James MacMillan: 
Miserere

“Three new responses to the [Stabat mater] text... are sung here with faultless clarity by The Sixteen.”

THE OBSERVER

Spirit, Strength & Sorrow

Firsova, Kõrvits, Martin

“This disc bears testament to a rare and wonderful relationship between composer, choir and conductor. Long may it continue.”

GRAMOPHONE

Padre Pio: Prayer

Remarkable works commissioned by the Genesis Foundation from James MacMillan, Roxanna Panufnik and Will Todd.

“The Sixteen’s performance here comes across as mightily assured and ardently convincing.”

BBC MUSIC MAGAZINE

O Guiding Night

O’Regan, Williams, Byrchmore.

“A fascinating project: the same three texts set by three different composers but all mesmerized by this poetry’s ecstatic conjunction of agape and eros, love sacred and love profane.”

CHOIR & ORGAN

To find out more about The Sixteen, concert tours, and to buy CDs visit www.thesixteen.com
The culmination of a 15-year association

In 2001, for the first time in the group’s history, The Sixteen commissioned a new liturgical work; it had always been my intention to do this but I was intent on ensuring that it would be a composition that survived the test of time. James MacMillan was the composer and the result was O bone Jesu, and I have no doubt that in this work we found that lasting voice. Thus started a long and fruitful relationship with James. Eight years later, in August 2009, we gave the world premiere of his Miserere. When I received the score, I was overwhelmed to see that James had dedicated it to me. The work had been commissioned by the Flanders Festival and the concert was in Antwerp’s glorious Carolus-Borromeuskerk. Even though Allegri’s famous Miserere was in the same programme, it was James’s rendition of Psalm 51, in the composer’s presence, that received a prolonged standing ovation.

Personally, I think that James ranks amongst a trio of truly great composers of sacred music, the other two being Tomás Luis de Victoria and Francis Poulenc. They have a common focus in their total commitment to the Catholic faith, but, for me, what makes them so exceptional is their intensely personal approach to the Scriptures. Of course, it is always said that penitential texts bring out the best in composers and, as with Victoria and Poulenc, that is true of MacMillan. I defy even the strongest atheist not to be moved by James’s Miserere or his Tenebrae Responsories. The demands made on the singers, especially in the latter, are extraordinary; not only are they harmonically complicated, but they are also technically demanding. Nevertheless, my goodness me, if you were to ask any of my singers whether they were rewarding to perform, the answer would be a resounding ‘Yes!’.

Some of the effects he produces are simply brilliant. James’s vision in his sacred works is second to none, just as John Studzinski’s vision in creating the Genesis Foundation is second to none. John and I have collaborated on numerous projects over the past 10 years. Every one of those projects has emanated from John’s devotion to the Catholic faith and his love of the wonderful poetry which encapsulates Christianity as well as his laudable mission to promote and nurture young talent. Three years ago we embraced the Stabat mater, without doubt the most powerful poem of the liturgy and one which has inspired composers through the ages, yet in recent times it has seldom been set to music. We proposed to redress that but also to delve further. For the Stabat mater project, we took advantage of our long association with James MacMillan. First of all, James, John and I drew up a long list of possible composers for this project, from which we chose three, all representing different backgrounds and cultures: Alissa Firsova, Tõnu Kõrvits and Matthew Martin. They each presented the initial drafts of their work and James and I spent a fascinating weekend in workshop with the composers and Genesis Sixteen (our unique young artists’ scheme which aims to nurture the next generation of talented ensemble singers, again made possible by the vision of the Genesis Foundation). It was an education for all of us: for the composers to have their work subjected to constructive and positive criticism and analysis by James and by me; for the student singers to adapt to three very different styles and harmonic languages; and for me, not only to get into the mindset of the three composers, but also to feel free to bring my own interpretation to their work. The whole experience was a resounding success, and so rewarding for every one of us.

