

8 | A Cluster of Gathering Shadows: Exposition and Exegesis in *Seven Last Words from the Cross*

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Seven Last Words from the Cross (1993) is a landmark work in MacMillan's career.¹ It has become one of his most frequently performed works, and was one of the early works that established his reputation.² Contextualized within MacMillan's oeuvre and the historical genre, this chapter analyses *Seven Last Words* both musically and theologically, demonstrating that rather than merely being a setting of the traditional text, MacMillan has provided a sophisticated exegesis of the seven last words uttered by Jesus. This is achieved through textual means (specifically adding texts from related liturgies), and musical means that demonstrate MacMillan's modernist approach to tradition. Although the work is powerful and effective as an occasion-specific Christian work, MacMillan has managed to transcend time and place, and make the historicized narrative into a psychological melodrama. Through a series of connected musical episodes MacMillan has utilized an array of musical techniques that serve to underscore the dramatic narrative. By analysing key structural moments and deconstructing the sophisticated and multi-layered theology, this essay demonstrates that MacMillan has, in the words of Scottish writer George Mackay Brown, found 'an old wisdom out of the cluster of gathering shadows', making sense for contemporary audiences out of the horrifying events of the crucifixion.³ Ultimately, MacMillan leaves his listeners with a legend that is utterly human and profoundly relevant.

Prior to *Seven Last Words* (composed 1993, premiered 1994), MacMillan had written a number of choral works, starting with *Beatus Vir* for

¹ James MacMillan, *Seven Last Words from the Cross* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 2003). All text in this chapter from *Seven Last Words from the Cross*, including the Preface, below, is © Copyright 2003 by Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

² '[It] was only gradually I began to realize that the piece was being performed a lot, mostly Easter time or during Holy Week, and in very different places . . . and it's now quite a regular happening to have it performed [in the United States] and elsewhere'. Bethany L. Alvey, 'Spirituality and Scottish Identity in Selected Works of James MacMillan', unpublished DMA dissertation, University of Miami (2016).

³ George Mackay Brown, *Time in a Red Coat* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), p. 72.

chorus and organ (1983, now withdrawn).⁴ His output in this first decade also includes several chamber works, a piano concerto (*The Berserking*, 1990), and a concerto for percussion and orchestra titled *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel* (1992), which was received with critical and public acclaim.⁵

As the preface to the score notes: '*Seven Last Words from the Cross* was commissioned by BBC Television and first screened in seven nightly episodes during Holy Week, 26 March–1 April 1994, performed by Capella Nova (A Scottish choral group) and the BT Scottish Ensemble under Alan Tavener'.⁶ MacMillan sets the seven last words in English and Aramaic, and adds texts in Latin and English. Each movement lasts between six and eight minutes (around forty-five minutes in total), and is accompanied by string orchestra (2 violins, viola, cello, bass).

In 1993 MacMillan was a featured composer at the Edinburgh Festival, but, by his own admission, it left him creatively exhausted.

I dried up and it felt like a creative block. *Seven Last Words* was the next piece – deadlines were looming. By October and into November of that year not a note had been written although I had been thinking about it. The commissioner and performers were getting worried. Suddenly those seven movements came very quickly and by January it was finished.⁷

In his programme note to the first recording he further explained:

When I realized I'd committed myself to making a 45-minute piece around seven sentences I was horrified! Then I began to think. Some of them could be done on their own, a starkly repetitive setting maybe, but there was also scope for amplification. So, I found words from the service of *Tenebrae*, the Good Friday liturgy, that could act either as a reflection on the words or as a direct counterpart – like the versicle *Ecce lignum Crucis* (Behold the wood of the Cross).⁸

⁴ For an analytical discussion of the choral works from this period see Stephen Kingsbury, 'The Early Choral Music of James MacMillan: 1983–1993', unpublished DMA dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (2003).

⁵ For a detailed list of MacMillan's works, see the year-by-year alignment of MacMillan's life and works on the Boosey & Hawkes website: www.boosey.com/pages/cr/composer/timeline?composerid=2799.

⁶ Preface to the score. The Preface also notes that the first concert performance was given on 30 March 1994 at St. Aloysius Church, Glasgow, by the same performers; and that the first recording was conducted by MacMillan himself and features Polyphony and the London Chamber Orchestra. The video won the Royal Philharmonic Society's award for Best Music Video of the Year, and the work was a finalist for the Mercury Prize at the 1995 Edinburgh International Festival.

