

Patrick's SJA Music Blog:

Post No. 2: May 1, 2018

Sir James MacMillan and The TheoArtistry Festival: Secular and Sacred Inspiration

Another recent [article](#) from the [Benedict XVI Institute for Sacred Music and Divine Worship](#) by Frank La Rocca recounts an interesting interview with Sir James MacMillan, one of the UK's leading musical minds and one of classical music's foremost contemporary composers. The article articulates the genesis of the [TheoArtistry Festival](#) which pairs young and developing composers with leading theologians to create works of artistic collaboration and synergy. MacMillan's inspiration for this festival comes from his work on the *St. Luke Passion* (2014) with Duke University's Jeremy Begbie, renowned theologian and musician at the forefront of the modern theological aesthetics movement. Other works of James MacMillan which have a spiritual outlook include a *St. John Passion* (2008), *Seven Last Words from the Cross* (a cantata for choir and strings of 1993), a *Mass* (2000), and [A European Requiem](#) (2017). MacMillan has also written works for many of the world's major forces and continues to be an inspiration for younger generations of performers and composers.

It is important to note that the TheoArtistry Festival is closely associated with "ITIA – the Institute for Theology and Imagination in the Arts – [which] was founded at St. Andrew's University in 2000, merging an existing program with Begbie's Cambridge project, "Theology Through the Arts." This interview then broadens "into large themes, especially the relationship between music and the sacred." Music's 'sacred' properties have been expressed in many ways throughout its history and have imbued the art form with a particular spiritual energy claimed even by the larger secular world. The music of Richard Wagner, MacMillan claims, is particularly influential to composers such as Olivier Messiaen, Francis Poulenc, Igor Stravinsky, and even Arnold Schoenberg and John Cage. These artists wrote a kind of reactionary music and philosophy of spiritual means. They wrote 'music for the ages' which sought to challenge the human mind to 'move beyond'.

In fact, it is Wagner (particularly *Parsifal* and *Tristan*) who "[brings] this search for the sacred right into the heart of modernity. Without Wagner, there wouldn't

have been this constant search for the sacred in music throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.” Rather, it is true, La Rocca continues, that “[this sweeping claim] does not intuitively yield to “the received wisdom...that Wagner laid the foundations for the modernist rejection of traditional harmony and form resulting in what musicologist Carl Dahlhaus dubbed modernism’s “Great Disruption”. That many graduate music schools of the 1960’s and 70’s spent much of their time making composition study difficult in their “brutalist rejection of beauty” and repudiation of the concept of drawing “inspiration from the pages of musical tradition” is testimony of such a transcendental mystical extension of harmonic aesthetic that was the essence high Romanticism. What then are we to make of those works of art which are not thought of as *religious*?

MacMillan continues, “This is a complete reassessment of modernity and modernism through theology, one that is required and timely. It means that even before we got on to Messiaen and all those composers who came out from behind the Iron Curtain after Shostakovich: Pärt, Penderecki, Gorecki, Kancheli, Schnittke, Gubaidulina; and in this country, Tavener, Jonathan Harvey, and many others. You could argue, therefore, that our discussion about modernity and music would be incomplete without a discussion of a search for the sacred. Which could even be argued has been *central* to modernity. It’s not just the so-called “conservative” composers that have been marked by this, but very cutting-edge modernist figures such as the ones I’ve mentioned have been among those most affected by Wagner’s example.”

On the impulse of creativity in the sacred tradition, MacMillan states: "I mean this idea of inspiration, you know, the in-breathing – which is what inspiration means – and the power of the Spirit even to the extent of the Spirit being instrumental in the conception in the Incarnation of Christ, it was a living reality with Mary and her Son. But perhaps it’s a living reality in every composer’s, in every artist’s, mind as well. It’s the same in-breathing process, the inspiration, the breathing in of that divine essence and spirit that gives birth to our little incarnations, which can be pieces of music, works of art, so in that sense, being open to the Spirit, being open to being divinely inspired is a Marian concept, and an inspiration for all Catholics.”