And so to the culmination of our Stabat mater project, a setting of this wonderful poem for choir and string orchestra by James MacMillan, commissioned by the Genesis Foundation for us to perform. The musical world has waited a long time for a substantial setting of the Stabat mater. The last major renditions were the very personal and powerful settings of Karol Szymanowski in 1928 and Francis Poulenc in 1951. 65 years on, we are witness to a new and equally personal work which encapsulates the power of the poem in a way no other composer has done to date. This is a masterpiece – the premiere at London’s Barbican
Hall and subsequent performances in October 2016 all received standing ovations. James digs deep underneath the surface of this 13th-century Marian hymn meditating on Mary’s suffering as she stands at the foot of the cross. He speaks of ‘a painful world of loss, violence and spiritual desolation’, and the score is packed to the full with those intense feelings. Our collaboration with Britten Sinfonia on this project has been a marriage made in heaven – both groups have had long associations with James’s music and both give of their all in bringing this score to life.

Experiences like this come, if we are lucky, perhaps once in a lifetime. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the artists for their total commitment and artistry. Special thanks to Julie, Dan, Ben and the four tenors – Jeremy, Mark, Simon and George – for their virtuosic solo singing, and Thom, Clare and Caroline for their ravishingly evocative solos which were so emotionally charged. Collectively, we feel very honoured and humbled by James’s work and are very proud of our association with him. Wherever we go, be it in the UK, USA, Australia or Europe, and whenever one of his compositions is in the programme, surrounded by other great composers, it is always James’s works that have had the greatest effect on the audience. That says it all.

The ongoing collaboration The Sixteen and I have with John Studzinski and the Genesis Foundation is one that continues to flourish. Together we have built a model of support and mutual respect. We have total faith in what we do at The Sixteen and to have that recognised by the Genesis Foundation is very special. Our renewed thanks to the Genesis Foundation for so often making the impossible possible.

Stabat mater

was commissioned by the Genesis Foundation for Harry Christophers and The Sixteen, and dedicated by the composer to John Studzinski.

A note from John Studzinski

Truly great works of art are rare. Works that challenge, deeply move and yet are also able to give hope are even rarer. James’s Stabat mater is all that and more. Those of us who were fortunate enough to be at the premiere performance were conscious that we were witnessing the birth of a choral masterpiece that will continue to enthrall audiences for centuries to come. This premiere was the culmination of the Genesis Foundation’s long partnership with James which has seen other commissions from him alongside others from younger composers whom James has mentored. With our new Stabat mater commission, James has created a work that encompasses the timelessness of Mary’s grief for her dying son, a story as relevant today as it has ever been. Everyone at the Genesis Foundation is indebted to James for moving us, and future generations, so profoundly.

John Studzinski CBE, Founder & Chairman, Genesis Foundation

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Music has an infinite ability to tell the same story over and over again. This is part of its tradition but even individual composers can be drawn back to the same models in attempts to reclothe and reinterpret musical forms and structures and settings of classic texts. This is especially the case with the Crucifixion narrative. Bach is revered for his two Passions—St Matthew and St John—but there have been other ways for composers to relate this story in sound. The Seven Last Words from the Cross, for instance, is a now defunct liturgical form which attracted the attention of Lassus, Schütz, Haydn, Rossini, Liszt and Dvořák. The liturgy of Tenebrae has given rise to settings of the Lamentations by Tallis, Charpentier and Stravinsky (Threni), as well as the Tenebrae Responsories by Victoria and Gesualdo. Allegri’s famous Miserere is also associated with Good Friday and then there are all those incredibly powerful settings of the Stabat mater.

The authorship of the hymn has been variously ascribed to St Gregory the Great (d. 604), St Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), Innocent III (d. 1216), St Bonaventure (d. 1274), John XXII (d. 1334) and Gregory XI (d. 1378), but the most likely candidate is the Franciscan monk Jacopone da Todi (d. 1306). It is a tricky text to set to music as it is difficult to sustain a persistent tone of pathos, and there are challenging repetitious rhythmic issues within it. But just as the image has inspired countless painters and sculptors through the centuries it has also attracted generations of wonderful composers.

