Aural Iconography: A Pärtian Study of James MacMillan

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TWENTY YEARS AGO, SCOTTISH composer James MacMillan published an article in the *New Blackfriars* journal entitled "God, Theology, and Music" laying out his own compositional philosophy.[1] In it, he discusses a rise of spirituality and the sacred in classical music that was a reaction against the modernism of the twentieth century. He notes composers such as Arvo Pärt, John Tavener, or Henrik Górecki whose music was an antidote and an answer to a sense of spiritual "hunger." Yet despite his own admission that for him "music is the most spiritual of the arts" and that his faith is majorly influential in his own conception of musical narrative and inspiration, he distances himself from and criticizes these other "spiritual" composers. While beautiful, MacMillan finds the music of these composers to be unreflective of human experience, as it "deliberately, aesthetically, and technically avoid[s] the whole notion of conflict." For MacMillan, "to avoid the darkness and tragedy is to refuse to face up to the abyss, which is our human experience." Such spirituality is a "flight from reality" and a mere "feel-good factor."[2] At least in this article, MacMillan seeks to identify himself as distinct from composers like Pärt or Tavener.

Yet MacMillan's career since the publication of this article tells a different story. Indeed, while there is still that underlying emphasis on conflict and narrative, there is also an increased focus on more "spiritual" themes and texts. Partly this is the nature of the composer economy, with commissions often determining the nature of a composer's work. In recent years, the Genesis Foundation (a noted arts commissioning body in the UK) has frequently partnered with MacMillan to create sacred choral works,[3] and thus his focus on choral music is at least partly financially motivated. Yet his "return" to choral writing also marks a genre shift that is as much philosophical as it is practical, noting that the increase in his choral writing since his younger years is indicative of a conscious rejection of the modernist focus on instrumental and virtuosic writing.[4] MacMillan spoke about the partnership with The Sixteen and its influence on his compositional style: "I did not foresee the intense imaginative relationship I would eventually build with the likes of Harry Christophers … and I did not see just how much the brilliant British choral ensembles would feature in the work of the modern composer."[5] Additionally, even a cursory examination of MacMillan's recent oeuvre outside of this partnership reveals an overwhelming number of sacred or religious

[1] James MacMillan, "God, Theology and Music," *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 947 (January 2000): 16–26.
[2] Ibid, 20.
[3] Genesis Foundation, "Sir James MacMillan CBE," accessed October 13, 2021, https://genesisfoundation.org.uk/james-macmillan/.
[4] James MacMillan, "A Master Class with Sir James MacMillan," Benedict XVI Institute. May 15, 2021. Video presentation, 2:13:02, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxKSRUuCNeU.
[5] Idem.

works. Most of his recent compositions are choral, but even the textless instrumental works often touch on a religious themes, such as MacMillan's fifth symphony (published 2019), which "contemplates the mysteries of the Holy Spirit."[6] MacMillan's own vocabulary also betrays a change; he speaks of his *Strathclyde Motets* in language such as "suspended animation," "introspective," or "numinous,"[7] terms closely resembling his earlier criticisms of transcendence.

MacMillan's treatment of these "spiritual" composers is potentially unfair, especially with regard to Arvo Pärt, and misses out on a key component in his own music. In particular, our understanding and appreciation of Pärt's music has benefited much from viewing it through the lens of Orthodox iconography, which was first argued by Paul Hillier, the Pärt scholar and conductor. I hope to explore this connection and ask whether there are ways in which a Pärtian, iconographic framework might be applied to and benefit our understanding of MacMillan's work as well. I believe such an application can be made, and to elucidate that I will first briefly discuss Pärt and MacMillan's contexts and characteristics. Then, I will give an account of iconography, and examine how it applies to Pärt. Finally, I will turn to MacMillan and consider such a Pärtian iconographic framework for his music.

It is helpful to understand Pärt and MacMillan as part of the re-emergence of sacred or spiritual music in the latter half of the twentieth century. The carnage of two world wars played a large role in the development of the musical and cultural psyche of the century, and we see an increase in religious or sacred musics particularly in response to this suffering.[8] Out of this we can trace a spirituality evident in composers as varied as Britten (*War Requiem*), Poulenc (*Mass*) or Penderecki (*St. Luke Passion*), to name just a few examples. Yet the dominant force of the serialist Second Viennese School continued as the primary expression of serious music well into the 1960s.[9] During this time, we first begin to see the emergence of "holy minimalism"[10] as a reaction against modernism. Largely without influence from popular minimalist composers in the United States such as Steve Reich, Philip Glass, or Terry Riley several European composers began to give voice to a simplified aesthetic with a "more overtly spiritual approach."[11] Of these, the music of Arvo Pärt makes up a

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[6] Genesis Foundation, "Sir James MacMillan CBE," https://genesisfoundation.org.uk/james-macmillan/. This symphony is admittedly commissioned by the Genesis Foundation, but is still paradigmatic of the larger pattern.

[7] MacMillan, "A Master Class with Sir James MacMillan."

[8] C. John Sommerville, "The Religious Music of the 20th and 21st Centuries," *Religion*, 1984.

[9] Leon Botstein, "Modernism," in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2001). Botstein points to a disconnect between the political radicalism of the era and a decreasingly populist modernism, as well as a rise in technology enabling the dissemination of a largely anti-modernist music via audio recordings that resulted in the music of the late twentieth century no longer being dominated by a modernist aesthetic.

[10] A term that is neither accepted by the composers themselves who have described it as pejorative (see Peter Bouteneff, *Arvo Pärt: Out of Silence* (Yonkers, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2015), 57.), nor is it fully accurate to their own stylistic elements. Nevertheless, it has entered popular musicological parlance to informally categorize the expression of spirituality through a reduced or minimalist aesthetic in the latter decades of the twentieth century by composers such as Pärt, Górecki, or Tavener.

[11] Keith Potter, "Minimalism (USA)," in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, December 30, 2019).

large portion of the spirituality reflected in twentieth century music.

Pärt was born in Paide, Estonia in 1935 under Soviet occupation, and until emigrating to Germany in the 1980's he lived and composed under the repressive measures of that government, suffering frequent censorship of his music due to his experimentation with modernist techniques of serialism and collage.[12] The conflict came to a head in 1968 with the premiere of Pärt's *Credo*. Despite not using the traditional "Credo" text, the explicitly religious nature of the work prompted harsh condemnation. Pärt quickly found his music banned from radio and the concert hall.[13]

Facing an increasingly critical stance from the Soviet authorities, and reaching a crisis point musically, Pärt felt that his modernist techniques no longer served for his own expression, and he withdrew from the public sphere.[14] The years between 1968 and 1976 marked a period of musical silence. He later wrote that "Those years of study were no conscious break, but…agonizing inner conflict. I had lost my inner compass and I didn't know anymore, what an interval or a key meant."[15] This conflict centered around a need to reduce music down to its essence. Pärt stripped away "all that was alien,"[16] and turned to early music to craft a "simple musical line that lived and breathed inwardly."[17] Pärt studied Gregorian chant, filling thousands of pages with simple melodic lines as he searched for a "new way of hearing."[18] Inspired by the monody of early music, he emerged out of these eight years of compositional silence with *Für Alina*, written in his original musical language self-described as tintinnabuli.

