 2

This enterprising work imaginatively gives the Latin Te Deum words to a choir of beginner singers and the Lakota chant is given to a three part choir of treble voices. The flute and bells support the vocal parts without merely doubling, and the piano part provides colourful accompaniment that often echoes the vocal parts. MacMillan's often-used vocal ornamentation is much in evidence here and the piece is challenging but not difficult. It is an ideal vehicle for young singers who will enjoy working through the rhythmic groupings and getting to grips with singing quick scales and tuning triadic passages. The beginners (who are also given simpler forms of the ornament) will also find the involvement with their more experienced counterparts exciting and motivating.

It is possible that a conductor of a youth choir might look at the score, see a lot of demi-semi-quavers and think it too difficult to contemplate. They should look further, however, and see that the opening material is re-used at the start of every section (at different pitches) and so that feeling of homecoming each time will help anchor the piece in the children's minds. It is very cleverly conceived and wonderful to see a composer writing music for children which makes demands which can be met rather than writing down to an imaginary 'children's' level.

There are very helpful notes by Doreen Rao (editor of the Choral Music Experience) in the front of the score which give hints about how to approach teaching this music to young singers in an imaginative and enjoyable way.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

I Awoke Today: Resurrection Chorus (2015) 4'
for SATB chorus and ensemble
Text: Manchester Streetwise Explore Group, arranged by Penny Woolcock (E)
Premiere: 25 March 2016 Manchester Streetwise Opera / The Sixteen / Penny Woolcock

Level 1

Streetwise Opera is an arts organisation working with the homeless sector to inspire change and empower people to realise their own creative potential. They aim to transform lives by supporting people to make meaningful connections through the arts, rebuild social networks, improve wellbeing and develop new skills. World-class artists are engaged to collaborate with individuals affected by homelessness to create powerful works of art, and to positively impact how society views homelessness.

Together with The Sixteen they made an abridged version of Bach's St Matthew Passion as their major project of 2016 and asked MacMillan to write a new final chorus which would be uplifting. The words were written by Streetwise's Explore Group and arranged by theatre director Penny Woolcock.

The scoring is for 2 flutes and oboes, string quartet and piano with a single SATB chorus. As originally conceived it is for unison voices but MacMillan has added some bars of harmony which can be used to enrich moments in the progress of the movement. In the original abridged version it followed the moment of revelation by the Centurion 'Truly this was the Son of God' and MacMillan ends the movement with that music as the choir trails away '...as the rain still falls...'. It is an intensely moving movement – almost inconceivably adding something to Bach's incomparable masterpiece.

> [More Info](#)

New-made for a king (2011) 6'
for SSAA chorus and piano
Text: Michael Symmons Roberts, from 'Her Maker's Maker' (E)
Premiere: 23 June 2012 Farnham Farnham Youth Choir / Andreas Klatt

Level 2

This beautiful upper voices piece was written for the Farnham Youth Choir and premiered in 2012. Fittingly it is dedicated to MacMillan's daughter Catherine and his new granddaughter, Sara, who tragically died so few years later, in 2016, of complications due to Dandy Walker Syndrome. The joy of this work reflects the joy of the family at its new addition however disabled she was and as MacMillan said in the eulogy he gave at her funeral, 'Over these years with Sara some of us experienced other, more gradual, more surprising, more silent and transformative realisations of the divine love...in the unassuming, patient, tiny, broken, handicapped, smiling, listening, quacking, delighted presence of Sara'.

This piece reflects all that overflowing of love in its warmth, its slightly unusual sound-world (for MacMillan) of light-romanticism and the lovely upper voice writing in four parts. The text is a beautiful poem by Michael Symmons Roberts from a set of three Nativity Poems as an echo of the birth of Jesus but for our own day: 'I show him all we made of his creation, colours of injustice: women slaving in the fields to cut the flax...so rich high priests and kings can drape in robes of lustrous purple'. But we, representing the three Kings, 'brought two turtle doves as offerings. No shame: we cannot afford a lamb. On our journey home, a woman gave to us a sheet of linen: 'New-made for a king', she said, 'a cloak, a net, a sail, a shroud'. And it is at the mention of the shroud that everything changes. The piano drifts upwards, the voices rise and fall humming sadly (Lontano), the piano rumbles as low as

possible and we are left anticipating the death of Jesus. But how sadly prescient this was also for little Sara.

This affecting work needs an upper voice choir of some capability. The notes are not difficult for a group used to singing in parts, but the engagement with the text is crucial for making the most of MacMillan's inspired realisation.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

● (2008) 7'
Advent antiphon for 21 December, for 3-part treble choir, trumpet and strings or organ
Text : Liturgical (E)
Premiere: 23 June 2008 Queen's Hall, Edinburgh St Mary's Music School

Level 2

Another spiritual journey here but always with something fresh to say. A mostly very straightforward piece with almost Lotti Crucifixus-like suspensions in its early and latter phrases. The string parts are mostly sustained or pizzicato and there is a quietly luminous moment for the strings at 'a light has shone' which is where the trumpet makes its first appearance. The middle section (purely set to the letter 'O') is marginally more challenging mostly because of the slightly more complex rhythm. The final section sees a return of the opening choral material accompanied differently. A successful performance needs a balanced group of upper voices, a confident trumpeter and a fair number of strings as the music divides at one point into 14 parts.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Os Mutorum (2006) 4'
Mouth of the Dumb
(The Strathclyde Motets)
for 2-part upper voices and harp
Text: Medieval chant from the Inchcolm Antiphoner (L)
Premiere: 22 June 2008 St Columba's Church, Maryhill, Glasgow
Canty / William Taylor

Level 2

This Latin motet for the feast of St Columba is a hauntingly beautiful piece for upper voices, whether employing girls, boys or an adult female group. The two-parts largely move in parallel with spread chords in the accompaniment, before launching into rapturous canons in the Alleluia section.

The accompaniment was originally written for clàrsach – a traditional Gaelic harp – but is equally suitable for modern harp or even for a keyboard with harp sounds for school performance. The overall flavour is Celtic in its devotional simplicity, recapturing a medieval world not too distant from the music of Hildegard of Bingen.

The work is very simple in terms of pitches and can be quickly learnt. However it calls for smooth legato singing, good tuning when moving in thirds, careful gradation of dynamics and the vocal confidence to float a couple of top As and unfold the Alleluias into space. An English language version is also available under the title Mouth of the Dumb.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

The Prophecy (1997) 8'
for school choir (or high solo voice) and ensemble consisting of flute; clarinet (E flat); trombone; percussion (glockenspiel/2 tom-toms/bass drum/suspended cymbal); piano; violin; cello
Text is anonymous from the ninth century (E)
Premiere: 11 October 1997 Queen Elizabeth Hall, London Children from Haringey schools and musicians from the Philharmonia Orchestra / James MacMillan, Nicholas Wilks and John Cooney

Level 2 for the voices

The text is taken from The Story of Deirdriu, described by MacMillan as an Irish mythological adventure tale. Yet again, he proves his ability in writing for young people in a way that will stimulate their imaginations and yet be entirely within their grasp as performers. The instrumental ensemble should ideally be a professional group, and its strongly dramatic writing contrasts with the straightforward story telling of the vocal parts.

