



James Macmillan - St John Passion □ □
Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

Reviewed by **Denis Joe** □ April 2011

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra (Conductor: James MacMillan)

Christopher Maltman Baritone

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Choir (Chorus master: Ian Tracey)

Colla Voce Singers (Director: Lee Ward)

Walking past the Catholic Cathedral on my way to the Philharmonic Hall, the bells were ringing out for the Easter week; an appropriate time to give a concert of St John Passion at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall.

A one-time Marxist, James MacMillan is probably one of Britain's most outspoken Catholics. At times he has railed against sectarianism in Scotland, referring to anti-Catholic atmosphere as 'the new anti-Semitism' (The Times, 8 December, 2009). It is questionable whether the problem is really that deep, as it mainly centred on the war in the Six Counties of Ireland, and is only really manifested, these days, at Glasgow Celtic/Rangers derbies (see e.g. Turning football fans into snitches <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/article/10448>). Whilst I find MacMillan's opinions a little overstated and whilst I am a staunch atheist, neither of those stances detracts from my opinion that Macmillan is one of the finest living composers and that the St John Passion stands alongside Britten's War Requiem as one of the finest Choral pieces in the repertory.

The St John Passion was written to celebrate the 80th birthday of the conductor/composer Sir Colin Davis who, with the London Symphony Orchestra gave the world premiere on 27 April 2008 at the Barbican Hall, London.



The scoring for the piece is overwhelming (as with most great choral pieces): Baritone solo (Christopher Maltman); small chorus (Colla Voce Singers for "narrator"), larger chorus (Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Choir 120 voices). The orchestra is made up of 2 piccalos, 1 CorAngais, 1 bass clarinets, 2 bassoons 4.3.3.1-timpani Percussion, t.bells/tuned gongs/tgl/Sanctus bells/suspended cymbals/sizzle cymbals chamber organ as well as a 64 strings and brass orchestra.

Having only one individual protagonist (Maltman as Christus) works well, and emphasises the

philosophical over the dramatic. That is not to say that the piece is not dramatic but MacMillan seemed to be more intent on presenting the discourse rather than the morality of the story. In doing so there he has managed to avoid the controversy over the setting of the Gospel passions.

The Passions have always been seen as controversial, mainly because of the crowd scenes where the Jews call for Christ's crucifixion. Bach's St. John Passion was altered by the German-American conductor Lukas Foss, who emigrated to the US as a refugee from Nazi Germany. In a performance of Bach's oratorio that he conducted in California in 1963, he changed the word "Juden" ("Jews") to "Leute" ("people"). But MacMillan manages to avoid that problem by setting Christ's ideals against those of the crowd and their representative Pontius Pilate.

The piece is divided into ten sections and opens with the narrating chorus setting the background to Jesus's arrest. The second movement has Peter disowning Christ. What I found interesting was that MacMillan, in editing the text, does not make mention of Jesus's prophesy ('before the cock crows, thou shalt deny me thrice'). It is as if MacMillan is presenting Christ as a human being without any 'magical' powers. This becomes more obvious in the next movement where Jesus stands before Pilate. The question Jesus asks of the crowd, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it about me?" strongly suggest a confused individual rather than 'the son of God', central to this (and perhaps to the whole issue of religion) is Pilate's question "What is truth?". The chorus delivered this line with such force that it seems as if MacMillan saw the importance of the question, making the condemnation of Jesus inevitable. In the following movement when Jesus is condemned to death it is not the result of some arbitrary demand of the 'mob', as we can see in Bach's setting. The reasoning for the crowd's demand for his crucifixion is that Jesus refers to himself as 'The King Of The Jews' and the crowd reminds the indecisive Pilate that "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend; everyone who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar".

The crucifixion, the dividing of the garments and Jesus and his mother form the second part of St John Passion, and again, MacMillan departs from other interpretations by not milking these scenes for emotional impact. Whilst this is partly down to the fact that there are no other individual roles except that of Christ, there is also the fact that the incidents act as a pause for reflection and in the eighth section, the Reproaches, there is a dramatic turn in the delivery of the text, which becomes truly poetic as Jesus asks of the crowd what he has done to deserve their scorn. This is delivered in couplets whilst the crowd respond, asking for forgiveness, in Latin. The death of Jesus, in the next movement is almost matter-of-fact. With the last words being 'It is finished'.



The final section, *sanctus immortalis miserere nobis*, is instrumental and is the only section that seems to suggest a powerful emotion. MacMillan describes it as 'a song without words'. It is a complete break from what has preceded it. The music suggests opera rather than a cantata. One gets a feeling of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, but what struck me was how much it owed to Puccini, especially the *Te Deum* from *Tosca*. And whilst the final section suggested a break with the rest of the Passion, it also suggested much of the idea of the resurrection; a looking forward rather than dwelling of the past.

I have the recording of St John Passion by Sir Colin Davis and the London Symphony Orchestra (which also has Christopher Maltman in the role of Christ) and I was reminded of the importance of live performances. The shared experience of this performance was brought home by the silence, of about ten seconds, once MacMillan had lowered his baton and signalled the end. There was not a sound during that time. Then the audience erupted as one, though I find the practice of whistling one's appreciation of such a piece beyond my understanding.

What makes a work great is the belief of the composer. It is irrelevant whether you share his belief. There have been many works of art created where the premise is difficult to find attractive - Wagner's Ring cycle (especially its overt anti-Semitism in the portrayal of Mime) is a case in point. However, the work as a whole surpasses the prejudices behind it and though it is fashionable to suggest that works are the cause of social problems, it does not explain why those 'problematic' works have endured even into more 'sophisticated' times.



The driving force behind artistic creation is the belief of the artist. When an artist succeeds in creating a work of great intensity it is possible for us to stand in awe of the power of that belief rather than the belief itself. I think that this is what MacMillan has done with St John Passion. It is truly a piece that belongs to our time in that it is devoid of offence. It makes no claims on behalf of the dominance of Christianity, but it does state firmly the power of inspiration.

This is not an easy piece, and unlike the minimalistic approach of John Tavener, MacMillan recognises that there is a need to reflect the complexity of the material he is dealing with. As such, St John Passion makes great demands on the singers and the orchestra. It says much for

the forces of the Liverpool Philharmonic that this music was not only performed but that it was performed with the technical and emotional intensity that MacMillan makes on the musicians and singers. This is not a work that any regional musical society can perform. It takes the dedication and devotion to music of a world-class outfit, such as the Liverpool Philharmonic. This performance is one that should go down as a landmark.