⁷ Shirley Ratcliffe, 'MacMillan', *Choir and Organ* Vol. 7, No. 4 (1999), p. 39.

⁸ James MacMillan, liner notes to 'James MacMillan: Seven Last Words from the Cross', BMG Catalyst, 09026-68125-2 (1995), p. 9.

The BBC commission affected the composition since it was conceived to be televised with one movement a night during the course of a week starting on Palm Sunday. Accordingly, MacMillan used the Palm Sunday text ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’ in the first movement, and the movements are all discrete entities (though they share musical material). Any of them would work as stand-alone anthems, and there is a version with organ accompaniment replacing the strings, which increases the likelihood of performance of individual movements or the suite.⁹ MacMillan was, however, aware of the ‘incomplete and unsatisfactory way of presenting the piece’, acknowledging that to be properly appreciated the seven movements ‘have to be encountered as a unity, a completeness’.¹⁰

The Texts and Their Musical Settings

The seven last words are compiled from the four canonic gospels and have come to be used as the basis for sermons and liturgies, especially on Good Friday. The order of the seven sentences has varied over time and is still subject to variation depending on the theological points being made.¹¹ MacMillan has not used the same order as Haydn (who includes an earthquake movement at the end, signifying the terrifying death of Jesus) and, although this distorts chronological time in certain ways during the narrative, it helps to make the work contemporary and relevant. There is a traditional understanding of the seven last words representing respectively forgiveness, salvation, relationship, abandonment, distress, triumph, and reunion. MacMillan’s exposition speaks to a modified form of this, so at the start of each description I have included an updated version of these descriptors that are influenced by his additional texts and the manner in which he has set them. This outlines the narrative of his own musical sermon.

At present, the earliest extant musical setting of the text is probably *Septem verba Domini Jesu Christi* by Orlando di Lasso. The text has been frequently set, and some versions have become part of the current canon.¹²

⁹ Boosey & Hawkes, 2003.

¹⁰ Mandy Hallam, ‘Conversation with James MacMillan’, *Tempo*, Vol. 62, No. 245 (July 2008), pp. 17–29. esp. 18.

¹¹ See Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, Vol. 2 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 645.

¹² For more detailed discussion of musical settings of the seven last words see: Raymond Dittrich, *Die sieben letzten Worte Jesu in der Musik* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2001);

These include *Die sieben Worte Jesu Christi am Kreuz*, SWV 478 (1645, revised 1655) by Heinrich Schütz; and Joseph Haydn's setting, *Die sieben letzten Worte*. This was originally an orchestral work dating from 1786, but was revised a number of times, including a choral version from 1796. Other notable settings include those by Pergolesi (1730–1736), Gounod (1855), Tournemire (1935 – for organ), Sofia Gubaidulina (1982), and Tristan Murail (2010). In composing his own setting, MacMillan has acknowledged this tradition, noting: 'I was very much aware of the Haydn "Seven Last Words" and of the Schütz setting, and of a very beautiful piece with the same title by Sofia Gubaidulina'.¹³

MacMillan's *Seven Last Words* is a comparatively early work, but he has a continued interest in the passion narrative and, in his own words, 'circled around [it] in different ways before settling to actually writing one' (*St John Passion*, 2007).¹⁴ Three other notable examples of his works based on the passion narrative are *Visitatio Sepulchri* (1992–1993) (The Visitation to the Sepulchre), which MacMillan has described as being based on a medieval liturgical drama of the woman encountering the angels at the tomb; a piano trio called *Fourteen Little Pictures* (1997), which is 'essentially the fourteen stations of the cross . . . a way of painting, painting the *Via Dolorosa* in fourteen little miniature movements all stitched together to make a bigger piece'; and a setting of the *Stabat Mater* (2015).¹⁵ Three further works are grouped under the title *Triduum* and deal with the same narrative, focusing on three days: Maundy Thursday (*The World's Ransoming*), Good Friday (*Cello Concerto*), and Easter Day (*Symphony 'Vigil'*).

MacMillan is a liberation theologian, which means he is part of a social and political movement within the church that attempts to interpret the gospels through the lived experiences of oppressed people.¹⁶ He has spoken of the contemporary relevance of the crucifixion and resurrection narrative, believing it to be at the 'core of our society, whether you want to accept its veracity or its depth of implication or not'.¹⁷ He describes the

Klaus Langrock, 'Die sieben Worte Jesu am Kreuz. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Passionsmusik', unpublished PhD dissertation, Bochum University (1987); and Vaughn Roste, 'The Seven Last Words of Christ', *The Choral Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 7 (February 2018), pp. 34–55.