> [More Info](#)

The Rising Moon (2014) 5'
for unison voices and handbells
Text by Robert Burns, from 'Death and Dr Hornbook' (Scots)

Level 1

This was written for Peter Maxwell Davies's 80th birthday and is a simple unison voices melody accompanied by handbells. It sets a verse by Robert Burns from Death and Dr Hornbrook which mentions Cumnock hills where MacMillan grew up and where he now runs an annual arts festival – the Cumnock Tryst. It is a very simple setting and powerfully melodic in that way which the best folk-song has of ingraining itself into our minds. MacMillan, time and again, shows how contemporary music can be intensely lyrical and yet be absolutely of its time and place.

> [More Info](#)

Seven Angels (2014) 36'
for mixed chorus (with multiple divisi), soloists (from chorus) and small instrumental ensemble
Text: Revelation 8; 9: 1-4, 13-17a; 11: 12b, 15-19; 21: 1-6a (E)
Premiere: 31 January 2015 Birmingham Ex Cathedra / Jeffrey Skidmore

Level 5

This adventurous work was commissioned by the Birmingham based chamber choir, Ex Cathedra and their conductor, Jeffrey Skidmore. The text is an extended one from the Book of Revelation where seven angels were given trumpets to blow and with each trumpet blast a new apocalyptic vision emerged ending in the wonderful image 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...'. It is rich pickings for an imagination as fertile as MacMillan's who has turned to the Revelation before: the wonderful motet The Song of the Lamb is a particularly powerful example.

The work is scored for 2 trumpets doubling Natural Trumpet in E flat and C and two Shofars (ram's horn), percussion (1 player with multiple instruments), harp and cello. It is an extended work lasting some 35 minutes and uses SATB soloists from within the choir but who need to use a Sprechstimme approach to some of their solo work at some extreme pitches.

This is an extremely dramatic work which draws the listener into the apocalyptic story line perhaps (rather like the Stabat Mater) made even more powerful through the economical orchestra which allows the text to dominate. There is a great deal of divisi work with all parts dividing into four at times and voices are asked to hum, to shout, to approximate pitch, and to be as flexible as MacMillan's instructions dictate. The ending is cataclysmic.

A remarkable work which needs a choir of considerable skill to bring it off successfully. There are many of these around the world which will relish the demands and the memorable outcome of a successful performance.

> [More Info](#)

Sing On, Sweet Thrush (2018) 4'
for SATB, piano and cello
Text by Robert Burns (1759-96)
Premiere: 24 January 2019 Ayrshire Genesis Foundation

Level 2

This lovely accompanied part-song was commissioned by the Genesis Foundation to celebrate Prince Charles's 70th birthday in 2018. It is scored for choir, piano and the Prince's instrument, the 'cello'. The choral parts are strictly in four voices with no divisi and this is a setting (text by Robert Burns) which will sit easily and gratefully in many choirs' programmes. It celebrates nature, another of Prince Charles's passions, of course, and the whole piece is alive with bubbling rhythm, lovely uneven 5/8 bars, and lots of joyful outbursts from the choir. There is almost nothing to scare a competent choir and only a few bars near the end where the sopranos and altos have to negotiate some phrases of rising semiquavers (16ths). This is a truly celebratory piece which will fit many programming themes.

> [More Info](#)

So Deep (1992) 7'
for SSAATTBB choir and optional oboe and viola solos
Text by Robert Burns (Scots)
Written as a wedding gift for two friends
Premiere: 13 June 1992

Level 2

A superbly imaginative arrangement of Robert Burns's O my love's like a red, red rose (Burns wrote both words and melody). The melody winds its way through this arrangement supported by a variety of drones (bagpipe-like at times). A little later the accompanying voices repeat the words 'so deep' in their own times to create what MacMillan describes as 'the ebb and flow of a large, gentle wave'. Close to the end of the vocal parts the oboe begins, soon followed by the viola and they bring the piece to a fading conclusion.

A straightforward and colourful work that would make an effective short concert piece perhaps in a group of unusual folksong arrangements.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)



Turn the Dark Cloud Inside Out (2018) 1'
for unison children's voices, bellringers, SATB & wind quintet
Text: Ivor Novello (1893-1951)
Premiere: 7 October 2018 Ayrshire
Cumnock Tryst / James MacMillan

Level 1-2

This short song for children's voices, wind quintet (flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, bassoon) and handbells uses the words by Lena Gilbert Ford written in the first World War ('Keep the home fires burning') and made famous by Ivor Novello's setting. It was written for the 2018 Cumnock Tryst festival when it was conducted by the composer.

The music is simple and the accompaniment entirely supportive. Only three pages of score long it is extended by the use of repeated sections, the main central one having simple ATB chords embellished by a fluid, gently hummed soprano reverie.

> [More Info](#)

Who are these angels? (2009) 6'
for SATBB and string quartet, or male voices (TTBB) and string quartet
Latin text anon, attributed to St Augustine. English text anon
Premiere: 28 April 2009 Laurenskerk Rotterdam
DoelenKwartet / Ensemble Amarcord

Level 3-4

This beautiful, atmospheric work stems from MacMillan's schooldays when, aged seventeen, he wrote the Latin setting which is almost pure Renaissance polyphony and contributes to the work's timeless quality. MacMillan's recent expansion of the work into its present form is linked to his opera Clemency which uses the 'Who are these angels?' idea. MacMillan has said that in the opera its meaning is clear but it gives the later work a mysterious quality as the words seemingly come from nowhere.

The two versions mirror each other exactly with the sopranos/altos taking the 'Who are these angels?' where T1/Baritones did in the male voice version. The setting is very straightforward and for a change, it is a viola some way into the piece which is given his characteristic ornamental 'chant' to play. The ending is extraordinary. Unpitched 'soft, little glissandi...like cooing doves or whale song, descending to the lowest registers' from all the string players gives a completely other-worldly feel – what MacMillan also describes as the 'unknowability of God. It is not dissimilar from the dying string sighs at the end of The Seven Last Words from the Cross.

While the notes in this work are straightforward, it is the tonal blend which needs real care. The top tenor part is exposed and needs some confident voices who are capable of well-produced top As. The usual grace note/ornament challenges are all here as well.

> [More Info](#)

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Dedicated to John Studzinski

STABAT MATER

I – Stabat Mater dolorosa

JAMES MACMILLAN
(b. 1959)

Adagio

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Choral

Works with orchestra

All the Hills and Vales Along (2017) 37'

for solo tenor, chorus, brass band and strings
Text by Charles Hamilton Sorley (E)
Premiere: 6 October 2018 Cumnock, UK
Ian Bostridge, tenor / Dalmellington Band / Edinburgh String Quartet / Nikita Naumov, double bass / Cumnock Festival Chorus / Eamonn Dougan

Level (choir) 3

This is a First World War centenary work premiered in October 2018 at MacMillan's Cumnock Tryst festival in its smaller-scale (chamber) version and followed the next month by the premiere with full orchestra at the Barbican Hall in London. It is scored for tenor solo, chorus, brass band and strings, or in its reduced version the strings can be a string quintet. The text is a series of poems by Charles Hamilton Sorley who died at the battle of Loos in 1915 (MacMillan used his poetry also in When you see the millions of the mouthless dead). Despite a small body of work he was highly regarded as a major war poet and certainly his work provides MacMillan with a rich vein of descriptive poetry which clearly excited his imagination.

