

## Article

# TheoArtistry, and a Contemporary Perspective on Composing Sacred Choral Music

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**Abstract:** This article presents the methodology and research underpinning the *TheoArtistry Composers' Scheme*, a project based in ITIA (the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts), School of Divinity, University of St Andrews (2016–2017). I analyse Sir James MacMillan's theology of music, outline some practical and theoretical issues that arose in setting up theologian-composer partnerships, and reflect critically on the six new works of sacred choral music that emerged (these are printed as supplementary materials). The article assesses the implications of such collaboration for future work at the interface between theology and music, and between theology and the arts more generally.

**Keywords:** sacred music; choral music; composition; theology; theoartistry; annunciation; Hebrew Bible; James MacMillan; Michael Symmons Roberts; Jeremy Begbie

## 1. Introduction

In *Sacred Music in Secular Society*, Jonathan Arnold highlights a strange phenomenon: 'the seeming paradox that, in today's so-called secular society, sacred choral music is as powerful, compelling and popular as it has ever been' (Arnold 2014, p. xiv). In particular, the explosion of new media through the internet and digital technology has created a new, much broader audience for 'the creative art of Renaissance polyphony and its successors to the present day', a genre of sacred music that seems to have 'an enduring appeal for today's culture' (ibid.).<sup>1</sup> Arnold suggests, moreover, that sacred choral music is thriving, as well, in Anglican worship: while attendance continues to decline in general, he cites the 30% rise at religious services sung by professional choirs in British cathedrals over the last decade (p. xv).<sup>2</sup> In his entertaining survey *O Sing Unto the Lord: A History of English Church Music*, Andrew Gant concludes on a similarly optimistic note: 'Tallis is not dead, because people are still using his music and doing what he did, in the places where he did it, and for the same reasons' (Gant 2015, p. 377). In 2015, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI acknowledged the tension in Catholic worship following the Second Vatican Council between the principle that 'the treasure of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with great care' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 114) and the active participation of all the faithful (Ratzinger 2015).<sup>3</sup> While celebrating 'the breadth of expressive

<sup>1</sup> In the twentieth and early-twenty first centuries, there has been a remarkable flowering of different kinds of Christian music both inside and outside the denominational churches. Genres of contemporary music as diverse as Christian Pop, Christian Hip Hip, and Praise and Worship arguably have an equal right to be referred to as 'sacred music'. Nonetheless, due to the focus of this article, I use 'sacred music' or 'sacred choral music' to refer, as does Arnold, to the predominantly Western Christian tradition of classical choral music from Gregorian chant, through Renaissance polyphony to the present.

<sup>2</sup> In surveying the situation of sacred choral music at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Alan Kreider considers, instead, the stark contrast between the omnipresence of music (of all different kinds) and the decline in organised religion: 'Decade by decade attendance at Christian worship services continues to fall: a recent authoritative survey of church attendance in England is significantly entitled *The Tide Is Running Out*'. See (Kreider 2003).

<sup>3</sup> For a brief introduction that situates Ratzinger's theological aesthetics in relation to the reforms of Vatican II, see (Rowland 2008).

possibilities of the faith in the liturgical event', he reaffirmed his conviction that 'great sacred music is a reality of theological stature and of permanent significance for the faith of the whole of Christianity, even if it is by no means necessary that it be performed always and everywhere' (ibid.).<sup>4</sup> Whether in churches, or in secular spaces, sacred choral music continues to be, then, a significant part of many people's experience of, and theoretical reflection on, Christian faith and music today.

A foremost contemporary composer of sacred music for both secular performances and for Christian worship is Sir James MacMillan.<sup>5</sup> In 2015, he was appointed as a part-time professor in the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts (ITIA), based in the School of Divinity, University of St Andrews. As part of a new initiative, *TheoArtistry*, MacMillan's appointment provided a stimulus for a research project—'Annunciations: Sacred Music for the 21st Century'—that sought to contribute to the fostering of sacred choral music in the twenty-first century as well as to interrogate, more broadly, the relationship between theology and music.<sup>6</sup> The project, undertaken between 2016 and 2017, had two principal aims.<sup>7</sup> The first was to re-engage composers with the creative inspiration that can come from an encounter with Scripture, theology and Christian culture. While composers are typically educated in the *techné* of their craft at conservatoire or university (even though, of course, the nature of that craft is contested), there has been a tendency in these contexts—as MacMillan highlights—to treat music as simply 'abstract', and to downplay the interrelation between music and the extra-musical. Commenting on the *TheoArtistry Composers' Scheme*, MacMillan wrote:

It will be interesting to see if the next generation of composers will engage with theology, Christianity or the general search for the sacred. There has been a significant development in this kind of intellectual, academic and creative activity in the last twenty years or so. In the world of theology there is an understanding that the arts open a unique window on the divine (MacMillan 2017a).

For the scheme, six composers were selected (from almost one hundred applicants) to collaborate with theologians in ITIA and the School of Divinity. This led to six new choral settings of 'annunciations' in the Hebrew Bible, six episodes in which God—in different ways—seems to communicate directly to humankind: God speaking to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3); Jacob wrestling with God (Genesis 32); the Burning Bush (Exodus 3); the calling of Samuel (1 Samuel 3); Elijah and the 'sound of sheer silence' (1 Kings 19); and the Song of Songs (3: 6–11).

The second aim of the project was to show how an appreciation of the theological engagement, and/or profound spirituality, of composers can influence not only the creation of their music, but that music's performance and reception. Where Historically Informed Performance (HIP), arguably the most influential development in classical music performance in the twentieth century, focused almost exclusively on style, Theologically Informed Programming and Performance (TIPP) seeks to privilege

<sup>4</sup> Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI makes the major claim ('that has recently taken hold of me more and more') that 'in no other cultural domain is there a music of greatness equal to that which was born in the domain of the Christian faith. From Palestrina to Bach, to Handel, even down to Mozart, Beethoven and Bruckner, Western music is something unique, which has no equals in other culture. [...] This music, for me, is a demonstration of the truth of Christianity' (Ratzinger 2015).

<sup>5</sup> MacMillan has also been a vocal public advocate for the important place of sacred choral music in Roman Catholic Liturgy, especially during the period leading up to and following Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Britain in 2010. See, for example, (MacMillan 2012): 'This is what Pope Benedict XVI is all about in his "Spirit of the Liturgy", there's an encouragement to regard high points of the Church's musical history such as classic polyphony and earlier, right back to Gregorian roots, as a kind of paradigm for Catholic music, "the very sound of Catholicism" as I have heard Gregorian Chant described. It can be kept alive in the modern age—a practical consideration, and also an ideological and spiritual consideration'; Ferguson (2015) has provided an invaluable, in-depth study that analyses MacMillan's theoretical and compositional approach to sacred music (profoundly influenced by Ratzinger, in part mediated by MacMillan's friend and former chaplain, the theologian Aiden Nichols; see (ibid., pp. 175–553, 326–27)), and situates it within the broader liturgical tensions and with a particular focus on Scotland.

<sup>6</sup> I founded TheoArtistry in 2016 as a new dimension of the work of ITIA. TheoArtistry explores how ITIA's research at the interface between theology and the arts might inform directly the making, practice, performance, curatorship and reception of Christian art, and transform the role of the arts in theology, Church practice, and society at large.

