God, Theology and Music*

James MacMillan

There has been a resurgence of interest in a particular kind of contemporary music in recent years. This has been a surprise to many, especially the composers involved, because we live at the end of a century that has seen a retreat by the composing community from the larger music loving public. If one looks back to the early days of the century we see figures like Schönberg, establishing private societies for the performance of contemporary music. A perception is beginning to emerge within the composing community that the priorities of composers have in some way separated from the priorities of the larger music-loving public. At the very time when a museum culture was beginning to be the main priority of classical music listeners, composers were going into a very exploratory mode. In the century of the holocaust and the loss of meaning generally, composers have gone into a kind of laboratory phase when the very nature of music was the stuff of their investigations. Composers like Boulez, Stockhausen, Berio and the young Turks of the post-war generation took music into a very abstract phase indeed by making explorations into the purely abstract nature of music but with an ideological and idealistic desire to turn their backs on the past. They wanted to start afresh from year zero, as it were, to write a music that was untainted by tradition, a music that would not have any resonance of a failed bourgeois culture.

However, in the last 10 years or so a number of composers have bucked this trend. Composers like John Tavener, Henryk Gorecki, and Arvo Pärt have been taken into the affections of a larger music loving public, not always the traditional older classical music audience but a new audience of younger people. Some might say disparagingly that it is a nineties new age audience that has taken to the mysticism and the simplicities of the likes of Tavener, Gorecki and Pärt. Why are we seeing such a flourishing of spiritual composers at this time? The music of these three composers on the face of it is very beautiful, it is music which avoids the complexities common in a lot of contemporary, avant-garde, modernist music of the twentieth century. There is a return to some sense of modality, if not tonality, and there is an ethereal atmosphere in their music that I think makes people relax and feel vaguely spiritual. There seems to be a hunger for something to fill the spiritual void and some of this music at least gives people a kind of folk memory of what spiritual sustenance was about.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01715.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Music and spirituality are very closely entwined. They have a centuries long relationship and you could say that music is the most spiritual of the arts. More than the other arts, I think, music seems to get into the crevices of the human-divine experience. Music has the power to look into the abyss as well as to the transcendent heights. It can spark the most severe and conflicting extremes of feeling and it is in these dark and dingy places where the soul is probably closest to its source where it has its relationship with God, that music can spark life that has long lain dormant. I haven't included my own name in this list of popular spiritual composers for various reasons, but the one thing we do have in common is a love of ancient church music and a desire to look back at the ancient tradition of Christian music and especially Gregorian Chant, which I am always using in my music: I quote chant, I elude to it, I fragment it, I dissect it, I use it as the building blocks, the DNA, of larger structures. It obviously means a lot to me. It is a kind of perfect music. I also feel I am rooting myself in something very deep culturally and spiritually. I feel I am plugging into a rich seam because not only is Gregorian Chant the most perfect music melodically, it is also the music that singly most characterises Catholic musical tradition and which carries the liturgy and theology behind the chant. I nearly always have a pre-musical reason for wanting to compose but that is now a rather odd position to hold, because music, as well as being the most spiritual of the arts, is also the most abstract of the arts. Much twentieth century music has retreated into itself, and many composers have become more and more obsessed, perhaps in a train spotterist fashion, with the very substance, the very stuff of music. They have tended to divorce themselves from the possibility of music having resonances and connections with life outside music. Music has this facility to retreat into itself. But perhaps I should speak subjectively about my own experiences as a younger composer.