For Pärt, tintinnabuli is simultaneously a technique, style, and ideology. In contrast to his previous modern musical language, Pärt's tintinnabuli is an expression of tonality, yet without the functional harmony of Western Classical systems. It arises from his hours studying chant with its modal scaler patterns, paired with a bell-like triadic structure.[19] The melodic, or "M" voice, moves stepwise toward or away from a central pitch, and is often based on an existing text or pre-determined structure.[20] The triadic tintinnabuli (or "T") voice is then fitted to the M-voice and holds the M-voice in place harmonically[21] while offering

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[12] Immo Mihkelson, "A Narrow Path to the Truth: Arvo Pärt and the 1960s and 1970s in Soviet Estonia," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, ed. Andrew Shenton, Cambridge Companions to Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 17, 23. According to Russian authorities, Pärt's music undervalued "the national-folkloric music" and inclined dangerously "toward certain 'modern' tendencies."

[13] Ibid, 26.

[14] Enzo Restagno et al., eds., *Arvo Pärt in Conversation*, Estonian Literature Series (Champaign, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012), 27. Pärt noted that his serial and collage style no longer felt "alive," and that he "could not go on with the compositional means at [his] disposal."

[15] "Arvo Pärt Biography," Arvo Pärt Centre, accessed December 7, 2021, https://www.arvopart.ee/en/arvo-part/biography/.

[16] Paul Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, Oxford Studies of Composers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 74.

[17] Restagno et al., *Arvo Pärt in Conversation*, 28.

[18] Ibid, 29.

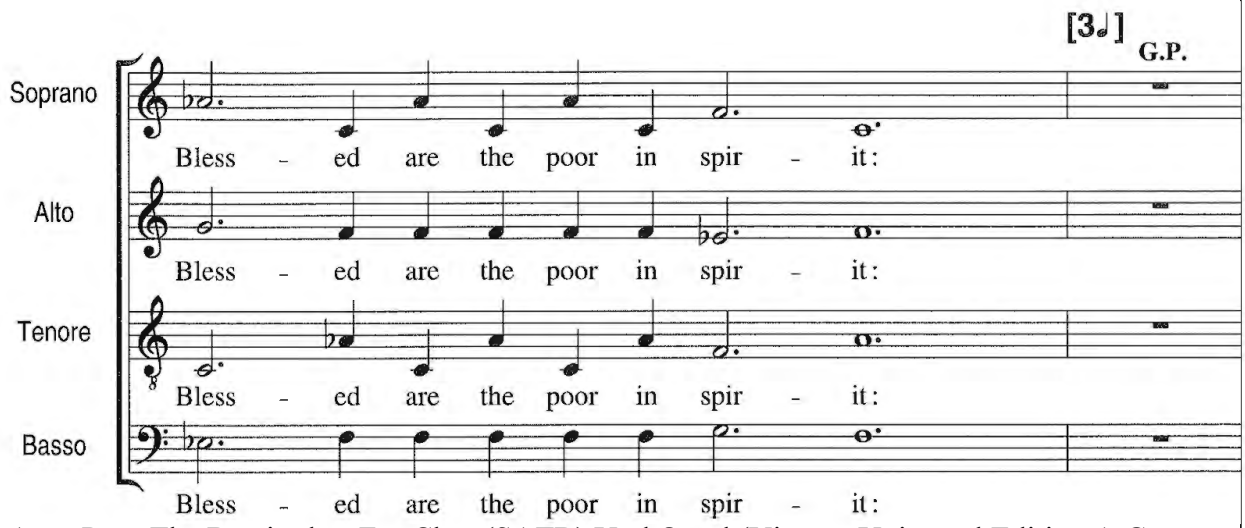
[19] Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 90-91. This bell-like nature is where the term tintinnabuli gets its name, from the Latin "tintinnabulum," or "tinkling bell." Additionally, though the scaler pattern is often modal, Hillier is careful to note that this does not connote a "neo-medieval" nature to Pärt's music. Rather, it is a "new blend of tonal and modal forces."

[20] Ibid, 92.

[21] Ibid, 92-97. Pärt's tintinnabuli style is deceptively simple and much discussed. For a fuller explanation and analysis that goes beyond the scope and purposes of this paper, see Kongwattananon, "Arvo Pärt and Three Types of His Tintinnabuli Technique," Langager, "The Tintinnabuli Compositional Style of Arvo Part," or Hillier, "Missa Syllabica," in *Arvo Pärt*.

structure for tension and release.[22] In his *Beatitudes*, for example, Pärt puts the M-voice in the altos and basses, and the T-voice in the sopranos and tenors. In the first measure shown in example 1, the M voice moves from a G and an Eb in the alto and bass to an F, while the T voices outline the rest of an F minor triad.

Example 1.



Arvo Pärt, The Beatitudes: Für Chor (SATB) Und Orgel (Vienna: Universal Edition A.G., 1990), m.1. All rights reserved.

[22] Robert Sholl, "Arvo Pärt and Spirituality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, ed. Andrew Shenton, Cambridge Companions to Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 142-143.

This simple two-part structure and the repetition of material has resulted in the identification of Pärt's style as minimalist, even though this is a "misleading" term.[23] Rather than minimalist in style, Pärt's tintinnabulation is its own "coherent form of musical architecture," with a "musical narrative" of short and long-term tension and release. Pärt's tintinnabulation stylistically unfolds this narrative through its simplicity and repeated blocks of sound produced by the interwoven M and T-voices, and though sparse in texture and harmony, Pärt's music is not "minimalist" in its purposes or methodologies.

For Pärt, tintinnabuli is also a philosophy deeply connected to his Orthodox faith.[24] One manifestation of this is Pärt's identification of the two tintinnabuli voices with spiritual symbolism: the M-voice signifies the human plight of "the subjective world, the daily egoistic life of sin and suffering," while the T-voice is "the objective realm of forgiveness."[25] This vision of a wandering humanity held firmly by the hand of a sublime divine order is not dualistic though; his music reflects a larger unity between the two voices such that tintinnabuli is a "single entity," as in the following equation used by Pärt to describe the tintinnabuli style: 1+1=1.[26]