<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank especially Professor Edward Foley for inviting me to reflect on this project in this special edition of *Religions*.

the spiritual content of the music. Admittedly, there is a noticeable trend in recordings of sacred choral music to pay attention to a liturgical season, gospel episode, or Christian theme; nonetheless, as with classical music as a whole, recordings of sacred music still tend to privilege a particular stylistic period, composer, performer or performance group often at the expense of attention to the spiritual or thematic content of the music.<sup>8</sup> ITIA and St Salvator's Chapel Choir developed and researched a programme (and produced a new CD recording) that takes listeners on a musical journey through salvation history, exploring moments in the Old and New Testaments when God communicates directly to humankind ([Wilkinson Forthcoming](#)). At the heart of the recording are the composers' six new settings of 'annunciations' in the Hebrew Bible. These are framed by moments of divine communication in the New Testament—including the songs of Mary, Zachariah, the Angels, and Simeon—as well as settings of the annunciation: the angel Gabriel announcing to the virgin Mary that she will give birth to the Messiah.<sup>9</sup> In addition to this theological theme or journey, the recording also explores MacMillan's ongoing contributions to sacred music, particularly in the British choral tradition. Alongside five of his own pieces, the recording includes works by two decisive influences on MacMillan (Benjamin Britten and Kenneth Leighton), by two significant contemporaries (John Tavener and Judith Bingham), and by the six 'next generation' composers mentored by MacMillan.

This article presents the methodology and some of the research underpinning the *TheoArtistry Composers' Scheme*. In the first part, I analyse James MacMillan's own theology of music and compositional philosophy; in the second, I outline some practical considerations and theoretical issues that arose in setting up the theologian-composer partnerships and, in the third, I reflect on the collaborations and the six new works of sacred music. In conclusion, I assess some of the implications of such collaborations for future work at the interface between theology and music, and between theology and the arts more generally. It should be evident throughout that the model of theologian-composer collaboration presented could be productively applied to other genres of Christian music, as well as to the Christian arts as a whole. Scores of the six new choral pieces are printed for reference as supplementary materials.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. James MacMillan: Composition as Annunciation

Whether or not the composers on the TheoArtistry scheme were religious believers, the invitation to work with Sir James MacMillan was also an invitation to reflect on the nature of artistic inspiration. More specifically, it was an invitation to reflect on, and potentially to be challenged by, MacMillan's powerful claim that the search for the sacred has historically characterised the vocation of the composer: 'In music', he writes, 'there seems to be an umbilical link with the sacred. Through the centuries, musicians have proved themselves to be the midwives of faith, bringing their gifts to the historical

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Arnold explores this issue of performance context at some length: see ([Arnold 2014](#), pp. 41–83). John Tavener, whose music has achieved a remarkable popularity, recognises the space for a kind of recording of his music that foregrounds its theological inspiration, with 'Mediations by Mother Thelka' accompanying his music. See ([Tavener 1994](#), p. xi): 'The purpose of this book and CD is to try to give a hint of how it might be possible to reinstate the Sacred into the world of the imagination. Without this happening, I believe that art will continue to slither into a world of abstraction, into being purely self-referential, a sterile and meaningless activity of interest only to the artist and possibly "Brother Criticus". All great civilizations, except the present one, have understood this as a matter of course. We live in abnormal times; as André Malraux has said: "Either the twenty-first century will not exist at all, or it will be a holy century." It is up to each one of us to determine what will happen'.

<sup>9</sup> See ([Wilkinson Forthcoming](#)). The programme order of the recording, entitled *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the 21st Century*, is as follows: 1. James MacMillan, 'Ave Maria' (2010); 2. James MacMillan, 'Canticle of Zachariah' (2007); 3. John Tavener, 'Annunciation' (1992); 4. Kenneth Leighton, 'Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis from the 2nd Service' (1971); 5. James MacMillan, 'A New Song' (1997); 6. Anselm McDonnell, 'Hinneni' (2017); 7. Dominic de Grande, 'Whilst falling asleep, Savta told me of Jacob' (2017); 8. Kerensa Briggs, 'Exodus III' (2017); 9. Seán Doherty, 'God Calls Samuel' (2017); 10. Lisa Robertson, 'The Silent Word Sounds' (2017); 11. Stuart Beatch, 'The Annunciation of Solomon' (2017); 12. James MacMillan, 'And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them' (2009); 13. Benjamin Britten, 'Hymn to the Virgin' (1930); 14. Judith Bingham, 'The Annunciation' (2000); 15. James MacMillan, 'O Radiant Dawn' (2007).

<sup>10</sup> I would like to thank the six composers, Stuart Beatch, Kerensa Briggs, Dominic de Grande, Seán Doherty, Anselm McDonnell, and Lisa Robertson for agreeing to the inclusion of the scores of their compositions as supplementary materials to this article.

challenge of inspiring the faithful in worship’ (quoted in (Arnold 2014, p. 1)).<sup>11</sup> For MacMillan, music and spirituality are ‘very closely entwined’, and this is the case with all musical works and not just with those that have an explicit theological stimulus:

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 (MacMillan 2000, p. 17).

MacMillan’s conviction about the intrinsic religiosity of music, however, was hard won and emerged in reaction to a prevalent attitude towards music ‘in university environments’ of his generation: namely, that music ‘was complete in itself’ and that ‘anything else was extraneous and irrelevant’ (ibid.). He subsequently considered such a retreat or ‘divorce’ from ‘resonances and connections with life outside music’ as ultimately sterile, a cerebral playing around with notes on the page in ‘train spotterist fashion’, a music which delighted in its own inaccessibility and unpopularity (ibid.).<sup>12</sup> MacMillan’s voice as a composer emerged, then, when he allowed—against this prevalent university music culture—the ‘spiritual dimension to emerge’ (ibid., p. 18).<sup>13</sup> He came, indeed, to relish the ‘extra-musical or pre-musical’ impetus, and to compare the transformation of these ideas into music as ‘to use a Catholic theological term, a transubstantiation of one to the other’ (MacMillan and McGregor 2010, p. 75).

For MacMillan, if one takes the long view (including—in perspective—the blip of some post-war obscurantism), it is not exceptional to be a religious composer but rather the norm: ‘I feel that I’m absolutely rooted in something that has lasted for thousands of years but, even in modernity, in my branch of the arts, if you think about it, all the composers of the past hundred years have been religious one way or another’ (quoted in (Arnold 2014, p. 29)).<sup>14</sup> MacMillan references Schoenberg (who ‘reconverted to a practising Judaism after the Holocaust’), Stravinsky (orthodox), Messiaen (Catholic), the ‘profoundly religious’ Schnittke, Ulstovskaya, Kancheli and Arvo Pärt (from behind the Iron curtain) and even Benjamin Britten (for his social questioning Anglicanism).<sup>15</sup> MacMillan emphasises that he is ‘part of a mainstream [ . . . ] I’m not peripheral—people like me, John Tavener, Jonathan Harvey, it’s not peripheral at all. It’s not just plugged into the Christian traditions but the very experience of modernism in music’ (ibid., pp. 29–30). Indeed, MacMillan highlights that religious conservatism may be, as with the case of Stravinsky, an inspiration for musical revolution.<sup>16</sup> MacMillan’s understanding of the history of classical music, and of sacred music in particular, is a challenge, then, to the composer in a contemporary cultural climate frequently characterised as secular: it suggests that the most exciting and innovative music has come about in response, or in relation to, theology and the search for the sacred. The TheoArtistry scheme proposed, therefore,

<sup>11</sup> For studies of some of the influences on James MacMillan’s identity as a composer, see (Ferguson 2015, pp. 165–82; McGregor 2011; Wells 2012).

<sup>12</sup> MacMillan again emphasises the ‘pre-musical or extra-musical starting point or impetus, its genesis, its inspiration’ in (MacMillan and McGregor 2010, p. 74): ‘music is plugged in to something more than the notes on the page or the concept of moving those notes about the page in as successful a way as possible’.

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that the composer Roxanna Panufnik (b. 1968), a decade on, had a similar reaction to the teaching of musical composition in the academy. See (Panufnik 2003, p. 84): ‘I left music college swearing never to write another note again, because I wasn’t getting good marks. It was during the mid-1980s when esoteric and cerebral avant-garde music was still considered the right kind of music to be writing. [ . . . ] I felt very false and that I wasn’t being true to myself in writing that kind of music, so I didn’t’.

