

An Analysis of the *Sanctus and Benedictus* and *Agnus Dei* in James MacMillan's *Mass* (2000)

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James MacMillan (b. 1959 in Kilwinning, Ayrshire)¹ is one of the most prominent composers on the contemporary music scene. He strongly identifies himself as both a Scot and a devout Catholic, and his music is often quite eclectic and aims to be more directly communicative than much of the music of the modernists of the early and mid 20th century. But while he may accurately be described as a ‘postmodern’ composer, his relationship to modernist techniques is by no means reactionary.² These characteristics are clearly seen in his masterful 2000 work *Mass* for mixed choir and organ.

This work, as stated in the preface to the score, “was commissioned for the glory of God in the Millennium Year of Jubilee, and was first performed on the Feast of Corpus Christi by the Choir of Westminster Cathedral, London, with Andrew Reid (organ), directed by Martin Baker.”³ It is especially unique in that not only is the Ordinary (minus the Credo) set, but also much of the Proper as well. This work was commissioned for specific liturgical use, and so MacMillan happily wrote music for the Gospel Alleluia and much of the priest / choir / people dialogue during the Eucharist. Because of his active Catholic faith, he shows extreme sensitivity and spiritual insight with his setting of the liturgical texts. He writes in his note to the first performance,

“The movements of the Mass are crafted like a musical journey which mirrors the

¹ Boosey & Hawkes, *James MacMillan, Biography*,
http://www.boosey.com/pages/cr/composer/composer_main.asp?composerid=2799&langid=1&tttype=BIOGRAPHY&tttitle=Biography

² Keith Potter, *Introduction to the music of James MacMillan*,
http://www.boosey.com/pages/cr/composer/composer_main.asp?composerid=2799&langid=1&tttype=INTRODUCTION&tttitle=In%20Focus

³ James MacMillan, *Mass* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 2001)

progression of mood, emphasis and poetic tension in the liturgy. From the Penitential Rite to the joyous hymn of the Gloria, to the mysteries of the Consecration through to the reflective ambiguities of the Agnus Dei, the music moves from clarity to a sense of uneasy resolution. Even though this is a work which explores the eternal mysteries and truths of the Catholic faith, it is written through the experience of the tragedies and uncertainties of our own age. It is inevitable that a contemporary celebration of Divine Love would be shrouded in the doubts and fears which characterise our time.”⁴

This analysis will focus primarily on the *Sanctus and Benedictus* and *Agnus Dei* movements with relatively brief attention given to the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, and elements of the Proper to give context to the bulk of the analysis.

The *Kyrie* and the *Gloria* (and the majority of the Proper) are generally unapologetically modal, although the *Gloria* is quite a bit more eclectic in terms of its more frequent poly-modality and non-functional harmonies. In the *Kyrie*, however, it is interesting to note the tonal relationships MacMillan establishes as a key to understanding the significance of some of the tonal centers in the last two movements of the Ordinary. The *Kyrie* begins clearly in A-minor, and the harmonies move slowly through several closely-related tonal areas (D, G, B-minor, G, F#-minor, D, and B-minor) until the climax of the section in bar 23 in F#-minor. The harmonies then slowly meander (through G, F#-minor, and G) to D in bar 32. This functions as a sort of half-cadence before the return of the opening noodling A-minor organ material in bar 34. Thus

⁴ James MacMillan, performance notes for premiere of *Mass*, quoted in James Whitbourn, sleeve notes for: James MacMillan, *Mass and other sacred works*, Westminster Cathedral Choir, Martin Baken, Hyperion compact disc 67219, 4 (available online at <http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/notes/67219-N.asp>).

the largest harmonic projection for this section of music is A-minor, F $\sharp$ -minor, D, A-minor. Expressed in Roman numerals, this would be i - vi - IV - i. This plagal cadential relationship between D and A is far more important throughout the work than any dominant-tonic relationship.

The main unifying motive for the work is the 'Lydian-pentachord' which makes its first appearance in bar 2 of the *Kyrie* after the organ introduction. It is first sung by the priest (or a solo bass) on the pitches C, G, F $\sharp$, D, E (07624). This five-note figure appears throughout the Mass in all four Ordinary sections and in many of the Proper with varying degrees of obviousness. At the beginning of the *Gloria*, it forms the first five pitches of the twelve-tone row 07624A39581B (P11 in bars 1-3 of the *Gloria* with one alteration in the trebles) which occurs in a few places in the *Gloria*, always in prime form and often not the complete row. Other complete (or mostly complete) occurrence include P1 in bar 53, P2 in bar 59, P4 in bar 71, P0 in bar 80 (but with an E substituted for the C), and the return of P11 in bar 85.

The *Sanctus and Benedictus* is a perfect example of his use of the 07624 motive. The motive begins in the first basses on F $\sharp$ in steady half notes, and when it reaches the B $\flat$ in bar 3, the 07624 sequence repeats starting on B $\flat$. This pattern continues from there through bar 20 with the Lydian-pentachord motive consistently in the top voice. Throughout the passage, the organ reinforces the voice parts by simply doubling the lines. All of this is over a C pedal tone.