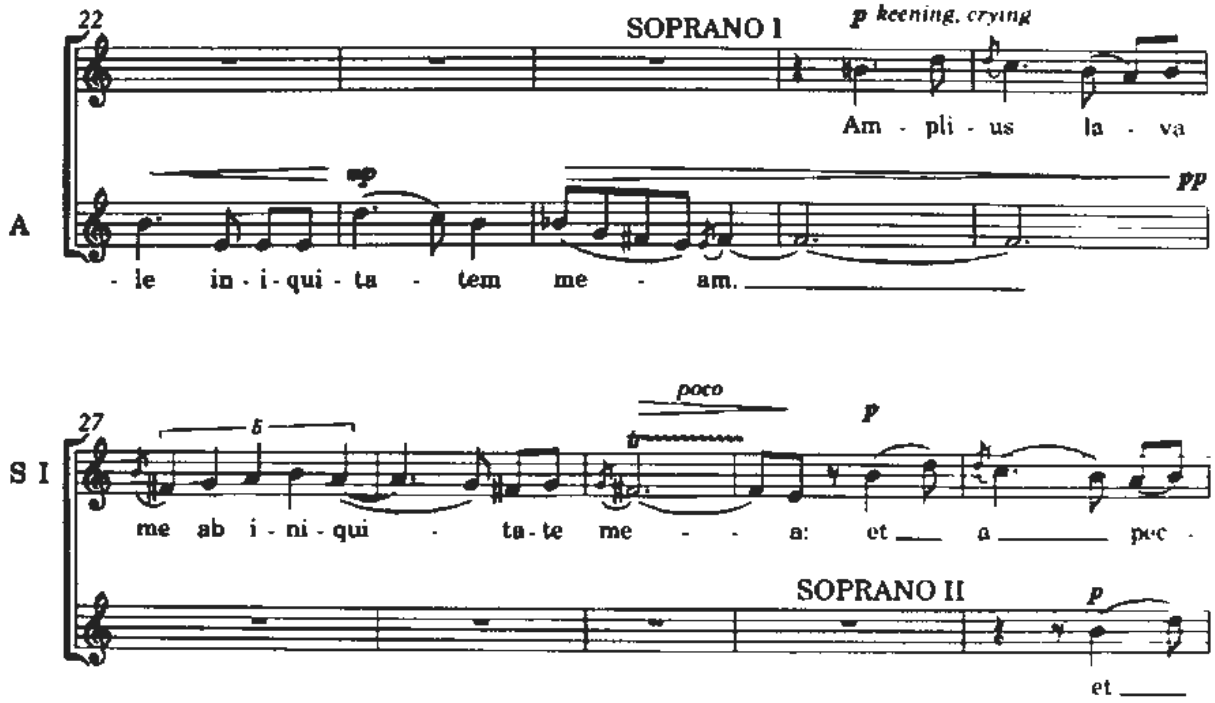
Like Pärt, James MacMillan's historical context is similarly important to understanding the composer's oeuvre. MacMillan was born in a small mining town in the west of Scotland in 1959 to a poor but devout and musical family. From an early age these family influences formed and shaped his identity. His maternal grandfather played a role in MacMillan's early musical development, taking him to brass band rehearsals and encouraging his musical aspirations. MacMillan was also shaped by his Roman Catholic parents' faith, and after his education in local Catholic and secondary schools, MacMillan attended the University of Edinburgh and Durham University to study composition.[27] Looking back in 2019, MacMillan reflected on these early influences, noting "an inescapable search for the sacred, the role of religious practice, tradition and identity, the influence of political motivation, for good or for ill, and the importance of music in the communities I hold dear" that comes out of his childhood experiences.[28] These influences – Scottish history and musical traditions, social and political issues, his Catholic faith, and the way they are all bound together – are key to MacMillan's music and identity.

In many ways, MacMillan finds his identity and musical language from Scottish musical traditions. This hearkens back to MacMillan's early adulthood playing in local Scottish and Irish pub bands and his interest in the "vernacular" music of his native land despite the attitude of the time, which maintained that anything outside of "serious" and complex music was not worth pursuing.[29] MacMillan's music seeks to bridge this gap, and he fuses the vernacular and the art musics together in a distinctly Scottish or "Celtic" way.[30] For MacMillan,

[23] Sholl, "Arvo Pärt and Spirituality," 143. Robert Sholl notes that Pärt procedurally and even more so aesthetically differs from American minimalist composers such as Steve Reich or Philip Glass.
[24] Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 68.
[25] Ibid, 96.
[26] Idem.
[27] For a full biography, see Phillip A. Cooke, *The Music of James MacMillan* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2019).
[28] James MacMillan, *A Scots Song: A Life of Music* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2019), 9.
[29] MacMillan, "God, Theology and Music," 17.
[30] Richard McGregor, "'A Metaphor for the Deeper Wintriness': Exploring James MacMillan's Musical Identity," *Tempo* 65, no. 257 (2011), 28. As McGregor points out, "Celtic" is a rather "dubious" term with a variety of contested meanings, but is one that MacMillan has nevertheless adopted in

this Scottish identity is reflected most obviously in his highly melismatic ornamentation reminiscent of the performance practice of Gaelic psalm singing or folk tin-whistle playing.[31] It is also found in MacMillan's use of a drone, and his musical references to the Gaelic funereal practice of keening,[32] a part of traditional Gaelic funerals where keeners would publicly mourn to pay respect to the deceased and express grief for the family of the deceased. The oral tradition of keening has been lost, but MacMillan's music reflects the lament of it stylistically and sometimes overtly, such as in his final Ph.D. work *Keening*, which uses a traditional Scottish lament tune "Great is the Cause of my Sorrow,"[33] or in musical directions, as in his *Miserere*, where one of the main themes is marked "keening", seen in example 2:

Example 2.
"Keening" theme, mm. 22-31 soprano 1 and alto parts.

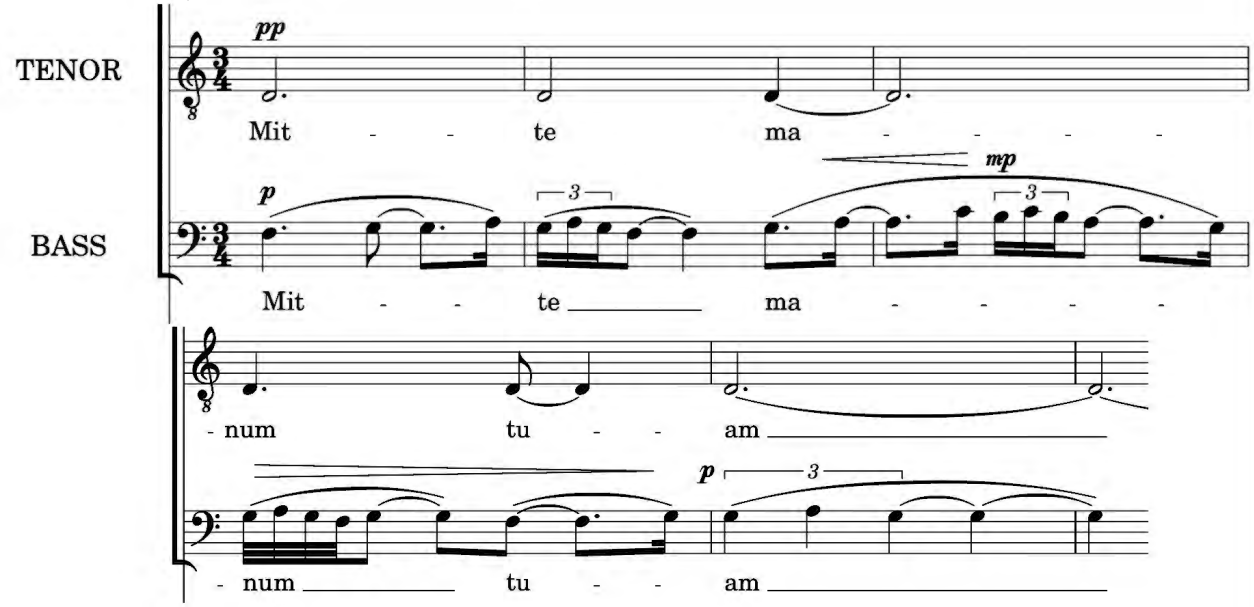


"Miserere" By James MacMillan

describing his own work and its relationship to Scotland.
[31] Idem.
[32] Ibid, 29-30.
[33] Cooke, *The Music of James MacMillan*, 16.