<sup>14</sup> See also (MacMillan and McGregor 2010, p. 71): ‘There’s a sort of *idée fixe*, I think, running through the development of a lot of musical modernism that points to the sacred’.

<sup>15</sup> In the epilogue to his survey of the history of English Church Music, Andrew Gant comes to a different conclusion. See (Gant 2015, p. 375): ‘Most leading composers of church music of the last hundred years have not been conventional believers’. It is notable, however, that he gives only two examples: Michael Tippett and Peter Maxwell Davies.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in (Arnold 2014, p. 29): Stravinsky was ‘as conservative [in his religion] as he was revolutionary in his music making’.

a renewed engagement with Scripture, tradition, and theology, in the confidence that such engagement of whatever kind (reverent, reactive, playful, etc.) and by composers of whatever faith or none would be generative, as in the past, of powerful new music, and striking theological expressions or perspectives.

The project's theme of 'Annunciations' focused on Scriptural moments where the divine communicates directly with the human. But the 'annunciation' also has resonances, as MacMillan emphasises, with the life of the Christian and, in a special way, with the vocation of the Christian artist. In describing his own compositional process, MacMillan draws on Scriptural accounts of the interplay between Divine and human creativity in the Old and New Testaments. He reflects on the word 'inspiration' itself, as 'from the Latin *inspiratio*, mean[ing], "in-breathing", an arousal or infusion of an impulse of illumination that impels a person to speak, act or write under the influence of some creative power' (MacMillan 2000, pp. 21–22).<sup>17</sup> The Old Testament model of creativity *par excellence*, for MacMillan, is Adam. In Genesis, MacMillan writes, 'God presents his limitless love for humanity in the gift of Creation and yet, at the same time invites Adam, the archetype, to make his own sense of this new world. [ . . . ] Humanity's inner creativity is being *inspired* to express itself in the face of God's immeasurable love' (ibid.).<sup>18</sup> The creation of Eve from Adam's rib is, for MacMillan, moreover, an image for how composers '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' (ibid.).<sup>19</sup> It is Mary, the second Eve, however, who provides for MacMillan the true model for the Christian composer:

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 (ibid., p. 23).

MacMillan has highlighted that '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' (ibid., p. 24). This is a standard theological reading of the Annunciation, of course: Aquinas, for example, comments that 'just as the blessed virgin conceived Christ corporeally, so every holy soul conceives him spiritually'.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, MacMillan draws out from this paradigm the very conditions of his own compositional process:

Mary opens the door to the very heart of God, and in the silence of my own contemplation, in that necessary stillness where all composers know that music mysteriously begins,

<sup>17</sup> (MacMillan 2000, p. 21) notes 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 the 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'. See also (quoted in Arnold 2014, p. 151): 'I [MacMillan] believe it is God's divine spark which kindles the musical imagination now, as it has always done, and reminds us, in an increasingly de-humanized world, of what it means to be human'.

<sup>18</sup> See also (MacMillan 2002, p. 34): 'All art is a kind of mirror image or a response to divine creation, to the first gesture of creation by the Creator. In many ways, artists have a tiny glimpse into the pathos with which God, at the dawn of creation, looked upon the work of his hand'.

<sup>19</sup> As MacMillan highlights, his own work *Adam's Rib* (1994–1995) is 'simply an acknowledgment of this eternally regenerative process of music as it develops through the ages' (MacMillan 2000, p. 22).

<sup>20</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, q. 30, a. 1, arg. 3: 'sicut beata virgo corporaliter Christum concepit, ita quaelibet sancta anima concipit ipsum spiritualiter, unde apostolus dicit, Galat. IV, filioli mei, quos iterum parturio, donec formetur Christus in vobis' [just as the Blessed Virgin conceived Christ in her body, so every pious soul conceives Him spiritually. Thus the Apostle says (Galatians 4: 19), "My little children, of whom I am in labour again, until Christ is formed in you"].



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 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.

MacMillan's compositional understanding is, then, profoundly incarnational: 'Mary, who was receptive to God; Mary who was filled by God; Mary who bore God's son. Mary is a paradigm of our receptivity [ . . . ] a model for all creative people [ . . . ] and an example for all Christian believers' (ibid., p. 23).

MacMillan's music, springing from his faith, is always a witness to that faith. And that faith by virtue of the Incarnation is bodily as well as spiritual: 'I've always been drawn to a theology of music which emphasises [ . . . ] a sense of the physical, the corporeal, rather than a sense of the spirit being in some way divorced or set apart from the corporeal'.<sup>21</sup> Through the Incarnation, as through music itself, MacMillan believes that one can come to intimacy with God: 'there's an analogy between music and the mind of God: that in music there is, we see or even feel something of the thinking of God' (MacMillan and McGregor 2010, p. 99). But this is a journey to God *through* and not *away from* the body.<sup>22</sup> Notably, on reflecting on the first workshop performance of the six new compositions in the TheoArtisty scheme, MacMillan returned again to this incarnation metaphor:

It is a huge thing for a composer to hear their work come alive in the hands and voices of interpreters. Up until the first rehearsal the composition remains in the inner imagination of the composer. But it comes to life, incarnationally, when conductor and singers (in this case) start to transform it into live musical flesh. The open rehearsal of these new works [ . . . ] was the moment when composer and theologian began to realise where their joint discussions had led (MacMillan 2017a).

As the Annunciation provides a model for his composition of music (and for artistic 'conception' itself), so Christ incarnate is, for MacMillan, the pattern for musical performance—the transformation of the 'joint discussions' and 'inner imagination of the composer' into 'live musical flesh'. As the Annunciation always points to the Incarnate living word through whom Christians come to know God, so musical creation, for MacMillan, is always fulfilled through the sensual, bodily communication of performance.

The 'Annunciation' may also be, at this performance stage, a model for the reception of music and, more particularly, for how God may encounter the human person through music: 'Being openly receptive to the transforming power of music is analogous to the patient receptivity to the divine that is necessary for religious contemplation' (MacMillan 2000, p. 25).<sup>23</sup> Indeed, MacMillan sees music as

<sup>21</sup> See (MacMillan and McGregor 2010, pp. 82–83): 'That's certainly a very Catholic way of understanding the theology of the body, the theology of spirituality which is about the here and now, as well as a sense of the Other. It's about the interaction—for us it has to be about—the interaction of the here and now, the mundane, the everyday, the joys and tragedies of ordinary everyday people, and some concept of the Beyond or something that we stretch towards, something that we're not completely fully aware of. And that tension brings about the great hope and potential for human beings to rise to the heights of what humanity is capable of'.

<sup>22</sup> In this way, MacMillan distances his own theology of music and compositional language from those of his contemporary, John Tavener. See (MacMillan and McGregor 2010, p. 98): 'I [MacMillan] don't share his [Tavener's] disparagement of the Western canon and indeed modernism, and I think we're even different kinds of Christian thinkers as well. And the way he talks in, I think, rather pessimistic terms about the body, although he, as a product of the 60s, is clearly someone who has taken full cognisance of hedonistic tendencies, probably more so than I have. But he talks about the body as quite distinct from the spirit and that always strikes me as rather odd, and a negation of full human potential. It seems an uneasy relationship in which to have the corporeal and the spiritual, and one could easily be dropped in relation to the other, and that worries me'.

<sup>23</sup> MacMillan speaks or writes eloquently about the transformative power of music on many other occasions. See, for example, (MacMillan 2002, pp. 35–36): 'Whether they are religious or not, people can and do speak in religious terms about the

not only ‘a striking analogy for God’s relationship with us’ but, more profoundly, as a ‘phenomenon connected to the work of God’:

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 (ibid.).

MacMillan therefore suggests a model for what he would describe as his ‘ideal listener’ who ‘has to be not just open minded or open eared [ . . . ] but a hungry listener, a curious listener’ (MacMillan and McGregor 2010, p. 87).