There are many great musical settings through history—by Josquin, Palestrina, Pergolesi, the two Scarlattis, Vivaldi, Haydn, Rossini, Liszt and Dvořák. In the 20th century there are beautiful settings by Szymanowski, Poulenc and Arvo Pärt. Pergolesi’s setting is one of the longest, but one of the most popular works of sacred music. Liszt created some of his noblest music in his setting, which is part of the larger oratorio Christus. Szymanowski’s is fragrant and compelling—a work that is simultaneously atmospheric and colourful. Dvořák wrote his Stabat mater as a grieving father and devout Catholic. The work turned out to be a landmark in his life, spreading his fame and reputation far, not just in central Europe, but also in the United States where the piece was widely performed.

I have also repeated myself as a composer. I’ve written two Passion settings (St John and St Luke), a Seven Last Words, some Tenebrae Responsories, a Miserere and even a response to the Stations of the Cross. Some people say that God intervened in human history. That is, he interfered with our story, to become one of us, to know what it means to be human, and for us to know An ancient story for a modern age
him and to discover that he loves us, with all the implications that has.

I seem to have been circling around these few days in history for some years. It can be done in purely abstract instrumental music too, but a composer enters into a mysterious collaboration with the word (and the Word) whenever a setting of a text like this is involved. And with the Stabat mater a composer enters into a particularly painful world of loss, violence and spiritual desolation. I seem to have grown up with the Stabat mater, singing it as a hymn at school (in the English translation by Edward Caswell) and in my local church in Scotland as a boy, and having my early perception of the crucifixion (and indeed the world) coloured by its beauty and sadness. It was a great delight and honour to respond to The Sixteen to write my own Stabat mater for them. Its composition has engrossed me for the last few years.

I regard Harry Christophers’ choir as one of the great choirs of the world and their standards of vocal brilliance and blend are unsurpassed. I remember conducting them in the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam a few years ago and encountering astonishment and wonder from the Dutch audience at their unique beauty. I have written a few smaller things for them in the past, but my Stabat mater, with string orchestra accompaniment played by Britten Sinfonia, is a big piece. I feel close to this choir and orchestra.

I do feel as if I’m telling an old story – that many others have been here before me, feeling the tread of history and tradition. But the tragedy keeps resurfacing, from one generation, from one century to the next.

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TEXTS & TRANSLATIONS

1 Plainsong Stabat mater

For text see tracks 2 - 5

2 I. Stabat mater

Soli: Julie Cooper soprano, Daniel Collins alto, Jeremy Budd tenor, Ben Davies bass

Stabat mater dolorosa
iuxta crucem lacrimosa,
dum pendebat Filiius.

Cuius animam gementem,
contristatam et dolentem,
pertransivit gladius.

O quam tristis et afflicta
fuit illa benedicta,
mater unigeniti!

Quae moerebat et dolebat,
pia mater, dum videbat
nati poenas inclyti.

Quis est homo, qui non fleret,
matrem Christi si videret
in tanto supplicio?

The sorrowful mother stood full of tears by the cross while her Son hung there.

Whose soul, lamenting, sorrowing and grieving, has been pierced by the sword.

O how sad and afflicted was that blessed mother of her only Son!

Who wept and grieved and trembled to behold the torment of her glorious child.

What man would not weep if he saw the mother of Christ in such distress?
II. Quis non posset contristari
Soli: Daniel Collins *alto*, Jeremy Budd *tenor*

Quis non posset contristari
Christi matrem contemplari
dolentem cum Filio?

Pro peccatis suae gentis
vidit Jesum in tormentis, 
et flagellis subjicit.

Vidit suum dulcem natum
moriendo desolatum, 
dum emisit Spiritum.

Eia mater, fons amoris,  
me sentire vim doloris 
fac, ut tecum lugeam.

Fac ut ardeat cor meum
in amando Christum Deum, 
Ut sibi complaceam.