The interesting thing about this work is how essentially simple it is. It is as if he wants Sorley's message to be as clear as possible. The orchestration is luminous and unfussy and the use of the brass band ignites feelings of the colliery band (MacMillan's grandfather was a coalminer) and the ordinary man who went out, as so many did, in hope but simply met their death. The work is full of powerful resonances in this way.

The vocal parts are remarkably straightforward which, again, connects with the idea of the local choir, or the band of military men singing as they march. The six movements are varied. The first is purely orchestral, the second brings the choir in in what MacMillan describes as 'martial, defiant and sardonic music'. The third is for tenor solo and strings, 'nocturnal and reflective'. The fourth is choral again with the choir singing chorale-like music while the strings punctuate with free, floating phrases. The fifth for tenor solo and strings, is quick, 'evoking the chaos and fury of battle' while the sixth, 'To Germany' is a remarkable poem addressed to the enemy looking forward to a time beyond all the mayhem when both countries can be friends and allies again. The work ends, as MacMillan has stated 'with the main theme, this time blared out in the band, with distant chords on humming voices and strings'.

This really is a work to be investigated. It is well within the reach of reasonably accomplished choirs and I can do little more than echo the comment in The Times's review of the work which stated that it is 'a work to touch your soul and keep you transfixed'.

> [More Info](#)

The Birds of Rhiannon (2001) 24'

Tone poem for orchestra and SATB choir 2.picc.2.corA.2.bcl. dbcl.ssax.2.dbn—4.3.3.1—timp.perc(4)—harp—strings
Words by Michael Symmons Roberts (E)
Premiere: 26 July 2001 Royal Albert Hall, London
The Sixteen and the BBC Philharmonic / James MacMillan

Level 4-5

This is a mainly orchestral work of great power based on a Welsh myth. The Birds of Rhiannon are mystical, angelic presences who appear and sing on the death of Bran – a Fisher King-type figure who sacrifices his life for the sake of peace between two warring peoples. MacMillan describes the work as being 'a dramatic concerto for orchestra with a mystical coda for choir'.

There is a dramatic first section, a meditative second section building to a huge climax. An Andante third section featuring a battery of unusual percussion uses a chorale-like motif (also a feature of Quickenings) and leads to a final section that employs the choir for the first time, lasting some seven minutes. This is scored as SSAATTBB (and is not for the faint-hearted!). This final music is very beautiful indeed and although MacMillan has written an alternative ending for when there is no chorus available, to my mind, this is what makes this work. It is big, passionate choral writing (with something of the elemental feeling of Britten's Grimes), with the choir in the foreground and spectral memories of orchestral events hovering in the distant background. This declamatory opening winds down to a peaceful and easier central section and this then builds again to wonderfully wide-spaced culminating chords of G major, repeated several times, topped by a short orchestral coda.

More straightforward (and shorter) than Quickenings and, for a conductor looking for a MacMillan choral/orchestral work to cut his/her teeth on, this is an ideal starting point.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Cantos Sagrados (1989, orch.1997) 22'

for SATB choir and orchestra or organ
3(III=af/picc).2.corA.2.bcl.3(III=dbn)—4.3.3.1—timp.
perc(3):vib/ metal bar/cyms/sizzle cym/t.bells/SD/susp.
cym/2tuned gongs(B,D)/BD/tam-t—harp—pft(=cel)—strings
Premiere: 21 March 1998 Glasgow Cathedral
Royal Scottish National Orchestra and Chorus / Christopher Bell

for further information see *Choral works with organ* on page 21

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Catherine's Lullabies (1990) 20'
for SATB choir, brass and percussion 3tp.2trbn.Btrbn—perc(2)

Text from the Creed and Magnificat, and from a mother of the Plaza de Mayo; Isaiah 61:1-2; Ecclesiasticus 4; Litany of the Saints (L/E)

Written to celebrate the birth of MacMillan's daughter, Catherine, on 22 September 1990
Premiere: 10 February 1991 Glasgow John Currie Singers

Level 5

As always, MacMillan looks freshly at his forms, here the idea of a 'lullaby'. This work has nothing to do with traditional lullabies, but is a 'manifesto of spiritual and social liberation'. The texts MacMillan has chosen for the work are biblically focussed and reflect his belief in social justice and equality which he then describes as 'the finest lullabies for our children – effective endearments, seeds of hope and freedom to blossom in the future'.

The work is quite hard-hitting and besides the setting of the main texts includes, in the final section, the singers playing a child-like, nonsensical word association game which builds to a huge climax and sudden stop. This has resonances with his major choral/orchestral work *Quickening* which includes a nonsense text. But where that was loosely based on old Aramaic, this is based on words plucked from the air having associations with faith, the liturgy and love. The whole effect is powerful and persuasive.

> [More Info](#)

Christmas Oratorio (2019) 105'

Oratorio for soprano, baritone, chorus and orchestra
Text: Biblical (E), Liturgical (L), Traditional (Scottish Gaelic), Southwell (E), Donne (E), Milton (E)
Premiere: 16 January 2021 Amsterdam
Mary Bevan, soprano / Christopher Maltman, baritone / Netherlands Radio Philharmonic & Choir / James MacMillan

Level 4-5

Written in 2019, this oratorio is one of MacMillan's most recent large-scale scores lasting just under two hours in two separate parts. It was commissioned by orchestras in London, Melbourne and New York, together with the leading Amsterdam radio concert series. It was premiered in Amsterdam instead of London where the COVID pandemic prevented its performance. It is a fascinating work – and again we marvel at MacMillan's ability to divorce himself completely from Bach's iconic work of the same name whilst obviously wanting to write his own version of the same concept, as with his *Passions*. Nothing could be clearer in this fresh approach than the opening which is redolent of Christmas carols we all know and love, child-like innocence – all 6/8 and baubles. It is delicious. But then look at his setting of Robert Southwell's Behold a silly tender babe so well-known from Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols* and see this soprano solo aria and its pure MacMillan soundscape. In a work this size it is almost invidious to single out individual sections but one of the most gently MacMillan-esque is the *Hodie salvator apparuit* in Part 1 (figure 48) which has unaccompanied choir with a wonderfully attractive dancing violin solo. This is interrupted by an orchestral interlude before calming down to take the movement to its end. In Part 2 his extraordinary setting of *Hodie virgo, cujus viscera demonstrates*, again, his exceptional ability with counterpoint. This unaccompanied setting has us in mind of Palestrina and yet it is pure MacMillan. Another comes in the fourth chorus *My love and tender one*. There is something in these settings which seems to resonate with MacMillan's own feelings as a father. The use of the celesta at the end of this sounds like the wind chimes which fascinate

any baby looking up from its pram. The final movement is purely orchestral. We are again reminded of how eclectic MacMillan can be, and how he can tug at our heart strings with the most romantic-feeling music. How far contemporary music has come since the heady and, for many, unfriendly days of the late twentieth century. This is a fabulous conception.

The work is structured around an assortment of poetry, liturgical texts and scripture relating to Jesus's birth. There are seven movements in each Part. MacMillan writes 'the music of each Part is topped and tailed by short orchestral movements (four in all), creating a palindromic structure. The Choruses are mostly Latin liturgical texts (although the last one is a Scottish lullaby), the Arias are settings of poems by Robert Southwell (2), John Donne and John Milton, and the two central Tableaux are biblical accounts from the Gospel of St Matthew in Part 1 and St John in Part 2'.