When I was studying in university environments there was an attitude among my fellow composers that music was all about the notes on the page and the way one moves those notes about the page in as clever a way as possible. Anything else was extraneous and irrelevant. Music was complete in itself and need not have any extra-musical reason for its existence. This disturbed me quite a lot although, as a composer, I shared their attitudes, looking at the nature of music, trying to get to grips with the techniques of composition, the very stuff of music and how to successfully build its structures and its designs. Yet I did have other interests. For example, I was very interested in what I describe as the vernacular forms of music, music that exists outside the European tradition of serious art. I had played in a rock band when I was a teenager. In my twenties I had sung and played in traditional Scottish and Irish folk bands in clubs and pubs in the West of Scotland. Here was a very different kind of music with a very different kind

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01715.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

of musician fulfilling a social function not of the art tradition. They were different from my composer friends who for one reason or another were distanced from vernacular forms of music; there was no connection between these two worlds or these two sets of friends. I was also very interested in politics and had prematurely joined a political party when I was 14. I was involved in various humanitarian activities of an ideological and idealistic nature and this world seemed to have no intersection with the world of composition. Yes, my fellow composers were romantically revolutionary but that's not the same thing as being practically engaged in the world of politics from an idealistic position. And there was another world, a world which I shared with my fellow Papes who came together for the practice of the faith. Catholicism has always meant a lot to me but even in those early days I couldn't see any way of allowing the religious dimension into the practice of my music and, of course, those who flattered themselves that they were at the cutting edge of this particular art form would say that there was no place for something as reactionary and as anachronistic as the Catholic faith in a modernist artistic world.

So you can see a number of compartments of my life emerging here that had no intersection or connection whatsoever and it led to a rather schizophrenic existence. Yet I took it for granted that that was the way it had to be and I saw no real possibility of allowing my music to reflect these other things in this severe and rigorous abstract expression. I remember looking with some envy at friends in the other arts—writers, film makers, poets and visual artists—who were inspired by these same things and who were able to give space and dimension in their work to a resonance of the world about them, either the physical or the political world or in some cases the metaphysical world. These experiences seemed to be off-bounds to me and my fellow composers. Now, whether something has changed in the Zeitgeist in the last fifteen years or whether it was just a process of maturation on my part, I began to see the barriers, which divide these compartments starting to dissolve, with strong possibilities of one element cross-fertilising with another. For example, I allowed my interest in vernacular music forms to infuse the processes of artistic creation in my work as a serious composer. And I began to see possibilities of allowing the political dimension some space in my compositions and ultimately I began to see really strong possibilities of allowing a spiritual dimension to emerge within my work as a composer. The first piece that allowed me to do this was a music theatre piece called *Busqueda*, a Spanish word meaning 'search'. It is a setting of poems by the Mothers of the Disappeared from Argentina interlaced with the Latin text of the mass. When I found these poems I was struck by their emotional power and the fact that, while they did not constitute sophisticated literature, they were nevertheless extremely

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01715.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

moving and had a transformative effect on those who read them. These women poets provoked something angry, fierce, loving, hopeful and grief stricken, yet they would not have written any poetry had they not been the mothers of the disappeared. I was also struck by the simple and traditional faith lying behind the poems. I think what I wanted to do in this piece was to bring together the timeless and the contemporary, the secular and the sacred, the religious and the political. I am intrigued, for example, by the dialogue between the message of the Gospels and message of various idealistic political responses in our own time. I have always been intrigued by the engagement between politics and religion: the conflicts and contradictions between them and also the synthesis of ideas that sometimes emerge. This piece *Busqueda* and another piece called *Cantos Sagrados*, a setting of poems by Ariel Dorfman and others, again interlaced with Latin liturgical texts, were my first attempts to make perceptible connections between the musical and the extra musical, the religious and the political, and I describe these two pieces, naively, as being inspired by the basic principles of Liberation Theology.

A piece that I wrote a few years after *Busqueda* called *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* was inspired by the story of a woman who seemed to represent the outsider in our midst and the way that outsiders always seem to succumb to our hatred. She was a woman convicted of witchcraft in late seventeenth century Scotland who made a fantastical confession and suffered brutally at the hands of her tormentors. I wanted to write a piece of music that on one level made some kind of statement of solidarity with this archetypal figure. But my choice of this particular archetype was similar to my choice of the Disappeared as archetypes because, in their lives and in their experiences of hatred and death and rejection, they resonate with the original archetype of Christ in the Passion narrative. Behind the composition of *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* I think there is an ethical dimension but this can be regarded as contentious by many musicians. It sits uneasily with the view that music should be complete in itself and should not have deeper representational resonances with extra musical issues.