In remarkably similar terms, Maeve Louise Heaney underlines the ‘annunciation’ as a paradigm for the receptivity of the listener when setting out her own recent theological epistemology of music: specifically, she suggests that: ‘to be open and receptive to Christ’s continued presence among us now through art and music is a doorway to a transformed and transforming experience of life and faith; a transforming presence theology needs to both receive from and speak to’ (Heaney 2012a, pp. 163–69). Drawing on Bernard Lonergan’s emphasis on embodied experience of God, Heaney presents music as ‘a gift of God to humanity’ that frees the human person from the ‘pragmatic’ to the ‘contemplative’, and opens a space or, in John Henry Newman’s terms, a ‘disposition’ for the experience of God (ibid.). The encounter with the aesthetic is, in George Steiner’s terms, ‘the most “ingressive,” transformative summons available to human experience’ and it is notable that Steiner sees in the Annunciation the ‘short hand image [ . . . ] of a “terrible beauty” or gravity breaking into the small house of our cautionary being’ (ibid.). For Heaney, then, music ‘enters “the small house” of our embodied self in a much more powerful way than any other form of art. It changes us. To not accept its potential at the service of a faith that is always experienced as Another entering one’s life, be it in the invitation of a gentle breeze, be it as an interruption or intrusion, would be shortsighted’ (ibid.). The model of Mary at the Annunciation is an invitation not just for the composer, then, but for the listener who, in receptive response to music, may be open to the communication of the divine.

### 3. Forming Theologian-Composer Partnerships

As part of his openness to extra-musical inspiration, MacMillan has not only set Scriptural, liturgical, and secular texts, but he has also actively sought out collaborations with other artists and theologians.<sup>24</sup> As he commented on the TheoArtistry scheme, ‘collaborations between musicians and others can be wonderful things and can push the composer beyond their comfort zone to see the impact of their music outside of purely abstract considerations’ (MacMillan 2017a). Foremost amongst MacMillan’s collaborators is the poet Michael Symmons Roberts. MacMillan first set Symmons Roberts’ collection of poems as *Raising Sparks* (1997), considering his poetry as ‘a search for the sacred that needs to ruminate in your mind’, a search which—he felt—his music could ‘enable and enhance’ (MacMillan and Symmons Roberts 2008).<sup>25</sup> As he commented in an interview with Rhiannon Harries after over a decade of collaborations, however, he sought a more dialogical creative process: ‘I really wanted to work with him from scratch on a piece so that we could both have some input into the other’s work’

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life-enhancing, life-changing, life-giving transformative power of music. This quasi-sacramental aspect of the form proves that music has a power and depth to touch something in our deepest secret selves, for music cannot be contained in its abstract parameters. It bleeds out into other aspects of our existences and experiences’.

<sup>24</sup> See (MacMillan 2002, pp. 34–35): ‘Many of my works begin with an extra-musical starting-point. The pre-musical inspiration is an important factor on the specific nature and character of the music itself. It is important that this connectiveness between the pre-musical and the musical is always palpable and audible in the final creation’.

<sup>25</sup> As (MacMillan 2002, p. 33) notes, *Raising Sparks* ‘sprung forth initially from Michael’s reading of the eighteenth-century Hasidic mystic and theologian Menahum Nahum’.

(ibid.). This has led to a series of collaborative ventures, including *Quickening* (1998), *Parthenogenesis* (2000), *The Birds of Rhiannon* (2001), *Chosen* (2003), *The Sacrifice: Three Interludes* (2005–2006), *Sun Dogs* (2006), and *Clemency* (2009–2010).<sup>26</sup> Although their roles as poet-librettist and composer are clearly delineated, it is apparent, then, that MacMillan and Symmons Roberts see themselves as part of the other's creative process.<sup>27</sup> Underpinning the collaboration, moreover, is a shared passion for the theological and human issues at stake: 'We spend a lot of time talking around our subjects, trying to get to the root of it before we work' (MacMillan and Symmons Roberts 2008).<sup>28</sup> As someone who highly values, and has considerable experience of, collaboration, MacMillan was a particularly appropriate mentor, then, for the *TheoArtistry Composers' Scheme*.

For the innovative project *Theology Through the Arts*, Jeremy Begbie invited MacMillan and Symmons Roberts to collaborate, in addition, with the theologian Rowan Williams. Symmons Roberts reflects on this creative process in his poem 'Study for the World's Body', which concludes:

[...] an intimacy  
takes two people by surprise.  
It may be, in the world's eyes  
  
they should not be here,  
but without their risk the house is bare. (Symmons Roberts 2002)

As Symmons Roberts suggests, collaboration involves risk, but such risk—such openness to the other—frequently turns out to be generative. This is, he writes, 'the open-endedness and risk involved in making any worthwhile art, and any worthwhile theology' (ibid.). Begbie's project, which pioneered the bringing together of theologians and artists in creative collaboration, provided a provisional model for the *TheoArtistry Composers' Scheme*.<sup>29</sup> Four insights proved especially important when constructing these six theologian-composer partnerships: first, the need for practical guidelines; secondly, the recognition of the revelatory power of such collaborations, thirdly, the emphasis on the value of *praxis*; and, fourthly, the issue of artistic integrity.

Begbie set up *Theology Through the Arts* (TTA) in 1997 in Cambridge but, from 2000–2008, the academic work of TTA was undertaken at the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts in St Andrews. TTA's stated aim was 'to discover and to demonstrate the ways in which the arts can contribute towards the renewal of Christian theology in the contemporary world' (Begbie 2002, p. 3). Begbie brought together theologians, artists working in different media (poets, composers, sculptors,

<sup>26</sup> See (MacMillan 2002, pp. 33–36): Where *Quickening* (1998) celebrates the 'mysterious fragilities and ambiguous sanctities of human life', *Parthenogenesis* (2000) confronts head on the moral and theological issues of embryo research and genetic experimentation and manipulation: 'areas that are uncomfortable, messy and disturbing [...] theologians need to engage in these areas and be involved in debates pertaining to the nature of human life which are currently raging in our culture'. See, also, (Fuller 2015) for a brief discussion of some of these collaborations including *Parthenogenesis*.

<sup>27</sup> (MacMillan 2000, p. 20) credits Symmons Roberts, indeed, with helping him to articulate his own theology of music: 'Michael Symmons 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'.

<sup>28</sup> In a revealing BBC radio interview, (MacMillan 2010) comments: 'When I set poetry [...] I live with the poem for a long time, a necessarily long time, so that I can fully understand it, and the music can wrap itself around the words in a way that brings about the deeper meaning which is not immediately apparent in first encounter'.

<sup>29</sup> The theologians and composers on our scheme were asked to engage with Begbie's research as well as with the reflections of James MacMillan, Michael Symmons Roberts and Rowan Williams on the fruit of their collaboration, *Parthenogenesis* (Begbie 2002, pp. 1–13, 17–53). *Parthenogenesis* focused on an intriguing story, or urban myth, of 'a young woman in Hanover in 1944', who was injured by an Allied bombing raid, and gave birth nine months later to 'a child whose genetic profile was identical to hers. She insisted that she had not had intercourse before conceiving' (Begbie 2002, pp. 21–22). In addition to a methodological model, *Parthenogenesis* (etymologically, 'virgin-creation'), with its theme of a peculiar 'dark-Annunciation', provided, of course, a key inspiration for our own theme of 'Annunciations'. Although our collaborations explored 'positive' Annunciations—God communicating directly with humankind and, at the Incarnation, becoming man (and of the lived and artistic experiences associated with this)—one cannot but be acutely aware in contemporary Western culture of the 'negative mirror image of the Annunciation' (MacMillan 2002, p. 37) in the destruction and manipulation of human life at its earliest and most vulnerable stage.



playwrights), and other interested parties (historians, local clergy, commissioners) to collaborate on new works of Christian art. Each of the four ‘pod groups’, as Begbie called them, were different, and the meetings arranged were flexible (some pod groups met more frequently, others less so; some always together, others in smaller and bigger groupings). The freedom of the ‘pod group’ had many advantages, not least that the artistic work could develop organically through meetings. Thus MacMillan, for example, describes fastening on to a ‘common concept that provided the basis for much discussion and thought, bearing artistic fruit in due course’ (MacMillan 2002, p. 33).

