

James MacMillan



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Introduction to the music of James MacMillan by Stephen Johnson. When James MacMillan began to make the musical headlines at the beginning of the 1990s it was clear this was a composer who had cast his net wide in terms of influences: from Celtic folk music to the hard-edged modernism of Harrison Birtwistle; from the radically experimental mysticism of Olivier Messiaen to the darkly humanist symphonic narratives of Dmitri Shostakovich. Of course there were some who grumbled about 'eclecticism'; but to many others who were stirred by such early masterpieces as the orchestral *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* (1990) and the percussion concerto *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel* (1992), it was clear that this was a composer whose inclusiveness was natural, unforced – as much a reflection of a coherent vision as any narrow ideology. The key word here is 'catholic', in its original sense of 'universal', 'all-inclusive'. MacMillan is Roman Catholic by birth, and today his faith remains central to his life. His early involvement with Marxism was strongly coloured by Latin American Liberation Theology, and its impact can still be sensed in his work today, right up to his latest opera *The Sacrifice* (2005-06). At the same time MacMillan is keenly aware of the divisions partisan religious thinking can cause. While his works often draw on Catholic liturgy and chant for their basic formal and melodic material, he can also include elements from the Jewish Passover rite in his second string quartet, *Why is this night different?* (1998), or instrumental colours associated with the Japanese Shinto religion in *Symphony No.3: 'Silence'* (2003). The result is music that embraces a startling variety of musical styles. Dense, thorny atonal textures can suddenly yield to soaring tonal melodies, reminiscent of Wagner (another crucial early influence). Jagged, complex, muscular rhythms may similarly melt into free-floating improvisatory lyricism, or fine-spun polyphony recalling Bach and the renaissance church composers. Thrillingly garish or abrasive colours sit alongside delicate, fragile patterns or velvety warmth. Hymn tunes, folk laments and brash marches float as conflicting layers in vibrant musical tapestries. One may be reminded of the teeming orchestral kaleidoscopes of the pioneering American composer Charles Ives, or the Russian 'polystylist' Alfred Schnittke. What draws all this together is MacMillan's deeply ingrained feeling for musical storytelling. Today grand narratives are often derided as outdated, irrelevant. MacMillan however has proved through works like *Isobel Gowdie*, *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel* and the massive orchestral trilogy *Triduum* (1995-97) that this kind of spiritual journey in music, as exemplified by Beethoven in his symphonies and Bach in his great 'Passions', can be recreated in terms which speak both to sophisticated musical intelligences and ordinary music lovers – MacMillan's more recent large-scale works include his own very personal

response to the classic *St John Passion* narrative. His choral-orchestral *Quickening* (1998) brought a potent reminder that compelling contemporary music can be inspired by the most common human experiences: in this case the conception and birth of a child. In an age when populism and modernism seem like irreconcilable poles, James MacMillan's music continues to hold out the hope of integration, the healing of painful divisions, of transcendence. © Stephen Johnson, 2008. Writer and broadcaster, author of books on Bruckner (Faber), Wagner and Mahler (Naxos), and regular presenter on BBC Radio 3's *Discovering Music*.