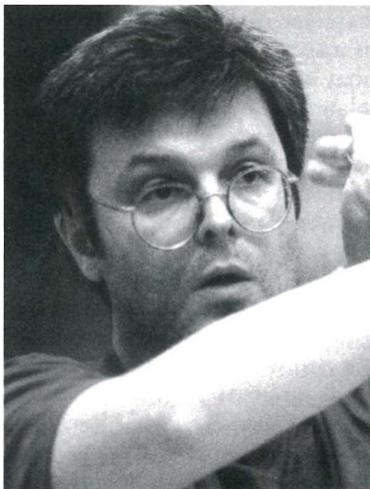


**Dr James MacMillan is a contemporary classical composer and teacher of international repute. He has recently joined the BBC Philharmonic as its new composer/conductor. Strongly held religious and political beliefs coupled with community concerns and a strong sense of the Scottish vernacular inform both the spirit and the subject matter of his music. Widely recorded, his most recent CD is Kiss on Wood.**

# The composer

*music by James MacMillan*



**M**ichael Symmons Roberts and I were a team by the time that *Theology Through the Arts* (TTA) and Jeremy Begbie made an approach. We seemed to fit quite well into his concept of the “pod” group, so we

became the artistic basis of this particular set-up and suggested a couple of possible theologians. When we realised Rowan Williams was available, we approached him. Michael studied theology at Oxford and was a great admirer of Rowan Williams.

We set up an official connection so we could meet regularly, in total about a dozen times. The first time was with Jeremy Begbie. In a sense, Jeremy kick-started it. He got us together and there was certainly an awareness that Michael and I were thinking along similar lines. The need was to find a common concept or theme that would allow us to have a lot of discussion which would, hopefully, bear artistic fruit but provide food for thought as well; not just for Archbishop Williams but for all three of us.

I am theologically illiterate, with no training at all, but nevertheless very fascinated by it all. The idea was not that I would deliver the musical response, Michael the poetic response and Rowan the theological response; rather, that in many ways we would all interact.

Rowan is a poet as well as a theologian, so was also able to bring some of that poetic presence and insight into our discussions at a very early stage. He is also a lover of music, he sings, he’s quite an expert in music actually, so there was a confluence of experiences.

We were able to proceed to finding common ground out of which the piece grew.

The idea for *Parthenogenesis* was originally Michael’s idea. Through his work at the BBC, he had researched

the sphere of genetics. He had interviewed many geneticists and had explored some of the ground already. During his researches, one of the astounding things he had found was this case study – he had found it on the internet – documented by doctors and scientists at the time and then discussed by geneticists ever since.

So, in our discussions there were a mixture of thoughts, as the chosen story impinged on ethics, on our concept of what human individuality really is, on the sanctity of human life and the implications there for creativity in life.

All art is a kind of mirror image, a response to divine creation, to the first gesture of creation by the Creator. In many ways artists have a tiny little glimpse into the paths with which God at the dawn of Creation looked upon the work of His hands. John Paul II, in his Letter To Artists (2000), writes, “A glimmer of that feeling has shone so often in your eyes when – like the artists of every age – captivated by the hidden power of sounds and words, colours and shapes, you have admired the work of your inspiration, sensing in it some echo of the mystery of Creation with which God, the soul Creator of all things, has wished in some way to associate you.”

I suppose in *Parthenogenesis* we are exploring that as well; human creativity from an artist’s perspective, but also what it means to create human life. There is a whole range of different interconnecting threads.

So there is a didactic element. Here we are dealing with genetics, politics, with so many issues that aren’t musical.

It wasn’t so much of a new direction for me because nearly all my pieces do in some way have some kind of pre-musical genesis – a pre-musical, even an extra-musical inspiration point. Important in many works is narrative of the crucifixion – I’ve gone round the crucifixion and resurrection in rather an obsessive way and, I suppose, in those pieces the theological pre-echoes the musical.

There are other pieces of mine that find their roots in other pre-musical things like politics. I wrote a music-theatre piece called *Busqueda* that is a

setting of the poems of mothers of those who have disappeared from Argentina. That was a work that allowed the political to come together with the religious: the sacred and the secular progressing in parallel lines which sometimes intercept.

For me, finding inspiration in something that is not immediately musical was not a new thing. However, there is an attitude in the music world that because music is the most abstract of the arts it doesn’t really need any justification other than its own abstract substance, its own musical cell. At a fundamental level, there’s a pride amongst musicians that music is an abstract form – quite rightly – that it speaks and communicates without words, beyond words in many cases.

However, people who love music talk genuinely about having their lives transformed by music, so that music does have this implication for other parts of our lives.

Music is not an abstract form that can be separated from everyday lives and boxed away into one little aesthetic corner of our existence. There are implications for the whole holistic experience of human life. The fact is that people can talk in religious terms (whether they are religious or not) about music transforming their lives. People will talk about music having the most important, transformative, “quasi-sacramental” effect on their lives. It proves that music does have this depth and ability to touch something in our deepest secret selves. For music cannot be contained in its abstract parameters. It bleeds out of that into other aspects of existence, and therefore music is the most spiritual of the arts for that reason.