This keening melody also features some of MacMillan's characteristic ornamentation, and a further example of this ornamentation is seen in his *Mitte Manum Tuam*, from *The Strathclyde Motets* (example 3). Here, MacMillan's Scottish influences are on full display in the ornamented bass line is paired with a drone in the tenor during the opening measures:

Example 3
Bass and tenor, mm.1-5.



"Mitte manum tuam" By James MacMillan

MacMillan's Scottish identity is also bound up in his political stances. In his teens and early twenties MacMillan was involved with Scottish socialist movements, and though he later abandoned this politically, his early compositions often reflect a political stance against injustice, especially in his native Scottish context.[34] Shortly after making a celebrated critical debut with *Busqueda*, a vocal-orchestral setting of lament texts by the Argentinian "Mothers of the Disappeared," MacMillan turned his eyes toward Scotland with his 1990 work, *The Confessions of Isabel Gowdie*. This work reflects on the 1662 trial and burning of a Scottish witch, who confessed under torture and who MacMillan suggests was part of the larger Catholic witch-hunt taking place in Scotland during this time.[35] MacMillan suggests too that this piece attempts to "capture the soul of Scotland in music,"[36] using folk melodies and traditional mass settings,[37] and *Isobel Gowdie* is reflective of the socio-political critique in much of MacMillan's music of the 80's and 90's.

More than anything else, though, MacMillan's Catholic faith has a profound impact on him, expressed in his selection of religious thematic and textual subject matter which is tied to his own musical philosophy. Even in the early political works such as *Isobel Gowdie*, religious overtones are highly evident, and MacMillan's corpus increasingly uses religious texts or recurring themes. One of these is a fixation on the Passion narrative ever since his 1993 percussion concerto *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel*.[38] In a moment of self-reflection, MacMillan writes that he is "pre-occupied with the crucified Christ, that I seem to be drawn again and again to the Passion… I'm drawn back obsessively to these three days. I can't help it; I know that the answer might be there."[39] This statement underscores the influence of MacMillan's faith on his own music, a music he describes as a "search for the sacred."[40] He writes: "Far from being isolated, restricted or peripheralized in the world of music because of religion, I have felt central in it and dynamically engaged…with the world around us."[41] For MacMillan, his faith is not compositionally limiting, but rather is central to understanding his philosophy and his technique. In addition to the Gaelic psalm singing connection, another major influence for MacMillan that we will examine momentarily is Gregorian chant, both as a wealth of melodic material and for the liturgy and theology associated with it.[42]

MacMillan somehow draws these disparate elements into an organic whole, and his music displays his own unique style, but like Pärt, this makes him difficult to categorize. Overall MacMillan seems to defy labels[43] and draw from many different sources and traditions,[44] prompting

[34] MacMillan, *A Scots Song*, 32-34. This is reflected in MacMillan's focus on liberation theology and frequent written and musical reflections on anti-Catholic sentiments.
[35] Cooke, *The Music of James MacMillan*, 48.
[36] James MacMillan, "Programme Note to The Confession of Isobel Gowdie," accessed November 9, 2021, https://www.boosey.com/cr/music/James-MacMillan-The-Confession-of-Isobel-Gowdie/3115.
[37] Cooke, *The Music of James MacMillan*, 49.
[38] This work is seen by Cooke as a "public declaration of faith" that "opened the door for MacMillan's Catholicism." Cooke 70. It is also MacMillan's most performed work.
[39] MacMillan, "God, Theology and Music," 19-20. The Passion narrative has provided MacMillan with an archetypal lens that he applies to many "secular" works such as *Isobel Gowdie*, where he sees her history as a mirror of Christ's death.
[40] MacMillan, *A Scots Song*, 9.
[41] Ibid, 75.
[42] MacMillan, "God, Theology and Music," 17.
[43] Dominic Wells suggests MacMillan as a "retrospective modernist." Dominic Wells, "James MacMillan: Retrospective Modernist" (Durham, England, University of Durham, 2012).
[44] MacMillan has cited Bach, Messiaen, Palestrina, Wagner, and of course chant as all significant in his

questions of identity particularly along "sacred" versus "secular" lines. MacMillan for his part sees the two as inextricably linked,[45] and he places himself with an increasingly large number of serious composers concerned with spirituality in their music.[46] At the same time, he sees his primary musical sphere being the concert hall rather than the church.[47] This dichotomy is salient: is a fundamentally religious framework (iconography) applicable to a composer that takes influence from his faith but refuses to be identified as a "sacred" composer? This question of validity, at least regarding performance practice and received meaning, is one that must be addressed. Turning to an account of iconography generally, and then as historically applied to Pärt, I will seek to make clear the various ways in which MacMillan's music could be construed as iconographic.

Christian iconography goes back at least to the fourth century after the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine, influenced by the art of the catacombs as well as pre-Christian Jewish and Hellenistic art. Yet it was not until iconoclastic division in the church during the eighth century that a robust theology of Christian art began to develop. The bases of these divisions were Christological: disagreement lay in the understanding of the nature of Christ and representation of that in human-made images. The concern was with the very possibility of portraying the indescribable divine nature of Christ, and iconoclasts argued that such portrayal amounted to idolatry following Old Testament prohibition against images of God.[48] Yet this issue of depiction was the very basis of arguments in favor of icons. St. John of Damascus argued that through the Christian incarnation God had shown himself in human flesh. Christ the human became the perfect image of God, redeeming that image and thus allowing for depiction of God, the prototype. Creation and veneration of icons was permissible because of this relationship between the image and the prototype:

> Of old, God the incorporeal and formless was never depicted, but now that God has been sent in the flesh and has associated with human kind, I depict what I have seen of God. I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation.[49]

John emphasized that veneration of an icon was not worship of it. Rather, it showed honor to the one depicted.[50] Yet even with the incarnational arguments, iconoclasts feared the heresies of either Nestorianism (an icon of Christ depicts his humanity and separates it from his divinity) or Monophysitism (an icon of Christ that depicts Christ mixes his humanity and divinity and thus denies the two distinct natures of Christ).[51] The Orthodox answer came down to a theological distinction between the two natures (human and divine) and one hypostasis, or person, of Christ. Reflecting on the incarnation, St. Theodore the Studite argued that Christ in his humanity took on individual human traits, and these traits reflect the person of Christ

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musical development. See MacMillan, *A Scot's Song*, or "God, Theology, and Music."

[45] MacMillan, *A Scots Song*, 11.

[46] Ibid, 66.

[47] MacMillan, "A Master Class with Sir James MacMillan."

[48] Egon Sendler, *The Icon, Image of the Invisible: Elements of Theology, Aesthetics, and Technique* (Redondo Beach, Calif: Oakwood Publications, 1988), 40.

[49] John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press (Crestwood, N.Y: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 29.

[50] Ibid, 35.

[51] Sendler, *The Icon, Image of the Invisible*, 41.

rather than either of his two natures.[52] An icon of Christ is an icon of this hypostasis, or person, made visible through the incarnation.