It is often said of Tavener's music that it is a celebration of the risen Christ. Whereas many have said about my music that I seem to be much more pre-occupied with the crucified Christ, that I seem to be drawn again and again to the Passion. I think this is true and it may account for the ideological difference between myself and the likes of Tavener and our technical and aesthetic differences in style and approach. Yes, I am drawn by the sacrificial aspect of the great Christian narrative and I do seem to be going round and round the same three days of history. The fact is that if history had to be changed, if we had to be changed, then God had to interact with us in a severe way. You can't have the resurrection without the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01715.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

crucifixion. In a number of the composers I have mentioned there is a sense of the transcendent which is beautiful but there is also a deliberate avoidance of conflict in their work. They deliberately, aesthetically and technically, avoid the whole notion of conflict. Tavener, for example, has stated that he has turned his back on that aspect of the Western canon. Symphonic form and sonata form are now anathema to him because they are about pitting widely contrasted materials against each other so that they come together, interact, clash, fuse and develop like a story teller with climaxes and conflicts. I am attracted to that in Beethoven and Mozart as in Tippet and in a lot of modernist music of our own time. My character needs that sense of conflict. In purely musical terms I need to tell a story; I need to create dramas and the best stories are the ones that have resolutions of conflict, not just resolution, while a lot of recent so-called spiritual music can be a mono-dimensional experience of transcendence without a sense of sacrifice. In my *Vigil* Symphony, influenced by the day before Easter, the first movement is called Light, but has some of the darkest music I have ever written because I don't think we can see the light until we can know why there is light and that involves a knowledge of the dark. Will I ever tire of circling the same three days in history? I don't think so, it's too rich a seam. Michael Simmons-Roberts, whose poetry I have set a lot, has used the term 'the deep mathematics of creation' about music. This is a term that chimes with me because music does seem to be a kind of calculus, a means of calculating something of our very nature. And because we are made in the image of God, music can be seen as a calculus of the very face of God. One way of doing that in music is to circle round the very moments when God made his deepest interaction with human history. I think that is why I'm drawn back obsessively to these three days. I can't help it; I know that the answer might be there. With this form of musical calculus there is an attempt to open doors and encounter the face of God. The face of God would be an awesome sight, if we could ever see it with human eyes and the way of finding access to that awe and fear is to experience God through the death and resurrection of his Son. Perhaps this is the reason I have drawn on quite frightening instances of human activity in our own time and within our cultural memory, such as Isobel Gowdie and the Mothers of the Disappeared. Here you are encountering the crucifixion narrative afresh in the lives of ordinary people. So even if there is a political dimension to their stories, it is like a mirror image or resonance of the great archetypal story of Christ. And to avoid the darkness and the tragedy is to refuse to face up to the abyss, which is our human experience. It is a flight from reality and from the true nature of God. Spirituality is not just some sort of easily won feel-good factor. Spirituality is something that you find in the here-and-now, in the fears, aspirations, joys and tragedies of human life, in the grit and

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01715.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

mire of daily existence, which then raises incredible possibilities of compassion in those encounters.

Being a composer I am frequently asked to speak about my music. Inevitably the question of inspiration arises. How did the ideas come? What made you think of that? How do you start formulating your ideas? These questions are deceptively simple and yet frighteningly enormous. They rank alongside the 'meaning of life' question in their ability to inspire terror and humility in any composer rash enough to attempt a response. Most of the time it's easy to hide behind answers which tackle the abstract nature of music. Most composers, myself included, devise methods of channelling attention towards impressive-looking charts complete with complicated note rows, fibonacci series and Shenkerian-style structural analyses.