¹³ Stephen Johnson, 'James MacMillan: Harnessing Extremes', *Gramophone* 72, No. 864 (May 1995), p. 17.

¹⁴ Alvey, 'Spirituality and Scottish Identity', p. 43.

¹⁵ Alvey, 'Spirituality and Scottish Identity', p. 43.

¹⁶ www.uscatholic.org/articles/201410/what-liberation-theology-29433.

¹⁷ James MacMillan, 'Belief: Joan Bakewell Talks to James MacMillan', *BBC Radio 3*; www.bbc.co.uk/religion/tv_radio/belief/documents/beliefmacmillan.htm (2000).

attraction to these stories through his own faith and as inheritor of a tradition, and explains how he feels compelled to respond to the gift of faith and tradition 'by engaging with these great texts, by this great story, by dealing with the crucifixion narrative, by circling round it rather obsessively perhaps, in many different works', noting that 'there's a great reservoir and a great depth of inspiration in these texts for me'.¹⁸ The 'cluster of gathering shadows' that surround the crucifixion refers not only to the prophetic darkness prior to the actual death of Jesus, but also to the ignominious events that led to this death. MacMillan's musical and textual exegesis of the narrative are interpreted through this lens of liberation theology and therefore become timely and perhaps more comprehensible to both Christian and non-Christian audiences.

The text is an extra-musical stimulus, and is of course directly connected to the musical outcome, but, for MacMillan, 'there has to be some element of (to use a theological analogy) transubstantiation of the extra-musical, so the idea communicates itself full as music'.¹⁹ MacMillan admits that:

For those people who initially do not want to engage with the theology, they should not need to. But to ignore where it's come from is to ignore something of the substance and essence of the music. That's where a composer like myself requires some open-mindedness from people who do not share my world view. There is never any attempt on my part to proselytize, to use music simply as a vehicle for an idea. Nevertheless, it has come from something pre-musical and wouldn't be the way it is if it weren't for its pre-musical genesis.²⁰

What MacMillan is suggesting is that it behoves non-Christians at least to be aware of the story that is being told even if they do not believe it to be the gospel truth.

In order to demonstrate, in part, how MacMillan has reinterpreted and updated the seven last words, what follows is an analysis of both text and music for each movement that explains the exposition of the musical sermon that MacMillan created, with exegesis about this unique version of the genre. Space precludes more than an overview of each movement, so a detailed analysis of portions that are particularly noteworthy have been included to highlight how MacMillan has structured and expanded the narrative. This does not do justice to the extraordinary inventiveness and

¹⁸ James MacMillan, 'Belief: Joan Bakewell Talks to James MacMillan'.

¹⁹ James MacMillan, Julian Johnson, and Catherine Sutton, 'Raising Sparks: On the Music of James MacMillan', *Tempo*, New Series, No. 202 (October 1997), p. 12.

²⁰ James MacMillan, Julian Johnson, and Catherine Sutton, 'Raising Sparks: On the Music of James MacMillan', *Tempo*, New Series, No. 202 (October 1997), p. 12.

control MacMillan has over the work, which is densely packed with musical detail throughout.

I Father, Forgive Them, for They Know Not What They Do (Luke 23:34)

The word of estrangement and forgiveness.

MacMillan adds two texts to the opening movement. First (in Latin) the Palm Sunday Exclamation: 'Hosanna to the Son of David, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel, Hosanna in the Highest!' Second, a passage from the Good Friday Responsories for Tenebrae, which describes the victimization of Jesus:²¹

The life that I held dear I delivered into the hands of the unrighteous and my inheritance has become for me like a lion in the forest. My enemy spoke out against me, 'Come gather together and hasten to devour him'. They placed me in a wasteland of desolation, and all the earth mourned for me. For there was no one who would acknowledge me or give me help. Men rose up against me and spared not my life.

Both of the additions are interesting. The first situates the narrative in real time and refers to some of the shadows that have been encroaching since Jesus began to be scrutinized by the authorities. The second speaks to MacMillan's own theology and moves the narrative to the present day, combining the original words of forgiveness with a salutary reminder that there are still many that are in a wasteland of desolation that no one will acknowledge or help.