For the *TheoArtistry Composers’ Scheme*, we experimented with a more compact and formal structure for the artistic collaborations, with a time frame of just six months.<sup>30</sup> The key collaboration was between one theologian and one composer; nonetheless, this ‘theologian-composer partnership’ was nourished by the wider research community of ITIA, the school of Divinity, and the Music Centre, as well as being mentored by MacMillan. We established a strict framework for these partnerships: in the first two months, the six theologians researched six ‘Old Testament’ annunciations, and the six composers were able to select one of the passages which resonated with them; at the first TheoArtistry workshop, the theologians then shared and discussed their research with the composer. For the next three months, the theologians and composers collaborated through three scheduled one-to-one meetings (via Skype) and continued email correspondence, as the compositions started to take shape. In the final month, first drafts of the new compositions were given to St Salvator’s Chapel Choir to rehearse before a second one-day workshop with MacMillan, in which the six new choral pieces were performed.

We encouraged the theologians and composers involved to be open to the revelatory capacity of the arts, ‘their ability to “open up” and disclose in unique ways [ ... ] to contribute to *theology*’ (Begbie 2002, p. 2).<sup>31</sup> Begbie presents the arts, indeed, as ‘vehicles of *discovery*’, as ‘the materials, not simply the channels, of learning’, citing Rowan Williams’s insight, which it is worth reproducing once again (ibid., p. 1, 5):

[ ... ] art, whether Christian or not, can’t properly begin with a message and then seek for a vehicle. Its roots lie, rather, in the single story of metaphor or configuration of sound or shape which *requires* attention and development from the artist. In the process of that development, we find meanings we had not suspected; but if we try to begin with the meanings, they will shrink to the scale of what we already understand; whereas creative activity opens up what we do not understand and perhaps will not fully understand even when the actual work of creation is done (ibid., pp. 1–2).<sup>32</sup>

This was important in re-approaching the Scriptures through the imaginative possibilities of the arts, always being open to how—if one allows one’s artistic imagination to engage sympathetically with the Scriptural stories—new meanings and perspectives may emerge. As MacMillan put it: ‘At the Symposium, we presented the composers with this underlying research. We then encouraged them to engage deeply with their theologian collaborator, to be open to surprises, to what such collaboration might bring to the creative process’ (MacMillan 2017a).

Begbie’s emphasis on *praxis* was also influential: ‘art is first and foremost not a theory or an “aesthetics”, but something done’ (Begbie 2002, pp. 4–5). By asking those involved to ‘recount

<sup>30</sup> I would like to register here my gratitude to Kathryn Wehr, then a doctoral student in ITIA, who provided invaluable administrative assistance to me in co-ordinating these theologian-composer partnerships.

<sup>31</sup> See also (Williams 2002, p. 29): ‘Artistic work is always discovery, not illustration. Or, to put it slightly differently, but to connect it with the whole thesis of this essay, artistic work both engages with the real otherness of the environment and itself becomes “other” to the original planning mind as it moves towards its final form. It is not an empty cliché to repeat that the artist genuinely doesn’t know until the work is coming to its expression just what it is going to be’.

<sup>32</sup> More controversially, (Williams 2002, p. 28) goes on to draw an analogy with the process of the composition of the Gospels themselves as ‘not a story repeated, not a story invented to make a point, as the more mechanically minded critics might argue, but a set of narratives constantly being retold, and altered in the retelling because of what the very process of telling opens up, shows or makes possible’.

the process of collaboration’ and ‘what the group members believed could be learned from their experiences about the future of theology’, Begbie valorises the doing and making of art as contributing to the enterprise of theology itself (*ibid.*). He writes:

the very activity of meeting together—praying, listening, responding, agreeing, disagreeing, exploring blind alleys, arguing at rehearsals, and so on—was not only intrinsic to the final result (‘the play behind the play’, as Ben Quash put it), but also the means through which a vast amount of the most important theology was actually done (*ibid.*).

Although research in Biblical Studies, the commentary traditions, reception history, liturgy and artistic representation was an important first stage, the participants similarly experienced the collaborative process itself as generative of ideas and theological insights.

Begbie addresses directly the issue of artistic integrity, recognising that his phrase ‘theology through the arts’ is in itself problematic: ‘To speak of the arts serving theology—I have been told—inevitably means they will be dragooned into some kind of slavery, condemned to being mere carriers of predetermined theological “messages”. Even worse, artistic freedom will likely be choked by some inflexible ecclesiastical orthodoxy. Either way, the arts don’t get the “room” they need’ (*ibid.*, pp. 10–11). At a theoretical level, Begbie seeks a *via media* between what he perceives as the ‘double hazard’ of ‘theological instrumentalisation’ (where ‘music is treated as essentially, or no more than, a vehicle, a mere tool at the behest of theology’) and ‘theological aestheticism’ (where an overriding concern with the ‘autonomy of music’ leads people to give music ‘a semi-independent role in relation to theology’, and to attribute to it a ‘veridical access to the divine’) (Begbie and Guthrie 2011, pp. 10–12).<sup>33</sup> Begbie’s concern with ‘theological aestheticism’ is that music, or the psychological and ‘spiritual’ power of music, may be set against the ‘norms derived from Scripture and its testimony to God’s revelation’, such that art becomes ‘an ultimate measure of theological truth’ (*ibid.*). Begbie’s anxiety, in this respect, is not specifically with regard to music but with regard to any of the arts, insofar as an independent ‘theology’ might be derived from them: ‘History is replete with examples of the arts over-determining theology: among the subtler forms, the keenness in much contemporary writing to identify the immense psychological power of music, film, painting or whatever as “spiritual” or “religious”, and then cultivate some strand of “theology” accordingly’ (Begbie 2002, p. 10).

One could argue, of course, that music does have the capacity to disclose the divine while maintaining, from a Christian viewpoint, that this cannot contradict the revealed doctrines of faith, a perspective provided, for example, by Richard Viladesau (Viladesau 1999; Viladesau 2000). But Begbie opposes this approach, explicitly rejecting ‘a norm immanent to musical activity’ as well as any ‘foundational metaphysics or ontology elaborated prior to, or apart from, the specific dealings of the Christian God with the world’ (Begbie and Guthrie 2011, pp. 12–13). Begbie affirms, instead, that Christian theology must have ‘a distinct orientation as it engages with practices such as music—to the gospel, the dramatic movement of God by which he reconciles us to himself by the Spirit through the Son, witnessed to and mediated normatively by Scripture’ (*ibid.*; Begbie 2007). Whether or not Begbie’s *via media* is in fact an in-between stance is, therefore, open to question. Although it is clear that Begbie’s approach avoids ‘theological aestheticism’, it is harder to see how it avoids envisioning art as merely carrying ‘predetermined theological “messages”’.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Begbie’s claim that his approach will not ‘suppress but enable a faithful honouring of music’s integrities’ because the Christian God, to which music is thus ordered, ‘is dedicated to the flourishing of creation in its own order

<sup>33</sup> Although the introduction is co-written with Guthrie, the discussion of instrumentalisation, aestheticism, and orientation seems to expand directly on the passages cited in (Begbie 2002). See, also, (Begbie 2000) and, more recently, (Begbie 2013) for his evolving theology of music.