MacMillan has married the joy of the birth of a child – and this child in particular – with a feeling for the tragic end to his all too short life. As in his *St Luke Passion*, the role of the Evangelist narrating the story is taken not by a soloist but by the chorus, and the arias setting the earlier English poetry are all, as MacMillan acknowledges, firmly in the oratorio tradition.

The orchestration is for normal-sized symphony orchestra with two percussion players in addition to the timpani. The choral parts in this work are not frightening (which doesn't mean that there are not challenges along the way) and it is surely manageable by any organization with the necessary resources to mount such a large-scale work. This is a deeply affecting, moving and involving work which will stay with the performer and listener for a long time after experiencing it. The mix between the associations we all have with music for this season, the telling of the nativity story in all its mythological wonder, together with the hindsight (or perhaps premonition) of Jesus's life as a triumph leading to tragedy is all here. It is a world of experience and what a great thing that it takes the whole evening so that it can't be watered down by a popular work simply to achieve 'bums on seats'! It would be my sincere hope that MacMillan, as one of the true greats of our day, would achieve that by himself.

> [More Info](#)

Credo (2012) 25'

for SATB choir and orchestra
2.1.corA.2.2(II=dbn)—2.2.0.0—timp—strings
Text from the Mass (L)
Premiere: 7 August 2012 Royal Albert Hall, London
BBC Philharmonic Orchestra / Juanjo Mena

Level 4

This is a large-scale work but using a fairly economical orchestra. Perhaps surprisingly it is also MacMillan's first setting of the Creed. As he has pointed out, musical settings of the Creed in a liturgical setting are no longer viable and so this work is conceived as a concert piece. As MacMillan's programme note details, the Credo is cast in three movements reflecting the Trinitarian nature of the text.

The short first movement, 'Pater', begins with a high intonation, evoking liturgical practice. Most of the choral writing here is syllabic and homophonic with orchestral interjections that are busier or fanfare-like.

The more substantial middle movement, 'Filius', begins with a festal theme in layers of different tonalities and pulses. Some of the choral writing is now more ornamented and florid, and that is taken up by the instruments too. In the central section, at the holiest words *et incarnatus est* and thereafter, the choir

is accompanied by three high solo violas. The opening fanfare motif returns in different colours towards the end.

The final movement, 'Spiritus Sanctus', is the longest, beginning with mysterious buzzing chords, first on wind and then on strings. The historical hinterlands of plainsong, motet and cantus firmus are the inspirations behind much of this music. After the final Amen, there is a brief joyous coda for the orchestra.

As MacMillan has continued to change and develop over recent years he has also done what few composers of his stature have bothered with and that is to realize that a choral work will stand far more chance of repeated performances by a variety of choirs through making his demands on them reasonable. This is true in Credo. While there are plenty of divisi, and the choir needs to be confident and to balance with a strong orchestra, the notes are not essentially difficult for a competent choir. Familiar issues do occur which will test some. The canonic ornamental chant in *Filius* between altos and tenors, for instance. But these hold few terrors in reality, and familiarity with the style will bring knowledge of how to deal with the grace notes and ornamental turns. They should not be done so quickly that they can't be heard (a common fault in performance). Pacing and tonal weight need thought.

There are beautiful passages in this work as well as dramatic outbursts and timeless chanting. MacMillan's ability as a contrapuntist brings an extra layer to the choral writing (let alone the orchestra...) and the powerfully emotive unaccompanied section for the 'Et resurrexit' is a wonderful piece of writing. The dancing 'qui ex patre' in the final movement is electric and has something of the B minor Mass Sanctus about its triplet exuberance – and talking of the Bach Mass, the cantus firmus-like *Confiteor* in MacMillan's third movement seems also to take its cue from Bach's powered *cantus firmi* in his own movement however different the sound world may be. Emphatic and exciting *Amens* close the work.

> [More Info](#)

A European Requiem (2015) 43'

for counter-tenor (or alto) and baritone soli, mixed chorus and orchestra
Text: (L)
Premiere: 2 January 2016 Eugene
Christopher Ainslie, counter-tenor, Morgan Smith, baritone / Oregon Bach Festival Orchestra / Berwick Chorus of Oregon Bach Festival / Matthew Halls

Level 4-5

It was an unfortunate coincidence that the day after the British vote to leave the European Union ('Brexit') the world premiere of this work was given at the Oregon Bach Festival in June 2016. MacMillan has therefore had to spend a lot of time and effort insisting that his Requiem has no overt political motivation but, rather, was a desire to write a work in what he saw as a particularly European form which composers have turned to 'when they identify with a sense of loss, often as much within themselves, as prompted by a specific death'. MacMillan has described the work as attempting 'to fuse the Requiem with symphonic form in a single continuous movement, moving between the sections of the text via linking orchestral episodes'. He also states that, as a non-liturgical work, he has not used Gregorian chant although obvious references do surface in melodic lines especially in the *In Paradisum* at the end.

The scoring is for counter-tenor (or alto) and baritone soloists, chorus, full symphony orchestra with three percussion players as well as timpani and harp. The work lasts for about 40 minutes.

MacMillan makes the interesting point about the text saying that Brahms stepped out of line when writing his German Requiem in his own language but MacMillan feels more drawn to Latin 'which represents for me the common European language that existed before nationalist barriers were erected... Setting texts in Latin may now seem counter-cultural to many, but for me it represents the ideal rediscovering of our common heritage'.

We have seen time and again MacMillan's instinctive feel for voices, his wonderful ear for textures, his melodic genius often based in his mind on the contours of Gregorian chant, his wonderful way with harmony which can be achingly beautiful at one point and gut-wrenchingly discordant at another. There is everything here in this work from the shouted Hosannas at the end of the Sanctus and Benedictus sections to the beautiful eight-part writing in the earlier Requiem near the start, and the heart-breaking, gentle *Agnus Dei* in which time seems to stand still. The *Libera me* is almost frightening in its energy and intensity where the *In Paradisum* is simply beautiful. As always, his orchestral writing colours, balances, contrasts and supports the voices by turn and is always fascinating for the imagination it demonstrates. How interesting, too, that he would choose a counter-tenor as a soloist, rather than (by choice) a female mezzo or alto. This, surely, is also, like the use of Latin, a glance over the shoulder at the centuries of tradition where male singers would take these higher voice roles in sacred music and thus rooting this overtly contemporary music in a long distant past.

The vocal parts are not as complex as in some of MacMillan's larger-scale works. It is the context which can make this work challenging for any but 'professional' symphonic choruses. But then it is likely that it will only be those kind of musical bodies which could afford to mount such a work with the necessary rehearsal time. However it is hoped that many such bodies all over the world would take this work to their hearts.

> [More Info](#)

Gloria (2011) 20'

for the 50th anniversary of the consecration of Coventry Cathedral
for tenor solo, treble voices, SATB choir, brass (3tp, ttrbn, btrbn), timpani and organ

Text: Liturgical (L)

Premiere: 23 June 2012 Coventry Cathedral
Ian Bostridge/Choral Society of Coventry Cathedral/Saint Michael's Singers/CBSO brass and percussion/James MacMillan

Level 4 (vocal parts)

James MacMillan has written of this major new work that it "is in one continuous movement but has clearly discernible sections throughout. It begins in a declamatory manner with the soloist, reflecting liturgical practice. The first main section Et in terra pax is boisterous and joyful, with instrumental interjections. The second section Laudamus Te is fast and energetic. This is followed by a slow, reflective solo for the tenor, Domine Deus. The children's voices are then highlighted in Domine Fili in music that is simple and dance-like.