Music is, after all, the most abstract of all the arts. A fundamental level it needs no point of reference beyond itself, other than its own substance, its own methodology and technique, its own explicable parameters. And yet these questions, whether posed externally or internally, keep coming. During a recent television interview the somewhat acerbic host, Muriel Gray, proffered one such question. Recognising that spirituality was now an issue of current debate again in the discussion of a lot of contemporary music, she was nevertheless keen to explore the matter from her own secular perspective. Did I, as a composer, think that religious piety sat uncomfortably with freedom of artistic expression? Did I not think that the greatest artistic challenges were faced from within a spiritual void involving a struggle which relied on no emotional or religious crutches, thus the artist could forge his or her own sense of meaning without falling back on any received traditional (and therefore probably false) sense of meaning?

As a semi-automatic response the words 'divine inspiration' slipped unguarded from my lips and were sitting there, exposed and vulnerable, awaiting the inevitable avalanche to be heaped upon them. It failed to materialise. My interrogator was surprised by my response which she described as non-conformist and, in its own way, avant-garde. Then it struck me that the engagement between theology and culture, between religion and the arts is now such a faded memory for most people that a whole generation has grown up without an understanding of the true meaning and implication in the word '*inspiration*'. And when a creative person comes across this definition for the first time, it is a discovery made with undisguised delight—a recognition of a primal truth that has lain hidden for a long time.

The true spiritual meaning of words like inspiration and transformation has been obscured by the layers of transient trendiness which pass for much cultural debate nowadays.

A childlike pleasure accompanies the realisation that inspiration, from

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01715.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Latin *inspiratio*, means 'in-breathing', an arousal or infusion of an impulse or illumination that impels a person to speak, act or write under the influence of some creative power. Divine inspiration is understood as the charismatic supernatural influence that moved and guided the prophets of the Old Testament in revealing God's will to Israel and the attendant writing of the word. The Christian tradition understands that the Spirit of God has been profoundly involved in the actions and communication of these prophets and authors.

Over the years I have scanned Scripture from a composer's perspective looking for clues as to the true nature of human creativity, of artistic fecundity, clues as to the significance of the eternal interaction between the Human and the Divine, clues to the religious artist about the significance of the full and active engagement of all ones human faculties—the cerebral, the aesthetic, the critical, the emotional, the visceral, the carnal and the corporeal; clues as to how all this should be open to the will of God; clues as to how one can become a channel for the divine will, without diminishing one's own God-given freewill.

Some of these clues may be unveiled in a couple of crucial passages from Scripture. In Genesis, God presents his limitless love for humanity in the gift of Creation yet, at the same time invites Adam, the archetype, to make his own sense of this new world. God provokes Adam into calling on his, that is Adam's, own imagination in naming the constituent elements of his world. Humanity's inner creativity is being *inspired* to express itself in the face of God's immeasurable love (Genesis 2: 18-23). Here is the interaction, indeed it might be suggested, the interface of God's will with that of human beings.

The creativity implied in the story of Adam's Rib has many resonances for composers who, through the centuries, have always taken fragments of material, consciously or unconsciously, from elsewhere and breathed new life into them, creating new forms, new avenues and structures of expression. Whether these fragments are taken from liturgy, from plainsong, from folk song, from self-quotation, from allusions to other sources, from traditional cadential formulae, from half-remembered melodic shape, from a dimly perceived harmonic resonance, from a distant pulse of rhythm—they are all like embers of an old fire, extracted and gathered up, and wafted into a new flame. Indeed one of my own pieces is entitled *Adam's Rib* (1994-95) and is simply an acknowledgement of this eternally regenerative process of music as it develops through the ages, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.'

An even more crucial New Testament passage from St Luke is linked, like a mirror image, with the extract from Genesis, through a text, by

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01715.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Jeremy Taylor (1613-67), that I once set for choir and organ—*On the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Heber, 1822).

'How good a God have we, who, for our sake,
To save us from the burning lake,
Did change the order of creation;
At first he made
Man like himself in his own image, now
In the more blessed reparation
The Heavens bow:
Eternity took the measure of a span,
And said,
'Let us like ourselves make man
And not from man the woman take,
But from the woman, man.'