<sup>34</sup> For this reason, (Broadhead 2012, pp. 157–61) characterises Begbie’s theoretical method as ‘dialogue through analogy’, and reproduces Heidi Epstein’s assertion that Begbie’s theologising ultimately ‘reduces music to a mere proof-text for biblical doctrine. Music thus remains an evangelistic revealer of Christian truths’ (*ibid.*, p. 161; Epstein 2004, pp. 84–86).

(the order out of which music is made)’ is, albeit theoretically plausible, problematic from a practical point of view, unless one works exclusively with Christian artists (*ibid.*). This seems to have been the case with the four pod groups involved in *TTA*: indeed, Begbie suggests that it was ‘just *because* of a joint orientation to the triune God of Jesus Christ, who is committed to the flourishing of the world in all its manifold particularity and diversity, that they were able to honour the integrity of the arts with which they were dealing, and the integrity of the artists in each group’ (Begbie 2002, p. 11).

For the TheoArtistry collaborations, however, we did not request that *either* the theologians *or* the composers had any faith commitments; at the same time, we maintained that, whatever the individual beliefs of the participants, the compositions could potentially contribute constructively to theology. Gavin Hopps, the Director of ITIA, presented new ways to envisage the relationship between theology and music, approaches which move beyond Begbie’s apparent insistence on pre-emptive Christological criteria, on particular musical forms, and on a privileging of cognitive over affective experiences of music.<sup>35</sup> Hopps advocated, instead, a recognition of the listener’s role in the co-constitution of music’s significance: one should begin, he affirmed, with particular works of music, as well as particular acts of reception, and consider their theological value in light of their affects or the experiences they elicit, and not simply in terms of their ‘immanent’ meanings. The work of David Brown, Emeritus Professor of ITIA, similarly seeks to validate less exclusive approaches to the presence of God in music, approaches which are particularly valuable—from a practical point of view—when working with theologians and composers in a more secular environment.<sup>36</sup> As Frank Burch Brown comments, ‘it has become more imperative than ever for theology to expand its scope to consider culture, arts, and specifically music not as somehow illustrational, or as helpful analogies “outside” theology’s intrinsic modes of thought, but, rather, as means of reshaping (and in turn being shaped by) that very thought—if, indeed, “thought” is the best word for what is called for’ (Burch Brown Forthcoming).<sup>37</sup> The theologians and composers on the TheoArtistry scheme were thus introduced to a rich, and developing dialogue about the contested relationship between theology and music, a dialogue which has been at the heart of ITIA research culture since the Institute’s inception.<sup>38</sup>

In the theologian-composer collaborations, the relationship between theology and music was, in one sense, somewhat straightforward insofar as the composers (whether Christian or not) were responding to ‘annunciations’ in the Old Testament. Perhaps especially because of this, it was important to stress that a ‘correspondence’, ‘applicationist’, or ‘instrumental’ method was but one way of approaching the task at hand. We were keen, then, that the theologians and composers had the licence to explore these scriptural passages with or without regard to particular doctrinal standpoints. In this respect, again, we were encouraging theologians and artists to exercise the freedom of their theological and artistic imaginations, without insisting on predetermined theological criteria or constraining them by an excessive concern with Scriptural or doctrinal ‘orthodoxy’. In his ‘Afterword’ to Begbie’s *Theology Through the Arts* project, Nicholas Wolterstorff registers anxiety about envisaging artistic media as ‘media of disclosure’: there is, he affirms, always ‘the need for *critical discernment*’: a ‘theological (or other) interpretation wrought in some artistic medium may prove *unacceptable* in one way or another; rather than being a means of disclosure, it may be a means of distortion if we allow ourselves to be led by it’ (Wolterstorff 2002, pp. 228–29). This is a valid concern, which Wolterstorff shares, of course, with Begbie; however, an alertness to these dangers need not lead one to restricting the role of theological art to simply communicating a predetermined revelation (as *propaganda fidei*). We sought

<sup>35</sup> I am grateful to Gavin Hopps for sharing with me, and with participants on the scheme, forthcoming research. See (Hopps Forthcoming).

<sup>36</sup> David Brown has consistently advocated in his work a ‘generous’ understanding of God’s self-revelation in the world through human history and culture. See, most recently, (Brown 2017). See also (Brown 2004, 2007, 2008). In this context, see also (Begbie 2012)’s response to David Brown’s approach to theology and music, including his ‘misgivings’.

<sup>37</sup> See also (Burch Brown 1989).

<sup>38</sup> This dialogue, of course, contributes to a much wider, international scholarly discussion on the relationship between theology and music. For a descriptive summary of some of these scholarly viewpoints see, for example, (Heaney 2012b).

to maintain, by contrast, that this is just one (albeit highly important) role of theological art, others being precisely to provoke and challenge, (as by distortion, play, or irreverence). As Burch Brown insists, theology ‘must exist in complementary and dialectical reaction not only with praxis but also with those richly aesthetic arts that can bring these relations imaginatively to life’ (Burch Brown 1989, p. 88).

A Thomist paradigm for engaging non-Christian truths may offer an additional way to articulate this more hospitable via *media* in which theology can be seen to interact with music without constraining music’s autonomy or, indeed, its intrinsic capacity to reveal the divine, while, at the same time, showing how music can be transformed and transfigured by the encounter with theology. Gavin D’Costa draws a parallel between twenty-first century attitudes to Christian engagement with other religions and the three attitudes characteristic of early Christian engagements with philosophy: first, a rejection of engagement altogether; secondly, a critical encounter and accommodation; thirdly, an uncritical adoption of philosophy such that it determines Christianity rather than being transformed by it’ (Ganeri 2012, p. 1058; D’Costa 2005).<sup>39</sup> D’Costa favours the second as the appropriate mode by which theology should engage with other disciplines, and sees in Aquinas’ theology a key model. What happens, then, in this encounter with theology? Aquinas uses the scriptural image of water and wine: rather than the philosophy (water) diluting theology (wine), philosophical doctrines (water) become, are transformed into, wine. Crucially, as Martin Ganeri highlights, ‘the water of [philosophical] thought still remains the material out of which the theology is made and without it we could not have the resultant theology in the form we have it’ (ibid., p. 1066). In other words, this wine is new to the cellar of divine wisdom, not replicating what was already there. Although I would make the analogy with theology and music tentatively, there is, I think, a sense in which music (the water) can be transformed by its encounter with Christianity and come not to *serve* theology, but to be theology or, more exactly, theoartistry, insofar as it may reveal God and His revelation in a new way through artistry.

#### 4. Six New Choral Works of Sacred Music for the 21st Century

The composers were given quite strict parameters for their composition: it had to be approximately three minutes in length and performable by a good amateur choir. Tom Wilkinson discussed with the composers different aspects of sacred music from a choral director’s perspective, including voice-leading, harmony, individual and ensemble rhythm, metre, texture and text. He invited the composers to challenge the choir in these areas, giving examples from the repertoire, but advised against doing so from each angle simultaneously. He also encouraged the composers to experiment, especially as the scheme incorporated a ‘workshop’ to try out compositional ideas, before a final draft of the composition would be submitted for public performance and for the recording. We considered this practical dimension important for the project not least because, in the tradition of sacred music, composers have always had to write with the capability of particular groups of performers in mind.

In preparing an Old Testament ‘annunciation’ for their composer-partner, the theologians may be seen to have taken three different kinds of approaches. The first was to reappraise a familiar Scriptural passage through the lens of the artistic imagination, bringing out a new or ‘hidden’ aspect that countered the dominant interpretative paradigm (whether in Biblical Studies or in the wider cultural imagination). The second was to approach the passage with a specific question or personal interest. The third was to explore the semantic challenges of representing God’s presence or voice through word, music, and silence.<sup>40</sup> In each of the six collaborations, the Scriptural passage spoke in a particular way to the theologians and composers; at the same time, the theologians and composers’ own cultural beliefs, individual personalities and research interests offered an enriched understanding of the Biblical episode in question.

