James MacMillan's *O Bone Jesu*

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O Bone Jesu is one of a large number of works, both instrumental and vocal, which James MacMillan has written to express aspects of his Catholic faith. It is an 8-part setting for mixed voices of a text originally used by the Renaissance Scottish composer Robert Carver. In MacMillan's work, as in Carver's, the word 'Jesu' (or similar) recurs 21 times and MacMillan has utilised this feature to help articulate a symbolic response to the words.

Within a broad sonata-like structure the text provides MacMillan with opportunities for drawing out meaning through emphasis on key words which are treated in the typical melismatic style for which he is well known, and these are contextualised in a clearly pre-planned harmonic framework.

This essay explores the ways in which MacMillan integrates the text setting into the formal structure, and explores some of the symbolic gestures that influence melodic and harmonic thinking in the work. The gestures which typify this setting are related to the broader context of his output as a whole and also to his understanding of his role as a composer with a faith which he feels it is important to express through composition.
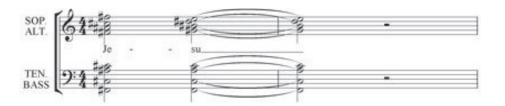
The present study concludes with a table that gives a complete overview of the work, broken down into its various components. The analysis therefore attempts to show how MacMillan's idea of, in this case, a specifically religious text, can be, as he puts it, 'transubstantiated into the musical'.

'Art is often linked to the transcendent, for it seems to speak of things that cannot be expressed in any other way' (Harvey 1999, p. 53). Although these words were written by Jonathan Harvey they express an understanding of the expressive potentialities of an artwork which resonates strongly in the music of James MacMillan, and in particular through those works which utilize religious texts and/or a 'spiritual' programme. While such resonances may be difficult to pin down, especially in a large scale orchestral work such as *Veni Veni Emmanuel*, an unaccompanied choral work like *O Bone Jesu* is a more restricted canvas within which to explore some of the compositional imperatives which inform MacMillan's writing. This essay seeks therefore to explore both how MacMillan has responded to the religious meaning and significance of the text 'O Bone Jesu', and also to show how the characteristics of the resulting musical structure are part of a wider compositional 'programme' that defines the composer's style.

MacMillan took the text for *O Bone Jesu* from a motet written by the Renaissance Scottish composer Robert Carver.[1] It is a work often considered to be among Carver's greatest achievements, not least for the fact that it was written for 19 voices and therefore represents a rather early example of multi-voice composition beyond the standard scale for polyphony. MacMillan first became aware of this work while in Manchester in the 1980s where, under the guidance of David Fallows, he mounted a performance of it.

In his programme note for the CD,[2] he writes of wanting to find an opportunity to use the anonymous text himself (Macmillan 2002, pp. 6-7), one that was soon found in the commission from *The Sixteen* for performance in a programme that would include Carver's original motet. The work was dedicated to his twins on the occasion of their First Communion because the text speaks of 'the most precious blood of Jesus', which will 'wash away …sin', clearly a very appropriate text for a Catholic First Communion. The text may have had an even deeper resonance for MacMillan since he habitually speaks of the starting point for a work being 'transubstantiated into the musical' (Macmillan 1998). Here then is perhaps the most potent of metaphors in relation to the text: a text which speaks of the power of the blood of Christ is itself 'transubstantiated' into MacMillan's new musical setting of those very words.

Although he says that no direct reference is made to the original motet in his own work there are some elements which have clearly been influenced, albeit indirectly, by the earlier work. Carver's motet has recently been subjected to an analysis of its number symbolism by John Purser in connection with a broadcast in early 2007 on BBC Radio Scotland (Purser 2007). MacMillan's work dates from 2002 so it is unlikely that he was aware of the full implications of this aspect of Carver's work either when he performed it, or when he was making his own setting, but there are obvious elements of Carver's approach which would have stayed with him and which undoubtedly influenced some of his compositional choices. In particular, Carver points up many, but not all, references to Jesus in the text by utilising all 19 parts, with the top soprano part set high in its register (depending on the modal cadence) and each time capped with a pause, which Purser has proposed is the crown on Jesus's head. MacMillan goes further than Carver in his setting by pointing up any reference to the name Jesus, whether in nominative, vocative, or accusative case, with a static rhythmic (though not static harmonic) framework of which Ex.1 is the first of twenty such occurrences. The most noticeable feature is the falling soprano F#–E, a characteristic of all but two of the cadences (and these exceptions will be explored in due course).