So, if we take that as the given, what did that mean in the terms of my formally engaging with the theologians?

I think music is a product of many different inputs and the theological can be a very vital, vibrant influence. I suppose with this piece it was an ideal situation that allowed all the pre-compositional thinking that goes on in my mind anyway to be much more focused, and be genuinely involved in the bouncing of ideas between the

three individuals.

Composing can be a very solitary activity. Being a poet can be a very solitary existence, and in many ways these are necessary solitudes because in that solitude and in that silence the work is created. But there can sometimes be, if one is not careful, an arid solitude. There can be a very thin dividing line between that which is fertile and that which is arid, and authors need to keep their minds and souls active. We need to read and be inspired – it comes down to these external influences.

I believe music is a result of external inspiration, sometimes perhaps divine inspiration, but certainly the inspirations of one’s fellows. To explore common threads, common ideas, common enthusiasms, such as we did in this pod experience, was a marvellous, heightened, focused way of bringing the extra-musical pre-compositional instincts to bear on the music itself.

I don’t think one could say “yes, this music is influenced by theology”. You can’t pin-point where it is in the music that the theology or whatever other extra-musical impulses made a mark. It’s just one of those mystical but entirely natural developments.

Many might think that the story that we tackled is a subject that perhaps shouldn’t have been tackled within a Christian context. It is certainly a disturbing phenomenon and touches on areas which are uncomfortable, and messy, but I don’t believe these are issues that Christians or any believing people should be turning their backs on. They should be engaging with them, being fully involved in public debates.

Christians and believers in general too often retreat from this engagement. To do so will leave a huge gap in the general response, the general understanding. It is not fair to humanity for Christians to remain silent on our experience and our understanding of the sanctity of life, for example. We must bring a unique and precious contribution to the discussion. Perhaps that goes for artists who are believers too.

There’s a lot of *Parthenogenesis* that is

▶ blasphemous; the implications of the story are blasphemous. There's a kind of dark annunciation. The fact that the father of this child, if you like, is not God but human evil, a bomb, and this was the instigation that dislodged the cell from the woman that led to the parthenogenesis.

The fact that the progenitor of this is human evil does cast a mirror image, a kind of negative mirror image, on the annunciation. We have presented it like a kind of mock annunciation – the woman is visited by an angel (one of the characters of the story is an angel, a fallen angel *Bruno*). The dialogue between the mother and him is not dealt with chronologically or historically, it is an imagined philosophical engagement between a woman and this dark angelic presence who has fallen, who is a wounded, prowling animal, and then in another dimension is a child (the clone child) who comments separately from the action from the dialogue.

There's a lot that gives me discomfort about the implications of the story, but I think that Christian artists have always felt the necessity to confront the crucifixion, which is a harrowing but central presence in the great Christian narrative. You cannot have resurrection without crucifixion and by looking into the abyss of this subject, one takes the cross

into the abyss. The presence of the cross is there in the language. It is there in Michael's poetry.

Yes, there is a lot that is discomfoting about it.

But I think that is what religious artists should be doing. The opposite would be to focus solely on the transcendent without a knowledge of the abyss. And I don't believe that in the Christian tradition, and Christian artistic experience, that is a real or valid experience. You feel the transcendent because of the knowledge of the death and crucifixion of Jesus.

I believe Christian artists of the past have plumbed the depths of the human spirit. Theologians, too, have done that. Christianity has had it in its tradition to do that, to find the historical knowledge of the crucifixion; to feel and to see the crucifixion in the lives of the ordinary people, in the dirt, and in the mire, in the sorrows as well as the joys of people. That is where Christian artists should be, along with the rest of the Church.

I think there is a common concept in the mind of the artist and the mind of the believer that could allow dialogue and engagement to be built into the future.

The fact is that artists deal with metaphor a lot, as do the Christian sacraments. Nevertheless, perhaps there is something in the linguistic roots of these metaphors which is precious to both types of person,

the artist and the Christian. Perhaps it might even be the and common ground could be established for the Church's first of all to reconnect with the world of the artist – which is of course now a secular world, and for the artist's sake, to reconnect with a deep reservoir of cultural and spiritual experience.

The day of church patronage of the arts has large passed. It was inevitable, but from the churches' point of view because they have always valued the artistic, creative principles, would be profoundly important to the churches' thinking in the future if they could engage on equal terms with artists, regardless of their religious faith, and explore again the depths and profundity of the creative principles.

I think the arts are important to the Church. Arts should be important to the Church. They have always been important in the liturgy and in the shaping of the buildings and we should never let go of that.

I also think that, in spite of an anti-clericalism and "the urban neurosis of atheism" that Jung refers to, there is deep within many artists, even non-believing artists, a recognition of those common roots and a fascination with the roots of the great Christian narrative and the concepts behind the sacraments.

*(This article is based on a conversation between the composer and John Lloyd).*