However, a more mysterious accompaniment is later added by the organ, muted trumpets and sliding timps. A climactic instrumental outburst then leads to the final section Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris where the large choir sings quietly and unaccompanied. The opening bold music returns before the final Amen which features the solo voice and the children again."

This is a festive setting and will make a welcome alternative to John Rutter's ubiquitous setting for similar forces (brass and organ). MacMillan has, as always, been very practical in making a setting which is an impressive aural experience but which is manageable by competent forces. Instrumentalists have to be agile, but the choirs are given music to sing which will be well within the range of most ambitious groups. There are some extended unaccompanied passages which need to be kept in tune to avoid embarrassment (à la Bruckner E minor Mass), particularly the 'Qui sedes' section. The most difficult moment is likely to be finding the cluster chord which is used for 'garbled recitation' of the 'quoniam' text just before the end.

An exciting and effective new concert work which should be quickly picked up by many choirs.

> [More Info](#)

Hodie puer nascitur (2011) 5'

Motet for chorus (SATB) and ensemble 0.0.0.0—1.1.2.0—perc(2):glsp/crot—cel—harp—strings(8,6,0,0,0)

Text and chant based on anonymous 14th century French-Cypriot antiphon (L)

Premiere: 13 April 2012 Concertgebouw Amsterdam
Huelgas Ensemble / Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra / Martyn Brabbins

Level 3

*This is a fascinatingly colourful motet based on a chant which MacMillan gives the tenors throughout. The sopranos and altos are given free rhythm and marked *lontano* (distantly) and MacMillan directs that 'each singer should enter a few seconds after the one before, creating a dense but quiet web of sound throughout'. The effect is magically ethereal. The highly unusual ensemble, using only violins and no string basses, together with bell-like instruments: celesta, crotales, glockenspiel and the gently percussive but resonant harp, creates an apt sense of ancient and modern and also conjures up something of a Christmas atmosphere.*

The notes are not difficult but the challenge will be for less expert choirs to have the confidence not only to sing softly and

beautifully enough, but also to sing sufficiently independently of each other as MacMillan asks. The issue of balance between the ensemble and choir will also need to be carefully worked out with the brass instruments playing as softly but expressively as demanded. Everything in the music is closely related and so everyone has a responsibility to everyone else in their sense of line and rhythm. The ending, which has the sopranos and altos fading out individually could be truly beautiful if managed with real sensitivity.

> [More Info](#)

Little Mass (2014) 30'

for children's chorus and orchestra

Text: Liturgical (L)

Premiere: 28 March 2015 Liverpool
Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra / Liverpool Philharmonic Training Choirs, Youth Choirs, Melody Makers / James MacMillan

Level (choir) 3

This setting of sections of the Mass (Kyrie, Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei) was commissioned by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society for its 175th anniversary, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. It was also personally supported by the Groves family marking the centenary of Sir Charles Groves in the month he would have celebrated his 100th birthday. It is scored for four-part treble voices and normal symphony orchestra. It lasts for about 30 minutes.

MacMillan felt that the vocal parts were 'imagined as an extension and enhancement of the orchestral palette where the young voices are 'smudged' into the orchestral sound in an impressionistic manner'. He also noted that the work is intended for concert rather than liturgical performance. But it is also a major addition to the relatively few large-scale works for upper voices. The vocal parts are mostly straightforward and where more complex music is demanded it is often in a very familiar MacMillan manner – the use of the triplet or demi-semiquaver (32nd) ornamental figures together with some free, fast recitation ('Pleni sunt caeli' in the Sanctus). But there is much which is beautifully lyrical here especially in the serene Benedictus and the Agnus Dei which is a moving movement starting with an extended string 'threnody'. The final climax before the 'grant us peace' (Dona nobis pacem) is impassioned before the work subsides into an ethereal ending.

There is much for young voices to enjoy here, and the opportunity of singing such a work with these orchestral forces is something which will stay with them for a long time.

> [More Info](#)

Magnificat (1999) and **Nunc Dimittis** (2000)

for SATB choir and organ or orchestra
2(II=picc).2(II=corA).2.2-4.3.3.1-timp.perc(2):vib/glsp/t.bells/tam-t/susp.cym-harp-organ(ad lib)-strings

for further information see *Choral works with organ*

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

O (2008) 7'

Advent antiphon for 21 December, for 3-part treble choir, trumpet and strings or organ
Text : Liturgical (E)

for further information see *Choral works with piano, instruments or ensemble* on page 32

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Quickening (1998 version / 2018 version) 48' / 51'

for soloists (A,2T,B or 2A,T,2Bar,B), children's choir, SATB chorus and orchestra
2.picc.3(III=corA).3(III=bcl).2.dbn—4.4.3.1—timp.perc(4)—harp—pft(=cel)—chamber org—grand org or synth(ad lib)—strings

Text by Michael Symmons Roberts (E)

Premiere: 5 September 1999 Royal Albert Hall, London
The Hilliard Ensemble, Boys of Westminster Cathedral Choir, BBC Symphony Orchestra and Chorus / Andrew Davis

Level 4-5

Quickening is a large-scale, complex work that is fascinating in its conception and is undoubtedly a major challenge to any group wanting to perform it. MacMillan has stated that "I have specifically written this piece so that it will continue to be performed by amateur choirs. I suppose, in that sense, it should not be technically demanding, although there are things asked of the singers that are quite unusual like the Glossolalia, like the very free, rhythmical approach to singing like that with a strange text, a kind of nonsense text, though it is based on a kind of adaptation of old Aramaic".

The work is about birth, new life, new impulses, but, as MacMillan says, it also has its dark side out of which hope is glimpsed. It is powerfully imaginative and is laid out over four movements, deploying three distinct vocal layers: a small ensemble of soloists (versions created originally for The Hilliard Ensemble and for the King's Singers) and a symphonic chorus on the stage, plus a boys choir with chamber organ support ideally spatially disembodied from the other performers.

A choir has to be confident to take on the kind of challenges posed by this work. The difficulty isn't always the actual notes but rather the context in which they are placed. However, given the large-scale nature of the work and the orchestral resources required (including a large percussion section with an exotic array of instruments) it is likely that any group taking it on will have the necessary expertise. In all the performances to date it has proved to be approachable and rewarding.

*Demands include low-range basses who are *divisi* à 4 in the second movement singing a low D flat/E flat drone (together) for several pages. The Glossolalia (nonsense texts) take some absorbing (and rehearsal) but add a major mystical dimension to the work. Detailed attention is needed on some cluster effects, though these are assembled melodically, then sustained. There is also some exciting unpitched (approximate pitch) rhythmic singing in the last movement, though some of the dancing patterns are doubled within the orchestra and are not as difficult to co-ordinate in performance as might appear.*

Overall, MacMillan's ear for sonority (choral and orchestral) makes this work more practical to rehearse than it looks to be in the score. The 3rd movement is a good example where voice parts are well led by the orchestra and are genuinely straightforward (even though the boys' choir is given some high tessitura singing). The triumphant, chorale-like conclusion of the last movement is thrilling and is some of the most celebratory in MacMillan's choral output, before a fade out with distant boys' voices.