In St Luke's account of the Annunciation, it is not just Mary's fecundity that is inspiring to a creative person. A more powerful and more pertinent metaphor for the religious artist is the balance between, on the one hand, Mary's independent free will and, on the other, her openness to the power of the Holy Spirit. There is something in the instinct of an artist or a composer, or any creative person, or any Christian for that matter, which is inexorably drawn to the idea of Mary's 'vesselship'—the notion of making oneself as a channel for the divine will. This is not, of course, to negate the individual's human will. The incarnation came about through Mary's free and rational acceptance of God's plan for her. Similarly an artist or a composer who thinks in real and meaningful terms of a divine inspiration would be mistaken in underestimating the full and active participation of all one's human faculties. It is a mistake to negate our human dimension and experience. It is through the interaction of all that makes us human—our intellect, our intelligence, our emotion and our physicality, our universal experience of joy and despair, our flesh and blood—with the breath of God which brings forth creative fruit (for an artist new work, new art, new music). Jesus himself was at once flesh of Mary *and* the Son of God.

This is why many have said that to be an artist, to be a Christian in fact, is to be spiritually or paradigmatically female. The Dominican, Gilbert Markus, sees this in the marriage-motif of the New Testament, in which the Bride makes herself ready for the coming of the Groom. '[This] is the sexual and reproductive metaphor of God's relationship with humanity, both collectively and individually. The [ultimate] paradigm here is Mary, whose son is also the Son of God.' Mary who was receptive to God; Mary who was filled by God; Mary who bore God's son. Mary is the paradigm of our receptivity. Mary is an extreme version of all of us—a model for all creative people, an image for Christian educators and an example for all

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01715.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Christian believers.

The Christian believer is paradigmatically female: receptive to the seed of God's word. Receptive of the potency of God, the believer is waiting to be filled, longing to bear the fruit which will result from his or her union with God, to bring Christ to birth in our own life stories.

We come closest to Mary's example of receptivity, longing and patient openness to God in our own religious contemplations. For these silent, introspective searches we are required to give up *time*. Prayer and contemplation are undeniably a kind of sacrifice. That is why we are so reluctant to put time aside. There is even at the heart of most committed Christians, the fear of inspiration since, on this view of inspiration, there is an implicit invitation to relinquish control of our time, of our structures, of our selves. Inspiration, in this sense, need not be associated with any particular form of liturgy and worship, nor need it be seen as the prerogative of particular groups of Christians who have the bounty of exclusive means of communication with God. Instead it may be regarded as an acceptance of our potential to be stretched, deepened, challenged and changed. The very notion that human beings may be changed embodies a sacrifice of some part of the self; the self that exists at this moment and with whom 'I' might be comfortable will, inevitably, be altered. The fear that this realisation induces, however dimly perceived, is an entirely understandable phenomenon. In the Annunciation it is clear that Luke regards Mary as embodying both fear of the unknown as well as the recognition that change is inevitable. Mary's 'blessedness' like Hannah's (1 Samuel 1: 16ff.) is bound up in her preparedness to be open to God. Again, as Luke has it, her soul magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God.

We know that her response to the Annunciation was an inspired and radical vision of a new life, a new revolutionary moral universe. We see this in the Canticle of Mary, the Magnificat, where as a good Jewish girl, she was able to take the words of Isaiah and transform them into her own vision. A vision in which the world as we know it is turned upside down, inside out, where the proud are scattered, where the mighty are deposed, where the poor are exalted and the rich and powerful are turned on their heels. Through the breath of God Mary is inspired to see a new world. Her eyes are opened to a frighteningly radical overturn of everything that is accepted—an end to tyranny and oppression. The world is changed through Mary's vision. Through Mary's example we learn to see beyond the apparently obvious and predetermined past of human behaviour. In Mary's example we see that when the breath of God moved through her she was made 'God-like' in her potential to love.