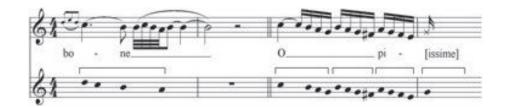*Ex. 1: O Bone Jesu* bars 4-5, first 'Jesu' chord sequence:

This idea is analogous to that adopted by Jonathan Harvey in his 1981 work *Passion and Resurrection*, in which he created a harmonic 'presence' for different characters in the Passion story.[3] MacMillan's approach is to use the static F#–E motif as a 'crown' with shifting harmonies underneath controlled to a degree by the upwardly chromatically rising bass line which contributes to the harmonic impetus of the work, as will be explored shortly. The 'crown' in MacMillan's work is always pitch-based and aural as opposed to Carver's, which is essentially visual. This tonal centring is quite typical of the approach adopted in his vocal works, as subsequent discussion will show. The most striking features, then, of MacMillan's musical language in this work relate to the tonal palette he uses: the melodic and harmonic ideas generated by it and the structural underpinning which derives from it. These are the two principal features upon which this article will concentrate.

The opening of *O Bone Jesu* (Ex. 2) is characterized by the initial wide leaping intervals at the 'head' and a descending decorated 'tail', the key decorations of which are [X] the upper mordent acciaccatura group, and [Y] the turn, both derived, it seems likely, from the 'sound' of the 'follow-me' type of Gaelic psalm singing of the N.W. of Scotland which MacMillan has acknowledged as an influence.[4]

Ex. 2: O Bone Jesu bars 1-3

The pitch profile of a descending appoggiatura (C–B) within a scalic context generates the second phrase 'o piissime' which emerges out of the 'tail' of the first phrase using sequential descending quasi melismatic scales. Such melismatic writing often embodies word painting to emphasize what MacMillan views as significant religious text.

Ex. 3: O Bone Jesu pitch derivation of second melodic idea

This type of choral writing is typical of MacMillan – a similar pitch profile to Ex.3 can be seen in bass duet, which opens the third section of the earlier *Seven Last Words from the Cross* (1994):

Ex. 4: bars 10-13 Bass 1, section III ('Verily I say unto you') from *Seven Last Words*

These principal melodic ideas contribute to the structural integrity of the work by defining the tonal framework of the whole, as shown in Table 1 (see Appendix). A certain modal ambiguity is present, even at the very start of the work: the first phrase seems to define an A minor tonality on the basis of the opening interval (E to C) with the final B as apparent super-tonic, however, it is more likely that in MacMillan's compositional thinking this is actually a cross between transposed Aeolian mode at the 5th (on E) and E minor. In the opening section at least, MacMillan's tonal palette uses 5th related tonal centres *qua* modulation:

T8	F#	G#	A	B	C#	D	E	(bars 18-22)
T2	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	A	(bars 22-24)
T7	E	F#	G	A	B	C	D	(bars 1-16)
T0	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	(modal origin)
Interval	[2	1	2	2	1	2	(2)]	

Ex. 5: O Bone Jesu – tonal areas defined by the opening sections

In the light of this harmonic ambiguity, the role of the 'Jesu' chord sequences is crucial to the overall shaping of the work. Interviewed by the author in 2005, MacMillan talked of the way in which his harmonic language developed, and in particular:

> [a] sense of a kind of fluid complementarity about the 12 pitches that can shape my harmony … I think I am concerned about a triadic root to my harmony but [with] a sense of colour, a sense of the potential of tension within that triad, or within that root… (MacMillan 2005)

In *O Bone Jesu* this harmonic tension is generated through the direct opposition of triadic harmonies and extended/chromatic harmonies. The first chord of the first 'Jesu' sequence (viz. F# major), is a clear and unambiguous tonal entity containing more than an echo of Vaughan Williams in the contrast between white notes in the melody and black notes of the chord itself, linked together by the F#. Where E is the modal tonic, F# is therefore the major supertonic, and while the melody itself always resolves onto the E, the chord underneath this pitch is often constructed to create tension (as in Exs 2 and 6).