This incarnational paradox of the invisible made visible is central to a theology of iconography, and from it we get the final element of the iconoclast disagreement: the presence of God in theological praxis. For Theodore, while the prototype and image are essentially not the same, nevertheless the "prototype is in the image by the similarity of hypostasis."[53] Theodore did not see iconography as sacramental (i.e. it did not allow direct participation in Christ, as in the Orthodox view of the Eucharist), yet the icon "allowed the participation in Christ by its relation to the hypostasis (person) of Christ, and this participation was of an intentional nature…The icon was an intentional, deliberate communion with the person it represented."[54] Veneration of an icon, in the Orthodox view, allows the viewer a transcendent experience with the presence of God where the honor shown the image as a liturgical object within a worshipful context is shown to the prototype: God himself.[55] Thus, Hillier claims that "an icon asserts the interpenetration of God and the world", wherein an image of the perfect, incarnate image of God could be created by adhering to strict artistic traditions which maintained the authenticity of the icon.[56]

This presencing aspect of icons is related to their liturgical function as pedagogical tools. To speak about iconography in Greek or Slavonic is to speak of "writing" an icon rather than painting one, and for the Orthodox faithful an icon transmits and teaches Christian truth in imagery just as the written word of scripture does.[57] One can think of the role of stained glass in cathedral windows during the Middle Ages as an analogue of teaching doctrine to the largely illiterate poor. Similarly, scripture itself is a type of icon according to the Orthodox view of divine revelation. Both icons and scripture guide the reader or viewer toward truth.[58] Accordingly, icons as "words in painting" are seen as a "visible gospel."[59] As both a location for divine veneration and as a transmitter of divine truth, the icon as image becomes a concrete symbol and embodiment of a transcendent reality made possible through the incarnation.

Turning to Pärt, we can see some of the ways that this iconographic transcendence might be applied to his work by examining the roles of silence, liturgy, technique, and symbolism in his music. We see this iconography first in Pärt's philosophical and stylistic use of silence. Pärt's music implicitly references the Orthodox *hesychast* tradition, where through silent prayer and contemplation the believer may come to "share in the divine nature" through *theosis*. This contemplation and kenotic receptivity to God's will is central to the iconic understanding of Pärt's music.[60] Pärt writes that "My music has emerged only after I have been silent for quite some time,

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[52] Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, trans. Catharine P Roth, On the Holy Icons (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981), 87.
[53] Ibid, 102.
[54] Sendler, *The Icon, Image of the Invisible*, 47.
[55] Constantine Scouteris, "'Never as Gods': Icons and Their Veneration," *Sobornost* 6, no. 1 (1984), 17.
[56] Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 3-4. The Orthodox belief is that the iconographic tradition is unbroken from eyewitness or miraculous artistic renderings of Christ and the saints, and thus an icon of Christ is a true rendering of his appearance if it was a direct copy, hence the strong artistic stylization.
[57] Sendler, *The Icon, Image of the Invisible*, 67. Sendler discusses this in depth, relating different categories and forms of icons that are as much literary as they are artistic.
[58] Scouteris, "'Never as Gods': Icons and Their Veneration," 12.
[59] Ibid, 11.
[60] Shenton, *Arvo Pärt's Resonant Texts*, 100-102.

literally silent. For me, 'silent' means the nothing from which God created the world. Ideally, a silent pause is something sacred."[61] Thus, Pärt's frequent use of silence in his music gestures towards this prayerful contemplation, either of the music itself or of something beyond the music, and it is this beyond that is iconographic. Through contemplation of the aural icon, the listener seeks to experience a sense of the divine.

Pärt's music is distinctly non-liturgical, and most of it is written for a concert hall setting. Nonetheless, we can see iconic parallels between it and Medieval Orthodox liturgy, namely in the bell-like structure of tintinnabuli. One of the most significant correlations exists between Russian bells and icons, one writer going so far as calling them "aural icons of past and future trumpeting."[62] In medieval Russia, the bell was a call to prayer and the herald of angel trumpets, signaling and embodying a direct interaction between God and humanity.[63] Pärt's music is reminiscent of this, with its bell-like triadic structure in the T-voice and minimalist chant-like suspension and contemplation. Hillier writes of the effect of a bell: "it rings out and reaches towards us, yet at the same time pulls us in towards it, so that soon we realize we are on the inside of it, that its inside and outside are one and the same,"[64] and although Pärt's tintinnabuli music does not seek to programmatically emulate the sound of Russian bells, like the bells of medieval Russia, it seeks to be an aural icon that encourages contemplation and a symbolic reminder of divine presence.[65]

Pärt's music can also be analyzed iconographically regarding its technique. As discussed, Pärt's tintinnabuli is heavily influenced by his study of Gregorian chant. Hillier points to the similarities between chant and iconographic painting. Like the heavily stylized traditional aesthetics of iconography, chant was the result of centuries of slow development and the conscious decision to adhere to strict traditions. Changes, if they occurred, did so "within the canonized style, rather than as a passage from one style to another."[66] Chant, and by extension tintinnabuli, follows this tradition. For musicologist Benjamin Skipp, the experience of Pärt's music is "to partake in the reenactment of medieval music and to become part of a catholic community which has existed throughout history."[67]

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[61] Leo Normet, "The Beginning Is Silence," *Teater*, 1988, 22. Quoted in Shenton Resonant Texts, 101. Pärt also describes his musical inspiration in these terms: "If someone approaches silence with love, then this might give birth to music. A composer must often wait a long time for his music. This kind of sublime anticipation is exactly the kind of pause that I value so greatly."

[62] Edward V. Williams, "Aural Icons of Orthodoxy," in *Christianity and the Arts in Russia*, ed. William Craft Brumfield and Miloš Velimirović (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 3.

[63] Idem.

[64] Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 20.

[65] See Marguerite Bostonia, "Bells as Inspiration for Tintinnabulation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, ed. Andrew Shenton, Cambridge Companions to Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 15. Similarly, Medieval Russian chant has numerous parallels with Russian iconography. Both embody theological ideas, conveying meaning through either seen or heard means. Additionally, chant was often used as accompaniment to the icon itself, either as the total liturgical soundscape of a Byzantine church and the atmosphere within which iconography was viewed, or as congregants were encouraged to sing along with the angels depicted in the icons themselves.

[66] Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 5. Some have even suggested that some stylistic aspects of Gregorian chant have passed down virtually unchanged from their origins in 2nd Temple Jewish chant practices. See Willi Apel, *Gregorian Chant* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1958).

[67] Benjamin Skipp, "The Minimalism of Arvo Pärt: An 'Antidote' to Modernism and Multiplicity?," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, ed. Andrew Shenton, Cambridge Companions to Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 170. Skipp's use of the term "reenactment" is

Even more than the techniques of chant and early music, Pärt's tintinnabuli was inspired by the "spirit" of it, which is heavily influenced by the text it conveys.[68] Pärt has said that "I have always allowed myself to be guided by texts that mean a lot to me and that for me are of existential significance."[69] Like iconography, Pärt's music "writes" the text in unwritten form. To listen to Pärt's music and to be profoundly moved does not require ideological agreement with his faith, as his popularity across religious background shows, but at the same time it is important to recognize that for him, the sacred text is paramount and inseparable from his music. This is precisely because it serves this iconographic function in his music. The chant-like text brings with it associations of liturgical space, proclaiming divine presence in the sacred words and as part of a stylized musical tradition.