The patristic writers talked about *deificatio* in connection with the breath of God, in that its influence makes us divine. We begin to see

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01715.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

things like God, to behave like God, like Adam when he engaged his inspired imagination to name the animals and other things in the Garden. The breath of God becomes our breath. No wonder we are terrified of being changed by our contemplations. Because along with the unbelievably joyous upheaval in Mary's life, the Annunciation also brought the shadow of the Cross. The recognition, right at the heart of Luke's infancy narrative, is that all joys carry their own ambiguity; that our soul will be pierced by a sword (Lk 2.35).

Music also demands our time. It unfolds its narratives in time with an authority that will not be hurried. Something essential to our lives is sacrificed to music. Whether we are performers, composers or listeners we need to give something up, something of ourselves, something of our humanity, our 'flesh and blood'—our time—to learn its intricacies, to communicate its depths in performance, or in its very inception itself—and in our serious hearing of it. Being openly receptive to the transforming power of music is analogous to the patient receptivity to the divine that is necessary for religious contemplation.

I have for a long time seen music as a striking analogy for God's relationship with us. As John McDade (1994, p.2) has it, 'music maybe the closest human analogue to the mystery of the direct and effective communication of grace'. I would go further and suggest that music is a phenomenon connected to the work of God because it invites us to touch what is deepest in our souls, and to release within us a divine force. Music opens doors to a deepening and broadening of understanding. It invites connections between organised sound and lived experience or suspected possibilities. In the connection is found the revelation, a realisation of something not grasped before. Such 'seeing' offers revelations about human living and divine relationships that can affect changes in our choices, our activities and our convictions. Music allows us to see, like Mary, beyond to what lurks in the crevices of the human-divine experience.

Rowan Williams, in a sermon for the Three Choirs Festival, said 'To listen seriously to music and to perform it are among our most potent ways of learning what it is to live with and before God, learning a service that is a perfect freedom. Noone and nothing can compel our contemplation, except the object in its own right. In this 'obedience' of listening and following, we are stretched and deepened, physically challenged as performers, imaginatively as listeners. The time we have renounced, given up, is given back to us as a time in which we have become more human, more real, even when we can't say *what* we have learned, only that we have changed' (1994, p.248).

Mary learned to live with and before God. She was not commanded or forced from on high, but the breath of God entered her—and she was

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01715.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

stretched, deepened, challenged and changed. As a composer asked about inspiration I am drawn back to these pages from Luke's Gospel. I find inspiration in Mary's Magnificat, which is one of the most set texts by composers throughout the ages, and in the story of the Annunciation, apparently one of the most painted scenes of the Scriptures. Artists are pointing us towards these two events in St Luke. There is obviously something momentously significant in their ubiquity throughout musical and artistic history. There is equally something momentously significant in Mary's central presence at the heart of these of these things. She is not only an example and a model for all Christianity but in this is the embodiment of what human beings experience only dimly; that we live with ambiguity of limitation and creative possibility in constant tension. She opens the door to the very heart of God, and in the silence of my own contemplation, in that necessary stillness where as all composers know that music mysteriously begins, the following words from our sacred liturgy have lodged themselves in the womb of my soul, trapped in a scarlet room, gestating gently with a tiny distant pulse:

Hail Mary, full of grace
The Lord is with thee
Blessed art thou among women
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

* The first half of this article was completely off the cuff; the second half was based on an article published in *Catholic Education — Inside Out, Outside In* edited by James Conroy (Lindisfarne Books, Veritas 1999).

Bibliography

MacMillan, J *Adam's Rib* for Brass Quintet (London, Boosey & Hawkes, 1994–95).

McDade, J 'A deathless song' in *The Month*, January 1994

Markus, G 'The potency of God the Father' in *Spirituality* no.3, Nov./Dec. 1995

Williams, R *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses* London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994)

Taylor, J *Festival Hymns on the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.* The manuscript is reprinted in Heber, Bp (1822), *The Collected Works of Jeremy Taylor*, vol 15, 1665.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01715.x Published online by Cambridge University Press