> [More Info](#) (1998 version) > [Listen](#)

> [More Info](#) (2018 version)

Seven Last Words from the Cross (1993) 45'

Cantata for choir and string orchestra
The traditional text of the Seven Last Words from the Cross is based on a compilation from all four gospels to form a sequential presentation of the last seven sentences uttered by Christ (E/L)

Premiere (TV): BBC TV, Holy Week 1994

Premiere (concert): 30 March 1994 St Aloysius Church, Glasgow Cappella Nova and the Scottish Ensemble / Alan Tavener

Level 4-5

This is rightly regarded as MacMillan's masterpiece. It is not easy – none of MacMillan's music really is - but what riches there are for those who scale these heights. MacMillan's conviction in this music, stemming from his deep faith, is passionately obvious and could not leave anyone unmoved by this experience. One of the great features of this work is the way MacMillan uses silence – and the effect it creates is as powerful as symphony orchestras of sound. How few composers know about silence, and how afraid of it we are in contemporary society. The string writing is wonderful and draws resonances from the whole distinguished line of 20th century composers who have written so brilliantly for the medium, here in particular bringing to mind Tippett's Concerto for Double String Orchestra.

There are so many extraordinary and powerful effects in this work that it is invidious to single any out, but the final sighs from the violins at the end of the orchestral postlude with which the work ends actually bring to life the last breaths of the dying Christ. It is mesmerizing and deeply, deeply moving. The plain-speaking (but increasingly dissonant) chordal outbursts at the start of the second movement are juxtaposed with huge balancing passages of silence. The mantra-like utterances of the beautiful but pathetic cadential figure (taken from MacMillan's Clarinet Quintet Tuireadh – Lament) treads its way through the whole of the first movement.

This work is well within the reach of good choral groups and it should be taken up widely. Conductors are urged to look carefully at this work.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)



St Luke Passion (2012-13) 75'

for SATB chorus, children's choir, organ and chamber orchestra

Text: The Bible, Revised Standard Version (E)
Premiere: 15 March 2014 Amsterdam
Netherlands Radio Philharmonic & Choir / Vocaal Talent
Nederland / National Jeugdchoor / Markus Stenz

Level 4-5

MacMillan's St John Passion was an almost operatic approach to the setting of the Passion story in John's version and what MacMillan described as 'examining the human drama'. But his St Luke Passion written five years later between 2012 and 2013 took a completely new direction: 'St Luke has a special appeal for me. As well as relating Christ's life and teachings, Luke is concerned with the idea of the Kingdom of God which points forward to the same author's Acts of the Apostles. This started me thinking about a more spiritual, inward, and pared-back approach to create a focused work about an hour long'.

The orchestration is economical 1:2 (+Cor anglais):1:2 (+Contrabassoon): 2:2:0:0: Timps: organ: strings. The text of the Passion narrative is preceded by a Prelude mostly from the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, and followed by a Postlude concluding with a moving passage from Luke's Acts. There are no soloists. A children's choir in three parts adds to the SATB chorus which acts out the parts normally taken by soloists. So, for instance, the 'recitative' narrative as we might expect it at the start of the Chapter 22 first movement of the Passion story begins 'Now the feast of the Unleavened Bread drew near which is called the Passover...' and this is taken by tenors and basses singing strongly, delivering the narration powerfully together and with absolute clarity. The part of Christus is given to the Children's choir, a really fresh concept, but emphasizing Christ's innocence in this whole saga. They carry a crucial role and this element of the performance needs to be really secure – but there are many fine youth choirs who would relish this task.

One of the impressive elements in this work is the utter clarity of the words through the orchestration which is often very spare, colourful and gentle. This makes the outbursts – and there are really huge moments in this work – so much more shocking by contrast with the surroundings. As so often, there are truly beautiful choral passages. A wonderful example is the passage at figure 33 in Chapter 22 'And there appeared to him an angel from heaven...'. MacMillan has such an ear for choral sonority. The freshness of approach is also very clear in the passage following this where Jesus asks the disciples why they are sleeping. But this is not accusatory, rather resigned, and accepting of the human condition.

Chapter 23 begins with the drama of the impending climax to the story as the trial gets under way. The febrile atmosphere is so brilliantly captured in the section with buzzing strings and uneven bar lengths as the sopranos and altos describe Herod's questioning of Jesus and his contempt for him before handing him back to Pilate. The organ punctuates these sections with massive clusters on full organ. There are echoes of The Seven Last Words from the Cross perhaps not surprisingly given the description of the same event. The portrayal of Jesus' death is incredibly powerful and has a funeral march *ostinato* built into it as the strings wind around leading to the choir introducing the Centurion's assertion that Jesus was indeed innocent. The movement ends with the statement from the horns of the great Passion chorale shining through the massively discordant screaming of the rest of the orchestra. The Postlude is based around chanting tenors and basses and sopranos and altos around which the orchestra play free figures for much of the movement. The choir moves to humming while wind and string arabesques seem to lead us

beyond the world and beyond the horrors of the whole saga just recounted to the promise of the 'new heaven and new earth'.

This is another truly remarkable work which many more choirs will feel able to tackle than might have been the case with MacMillan's St John Passion. It is not easy, but the choral parts are to a far greater degree manageable and will be within the grasp of a good choral society who can sing rhythmically and confidently. It needs a confident approach and a choir from which both men and women will be able to sing MacMillan's considerable lines with good blended tone and clarity of diction. This goes, too, for the Children's choir who have a very meaty role to play throughout which will be an exciting project for boys, girls or a mixture of both.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

St John Passion (2007) 87'

for solo baritone, chorus and orchestra

Baritone solo, small chorus(="narrator"), larger chorus (professional chorus minimum 80 voices, amateur chorus minimum 120 voices)

2(II=picc).2(II=corA).2(II=bc).1.dbn—4.3.3.1—timp.perc(1): t. bells/tuned gongs/tgl/Sanctus bells/5tpl.bl/SD/BD/susp.cym/sizzle cym/tam-t—chamber organ—strings

Text: Revised Standard Version of The Bible (E); the Vulgate (L)
Premiere: 27 April 2008 Barbican Hall, London
Christopher Maltman (baritone) and the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus / Colin Davis

Level 5

This work is a major achievement and as fundamental an addition to the choral repertory as, say, Britten's War Requiem. It was written for Sir Colin Davis' 80th birthday. To follow in Bach's footsteps in creating a work which shares a title with one of his great works rather than calling it something new and trendy shows another aspect of the fundamental nature of this work. It is huge, lasting nearly an hour and half. Its forces are modest on one level – only one soloist, Christus, a baritone.

He needs to be a force to be reckoned with and have real staying power up on top G flats. A 'narrator' chorus (SATB) takes the role of the Evangelist. This is a refreshing and original change to our perception of this role. However, such is the nature of the writing for this group that a small professional ensemble is probably needed both for security and projection. In practical terms this, then, balances the economic benefit of having only one professional solo role.

The 'large' choir takes the other 'personality' roles such as Pilate and Peter, and of course takes the role of the turbae – the crowd. This group needs to be sizeable as the orchestra is large and is used fully. There are many fortissimo passages in this work. It is a dramatic story and is dealt with as such.