In addition to the symbolism inherent in the M- and T-voices, Pärt's iconography can also be seen in the formal symbolism of some pieces. In Carol Matthew-Whiteman's doctoral dissertation on Pärt's setting of the St. John Passion, she examines this key work from this lens and discovers that Pärt structurally depicts an icon of the crucifixion of Christ within the hour-long work. The work is heavily symbolic at all levels of the composition; from the relationships of specific pitches and harmonies, to texture choices, to the macro levels of timing within the piece, Pärt's score is formally reflective of typical visual iconography of the crucifixion.[70] Pärt's *Passio* aurally depicts the crucifixion icon, and though this work is more intricate than many of Pärt's pieces, it is evidence that he is not primarily concerned with aesthetics as much as he is with making the invisible heard.

Pärt's work from 1987, *The Beatitudes*, is an example of his tintinnabuli style and aesthetic, and while not as complex as *Passio*, still displays an intentionality and narrative.[71] Like visual iconography, this piece is approached in silent contemplation. It begins and ends in silence and is punctuated by silences throughout that are as necessary to the musical experience as the sounding notes. The chant-like sung text, taken from Matthew 5:3-12, teaches the words of scripture not in written but aural form. From Pärt's Orthodox perspective, the work embodies Christ's presence as both the original speaker of the words and as the singers embody the image of God according to Genesis 1, enfleshing the text as they sing it. The bell-like T-voice with its connections to Russian liturgical practice reinforce the textual associations. We are reminded too of Pärt's original description of tintinnabuli where the M-voice (representing humanity) wanders, but the divine, forgiving T-voice holds the structure firmly in place. Together, they make a single entity of contemplation and stillness, and, at least for Pärt, offer an opportunity to glimpse and participate in the divine.[72]

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interesting here. Cf Gadamer's concept of the festival to reveal truth and establish meaning, in Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.

[68] Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 78-79. This is true even though Pärt's music is almost entirely non-liturgical. See also Restagno et al., *Arvo Pärt in Conversation*, 57.

[69] Restagno et al., *Arvo Pärt in Conversation*, 54.

[70] Carol Leonore Matthews Whiteman, "'Passio': The Iconography of Arvo Part" (Ph.D., United States -- New York, City University of New York), accessed September 8, 2021. Matthews Whiteman shows this in reference to a myriad of details, for example in the way that Pärt changes timbre or texture at specific moments in the piece that correspond to the ratio of the arms of the cross, setting crucial parts of the text at this moment and thus aurally depicting formal cruciformity.

[71] This is most clearly seen in the analysis of harmonic movement. See theorist Milton Mermikides's tonnetz diagram printed in Shenton, *Arvo Pärt's Resonant Texts*.

[72] Robert Sholl is helpful here, defining Pärt's music "as an agent in this complex negotiation of searching

Allowing for Pärt's music to be construed thusly, we turn to MacMillan now and seek to apply this Pärtian framework to his music. Revisiting his initial dislike of such a comparison, we again must ask the question of validity in both composerly intent and performance practice. As it is articulated in his "God, Theology, and Music" article, MacMillan's criticism of Pärt is based on his understanding of an ideological difference reflected in their respective musics. MacMillan's depiction of "the abyss" of human experience comes out of his search for divine encounter in the crucifixion narrative, and he views Pärt as avoiding the reality of suffering. However, Pärt's music does not wholly do this, and there is a sense of lament and desolation inherent in the statis of Part's music that is meant to be contemplated.[73] Indeed, Pärt's tintinnabuli music is reflective of a holistic spiritual vision encapsulating the human-divine experience in one musical outlet.[74] Pärt himself denies that his spirituality is "mystical," instead describing it as "concrete."[75] Addressing criticisms of Pärt as disembodied similar to MacMillan's, Robert Sholl notes that even the unnuanced account of Pärt's music as vaguely simple and spiritual and therefore escapist locates Pärt's music as an "external agent that do[es] something to a person…[it] invites the listener to…active, somatic participation."[76] For Sholl, this participation is rooted in Pärt's faith:

> One of the purposes of Pärt's music would be to show humanity, in a Christian sense, what it would be like to live as though it were possible to be resurrected. Through the imagination, humanity is required to realize something of and beyond itself. This is the essence of the music's enchantment.[77]

And Sholl notes that this feeling of transcendence is not limited to the Christian. Until recently, Pärt was the most listened-to contemporary composer (followed closely by MacMillan), and his enduring popularity points to this "enchantment" across faith backgrounds. The experience of this sublime enchantment in Pärt's music is embodied, life-enhancing, and concerned with the present.[78] Pärt's philosophy and music is therefore perhaps closer to MacMillan's than "God, Theology, and Music" admits, and as MacMillan stylistically shifts towards the sense of transcendence he criticized in Pärt, the iconographic lens seems more and more applicable.[79]

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and of realization…As much as it espouses a unity with God, [his music is] symptomatic of humanity's search for God…[it] points to an excruciating gap between humanity and God that, in unexpected ways, is an exhortation to participate in and even bridge this liminal space." Sholl, "Arvo Pärt and Spirituality," 140.

[73] Sholl, "Arvo Pärt and Spirituality," 153.

[74] Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 96.

[75] Restagno et al., *Arvo Pärt in Conversation*, 34.

[76] Sholl, "Arvo Pärt and Spirituality," 154.

[77] Ibid, 156.

[78] Ibid 156-157.

[79] It is worth noting that MacMillan is no stranger to a visual analysis of his own work. Robert Sholl analyzes MacMillan according to such a framework, comparing his music to paintings by Caravaggio and discussing MacMillan's musical imagery, embodiment, and transformation. Sholl is the to first suggest that MacMillan might share Pärt's interest in image-making or iconography, but largely dismisses the staticism of Orthodox iconography so prevalent in Pärt as applicable to MacMillan. He instead describes MacMillan's image-making as vivid and arresting, and thus transformative. Sholl largely dismisses viewing MacMillan iconographically due to a lack of contemplative stasis, but as we've seen, Pärt's music is not wholly static, and MacMillan's music is increasingly contemplative. Thus, while Sholl's discussion of the Caravaggio connection is astute and sheds light on aspects of MacMillan's work, its brief argument against such an iconographic framework is unconvincing. Robert Sholl, "Exquisite Violence: Imagery, Embodiment and Transformation in MacMillan," in *James MacMillan Studies*, ed. George Parsons and Robert Sholl, Cambridge Composer Studies (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 95.

Indeed, MacMillan himself implicitly makes the connection between his music and iconography in a discussion of silence and the composer's relationship with it. MacMillan poignantly describes silently staring into his young granddaughter Sara's eyes shortly before she died from Dandy-Walker syndrome and other developmental disabilities. He writes:

> Looking at Sara was perhaps like gazing silently into the eyes of an icon. Doing so is meant to let us see into the beauty of the divine presence; the icon's eyes become windows into the soul of God. And God looks back…It was like rapture gazing at rapture, tenderness gazing at tenderness, devotion gazing upon devotion, worship gazing at worship, the cherisher cherishing the cherished, the enchanter enchanting the enchanted, heart lost to heart. Silence listening to silence.[80]

For MacMillan, silence, which he elsewhere describes as divine presence rather than absence, calls out to the composer and it is from this silence that his music comes.[81] It is important to note this, as he elsewhere describes the same process of musical inspiration in terms of kenotic receptivity in imitation of the Virgin Mary at the Christian Annunciation.[82] Taken together, MacMillan seems to suggest that like Pärt, his music arises from a place of silence and divine contemplation, and this silence functions iconographically as a window into the divine.