Table 1 shows that there is some significance in this use of F# major since as a chord it is heard only 3 times – at the beginning in bar 4 (Ex. 2), at the end in bars 136-7, and on the 13th 'Jesu' at bar 87 (Ex. 6). Asked about number symbolism in his music MacMillan

responded that 'numbers matter a lot … I use 3 a lot … 12 is still important to me' (MacMillan 2005), and agreed that both these numbers might have religious connotations in his music. It is reasonable to assume therefore that at least some of the apparent number symbolism encountered in *O Bone Jesu* was intended. Rather more prosaically, the F# as the bass note of the 1st and of the 13th 'Jesu' sequence actually arises from the simple fact of a rising chromatic bass line (F#2–F#3) through subsequent 'Jesu' statements, which causes the repetition of the bass at the 13th occurrence. Number symbolism is an essential feature of the music of Messiaen whose music MacMillan admires, and, as Sherlaw Johnson has shown, the numbers 3 and 5 are both very audible musically and feature strongly in some of the titles and/or descriptions that Messiaen gave to his works (Sherlaw Johnson 1975/2008 pp. 40-2). For MacMillan, Messiaen was the 'most vigorous pointer' to the 'sense of the sacred in music' and as a composer was 'not at all embarrassed about making clear what the theological starting points were' within his music (MacMillan 2005). The same could of course be said of MacMillan himself.

The placing of the repeat of the text 'O Bone Jesu' at bars 85-7 (out of 137) is structurally significant in that this is the heart of the work, and specifically the point of the Golden Section which, mathematically at least, occurs halfway through bar 85, co-incident with the start of the phrase. Whether MacMillan planned this strictly mathematically is not clear.

Ex. 6: O Bone Jesu bars 85-7, the Golden Section

A good idea of how the various elements fit together can be gleaned from an examination of the passage at bar 36 where Melodic Idea 1 recurs:

Ex 7: O Bone Jesu bars 36-41

As Table 1 shows, this is Melodic Idea (1) as originally heard in bar 1 but now a tone higher – that is, dominant of the dominant – and in canonic imitation between Bass and Alto at a bar's distance, accompanied by a freely adapted quasi-canonic line in Tenor which tends to run in sixths with one of the other lines. There is a change of modality to the dominant on the word 'sanguinem' at bar 40, allied to the use of Melodic Idea (2) for the 'flowing blood'. Indeed the word setting has some theological significance: MacMillan uses the turn shape from Melodic Idea (1) for the word 'pretiosum' (precious) and subsequently to mark the words 'peccatoribus' (for sinners), 'abluas' (wash away) and finally, and perhaps most importantly from a theological point of view, 'meam' (my) sin. The use of decoration as a means of pointing up important words and hence underscoring their meaning is a particular feature of MacMillan's vocal writing. It is already found at some points in *Seven Last Words* (for example in Ex. 4) and especially on the word 'sabachtani' in Section IV of that work:
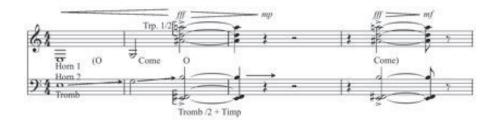
Ex. 8: bars 70-5 'sabachtani' – section IV *Seven Last Words from the Cross*

Comparison with other choral works of the late 90s such as the *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* (1999) shows that this approach to word setting using mordent or turn-based decorations developed to become a key feature of his vocal style for pointing up significant words in the text (and particularly for those words calling for explicit theological emphasis.[5]

Finally in relation to Ex. 7, there are very few occasions in the work when a straightforward triad occurs as the first chord of the 'Jesu' motif (apart from the F# major mentioned earlier) and here at bar 36 is one of these: B minor. Harmonically B minor in bar 36 is nicely ambiguous since although it is simply a minor triad, compared with the majority of extended chromatic chords in the work, it is undoubtedly the dominant of the transposed Aeolian mode which starts the work and thus the minor dominant of E minor, the modal tonic. Its role is therefore as a structural marker corresponding to second subject dominant in the basic sonata-derived form in which the work is cast although at this point in the work the thematic material is not new, but a variation of the original.