The listener is invited into the piece by a single F \sharp ⁴ in the strings, and a musical figure derived from the middle of the J section of *Tuireadh*, a clarinet quintet which MacMillan composed in 1991.²² *Tuireadh* was composed in response to the Piper Alpha oil and gas platform disaster in 1988. MacMillan may have reworked the musical material because the human emotion is similar, or he may have had the musical gesture in mind and this was just another way of making it manifest, or it may simply have been a

²¹ Text below from MacMillan, *Seven Last Words*.

²² Bar 133 forwards. MacMillan acknowledged the self-borrowing in his recording liner notes (p. 6). Musical pitches are denoted by capital letters. Octave position is indicated by the use of a superscript numeral according to the American Standard Pitch Notation (ASPN) scheme in which middle C is denoted C⁴.

necessity because of the impending deadline for the BBC commission. Of these the latter is perhaps the most likely since six out of the seven movements contain music from works composed between 1991 and 1993.²³

Over a slow ostinato in the strings, the first of the 'last words' is sung by divisi sopranos to an ascending scale from F \sharp ⁴ to F \sharp ³. They are joined by the altos in bar 19, and this forms a texture that is modified, but continuous, throughout the movement. Many commentators have noted that MacMillan often uses compositional layering or stratified polyphony in his works.²⁴ In this case the layering is a response to the text, and a second layer is added starting in bar 23.

MacMillan has acknowledged that the technique at the start of *Seven Last Words* is a feature of his style:

Sometimes I look for a simple idea that could either be repetitive or form patterns that go round in circles. This can focus attention and create atmosphere giving a bed rock of sound from which other things emerge. It could be a repeated set of chords or a melodic phrase. That sense of focusing on a thought is good because it allows you to narrow your material down.²⁵

Having focused the listener into the piece and cultivated a sombre mood, what MacMillan does starting at bar 23 is both clever and effective. The women lead the way down the *via dolorosa* to the inevitable, while the men take the part of the *turba* (crowd) of the traditional passion settings, a role that is both observation and commentary. The two different textures amount to two different kinds of time, one sombre and steadfast, the other quick and alert. The men sing in a whisper the 'Hosanna filio' text in a much faster tempo, using a reciting tone with some simple embellishments in the style of chant. MacMillan also divides the strings, keeping the slow ostinato in the lower strings (supporting the women's voices), while the violins execute virtuoso embellishments that move to a climax at bar 33 ('Rex Israel').

At bar 42 there is a transition as MacMillan begins to reverse the two layers, moving the fast chant into the sopranos and the slow march into the lower voices. This has the effect of clouding the texture, but allows him to orchestrate an extraordinary ending to the work. In bar 66 the lower voices and strings cadence on an E major chord (with added second and sixth), while the sopranos continue their litany of estrangement. The voices fade away, followed by the strings, leaving just the F \sharp ⁴ from the opening sung

²³ James MacMillan's *Seven Last Words from the Cross and Stabat Mater: Analysis and Approach*. unpublished DMA dissertation, Boston University (2017), p. 11.

²⁴ See for example, Kingsbury, p. 10. ²⁵ Ratcliffe, 'MacMillan', p. 38.

by the sopranos. The quasi-litany of the repeated phrase in the sopranos is musically highlighted by the absence of any other parts. The loneliness of the single voice singing such powerful words of estrangement is highly effective and leaves the listener in no doubt as to MacMillan's view of the desolation of Jesus and its contemporary impact.

II Woman, Behold Thy Son! ... Behold Thy Mother! (John 19:26–27)

The word of succession.

In contrast to the complicated structure, both musically and theologically, of the first movement, the second movement abandons the F# pitch centre and begins with a declamatory chorale in G major, punctuated by long rests. The Biblical passage indicates succession, as Jesus sees his mother from the cross and signals that John is now her son and she his mother. This is part of a contemporary tradition that mandates passing the care of a mother to another.

In MacMillan's music the modernist interpretation of the chorale pays homage to notable predecessors such as J. S. Bach, but the move away from traditional harmonization and key structures means that these repeated phrases, sung with great fervour, signal to the audience not only that the work is part of a tradition, but also that the intense drama of this succession is important to Jesus. MacMillan separates the text into two clauses and declaims the first phrase three times with choir alone singing in seven or eight parts. When the strings enter in bar 16 they begin with cellos and basses on a low C#, the furthest pitch possible from the tonal centre at the start. This underpins a fourth statement of the phrase that moves from D minor to B major. The strings have a short chromatic interlude that refers to the opening musical gesture of the first movement, and then transitions to C major (bar 27) for the second set of choir phrases (who sing the text twice punctuated not by rests but string writing). A second string interlude moves the key centre to F# (bar 40) for the third iteration of the text (sung twice), which starts building through an increase in the harmonic and rhythmic rate to a fourth statement (bar 53). The final pair of utterances of the first clause are separated by string passages that are fervent and troubled. The final one being the most pained, pitching the choir in the G major tonality from the start over C# minor in the strings. The strings continue the chorale for a couple of bars but this is unsustainable and evaporates in a chromatic downward scale to a new pitch centre

(G minor). The utterance of the second clause is sung by the men only in a faltering and broken way, using a baroque ‘sighing’ motif. It is sung only once before the strings graphically depict life ebbing away from the body. This is the first death.