This iconographic composerly philosophy is revealed in the technique of the music itself. Here we again see the influence of Gregorian chant as a stylized tradition. Like Pärt, MacMillan's music heavily relies on chant, not just for melodic material but also as a tradition to plug into.[83] This tradition that is passed down is one of ritual experience where the text is "almost secondary" to the sacred sound-world of the space it was performed in.[84] Like the Byzantine liturgical space of the icon, Gregorian chant contributed to an atmosphere of sensory religious experience in tandem with architecture, stained glass, incense, and even the icon itself. Although this liturgical experience may be foreign to many non-Catholics, for MacMillan it is a formational reality from his earliest memories. He writes of his childhood experience of chant in the Catholic Mass as a sensory totality, describing it as a:

> Ghostly, distant and affecting sonic concoction that gripped my childish attention…Stylized movements of adults and children in robes, clouds of smoke and actions of devotion that I didn't yet comprehend. The sound was accompanying, facilitating. Looking back on it, and knowing now what liturgy is, I must have been hearing polyphony and Gregorian chant.[85]

For MacMillan, chant has iconic associations. It draws the listener in to a religious space, "accompanying" and "facilitating" a connection to the sacred.

MacMillan's use of chant also mirrors the icon as an embodied pedagogical tool. Before and even after the development of Western musical notation, Gregorian chant was an oral tradition sung from memory,

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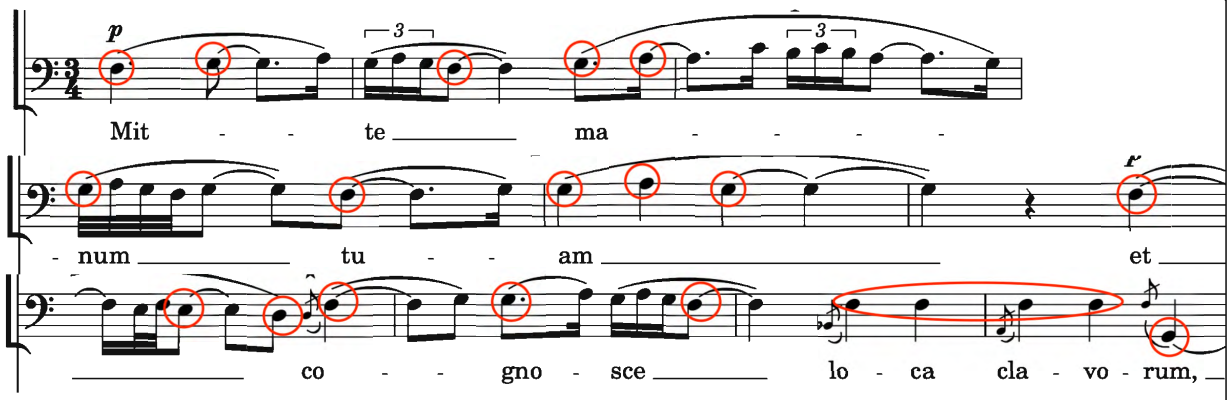
[80] MacMillan, *A Scots Song*, 92-93.
[81] Ibid, 76-93. MacMillan's concept of his own musical inspiration is also closely linked to this kenotic and iconic silence. He sees his music as resulting from a posture of receptivity and coming out of an experience with God.
[82] MacMillan, "God, Theology and Music," 21-22.
[83] Ibid, 17. C.f. Lisa Colton, "Containing Chaos? Aspects of Medieval Liturgy in James MacMillan's 'Visitatio Sepulchri,'" in *James MacMillan Studies*, ed. George Parsons and Robert Sholl, Cambridge Composer Studies (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
[84] David Hiley, *Gregorian Chant*, Cambridge Introductions to Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.
[85] MacMillan, *A Scots Song*, 7-8, italics mine.

with individual chants occurring frequently according to the daily office and liturgical calendar. As such, chant was a transmitter of sacred text, a "reference point for a religious musical experience, for a reaching out to the deity, who is no more to be comprehended in words than in music itself."[86] Chant is thus a medium through which the participants proclaim truth and search for divine presence and is therefore essentially iconic. This physical proclamation of sung text renders the participants iconic as well as the sacred text which is put into embodied sound. MacMillan's style is heavily influenced by this tradition, and often specific chants are used as primary melodic motives. In the same ornamented example from earlier, MacMillan's bass melody line (example 4.1) is lifted straight from a liturgical communion chant (example 4.2). You can see the corresponding main pitches circled, and MacMillan even keeps it in the same modal area of F hypolydian. In practice, MacMillan's use of chant connects him to an iconographic tradition through its facilitation of worship and as conveyer and embodier of a sacred text.

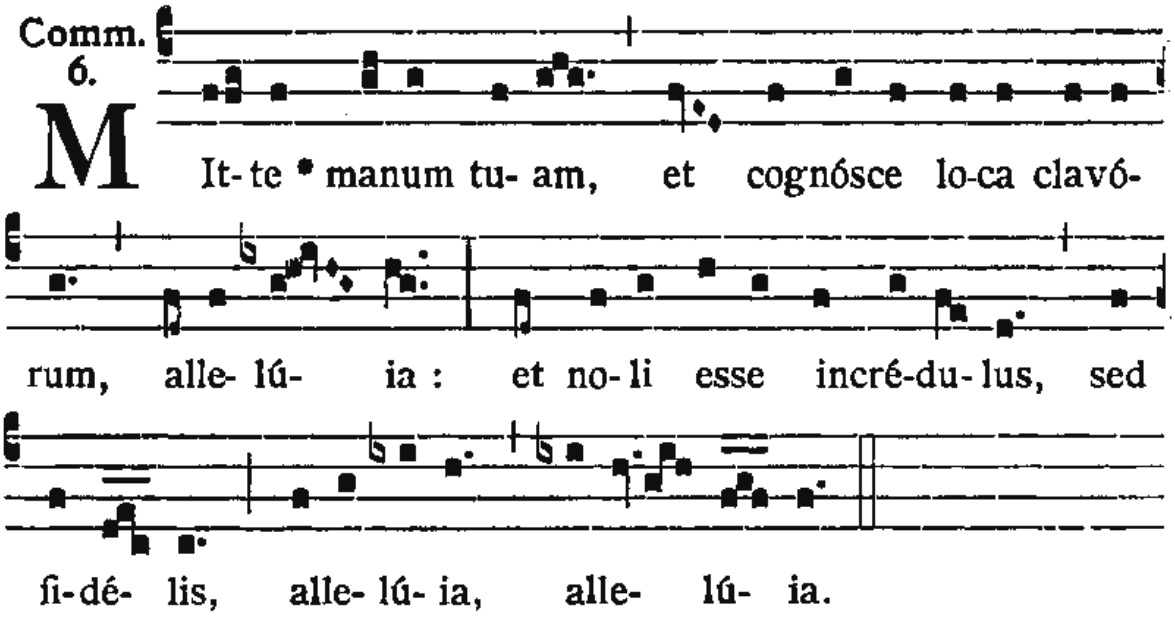
Example 4.1
Bass part, mm.1-10.