This Passion would stretch many amateur choral societies. The writing is dense and complex in places, the rhythmic interaction between choir and orchestra often difficult, and tuning could be a real issue in those (absolutely beautiful) passages which MacMillan leaves unaccompanied for several minutes before bringing the orchestra back in again (movements three and four). Anyone who has sung Bruckner's E minor Mass will recognise the issue. The choir's sopranos are also asked to hum top B flats pianissimo amongst other effects. There is a sizeable passage of cluster singing which will challenge some choirs. One could go on listing such things, but the point is made. This is a work for professionals or for amateur choirs used to working at professional standards – the symphonic chorus with a generous rehearsal schedule. It should be taken up as a 'standard' by the Three Choirs Festival and similar choral focused organisations. It

would be impossible to mount a performance of this Passion safely with a normal 'on the day' three-hour rehearsal, so many singers may experience this important work in the audience rather than on the platform.

The originality of the St John Passion lies in MacMillan's ability to mix old with new, rather in the manner of Bach in his day. There are passages of sumptuous polyphony, there is a new look at the text where passages of Latin are interspersed with the Gospel story in English. After Peter's denials MacMillan inspirationally gives the choir the Latin text 'Tu es Petrus' to sing, redeeming Peter with Jesus' words of affirmation rather than having him break down into tears. Later, in movement seven (Jesus and his Mother), MacMillan introduces not only part of the Stabat Mater but also his own words in the manner of a Christmas carol Lully, lulla, my dear darling. At the end of the work, in the final movement which is purely orchestral, a kind of *via doloroso* march, he introduces a Scots lament over quite brass chords. The string writing here, and especially the elegiac 'cello lines are deeply reminiscent of the early 20th English school. These points stick out as personal markers in a work which deserves world-wide performance. This should be the War Requiem of the 21st century.

see also *Choral Sequence from St John Passion*, under *Works for choir and organ*

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Stabat Mater (2015) 55'

for chorus and string orchestra

Text: Latin, attrib Jacopone da Todi (c.1230-1306)

Premiere: 15 October 2016 London
The Sixteen / Britten Sinfonia / Harry Christophers

Level 4-5

John Studzinski's Genesis Foundation is responsible for some wonderful philanthropic projects, one of the most special being the relationship with Harry Christophers and The Sixteen. They have collaborated frequently and perhaps most notably on Genesis Sixteen, the youth choir associated with the senior group giving opportunities and training to the next generation of young professional consort singers. Like MacMillan, Studzinski is a passionate Catholic and was named Catholic of the Year in 2017 by the Catholic Herald. The Stabat Mater was commissioned by the Genesis Foundation for Harry Christophers and The Sixteen and was premiered with the Britten Sinfonia at the Barbican Hall in London in October 2016.

The work is scored for eight-part choir with soloists from the choir and string orchestra, and the composer views it as a partner piece to his Seven Last Words from the Cross – indeed the Stabat Mater starts from the close of the earlier work. The poem, from the 13th century, is a deeply personal meditation describing the suffering of Jesus's mother as she stands at the foot of the cross watching her son's final agony and death. MacMillan digs deep under the surface of this harrowing poem and the result is so deeply personal that it as if we are carried on that journey as witnesses being caught up in the drama and the emotional turmoil. The level of imagination, the unswerving aural acuteness – the variety of textures and effects are simply overwhelming. But perhaps what tells most is that the means of achieving all this never stretches beyond the possible however challenging the work may be overall. As always, the mixture of these means; chant, pure, simple harmony, complex polyphony, extraordinary virtuoso string writing and passages of the richness which seems to pay homage to Vaughan Williams but is MacMillan through and through, permeate the score.

For the choir and orchestra who can undertake this work effectively it will bring untold rewards. It matters little whether those taking part are practising Christians or of no faith, the sheer humanity which pours from these pages cannot fail to move each and every one, as it does the audience who witnesses it. It is notable that the Vatican allowed The Sixteen's performance of the work as its first live-streaming from the Sistine Chapel gathering a global audience. This is a masterpiece by anyone's reckoning.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Summae Trinitati (2009) 4'

for mixed voices, brass, timpani and organ

Text: Responsory for the solemn reception of an Archbishop, from a 15th-century Canterbury pontifical (L)
Premiere: 21 May 2009 Westminster Cathedral, London
Westminster Cathedral Choir / Martin Baker

Level 3

This short work demonstrates MacMillan's versatility as a composer. This has 'coronation service' wow factor with brass, timpani and organ making a hugely impressive entrance fanfare/motet for the new Archbishop as he entered the west door of Westminster Cathedral and processed down the centre of the nave to the high altar. It is pure musical theatre and would be a good starting work in a concert which included MacMillan's Gloria.

The notes are not difficult for a choir to master. The work is in three sections. Fanfares and choral outbursts followed by chant in the habitual MacMillan manner interspersed with free chant in four part harmony before a return to the opening fanfare material and a wonderfully 'driven into the buffers at full tilt' ending.

> [More Info](#)

The Sun Danced (2016) 29'

for soprano solo, chorus and orchestra
Text from the Apparitions of the Angel and of Our Lady and from the Miracle of the Sun at Fátima (Pt, L, E)
Premiere: 13 October 2017 Fatima, Portugal
Elisabete Matos, soprano / Gulbenkian Orchestra and choir / Joana Carneiro

Level 5

This work is yet another blistering response by MacMillan to a story which has simple magic at its heart. Whether or not you believe in the power of the Virgin Mary to work miracles in the early 20th century you can still become completely engrossed in the telling of this story over a century later.

The work commemorated the centenary of the apparitions of Mary to three shepherd children. In a series of apparitions Mary (called Our Lady of Fatima) promised a miracle on 13 October 1917. Part of MacMillan's text quotes the words she is reported to have spoken to these children, asking them to come for six months on the thirteenth day of the month at the same time. She then promised a seventh visit. In addition she promised that the war would end but also said that a worse one would occur if people did not turn to God. She also asked for a chapel to be built in her honour. The miracle was reported to be a mysterious distortion of the sun which appeared to dance, to come towards the earth and emit radiant colours.

The work is for soprano soloist, choir and orchestra and was commissioned by the Shrine of Fatima in Portugal for the centenary of the apparitions and the miracle. MacMillan uses three languages: Latin, English and Portuguese. It is in a single continuous movement but with various subsections which give it colour and variety, creating the impression of a symphonic structure.

Key points in its progress are the beautifully mysterious orchestral opening with the basses joining later with Mary's words from her first apparition which develops powerfully before the second section which is a deeply moving soprano solo aria during which the end of the war is predicted. The next section is a 'dance-like' orchestral 'fantasy'. This is thrillingly rhythmical and the choir eventually joins. Then, finally, there is another soprano solo 'arioso' where floating top B flats at the end of each phrase show the level of soloist required. The ending is joyful and affirming.

This is a very special work which engages on so many levels. It requires a professional approach and while the choral parts are not anything like as complex as some of MacMillan's other works, their context makes them challenging – but what a challenge to accept and to master!

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Symphony No.5: 'Le grand Inconnu' (2018) 50'

for chamber choir, chorus and orchestra
Text: St John of the Cross (E), Veni Creator (E) Biblical (E, L), H,L,G words
Premiere: 17 August 2019 Edinburgh
Scottish Chamber Orchestra / The Sixteen / Genesis Sixteen / Harry Christophers

Level 5

This is one of MacMillan's most recent major works premiered in 2019 by the Sixteen with the Britten Sinfonia conducted by Harry Christophers who has become one of MacMillan's greatest interpreters. It was commissioned by that remarkable philanthropist John Studzinski through his Genesis Foundation which has supported this partnership so regularly and wholeheartedly.