Because the ending pitch of the motive is a major third above the starting pitch, following the pattern exactly would return the pitch collection to the starting note of F $\sharp$ after three repetitions. Rather than doing this, the final note of the third repetition is lowered by a semitone to an F $\flat$ in bar 7. Three repetitions later in bar 13, he again lowers the third of the pentachord to

an E. This brings the final pentachord of the section to C, resulting in a glorious arrival point in bar 17 because of the C pedal tone.

The other lines in the section (bars 1 through 20) are best understood in terms of their contributions to the vertical sonorities rather than in any linear fashion. The passage is clearly divided into 2-bar groups, and by analyzing the interval content of the voice parts, a pattern emerges illustrated by the table in Appendix A.

The first bar of each of the 2-bar groupings is an open fifth (the first two half notes), followed by (after the first three groupings) a more dissonant chord on the downbeat of the second bar and a sort of resolution of the final chord of the set, which leads into the open fifth of the next group. This pattern is not broken until the chord preceding the final set, a densely-dissonant chord which sets up the arrival point of bar 17. While it is possible to analyze the final set in terms of polychords, I do not think it appropriate here; because the voices (and organ) are in such a compact range and of the same relative timbre, and because they are all moving in parallel or similar motion, they are heard as one harmony with a clear root of C rather than as separate harmonies, even with the polymodal dissonances (i.e. the E $\flat$ / b and B $\flat$ / b). The final two distinct chords of the section in bars 19 and 20 have the same IC vector of 143241; taken together, all seven pitches of the Lydian-Mixolydian scale are present.

The *poco più mosso* section from bars 21 through 28 on the text “Hosanna in the highest” is the most active passage in the entire piece. Individual lines are all but lost in a thick, almost cacophonous, texture, but upon closer inspection, it is actually very tightly constructed. The organ part of this passage (in the manuals) consists of a virtuosic flurry of 32nd-note quintuplets. Each of the four voice parts has the exact same rhythm and melodic contour but in canon with a

temporal interval of one beat. Both the trebles and the tenors begin on the root of the C-Lydian-Mixolydian scale (although they do not actually sing the seventh scale degree), the altos begin on the third of the scale, and the basses on the dominant. The basses, however, have a D $\flat$ instead of the natural second scale degree in the Lydian-Mixolydian scale. This is rather confusing, but I believe by treating it enharmonically, it can be understood as the third of an A-major seventh chord; thus the D $\flat$ actually brightens the harmonic content.

Because of the hyperactivity of all the other parts, the organ pedal line of steady half-notes becomes the most important line. The pitch content of this line, beginning on F $\sharp$, is identical to the sequence of the 07624 motive at the beginning of the movement: it repeats the figure three times, exactly as in bars 1-6. But where the third of the Lydian-pentachord was lowered in bar 7 to an F $\flat$, the pedal line arrives solidly on the major third in bar 27 for a glorious cadence on the last word of “Hosanna in the highest” in F $\sharp$ major, which is an important pitch in the harmonic projections of the *Kyrie* movement.

From the glory of the bar 28, the texture and mood changes abruptly in the following passage on the text “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” to material that resembles very closely the material that will be used in the *Agnus Dei* movement plus unique material including non-functional and polytonal triads, tone clusters, and a three-semitone motive. When the arrival in bar 34 on C $\sharp$ minor is reached as the first clearly stable harmony since the cadence in bar 27, the F $\sharp$ major from that cadence is still in the listeners’ ears, thus establishing a plagal relationship between the two.

The textual/musical association between this section of the *Benedictus* and the *Agnus Dei* may be an example of MacMillan’s keen perceptiveness when it comes to the content of the

liturgical text. This text is from the Triumphal Entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem (see Matthew 21) celebrated by Christians as Palm Sunday; by using the same musical material that will be used in the *Agnus Dei* section where the text reads “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world”, MacMillan may be using the music as a somber foreshadowing of the Passion in what is traditionally treated as a very triumphant and celebratory text.

The last few bars of this unstable section crescendo to bar 48 where the material from beat 3 of bar 17 through beat 1 of 19 is repeated exactly on the text “Hosanna in the highest.” After these four chords beginning on beat 3 of bar 50, the music through bar 66 is the exact same, note for note, rhythm for rhythm, as the music from bars 1 through 17, but in retrograde. The movement ends quietly on F#-Lydian with ascending diatonic thirds in the organ. This gives the movement a nicely symmetrical form and allows for a perfect transition into either the Eucharistic Prayer (beginning on F# minor) when in liturgical contexts or the *Agnus Dei* (the first two pitches (C $\flat$ and C $\sharp$) of which are enharmonically the fourth and fifth notes in the F#-Lydian scale) when sung in concert performances.