"Mitte manum tuam" By James MacMillan

[86] Hiley, *Gregorian Chant*, 4.

Example 4.2
Communion motet for the second Sunday of Easter.



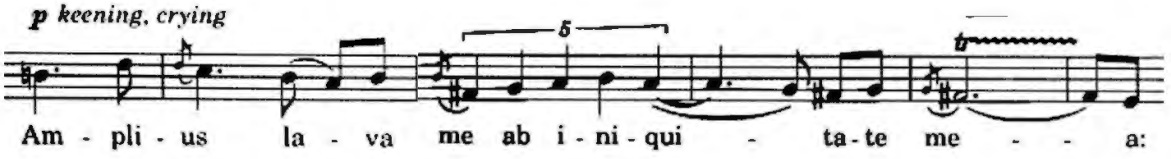
Graduale sacrosanctae Romanae Ecclesiae de tempore & de sanctis (Solesmis: Abbaye Saint Pierre, 1979), 218.

When an icon is venerated in the Orthodox church, this veneration is not supposed to be directed towards the icon itself; at a basic level, the icon symbolically points to the image depicted. It stands in the place of the person rendered, in social practices of veneration.[87] In MacMillan's music, he frequently makes use of musical symbolism. This is seen in programmatic depictions of Christ, musically embodied in the *Seven Last Words from the Cross*, *Veni Veni Emmanuel*, or most explicitly in MacMillan's *Triduum*, a collection of three works that together describe the three-day Passion narrative.[88] This is also seen in his re-use of material, including chant, that points towards something extra-musical and beyond itself. One example of this is the "keening" melody we saw in his *Miserere* (example 5.1). There, it seems to be a reflection on the human condition; it is paired with the Psalm text in opposition to MacMillan's frequently re-used "Tryst" melody, which symbolically points towards divine sacrificial love.[89] Yet MacMillan reuses this keening melody in his *Since it was the day of Preparation*, a work continuing the Passion narrative where the St. John Passion leaves off. The solo horn interlude picks the melody up, this time as a reflection on the mystery of the resurrection (example 5.2). The melody is transformed

[87] C.f. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[88] McGregor, "'A Metaphor for the Deeper Wintriness,'" 31-35.
[89] See Dominic Wells, "Reincarnating the Tryst: The Endurance of a Simple Love Song," in *James MacMillan Studies*, ed. George Parsons and Robert Sholl, Cambridge Composer Studies (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 67-86. The Tryst melody occurs throughout MacMillan's oeuvre both consciously and unconsciously, transformed from a romantic love song in The Tryst to love of church in St. Anne's Mass, maternal love in Busqueda, and divine sacrificial love in Miserere and St. John Passion.

from the frantic, grieving, keen in the *Miserere* into a subdued but insistent symbolic recognition of Christ's redemptive power over death.[90] As a referent, MacMillan uses this theme symbolically to exegete the implications of the text, subverting the knowing listener's expectations of what this melody has signified in previous works and thus transforming the meaning of the music itself from grief to hope. Like visual iconography, MacMillan's re-use of melodic ideas and programmatic depictions of religious subject matter symbolically point beyond the merely musical.

Example 5.1
Keening melody.



"Miserere" By James MacMillan

Example 5.2

"Since It Was The Day of Preparation" By James MacMillan

MacMillan's music is thus characterized by many of these iconographic traits. It stems from silence as a window into divine presence, it is grounded in liturgical worship as a stylized and pedagogical tradition of Gregorian chant, it is embodied in the act of singing sacred text, and it symbolically points toward the beyond. MacMillan says of his music that it is fundamentally an "attempt to…encounter the face of God," and this creative encounter for both the composer and the listener is only possible through a sacrificial, embodied, and contemplative receptivity.[91] MacMillan writes that "being openly receptive to the transforming power of music is analogous to the patient receptivity to the divine that is necessary for religious contemplation…music allows us to see beyond to what lurks in the crevices of the human-divine experience."[92] It is this seeing beyond toward the divine that I argue is essentially iconographic in MacMillan's music, but it is not one-sided. As he wrote of his iconic experience with his granddaughter that mirrors his conception of music, sometimes "God looks back." MacMillan's music is therefore a space for transcendence.

[90] The interlude comes near the end of the work, immediately preceded by text from John 21, where Christ is revealed to the disciples at breakfast on the beach, forgives Peter, and foretells Peter and John's deaths.

[91] MacMillan, "God, Theology and Music," 20, 24-26.
[92] Ibid, 25.

It is this space that Arvo Pärt so deftly navigates, offering his music as an iconographic connection to the divine. Insofar as MacMillan himself is concerned, he seems to similarly consider his own music iconographically in both philosophy and technique, at least implicitly. Yet this raises questions for our interaction with his work that are perhaps different than with Pärt. In particular, issues of audience reception, composerly authority, and applicability beyond the particular religious context remain. While the composer may see no difference between the sacred and secular in his music, can we universally see his music as an encounter with the divine in the absolute-music instrumental works as well as the sacred choral ones, the liturgical as well as the concert-hall works? Pärt's own conception of tintinnabuli is all-encompassing, and as we've seen his religion and philosophy are wedded to his technique. I have attempted to motivate a similar movement in MacMillan's work, but admittedly his oeuvre is more varied in style and his Catholic background is religiously distinct from Pärt's Orthodox context. Furthermore, musicologist and theologian Jeremy Begbie problematizes musical transcendence itself in MacMillan's religious context, and he notes that a vaguely Kantian understanding of musical transcendence is incompatible with God's "self-representation" in the incarnation of Christ. For Begbie, such a continental understanding limits the power of music to transcend the human experience in the same way that the iconographic lens would suggest.[93] We need to therefore ask if the iconographic claims for transcendence are applicable to an audience who do not share in MacMillan's own religious beliefs. Since the publication of "God, Theology, and Music" in 2000, MacMillan's philosophy and output has given rise to these issues, and it will be interesting to note how they change or expand in the future as MacMillan continues to compose sacred music.[94] Further research is needed, and satisfying answers to these issues lie beyond the scope of this paper, yet in all this it is hopefully evident how this Pärtian iconographic lens could and indeed does apply to aspects of MacMillan's work as it seeks to be an aural icon, a window into "the face of God."

[93] Jeremy Begbie, "Negotiating Musical Transcendence," in *Music and Transcendence*, ed. Férdia J. Stone-Davis (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2015). Begbie's analysis would support my iconographic claims for MacMillan within the specifically Christian context: the incarnation reveals a locus of transcendence that is found in a specific space and time (the person of Christ), rather than at the limits of human perception in the "quasi-divinity of the sublime." Transcendence in this view is thus embodied, occurring in and through matter like the icon, and music uniquely serves to enrich and transcend language about the divine. However, the question here is whether MacMillan's music can offer transcendence regardless of belief in the Christian narrative of transcendence.

[94] See Cooke, *The Music of James MacMillan* for a discussion of future projects, including MacMillan's plans for two more Passion settings.

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