III Verily, I Say unto You, Today Thou Shalt be with Me in Paradise (Luke 23:43)

The word of salvation.

The third movement is in contrast to both of the two preceding movements in style and mood. The sentence from Jesus is addressed to one of the two thieves who were crucified on either side of him. It is the most optimistic of all the seven last words, noting that despite his alleged crimes, God will forgive the thief and he will join Jesus in paradise.

MacMillan’s additional text is the *Ecce lignum* versicle from the Good Friday liturgy, set in Latin: ‘Behold the Wood of the Cross on which the Saviour of the world was hung: Come let us adore him’. In the liner notes to his recording MacMillan describes the specific liturgy, called the Veneration of the Cross, that this movement is meant to evoke. MacMillan writes: ‘during the liturgy [*Ecce*] is normally sung three times, each time at a higher pitch as the cross is slowly unveiled and revealed to the people’.²⁶ The chant is usually sung antiphonally; the priest intones the first part and the people respond ‘venite adoremus’. MacMillan keeps this duality, using an AB form that has the first part of the text sung by two voices in a highly ornamented fashion with minimal accompaniment, followed by the ‘venite’ response, which is accompanied by the strings in a wonderful evocation of paradise. MacMillan keeps the liturgical number and pitch scheme, giving the three iterations of the text to bass, tenor, and alto voices respectively.

The form of the movement is AB, AB, AB, interlude (C), D. The string interlude between bars 88 and 105 at first seems incongruous given the nature of the narrative; however, MacMillan has explained why the form is interrupted:

The direction is still going on towards the final statement, the Versicle is complete, so there’s a vacuum that could be filled with something else before moving on, hence the quite emotional string interlude, compared to the detachment of what

²⁶ MacMillan, liner notes, p. 7.

comes before and after. There's a liturgical detachment from the three statements previous to it and the last one, and there's subjectivity that fills the gap. It moves in to a kind of mental space for that string interlude.²⁷

It is interesting that MacMillan has made space in the drama for reflection (albeit mediated by his evocative and unrelenting interlude). There are two other notable instances of this move away from the sung narrative to periods of music for the strings only, giving breadth and depth to some of the most difficult passages. The first is the dramatic opening to Movement VI, the second is the long string postlude. Both are discussed further below.

As with Movement II, the English text (the third 'word') is left to the end and sung by two soprano voices. It is not too fanciful to imagine that MacMillan is here referring to some of the traditions of musical expression from the baroque, using two high voices to indicate the ascent to paradise, and having these two voices (perhaps representing Father and Son) join on a unison pitch right at the very end (suggesting union), and turned into a magnificent major chord of completion and repose by the upper strings.

In this movement MacMillan not only uses the text of *Ecce lignum* but also the chant melody with which it is associated. Chant has always been central to music in the Catholic Church and chant paraphrase is a common occurrence in MacMillan's music.

I quote chant, I allude to it, I fragment it, I dissect it, I use it as the building blocks, the DNA, of larger structures. It obviously means a lot to me. It is a kind of perfect music. I also feel I am rooting myself in something very deep culturally and spiritually. I feel I am plugging into a rich seam because not only is Gregorian Chant the most perfect music melodically, it is also the music that singly most characterizes Catholic musical tradition and which carries the liturgy and theology behind the chant.²⁸

The first part of *Ecce lignum* chant occurs in a highly modified manner in all three A sections. The 'venite' section of the chant appears in the exquisite solo violin part in the B and D sections, which utilize the chant in irregular augmentation. Ex. 8.1 and Ex. 8.2 below show the original chant and then part of the violin solo.²⁹

Another particular feature of this movement is the use of Scottish ornamentation, employing both 'scotch snaps' and *pibroch* features. A scotch snap is a melodic figure consisting of a stressed sixteenth-note followed by

²⁷ Hallam, 'Conversation with James MacMillan', p. 20.