In terms of tonality there are some parallels to be found with the earlier work for percussion and orchestra *Veni Veni Emmanuel* which likewise, at least initially, uses a modal E minor as the starting point, arising in that case out of the plainsong of the same name as, for example, at bars 42-45 in the brass on a repeating pedal bass:

Ex. 9: Veni Veni Emmanuel E minor/modal basis of Section I – tonic pedal (bars 43-6, brass only)

I have previously shown how MacMillan subsequently constructed the events in that work such that the music was always seeking resolution, there D major, a resolution only finally achieved at the end in the resurrected Jesus as expressed through a second plainsong *Ubi Caritas Est* (McGregor 2007). In *O Bone Jesu* MacMillan uses a smaller scale but analogous 'harmonic seeking' to give tonal structure to the work. This relies on a perception of the F# major chord

as effectively a chord II (#3), and the B minor chord as explicitly chord V (minor) occurring at key structural points in the work, specifically at bar 36 as in Ex.7, marking the end of the first section and the beginning of the second, and at bar 120 ending the final section and heralding the Coda which culminates in the extended B minor 11th chord (minor V11) before finally resolving onto the E minor tonic. The interjection of the F# major chord II at bar 136 seems to undermine this resolution as a result of the fact that F#–E, previously referred to as the melodic 'crown' is now at the bottom of the chord rather than at the top as it has been consistently before. This has to be because the music must resolve itself onto the root position triad, but somehow an incomplete feeling remains. It is as though Jesus is still high above and has not yet come again.

The tonal significance of E (minor) is emphasized through the use of tonic pedals at significant points of structural transition, specifically at bar 32, the end of the first section, at bar 85 (an inverted pedal at the Golden Section, the structural heart of the work), and at bar 96, the final tonic pedal – actually 5th drone – which starts the recapitulation. Pedals or drones are common in MacMillan's music, and his use of them has evoked some criticism (Wright 1992). However, they are very important to him and he explains and underlines their significance for him as follows:

> I love drones… I'm writing choral music just now where I just can't get away from it … It's something about the rootedness of music that draws me to the importance of drones … The suspension of time which can bring about a cleaning of the ears, a new impetus to listening, a new way of listening to what is to come (MacMillan 2005).

Such drones and pedals have been a key feature of all his music going right back to the earliest works upon which his reputation has been built. *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie*, for example, opens with a whole tone middle register 'cluster drone' (C–D) on horns which lasts for 36 bars.

The discussion to this point has touched on various aspects of the music that relate to its structural integrity and it is now essential to give more detailed consideration of the actual elements and connections generated by this structure, as summarized in Table 1. The original Carver motet had five sections whereas MacMillan has created six discrete sections – the last being a Coda leading up to the final 'Jesu'. As noted previously, bar 36 is a varied repeat of the opening material, and it is clear that bar 96 functions by way of recapitulation. The third section begins at bar 60 and is not subsequently repeated – it involves *portamento* sliding and serves primarily to contrast with what has gone before. There is a development section between bar 75 and bar 95, which will be considered shortly, and the Coda begins at 120. As seen in Ex. 7 Melodic Idea (1) in bars 36-8 is on the dominant of the dominant while Melodic Idea (2) is on the dominant. At the recapitulation in bar 96 the tonal centres are reversed so that Melodic Idea (2) comes first and is based on the dominant. The significance of this will be explored in due course in relation to palindromic structures.