The *Agnus Dei* is by far the darkest, most unstable and uncertain movement of the work. It is also one of the most tightly controlled. Since it is readily apparent that MacMillan uses very similar musical material for each of the three lines of text, it seemed natural to take a comparative approach in the analysis of the movement.

The movement opens with a provocative minor second of C and C $\sharp$ in the organ which, as will become apparent, functions as a split third to an A triad. The tenors, altos, and trebles provide the root and fifth, and by following the treble line, we see another use of the 07624 Lydian-pentachord motive, although the C $\sharp$ appears in the organ pedal rather than in the actual

treble line. By treating these first 6 bars as a single subsection based on A, the pitches can be represented in integer notation thus: A: 34 A0 7B2 6 2.

The second section, a continuation of the “Lamb of God” text, is based on C♯. After the C♯ in the organ pedal, the tenors and basses doubled by the organ enter a fifth above on G♯. The basses then move down to a G♭. From C♯, these pitches are 076, the beginning of the Lydian-pentachord motive, but the next pitch is a D rather than a D♯ which breaks the expected pattern. From that section, the order of the pitches is C♯: 07614B95 until the A♭ on the text “You take away”. From there, we have the proper Lydian-pentachord proper on A♭ with the fifth pitch being the first pitch of “the sins of the world” section, which is the exact same order as the first occurrence of that series on bar 7. Bar 20 introduces the text “have mercy on us” on a simple E-Dorian figure in the tenors and basses which first appeared in bar 66 of the *Gloria* on the text “receive our prayer.” This is surely not coincidental.

Bars 23-43 contain an almost identical succession of pitches at the level of one whole-tone lower than the first 22 bars, which is appropriate since the text is exactly the same. Exact differences in the order of pitches between the two sections may be seen in Appendix B.

The third section of text is where the pitch relationships established in the first two sections are modified. After the first 5 pitches, bars 44-50 bear little resemblance to corresponding passages in bars 1-6 and 23-28. After that, the pitch relationships present in the first two sections are present but hidden: instead of having a succession of isolated pitches, the pitches are hidden in several triads, mostly all major. (Exact relationships of the key pitches with the triads are detailed in Appendix B with the ‘functional’ pitches in bold typeface.) This creates a very unique sound for the piece, at once bright and uncertain. The relationships of the pitch

levels between sections (identified in Appendix B by the parenthetical numbers) also does not follow the pattern established by the earlier corresponding passages. This eventually subsides to “grant us peace” on A-Dorian in bar 64. But the figure is not identical to the corresponding “have mercy on us” passages in the preceding sections. Instead, this material is from bars 7-11 of the *Gloria* (on which bars 65-68 are a variation) where the text reads “Lord God, heavenly King,”; this material also occurs on the “Amen” in bars 92-97 of the *Gloria* and in the *Alleluia*.

On a final note, it is important to note the tonal relationships between the two occurrences “have mercy on us” and “grant us peace.” In bar 20, it is E-Dorian; in bar 41, D-Dorian; and in 64, A-Dorian. In tonal progressions, this would form a v - iv - i progression. One should remember back to the *Kyrie* especially where the plagal relationship of iv - i was of primary importance in the harmonic projection, a cadential formula which he follows here at the conclusion of the Mass. And of course, MacMillan constructs the piece in such a way that it ends in A-minor, the same key with which the work began.

Appendix A

IC Vectors for <i>Sanctus and Benedictus</i> bars 1-18 and 49-66 (excluding C pedal)				
bars 1-2; 66-65	000000	000010	000010	000000
bars 3-4; 63-64	000010	000010	000010	010000
bars 5-6; 62-61	000010	000010	000010	011010
bars 7-8; 60-59	000010	000010	102111	001110
bars 9-10; 58-57	000010	000010	021120	011010
bars 11-12; 56-55	000010	000010	123121	010020
bars 13-14; 54-53	000010	000010	202321	010020
bars 15-16; 52-51	000010	000010	001110	546652
bars 17-18; 50-49	224232	113221	123121	143241

Appendix B

A comparative analysis of the *Agnus Dei*

Lamb of God,		You take away		the sins of the world:	have mercy on us.
bars 1-22	A: 34 A0 7B2 6 2 (4)	C #: 07614B95(7)	A b: 0762(4)	C: 07614B95(4)	E-Dorian (v)
bars 23-43	G: 34 A0 7 6 2 0 7B2 6 2 (4)	B: 076149B5(7)	F #: 0762(4)	B b: 07614B95 [78A](4)	D-Dorian (iv)
bars 44-75	F: 34 A0 7 269 B A 8 (1)	F #: 07614B95(2)	G #: 0762(4)	C: 07614B95(9)	A-Dorian (i)
					grant us peace.

detail of bars 51-61

F #: 590 7B2 6A1 158 48B 6A1 48B 590

G #: 0 037A B26 2 (4)

C: 0 047 B36 148 47B B B9 158 B36 904

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