²⁸ James MacMillan, 'God, theology and music', *New Blackfriars* Vol. 81, No. 947 (January 2000), p. 17.

²⁹ Ex. 8.2 from MacMillan, *Seven Last Words from the Cross*.

an unstressed dotted eighth-note, usually in association of a melodic rise or fall by step.³⁰ More elaborate than the scotch snap, *pibroch* is a further form of melodic ornamentation which developed out of the Highland bagpipe tradition of *ceòl mór*, or ‘great music’.³¹ The pibroch often uses several grace notes before the principal pitch, but as with the scotch snap, the ornaments are accented and played on the beat. In the paraliturgical context of MacMillan’s piece these nationally derived ornaments also sound like some of the characteristic ‘breaks’ in the voice common to Byzantine chant, thereby lending further reference to chant in the music.



Ex. 8.1 *Ecce lignum*, ‘Venite adoremus’³²

Four staves of musical notation for violin parts. The first staff is labeled 'Solo' and starts at bar 16 with a *ppp* dynamic. The second staff is labeled 'Vln.' and starts at bar 20 with a *mp* dynamic. The third staff is labeled 'Vln.' and starts at bar 23 with a *p* dynamic. The fourth staff is labeled 'Vln.' and starts at bar 26 with a *pp* dynamic. The notation includes various ornaments, phrasing marks, and dynamic markings.

Ex. 8.2 *Seven Last Words*, bars 16–28, violin chant paraphrase

IV *Eli, Eli, lama Sabachthani?* (My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?) (Matthew 27:46)

The word of abandonment.

There is no additional text for this movement and MacMillan sets the fourth ‘word’ in Aramaic, as has become customary, using canon and imitation as the principal musical devices.

³⁰ David Johnson, ‘Scotch snap’, *Grove Music Online* (2001).

³¹ Peter Cooke, ‘Pibroch’, *Grove Music Online* (2001). For more, see Alvey, 80ff.

³² Benedictines of Solesmes, *The Liber Usualis* (Tournai, Belgium: Desclée, 1961), p. 736.

Perhaps because of their original performance as individual movements the seven words are all contrasted, but they are all also connected. So, for Movement IV MacMillan takes the high A⁶ from the end of the previous movement and moves it to A¹ in the double bass, to begin a canonic opening starting from low and moving upward through the voices and strings using points of imitation, to a tessitura that ends five octaves from the first pitch (bar 50). The movement also echoes the Scottish-style ornamentation from earlier movements, especially III. A new and pervasive ornament in this movement is the glissando which occurs in both the vocal and string writing. Usually covering a descending second, the glide intensifies the emotion of the passage moving from a sigh to an impassioned lament.

This movement is in a ternary form, ABC. Notable in the opening A section is the cello part, which starts gently in long notes, imitating the opening of the double bass. It quickly becomes a virtuous obbligato part that has all the complexity of the ornamented vocal line and becomes a kind of *vox deus*, indicating that Jesus is not in fact alone, but that God is with him, sharing in his agony.

MacMillan contrasts the slow-moving start with an organically derived section for the full ensemble (bars 49–66), which he describes as ‘an impassioned, full-throated lament above which the strings float and glide’.³³ This recaptures some of the complexity of the opening movement, having a rich polyphony that includes rapid chant and sustained long lines combined with the ornamentation and glides of the opening. The section quickly fades away and ends with the sopranos singing the text in a chilling reminder of the end of Movement I.

During the C section the piece unwinds and descends back to the depths from which it came, ending on the low A¹ from the opening, creating a quasi-palindromic arch form. It is cleverly based on a single descending line in the voice parts that moves from A⁵ to F² in the order SATB, and with each of the parts overlapping so that the line is clearly audible as a single descent. The descending line continues in the string parts and finally comes to repose in the double bass in a major modality that refers back to the modality of paradise in Movement III, hinting perhaps that paradise will be obtained shortly.

³³ MacMillan, liner notes, p. 7.

V I Thirst (John 19:28)

The word of sorrow and distress.