There seems to be a deliberate linking of textual meaning with specific melodic ideas in order to underline some of the theological messages contained in the text. For example, Melodic idea (1) connects 'O good Jesus' to 'I pray to you' and 'your goodness created me' (bars 1, 38 and 98), Melodic idea (2) connects 'holiest Jesus' to 'most precious blood' and to 'do not abandon me' (bars 6, 40 and 96). Possibly the most interesting of these connections involves the harmonically ambiguous Melodic Idea 3 (ambiguous because of the false relations F–F#, C–C#) which connects the words 'according to your mercy' with 'most loving Jesus': the false relations give a sense of insecurity to the melodic line and hence may suggest that nothing is assured.

The section between bars 75 and 95 represents a sort of harmonic development where the harmony becomes chromatic. It is framed by the 12th and 14th repetitions of the name 'Jesu' and these encompass the Golden Section point, which marks the 13th repetition. This occurrence could be interpreted as symbolic of Jesus 'above' the disciples, a reading might be given some credence by the fact that the 12th repetition of 'Jesu' is the only one in which the first pitch of the highest soprano part is not F#, but rather F above an F minor chord. Leading as it does into the chromatic section this might be thought of as a 'Judas moment', the false pitch representing the only 'false' disciple.

MacMillan uses chromaticism as a means of building up tension – a straightforward but effective example can be found at the end of the second main section of the Cello Sonata no 2 at bar 52. In the vocal works MacMillan moves away from triadic chords into greater chromaticism in order to express agony and suffering. Where there are accompanying instruments these are divided to produce clusters, often of 12 notes, as at the opening of the sixth section of *Seven Last Words* ('It is finished'), where a wide-spaced 12-pitch chord on strings is iterated rhythmically at the beginning and the end of the section. There are similar evocative examples in works with overt programmes such as the second section of *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* (see particularly bar 65ff) and in the first section of *Veni Veni Emmanuel*, with its suggestion of humanity in chaos (McGregor 2007):

Ex 10: opening section of *Veni Veni Emmanuel,* bars 14-16

Such representation of chaos, with its overtones of the creative process, and its corollary, bringing order to chaos, is not by any means unique to MacMillan and apart from the obvious example from Haydn's *Creation*, it is a theological understanding which informs various works by Messiaen, notably 'L'Amen du Creation', the first movement of *Visions de L'Amen*.

The section from bar 75 in *O Bone Jesu*, which is the most heavily chromatic in the work, coincides with that part of the text which speaks of death and damnation and certainly represents a response to the meaning and import of the words. Perhaps MacMillan thought of this 'development' section as in its way symbolic of the crucifixion, which would allow the 'reca-

pitulation' at bar 96 to be interpreted as a 're-surrection' through the return of the melodic ideas. The reversal of the melodic ideas at bar 96 is a simple example of a palindromic structure, such as is found in more complex form in *Veni Veni Emmanuel* and the Cello Sonata no. 2 (2000). MacMillan remarks:

> I am very concerned with palindromic structures, [and] still work with them sometimes - the cello sonatas I've written recently are both palindromic in outline… I have this inkling, this suspicion, that there's something about that kind of structure and development that brings about some kind of opening, or, reassessment of material at another given point in the structure, depending on what has preceded it and what has shaped the expression of moods before it (MacMillan 2005).

Contributing to the religious 'meaning' of *O Bone Jesu* the recapitulation contains a particularly significant example of harmonic word painting: Melodic Idea (1) returns in a harmonized form between 104 and 108, but in the wrong transposition, effectively F# major, but, in terms of the modal repeat, a semitone too low for the recapitulation of the opening. This is clearly a response to the words 'recognosce quod tuum est et absterge quod alienum est': 'recognize/ grant what is yours', that is, Melodic Idea (1), and 'wash away what is alien/unworthy', that is, it is in the wrong 'key':

Ex 11: O Bone Jesu bars 104-109

The final sections, from the Recapitulation into the Coda, emphasize the essentially optimistic nature of the work. The lowest part steadily rises higher into the treble register and lends a feeling of aspiration to the work's conclusion, notwithstanding the slightly ambiguous harmonic progression to the last chord. Hope is here expressed through music that is itself aspirational. This can be interpreted as a musical expression of a theological understanding on MacMillan's part which desires to relate the 'here and now' to something beyond. MacMillan remarks:

> [I've] always been drawn to a theology of music which emphasizes a sense of conflict, sense of unease, a sense of the dirty as it were, a sense of the physical, the corporeal … for us (as Catholics) it has to be about the interaction of the here and now, the mundane, the everyday … and some concept of the beyond, or something that we stretch towards, something that we're not really aware of, and that tension brings about the great hope for human beings to rise to the heights of what humanity is capable of (MacMillan 2005).