Who could not be sorrowful to see the pious mother grieving with her Son?
For the sins of his people she saw Jesus in torment, and subjected to lashes.
She saw her sweet Son dying, deserted, as he gave up the spirit.
O mother, fount of love, let me feel the force of your grief that I may mourn with you.
Make my heart burn with love for Christ the God, that I may be pleasing to him.

III. Sancta mater, istud agas
Soli: Jeremy Budd, Mark Dobell, Simon Berridge, George Pooley *tenor*

Sancta mater, istud agas, 
Crucifixi fide plagas 
cordi meo valide.

Tui nati vulnerati, 
tam dignati pro me pati, 
poenas mecum divide.

Fac me tecum pie flere, 
Crucifixo condolere, 
donec ego vixero.

Iuxta crucem tecum stare, 
et me tibi sociare 
in planctu desidero.

Virgo virginum praeclara, 
mihi iam non sis amara: 
fac me tecum plangere.

Holy mother, bring this to pass, transfix the wounds of him who is crucified deep into my heart.
Of your wounded Son, who deigns to suffer for my sake, let me share the pains.
Let me weep with you, pious one, grieving with him who is crucified, so that I may live.
To stand beside you at the cross, to be freely joined with you in lamentation I desire.
Virgin of virgins, resplendent, do not now be bitter towards me: let me weep with you.
Fac, ut portem Christi mortem, passionis fac consortem, et plagas recolere.

Fac me plagis vulnerari, fac me cruce inebriari, et cruore Filii.

Flammis ne urar succensus, per te, Virgo, sim defensus in die iudicii.

Christe, cum sit hinc exire, da per matrem me venire ad palmam victoriae.

Quando corpus morietur, fac ut animae donetur Paradisi gloria. Amen.

Attributed to Jacopone da Todi (c.1230–1306)
Harry Christophers is known internationally as founder and conductor of The Sixteen as well as being a regular guest conductor for many of the major symphony orchestras and opera companies worldwide. He has directed The Sixteen choir and orchestra throughout Europe, America and Asia-Pacific, gaining a distinguished reputation for his work in Renaissance, Baroque and 20th- and 21st-century music. In 2000 he instituted The Choral Pilgrimage, a national tour of English cathedrals from York to Canterbury in music from the pre-Reformation, as The Sixteen's contribution to the millennium celebrations. The Pilgrimage in the UK is now central to The Sixteen's annual artistic programme.

Since 2008 Harry Christophers has been Artistic Director of Boston's Handel and Haydn Society; he is also Principal Guest Conductor of the Granada Symphony Orchestra. As well as enjoying a partnership with the BBC Philharmonic, with whom he won a Diapason d'Or, he is a regular guest conductor with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. With The Sixteen he is an Associate Artist at The Bridgewater Hall in Manchester and features in the highly successful BBC television series Sacred Music, presented by Simon Russell Beale.

Harry has conducted numerous productions for Lisbon Opera and English National Opera as well as conducting the UK premiere of Messager's opera Fortunio for Grange Park Opera. He is a regular conductor at Buxton Opera where he initiated a very successful cycle of Handel's operas and oratorios including Semele, Samson, Saul and Jephtha.

Harry Christophers is an Honorary Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, as well as the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, and has Honorary Doctorates from the Universities of Canterbury Christ Church and Leicester. He was awarded a CBE in the 2012 Queen's Birthday Honours.

The Sixteen is recognised as one of the world's greatest ensembles. Its special reputation for performing early English polyphony, masterpieces of the Renaissance, Baroque and early Classical periods, and a diversity of 20th- and 21st-century music, all stems from the passions of conductor and founder, Harry Christophers.

The Sixteen tours internationally giving regular performances at the major concert halls and festivals. At home in the UK, The Sixteen are 'The Voices of Classic FM' as well as Associate Artists of The Bridgewater Hall, Manchester, Artistic Associate of Kings Place and hold a 2016-2017 Artist Residency at Wigmore Hall. The group also promotes The Choral Pilgrimage, an annual tour of the UK's finest cathedrals.