Movement V is a recasting of MacMillan's 1994 work *Angel*, a four-minute piece for solo piano. The movement has an additional text, set in Latin, taken from the Good Friday Responsories for Tenebrae: 'My eyes were blind with weeping, for he that consoled me is far from me: consider, all you people, is there any sorrow like my sorrow! All you who pass along this way take heed and consider if there is any sorrow like mine'.³⁴

The movement opens with the single F \sharp ⁴ from Movement I, but treats it as an insistent inverted pedal that pervades the movement. The 'word' is sung by divisi basses on a dissonant F² / C³ dyad to two dotted whole notes, after which the altos sing an aleatoric passage with the additional Tenebrae text. This is always divided into two clauses and is taken up by other voices alternating between repetitions of the original 'I thirst' phrase. For the additional text MacMillan provides a pitch and instructs the singers to sing on a 'fast monotone: entries should be staggered, individually or in groups'.³⁵ The form of the movement is derived from the alternation of the principal text 'I thirst' and the additional text. The ending of the movement is remarkable. Altos and tenors sing 'I thirst' on an E \flat / D \flat dyad. The F \sharp returns and the strings join in a tremolo crescendo on a dissonant chord that moves to a climax that MacMillan describes as 'like a violent shuddering', and the piece closes on the F \sharp . This is the second death.

VI It Is Finished (John 19:30)

The word of termination and sorrow.

This movement also begins in complete contrast to the previous movement. In the narrative, the veil of the temple separated the Ark of the Covenant (the Holy of Holies) from the rest of the Temple. At the death of Jesus this was ripped in two from top to bottom and it is perhaps this that MacMillan depicts as part of the musical realism of this piece at the

³⁴ For text, and below, see MacMillan, *Seven Last Words*.

³⁵ Movement V, bar 10 and elsewhere.

start of this movement. The strings open with fortissimo chords, which MacMillan described as 'hammer-blows'.³⁶ As these chords of anger and grief subside, the ATB chorus (bass divisi) sing a wordless chord that overlaps the end of the string outburst and underpins a slow recitation by the sopranos of the additional text for this movement, which also comes from the Good Friday Responsories for Tenebrae: 'My eyes were blind with weeping, for he that consoled me is far from me: consider all you people, is there any sorrow like my sorrow? All you who pass this way take heed and consider if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.'³⁷ The extraordinary depth of this emotion is set with the additional text in the soprano part over an ostinato of the words 'it is finished' in the other voices (echoing the *Tuireadh* motif from previous movements). The effect is of a narrator singing the text of sorrow against a background of the other witnesses (both living and dead) repeating the mournful litany of termination. The strings are silent for the main section of the movement but return in bar 31 to sustain a similar section, this time sung by the three lower voices. When the sopranos return in bar 44 the strings disappear again for another SATB section, this time in B major. MacMillan ends the ATB ostinato in bar 67 in an echo of the end of Movement I, but instead of leaving the sopranos to intone the text he aggressively intersperses the opening hammer blows in the strings. This graphically depicts the end of an introvert period of grief with an intense and angry outburst that concludes the movement.

VII Father, into Thy hands I Commend My Spirit (Luke 23:46)

The word of reunion.

The final movement has no additional text. It begins with long slow chords in eight parts in the chorus (over a C pedal) that declaim 'Father!' twice. After the third time the choir continues with the rest of the phrase, sung once in a contrapuntal style reminiscent of the sparse polyphony of the previous movement. The tension scales down from the *fortissimo* of the start, and ends with a return of the *Tuireadh* phrase. The choir ends on an E major chord with the insistent F \sharp ⁴ from the start remaining in the

³⁶ MacMillan, liner notes, p. 9.

³⁷ See MacMillan, *Seven Last Words*.

soprano and violin parts. They are then tacet, from bar 17 to the end (bar 82), leaving a long string postlude which is principally a duet for upper strings that uses much of the Scottish-style ornamentation that has been a feature of the work. It reprises variations on the *Ecce lignum* chant material first exposed in Movement III.

In the third movement MacMillan divides the chant into its two clauses, versicle and response, setting the first in paraphrase in the voices and the second in a solo violin part. Ex. 8.3 shows the first part of the chant.³⁸

Ex. 8.3 *Ecce lignum crucis*, chant

MacMillan's paraphrase in Movement III begins with the chant in the first bass voice with melodic and rhythmic changes and several acciaccaturas and grace notes that thinly disguise the original. This is accompanied by a D pedal in the low strings (that has the effect of an ominous presence), and a countermelody in the second bass voice that emulates and shadows the upper voice in a similarly ornamented and improvisatory sounding manner (see Ex. 8.4).³⁹

Ex. 8.4 *Seven Last Words*, Movement III, bars 1–15

³⁸ *The Liber Usualis*, p. 736.

³⁹ MacMillan, *Seven Last Words from the Cross*.