MacMillan's vocal work *O Bone Jesu*, though modest in scale, presents in microcosm all those elements which underpin his compositional thinking in much larger works, and particularly those with any kind of overtly religious 'programme' such as *Veni Veni Emmanuel*, *Seven last Words from the Cross* and the *Magnificat*. His introduction to *O Bone Jesu* for the CD (MacMillan 2002) makes no mention of any of the symbolic details that have been explored in this short study. This is because MacMillan does not see himself as an 'evangelist' rather:

> to give witness to what is the essence of what I do as a composer, but it's a much more generous act of sharing, shared values … the universal love of music which I believe, as a Catholic, has its roots in very specific spiritual dimensions even to the extent of saying there's an analogy between music and the mind of God that in music we see or even feel something of the thinking of God (MacMillan 2005).

Like most composers motivated by a deep sense of religious conviction the act of creation for MacMillan is a symbolic one, mimicking the role of the Creator in bringing forth new life, but additionally in his case, drawing on his Catholic Christianity, it represents the liberation of the essence into 'new life'. In *O Bone Jesu* this essence is the original anonymous text which becomes the 'body and blood' of the new work (that is, as MacMillan would put it, 'transubstantiated into the musical') what Sofia Gubaidulina, a composer he admires, has termed 'the Eucharist in my fantasy' (Lukomsky 1998).[6] The musical symbolism which has been demonstrated in this work reflects this transubstantiation, but, as in the Catholic ritual to which it refers, this process is not really meant to be 'seen'. It may be perceived, as it were, intuitively, or felt as MacMillan puts it, by 'a hungry listener' (MacMillan 2005).

Endnotes

1   Carver's motet *O Bone Jesu* has been widely known since the publication of the work in the Collected Edition of 1959: *Robert Carver, Collected Works* Vol. 1, ed, D. Stevens (Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1959). For a newer edition see: *The Complete Works of Robert Carver and Two Anonymous Masses*, ed. Kenneth Elliot (Glasgow: *The Musica Scotica Trust*; University of Glasgow Music Department Publication, 2002).

2   The CD contains a performance of both the Carver and the MacMillan.

3   'I lit on the idea of a symmetrical harmony around a central axis …I supplied all the characters with a spectrum of one to twelve partials according to the dullness or brilliance of the halo I imagined them to have … Jesus has the most elaborate halo and the most pitches' (Harvey 1999 p. 53).

4   An example can be found at www.gaelicpsalmsinging.com (accessed 23rd April 2007). Reference to the influence of Gaelic psalm singing is made in the portrait of MacMillan broadcast in *The South Bank Show* in 2003: *The South Bank Show*, 'James MacMillan', ITV, first aired 5 Jan 2003, Season 26, Episode no. 594.

5   Thus in the *Magnificat* we find (decorated words underlined): 'He hath filled the hungry with good things and the rich he hath sent empty away'; in the *Nunc Dimittis* 'Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace'. The *Te Deum* of 2001 is very close to *O Bone Jesu* in date and has many examples of this technique: 'Heaven and Earth are full of the Majesty of thy Glory, the glorious company of the apostles praise thee' and 'we therefore pray thee help thy servants whom thou hast redeemed with thy precious blood' are notable examples.

6   This is further explored in McGregor, 2005.

Appendix

Table 1 – see atached pages

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Biographical Note

Richard McGregor is Professor of Music at the University of Cumbria. He has published extensively on the music of Peter Maxwell Davies, and also on works by James MacMillan and Wolfgang Rihm. In addition to these he has written articles concerning composers' views of their spirituality, and on the nature of musical inspiration. His compositions are held at the Scottish Music Centre.