<sup>39</sup> Martin Ganeri situates his Thomist model for comparative theology in relation to the summary of approaches provided by Gavin D’Costa.

<sup>40</sup> In discussing briefly each of the six collaborations, I rely on the draft chapters of the theologians and composers which will be published subsequently in (Corbett Forthcoming).

Theologian Margaret McKerron emphasised that in the Biblical commentary tradition, and in the popular cultural imagination, *Genesis* 3 is typically envisaged in terms of the temptation and judgement of Adam and Eve, and their expulsion by God from the garden of Eden. This is even the case when the Biblical story is self-consciously parodied or inverted in modern popular culture and advertising, where temptation becomes self-liberation, sin self-fulfilment, and expulsion emancipation. Returning to the passage with a focus on how God speaks to Adam and Eve, McKerron sought a way out of this polarised cultural perception of *Genesis*. She showed that the verses between the eating of the fruit (3.6) and God's judgement (3.14) are conspicuously under-represented in art. Moreover, she highlighted the chiastic structure unifying *Genesis* 2.4 and *Genesis* 3.25: the creation of Adam (A), the creation of Eve (B), the serpent's dialogue with Eve (C); Adam and Eve's sin and its revelation to God (X); the judgement of the serpent (C); the judgement of Eve (B); the judgement of Adam (A). In the first part (AB), we witness God's provision for man while, in the heart of the episode (X), God poses three questions prior to his three judgements (CBA), re-opening the lines of communication and relationship. These questions are: 'Where are you?' (3.9b); 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' (3.11). Even after Adam and Eve resist the opportunity to acknowledge their own guilt and seek repentance (instead Adam blames Eve, Eve the serpent) and are judged and expelled, God continues to provide for them in the world outside. McKerron suggested that this provision and promise is a protoevangelium, to be fulfilled in the coming of Christ and, ultimately in Christ's passion on the cross. McKerron and composer Anselm McDonnell, therefore, creatively explored Jesus as the new Adam. In the first part of McDonnell's choral setting *Hinneri* (2017), the focus is on the central moment of God's conversation with Adam and Eve before their expulsion from Eden, with God asking them: 'Where are you? Who told you you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and evil? What have you done?' In the second half of the composition, it is now man who questions God on the cross: 'For whom are you naked? What is this you have done, my saviour? Hanging cursed from the tree of death, of wrath, of death, for me? What is this you have done, my God'. Throughout there is the refrain 'Hinneri' (Here I am), the ongoing presence and provision of God even when man is hiding or seemingly helpless.

Theologian Caleb Froehlich similarly sought to challenge a conventional interpretation through re-appraising his Old Testament 'annunciation' through an imaginative, artistic lens. The story of God's threefold calling of Samuel (1 Samuel 3) is typically associated, Froehlich suggested, with children and 'Sunday school': in developing their own relationship with God, Samuel seems to offer them a simple model. Even Biblical scholars, moreover, can characterise the episode as 'an idyllic childlike exchange'. By contrast, Froehlich explored the setting of God's call, what the episode might reveal about the voice of God (how it is mediated, and how we might miss it), and the 'psychological and emotional turmoil' that the young boy, Samuel, might have experienced. Froehlich emphasised the climax of the story: God's terrible judgement on the house of Eli, Samuel's mentor. The composer Seán Doherty responded, in particular, to this potential terror of Samuel; in discovering that Samuel could have been as young as four to eight, he writes: 'this made the passage more personal to me as I reflected on my Godson, my nephew Aodhán (the dedicatee of this piece), who was six years old at the time. I thought of what my own reaction would be to a child who was visibly distressed after waking up, which would be comfort them immediately'. Doherty then took up the 'viewpoint of Samuel, who is traumatised by this nightmarish prophecy' which foretells the 'destruction of the only family he had ever known', to such an extent 'that he is afraid to tell Eli about it in the morning'. Doherty stripped the dialogue to its essentials, drawing on the etymological potency of the three names Samuel (meaning 'God hears/the one who hears God'), Eli (meaning 'My God') and El ('God') to carry implicitly the dialogue of the episode. The only further speech is 'Hinneri' ('Here I am') and 'Daber ki shomea abdecha' (Speak, for your servant hears'). As Doherty states, 'the rest of the narrative could unfold in the music itself'. Doherty structured his piece in three sections around God's threefold call to Samuel (A), Samuel's call to Eli (B), and Eli's call to Samuel (C). In the manner of an oratorio, Doherty assigned to each protagonist a group of performers: 'the soprano soloist is the boy Samuel; the choir



with organ is the voice of God; the choir without organ is the voice of Eli'. In this way, 'the musical material of the three-fold call (A) is echoed by Eli (C), but now without the organ accompaniment, signifying that the voice of God has now departed, and it is Eli, alone, who speaks'. Doherty thus renders musically the mediated voice of God that 'sounds like' but is not that of Eli, the addition of the organ being a self-conscious allusion to 'the use of the organ as a metaphor for the word of God in seventeenth-century sources'.

In her exploration of the 'Song of Songs', theologian Kimberley Anderson considered how a traditional gendering of the experience of God (the soul as female, God as male) can be difficult for men to inhabit, given the still pervasive cultural norm that sees men 'as strong and logical'. She drew on her own research interest in contemporary rock music, where gender stereotypes can be both reinforced and creatively challenged as, for example, in Beyoncé's album *Lemonade* (2016) and her husband, Jay-Z's responding album *4.44* (2017). While registering the traditional allegorical glosses of the bridegroom and bride in terms of Christ and his Church, or God and the human soul, Anderson chose to focus primarily on the heterosexual relationship between bridegroom and bride in the *Song of Songs* alongside, and as a reconstitution of, Adam and Eve's relationship in *Genesis*. She explored the ambiguity of *Genesis* in relation to gender, highlighting Adam's incompleteness: 'it is not good that the man should be alone' (Genesis 2.18). Even Eve's status as 'bone of my bones', as Anderson argued, can be interpreted in a superlative sense (as in 'King of Kings' or, indeed, 'Song of Songs' itself). She also suggested texts from Milton's *Paradise Lost* in order to give a voice to the bridegroom, and to explore the vulnerability and sensitivity of maleness within the marriage union. In the first section of his composition, Beatch's threefold repetition of the line 'Who is this?' underlines the key question of identity. In the second part, Beatch adapts Milton's text with its description of Eve as 'in herself complete'. Deciding that 'Solomon's masculinity would be purposefully feminized', Beatch 'intentionally aimed to portray this masculine voice through stereotypically "feminine" music [ . . . ] the harmonies are lush, the phrases are short and breathless, and even the rhythms are gentle'. Furthermore, the female voice 'is given direct agency at the opening of the piece, since it is the sopranos and altos who first observe and define Solomon's agency', whereas the literal male voice (the men of the choir) sing alone for only two brief moments. In the final 'chant-like' section, the pomp of 'Solomon King' is avoided, and—instead—the vulnerability and complexity of the young man and woman in the marriage union is evoked.