When the chant reappears in the final movement it emerges in the upper strings from the final choir chord and an iteration of the *Tuireadh* motif. It begins with the half-step sighing motif, marked *doloroso*, but with a *sfz* insistence that gives way to some loud and expressive paraphrases of the *Ecce* chant, which is in two voices (Ex. 8.5).⁴⁰

Ex. 8.5 *Seven Last Words*, Movement VII, bars 19–31

The violin duet is gently underpinned by quiet chords in the other strings starting in bar 43, reminiscent of the *Tuireadh* motif. The ornamentation and chromaticism subside by bar 64 and the end of the piece cadences on an E minor chord with the sighing motif now a dyad $F\sharp^5 / G^5$ in the violins that is repeated irregularly thirteen times, eight of which are unsupported by the lower strings. This echoes the start of the movement which has thirteen instances of the double semiquaver chord, before the parts start to fragment.

The return of the opening music naturally brings the listener back to the word of forgiveness from the first movement, but some commentators have rightly gone further in their exegesis of the text and music. Musicologist Richard E. McGregor provides the following insight for the end of the last movement, suggesting that ‘failing to resolve the $F\sharp$ in the final bars of the work suggests some doubt as to whether this forgiveness has been

⁴⁰ MacMillan, *Seven Last Words from the Cross*.

achieved. The high hanging F \sharp / G dyad . . . can suggest “objectively” the life ebbing out of the Saviour “hanging” on the cross but it can also be read “subjectively” as a theological question left “hanging” – symbolically unresolved.⁴¹ MacMillan has effectively used this type of ending before, for example in the *Sinfonietta* (1991), and the *Symphony ‘Vigil’* (1997). Here, however, the context determines the perception, and the hermeneutical analysis provided by McGregor is both apt and rich with further possibilities.

There is of course much more to say about this remarkable piece. McGregor has explored the possibility that ‘there may be deeper significance attaching to the choice of specific pitch combinations’, and explores this in his essay.⁴² He notes, for example that the pitch C \sharp performs a similar function in *Seven Last Words* as it does in earlier works ‘in relation to developing musical arguments leading towards the climactic movements in *Seven Last Words*’.⁴³ There are many other features working on many levels that belie a superficial and passive approach to the piece, which repays active and experiential listening.

This sermon-in-music is contemporary, but in line with the strictest Catholic dogma. It provides new wisdom on the form because it transcends the date of the composition, providing a new standard for engagement with the text that avoids the saccharine and the obvious, and doesn’t shy away from reality. This is a piece that demands active participation, but more than that it is a call to action: a reminder to leave no one estranged or punished for their views. It demonstrates that, although this was probably composed for a Christian audience, MacMillan has found ways of transcending the institutional religion of the narrative and allowing it be understood in contemporary contexts. It is a duty for Christians to proclaim the gospel, so one might expect that this is a primary goal for MacMillan. In fact, this is not a piece of evangelism, at least not for Christianity itself. For that to be the case one would need to know far more of the surrounding story as the narrative of the seven last words begins *in media res*.

This work is a contemporary lament, a genre that fascinates MacMillan and one to which has contributed notable examples, including his *Violin Concerto* (2009).⁴⁴ It is representational art, evocative of the events that in

⁴¹ Richard E. McGregor, “A metaphor for the deeper wintriness . . .”: Exploring James MacMillan’s musical identity’, *Tempo*, Vol. 65, No. 257 (July 2011), pp. 22–39, esp. 33.

⁴² McGregor, “A metaphor for the deeper wintriness . . .”, p. 30.

⁴³ McGregor, “A metaphor for the deeper wintriness . . .”, p. 30.

⁴⁴ See Chelle Stearns’s essay, Chapter 3.

some ways come to embody Christ's suffering. It is more than that though, moving from nihilistic despair through a series of dark and complex emotions, which leaves the listener thinking and questioning. It is a sacred piece in MacMillan's own interpretation of the word: 'To me, the very sense of the sacred that we are talking about is rooted in the here and now, in the joys and tragedies of everyday life, in the grit and mire of human existence.'⁴⁵ It is also an expository piece, and it is certainly melodramatic (in the sense that it is designed to appeal strongly to the emotions). Its evangelism is for human action and compassion. The shadows cluster on Good Friday, but in the Christian story they disappear, and light prevails if we (Christian or not) make it so.

⁴⁵ Robert Hugill, *Classical Source*, 2005, www.classicalsource.com/db_control/db_features.php?id=2850.