MacMillan writes of the symphonic tradition and Beethoven's 'monumental impact on it' being an 'imposing legacy which looms like a giant ghost over the shoulder of any living composer foolhardy enough to consider adding to it'. This may be what it feels like in the consideration of the task ahead for him, but it will surely be MacMillan amongst a few other 'greats' to whom future generations will look back as their benchmark and be 'drawn to it like moths flapping around a candle flame'.

Again, it is the depth of MacMillan's imagination which we marvel at. There is always a new approach in the way a project is considered. In this case John Studzinski gave MacMillan Wilfred Stinissen's book The Holy Spirit, Fire of Divine Love which contained this line "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'". And it is these words provided much of the impetus and inspiration for the approach to this work. The first movement is called Ruah, the second Zao and the third Igne vel Igne (Breath or Spirit, Living Water, and Wind, Water, Fire).

The symphony begins with actual breathing, barely heard at first but building as instruments also add their breathing sounds and strings gently tap their fingerboards and as this develops the sound is extraordinarily like gently moving water. It is a curiously moving effect. And as MacMillan says, the symphony is not a traditional setting of words – though there are words set – but he is more interested in the exploration of sound associated in his mind with the Spirit. MacMillan is adamant that, for all its religious associations, it is not a religious work, but it is spiritual, connecting with the post-modern interest – even preoccupation - with spirituality which may or may not meet in liturgical space. So it is the connection with our hunger for meaning, and a reassessment of our place in the world which this work addresses.

There are so many remarkable elements to it that it is almost invidious to pick some out, but the twenty-part chorus at the end of the second movement reminds us that he was also working on Vidi Aquam, his 40-part motet paying homage to Tallis's masterpiece Spem in Alium. He is a master of choral texture and sonority as the start of the final movement also reminds us. The relentless building of the first movement from its almost inaudible opening to its bubbling energy later on is typical of this composer who can work on such large-scale canvasses and in such long paragraphs. That in itself is a mark of his particular genius. Who, also would think of ending the second movement with crash into the buffers at full tilt with no warning. It takes the breath away. Bach looms large in the gentle piano writing accompanied by strings in the third movement – Mahler, too... but these are like little glances back (as with Tallis) as if to seek the approbation of these masters before he moves back fairly and squarely into his own hard-won territory and reminds us that he is the leader of the pack in our time.

This is a major undertaking for whoever programmes it but the journey is such a powerful experience that with the right forces capable of realizing the demands, and the right person in charge, this becomes the journey of a lifetime. It is a musical Camino.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Tu es Petrus (2010) 4'

for mixed voices, brass (4pt.3trbn), timpani, percussion (3 players: t.bells/cyms/tam-t/BD) and organ
Text: Matthew 16: 18 (L)
Composed for the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Westminster Cathedral
Premiere: 18 September 2010 Westminster Cathedral London
Choir of Westminster Cathedral and London Brass / Martin Baker

Level 4

Another great occasional piece for a ceremonial event. MacMillan really has a perfect feel for the kind of music which sends shivers up and down the spine as the organ, brass and timpani thunder around a great reverberant space. The text: 'Thou art Peter and on this rock will I build my church' is perfectly appropriate for the visit of St Peter's modern successor. The feel of the music, unlike that for the installation of the Archbishop of Westminster, however, is of a darker hue— maybe a reflection of the weight of responsibility surrounding the Pontiff, maybe a reflection of the dark secular times in which we live. Who knows? But what MacMillan marks to be played 'joyfully' in the brass triplet semiquavers (16th notes) feels slightly portentous – but then it is an extraordinary occasion in which awe is probably more in evidence than levity.

As with the other Westminster Cathedral 'occasional' works the choral parts are not especially difficult though it is a more challenging work than Summae Trinitati. There is a separate instrumental Processional movement based on the opening material. The end of the main motet leads directly into chant and the Introit for Christ The King. In a concert situation an ending would have to be organized. It could lead directly via the organ pedal G which is held over after the final choral phrase into the Processional movement.

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

Visitatio Sepulchri (1992-93) 40'

for 7-part chorus (SSATTB, male speaker (Sprechstimme)) or 7 solo singers and chamber orchestra 2(II=picc).2(II=corA).2(II=b cl).2(II=dbn)—2.2.2(II=btrbn).0— timp.
perc(1):2cowbells/2wdbl/2bongos/2timbales/SD/2tam-t/5tom-t/5tpl.bl/glsp/t.bells/BD/cyms/bell tree—
strings(min:8.6.4.4.2)
Text: from a 14th century Easter Day liturgical drama and the Te Deum (L)
Premiere: 20 May 1993 Tramway, Glasgow
Soloists and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra / Ivor Bolton
Directed by Francisco Negrin

Level 5

This work is one of a number by MacMillan that can be presented in a number of formats: fully staged as at its premiere, in a music theatre style with simple lighting, or as a purely concert work. Originally performed with solo voices, MacMillan recast the work for seven-part choir, each choral section taking one of the solo parts. Visitation Sepulchri dates from the time the composer first burst onto the musical scene with works such as The Confession of Isobel Gowdie and Veni, Veni, Emmanuel, and shares their blending of energy, passion and reflection.

In biblical terms it moves on from where his St John Passion ends as it is concerned with the women's visit to the sepulchre where Jesus' body has been laid following his crucifixion.

Scene One is a purely orchestral, powerfully moving scene-setter mirroring the drama of the crucifixion. Scene Two introduces three angels (TTB), the three women (SSA) and a male Cantor section which sings/speaks/shouts un-notated,

approximate pitch throughout (rather like sprechstimme). The extreme contrasts between the still, reflective meditations of the singers and the dramatic brass-dominated interjections from the orchestra seem to reflect an outward prayerfulness and inward turbulence following the Angels' confirmation of Jesus' resurrection. Scene Three follows without a break and is a setting of the Te Deum. This is complex and incredibly energised. The winding-down process sees a statement of the plainsong Te Deum melody used effectively in long notes against a still hyperactive orchestra. At the end of the text, 'let me never be confounded', the music moves into an extraordinarily different mode – almost cinematic in its triumph and consolation which might follow the successful resolution of the plot of a thriller. The voices whisper a fade-out.

This remarkable score is complex and needs highly skilled singers with, in some cases, fairly extreme ranges: the 1st tenors have to touch a top D flat at one point and the 3rd Angel (basses) begins the second scene on low Es. The orchestral writing is often virtuoso and the whole work will, of course, need to generate theatrical electricity whether performed staged or in concert. MacMillan's deep feeling for religious drama is one of the things which sets him apart from almost all his composer colleagues working at this level.

NB: this work is available both as a music theatre piece and for concert performance

> [More Info](#) > [Listen](#)

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James MacMillan, 2010

Publisher information

James MacMillan's music is exclusively published by Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers.

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Hal Leonard Corp (North & South America, Australasia)

www.halleonard.com

sales@halleonard.com

Guide text: © Paul Spicer, 2021

Editorial: David Allenby, Bronte Larsen-Disney

MacMillan photos: © Marc Marnie, Philip Gatward, Genesis Foundation/Adrian Myers

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James MacMillan in Rome for a 2018 performance of *Stabat Mater*, the first live-streamed concert from the Sistine Chapel.



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