The Sixteen's period-instrument orchestra has taken part in acclaimed semi-staged performances of Purcell's The Fairy Queen in Tel Aviv and London, a fully staged production of Purcell's King Arthur in Lisbon's Belém Centre, and new productions of Monteverdi's Il ritorno d'Ulisse at Lisbon Opera House and The Coronation of Poppea at English National Opera.

Over 150 recordings reflect The Sixteen's quality in a range of work spanning the music of 500 years. In 2009 the group won the coveted Classic FM Gramophone Artist of the
Britten Sinfonia is one of the world's most celebrated and pioneering ensembles. The orchestra is acclaimed for its virtuoso musicianship, an approach to concert programming which makes bold, intelligent connections across 400 years of repertoire, and great versatility. Rather than having a principal conductor or director, it instead collaborates with a range of the finest international guest artists from across the musical spectrum.

Britten Sinfonia is an Associate Ensemble at the Barbican and has residencies across the east of England in Norwich, Cambridge (where it is an Ensemble-in-Residence at the University) and Saffron Walden, where the orchestra is Resident Orchestra at Saffron Hall. The orchestra also performs a chamber music series at the Wigmore Hall and appears regularly at major UK festivals. The orchestra's growing international profile includes regular touring to Europe, North and South America and Asia.

Founded in 1992, the orchestra is inspired by the ethos of Benjamin Britten through world-class performances, illuminating and distinctive programmes where old meets new, and a deep commitment to bringing outstanding music to both the world’s finest concert halls and the local community. Britten Sinfonia is a BBC Radio 3 broadcast partner and regularly records for Harmonia Mundi and Hyperion.

Central to Britten Sinfonia's artistic programmes is a wide range of creative learning projects both within schools and the community including Britten Sinfonia Academy, an ensemble of talented young musicians from the east of England and OPUS, its annual composition competition.

It has won Royal Philharmonic Society awards in 2007, 2009 and 2013. Its recordings have been Grammy nominated and received a Gramophone Award, an ECHO/Klassik Award, and BBC Music Magazine Award.

Year Award and the Baroque Vocal Award for Handel's Coronation Anthems. The Sixteen also features in the highly successful BBC television series Sacred Music, presented by Simon Russell Beale.

In 2011, with the support of the Genesis Foundation, the group launched a new training programme for young singers, called Genesis Sixteen. Aimed at 18- to 23-year-olds, this is the UK's first fully funded choral programme for young singers designed specifically to bridge the gap from student to professional practitioner.
Sir James MacMillan

Sir James MacMillan is the pre-eminent Scottish composer of his generation. He first attracted attention with the acclaimed BBC Proms premiere of The Confession of Isobel Gowdie (1990). His percussion concerto Veni, Veni Emmanuel (1992) has received close to 500 performances worldwide by orchestras including London Symphony Orchestra, New York and Los Angeles Philharmonics and Cleveland Orchestra. Other major works include the cantata Seven Last Words from the Cross (1993), Quickening (1998) for soloists, children’s choir, mixed choir and orchestra, the operas Inès de Castro (2001) and The Sacrifice (2005-06), and St John Passion (2007).

He was featured composer at Edinburgh Festival (1993), Southbank Centre (1997), BBC’s Barbican Composer Weekend (2005) and Grafenegg Festival (2012). His interpreters include soloists Evelyn Glennie, Colin Currie, Jean-Yves Thibaudet and Vadim Repin, conductors Leonard Slatkin, Sir Andrew Davis, Marin Alsop and Donald Runnicles, and choreographer Christopher Wheeldon. In October 2014 he founded a music festival, The Cumnock Tryst, which takes place annually in his native Ayrshire.

James MacMillan was awarded a CBE in 2004 and a knighthood in the 2015 Queen’s Birthday Honours. He is published exclusively by Boosey & Hawkes.

For further information about recordings on CORO or live performances and tours by The Sixteen, call: +44 (0) 20 7936 3420 or email: coro@thesixteen.com

Also available as a studio master quality download at www.thesixteen.com