In preparing *Genesis* 32: 22–32 in its immediate context, theologian Marian Kelsey first addressed the interpretative ambiguity surrounding Jacob's nocturnal wrestling with God. Jacob is blessed by God, and given a new name—Israel—, and rejoices in having seen 'God face to face', but there is also a self-awareness of his proximity to death: 'and yet my life is preserved'. In the struggle itself, moreover, Jacob's opponent is unidentified, and Kelsey emphasised that the term translated as 'God' in this passage (the Hebrew *'ēlōhîm*) may also refer to angels, leaving the engagement with the divine more open-ended. Kelsey then showed how Jacob's encounter with his divine opponent has been appropriated in diverse ways in the history of its reception, from being a model of persistent prayer (set alongside the parable of the unjust judge; Luke 18: 1–8) to embodying human struggles with 'spiritual and emotional crises'.<sup>41</sup> Composer Dominic de Grande responded to Kelsey's challenge to find his own personal reinterpretation of Jacob's struggle:

I had struggled with many starts and stops (the irony of wrestling with a narrative about wrestling was not lost on me). [ . . . ] I began to realise that I needed to develop a deeper and more personal relationship with the text, something that I could feel invested in. [ . . . ] The turning point for me came when I thought about my Grandmother who was religious

<sup>41</sup> In terms of theologian-artist collaborations, of particular note is the play *Wrestling with Angels* (based on *Genesis* 32–33 and 2 Corinthians), a collaboration between theologians and Riding Lights Theatre Company in 1998 that led, in turn, to the collaboration organised by Jeremy Begbie, *Till Kingdom Come*, in 2000. See especially (Ford 2002).

and the way she was full of music and stories. She would improvise bedtime stories and I would often have to wake her for conclusions that seldom ever came. I realised that it wasn't only about the words working with the music but feeling comfortable with the numinous context that bound them together. It turns out that my own sense of religiosity was found through the memory of my Grandmother.

De Grande explains that his title 'Whilst falling asleep, Savta told me of Jacob' evokes this relationship: 'Savta is the Hebrew word for grandmother. My own grandmother used to sing and whistle to me when I was a child and she would tell me stories as I fell between sleep and dreams'. This intermingling between 'whistling' and 'singing' is heard as a novel texture throughout De Grande's composition. To evoke the delicate balance of adult seriousness and childlike simplicity, De Grande sets an Emily Dickinson poem, 'A Little East of Jordan', suggested to him by Kelsey: the poem draws out the inherent ambiguity of the Biblical text, with the unnamed opponent referred to as an angel until the very last line and word of the poem in which the Gymnast 'found he had worsted God!'

For theologian Rebekah Dyer, 'the challenge of presenting the burning bush in music necessitated an entirely new theological method'. Dyer started from her own experience as an amateur fire-spinner, an experience which makes palpable the full sensory aspects of fire: heat, light, movement, smell, the 'sound of a flickering flame'. The burning bush, then, is not just a visual image but a multi-sensory one: prioritising sound, Dyer emphasised, meant 'doing theology with my eyes closed and my ears open'. Dyer sought out an 'embodied way of knowing', an 'experiential, rather than intellectual, exploration of fire', which would correlate with her sense that God, like fire and music, is 'ungraspable'. Composer Kerensa Briggs responded to the mystery of the consuming fire that does not consume, and to the initial ambiguities surrounding the voice from the fire, and Moses' identity itself: 'These were factors which I felt were important to express within the piece, and directly influenced the continually flickering quaver writing in the organ part and the recurrence of harmonic ambiguity or bitonality. I wanted to juxtapose tonal harmony against bitonal ambiguity to express the different sections and ideas found within the text'. Briggs' setting for the opening line 'Moses, Moses, Here I am' in three upper voices, furthermore, similarly reflects musically 'the notion of the Trinity, the ambiguity of the voice coming from the bush, and a reflection on or response to the quivering flame'.

As Rebekah Dyer drew on her experience as a fire spinner in approaching Exodus III, so theologian Mary Stevens's experience within the Carmelite Order gave a privileged entry point into considering Elijah's encounter with God in 1 Kings 19: 4–12. Stevens introduced early on the poetry of St John of the Cross, with its contemplation of the paradox of divine presence:

The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul. [ . . . ] What we need most in order to make progress is to be silent before this great God with our appetite and with our tongue, for the language He hears best is silent love.<sup>42</sup>

Stevens emphasised that 'the sound of sheer silence' is 'an encounter with God', an encounter beyond the medium of words. Composer Lisa Robertson picked up this lead in making 'the sound of sheer silence' the focal point of her piece:

As this follows the three dramatic natural phenomena of 'the wind, the earthquake and the fire', it was possible to use these events as a means of intensifying the tension towards the climax point. I felt that the most successful means of achieving this would be to enhance the listener's musical expectations with four repetitions of musical material. The fourth repetition begins to conform to the listener's expectations, according to the patterns, but is then suddenly interrupted and, surprisingly, met with lengthy silence.

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<sup>42</sup> St John of the Cross, *Maxims and Counsels*, 21, 53.

To create a soundscape ‘inspired by the vastness of the mountains’, Robertson adopts a ‘sparse but widely spaced harmonic language [including] large contrasts in the dynamics, texture and range’. To suggest the points where God is not present (‘My God is not in the earthquake’), Robertson inserts ‘percussive sounds’; where He is present, she employs another extended technique of ‘whispering sounds’, mimicking the sound of wind (and evoking the breath of God which ‘hovered over the waters’ in the Creation story).

## 5. Conclusions

Cathedral, chapel and chamber choirs need new works in their repertoire, as well as those of the great masters of the past. The fostering of sacred music therefore includes engaging the next generation of composers with the extraordinary creative power of Christianity, of a faith that ‘makes all things new’. At the same time, artistry brings new dimensions, perspectives and insights to theology, whether challenging conventional readings of Biblical passages (as with regard to the Fall, or the calling of Samuel), turning to that tradition with contemporary questions (as in relation to gender or the search for faith in a more secular environment), or meditating on the communication of the divine (through the word, the senses, and silence). TheoArtistry’s inaugural project seeks to contribute, then, to this long tradition of sacred choral music, with its particular cultural presence in British culture. As Kenneth Leighton, one of MacMillan’s teachers, commented: ‘it is perhaps only in the light of experience that one realises how fundamental and important a part the Church music tradition—which is after all the only unbroken musical tradition in this country, stretching right to the middle ages—plays in the musical life of Britain as a whole’ (Leighton 1984).

TheoArtistry seeks to do more, however, than helping to foster theologically engaged and fruitful choral music. It seeks to offer a new, open and flexible model for collaborations between theologians and artists that can be adapted in different contexts, with different art forms, and with different styles within those art forms. Indeed, MacMillan sees music—with its special relationship to spirituality—as a medium which may lead the reintegration of theology and the other arts. As he comments:

the discussion, the dialogue, between theology and the arts is not some peripheral thing that some have claimed it has been, but it actually might have been a very central thing in the development of the way that we think of our culture (MacMillan 2017b).

TheoArtistry’s second project—*The TheoArtistry Poets’ Scheme*—is a collaboration between ITIA and StAnza (Scotland’s International Poetry Festival), and over fifty poets applied for six places to work, like their composer counterparts, with the School of Divinity’s theologians. These poets will be mentored in 2018 by MacMillan’s long-term collaborator Michael Symmons Roberts. But the hope is that the collaborative experiments of *TheoArtistry* will inspire others to set up similar initiatives, and to contribute to a growing dialogue about the creative power of Christianity.

This reintegration of theology and the arts, as I have intimated, has important implications not just for the creation of new art works, but for their curatorship and programming, their performance and reception. It is vital not just to the future of our culture and our arts but also as a way of encouraging the full appreciation of the art of the past, which due to the secularised impoverishment of so many people today is often misunderstood, misconstrued or ignored altogether. The recognition of the theological and spiritual significance of art is an important starting point. There is a discernible trend (albeit still a minority one) in the curatorship of visual art to recontextualise religious paintings, so far as is possible within the ‘secular frame’ of a museum. In the recording of choral music, there are signs, as I have suggested, that more attention is being given to Christian liturgy, themes, and context. By practising and celebrating theologically informed programming and performance (TIPP), however, it may be possible to improve dramatically the public appreciation of Christian music, both past and present. For believers and non-believers alike, the artistry of the composers will be so much more apparent when the composers’ theological inspiration is more fully understood. But, also, this may

allow art to create a space for and communicate the divine, which is one of its most ancient and celebrated capacities.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following are available online at [www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/9/1/7/s1](http://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/9/1/7/s1).

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