



# The making of Parthenogenesis

*Composer James MacMillan was commissioned by the Theology Through the Arts project to engage with a poet and a theologian to create a new work. Working with Michael Symmons Roberts and Archbishop Rowan Williams he produced Parthenogenesis, “the story of a dark seduction that calls into question our genetic future”. Here they tell of the experience and how it has affected them.*

## The poet

*libretto by Michael Symmons Roberts*



It may just be my literary bias, but I'm convinced that when theology meets the arts, stories must come first and ideas second. Here is the story that kick-started us.

One night in Hanover, Germany, in 1944, a young woman was caught on the streets in an Allied bombing raid. She was unable to find her way to a shelter, and was thrown to the pavement by the blast of a bomb in a nearby street. She recovered from minor injuries, but nine months later gave birth to a daughter. This baby girl had identical fingerprints, blood type and other indicators to her mother. The woman adamantly

maintained that she had not had sex, and medical tests supported her claim. How was the child conceived? Examining doctors hypothesised that the shock of the bomb may have jarred a dormant body cell within the woman's womb, triggering parthenogenesis – non-sexual reproduction.

Although this case (as with all claims of human parthenogenesis) was never fully proven, the issues it raises, and the poetic power of the story, captivated me. Parthenogenesis is a strange form of reproduction that occasionally occurs in plants and animals. The word comes from the Greek *parthenos*, “virgin”, to signify that in parthenogenesis there is no mixing of parental genes – all the genes come from one parent organism. The offspring is produced by action within a single cell. In effect, it is cloning by nature. The product of a spontaneous human parthenogenesis would be female, and may not live beyond birth. However, this rare natural cloning has been the spur for generations of scientists to try to achieve this by design, rather than by accident. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, scientists have been fascinated by the possibility of parthenogenesis in animals. Famous (and infamous)

**Michael Symmons Roberts studied philosophy and theology at Oxford, then worked in journalism before joining the BBC in 1989. He now combines working as a radio and TV documentary-maker with writing and reviewing. His published collections of poetry include *Soft Keys* and *Raising Sparks* (the title of another collaboration with composer James MacMillan).**

▶ experiments were performed on seahorses, insects, frogs, etc., with mixed results.

The Hanover story is rich and resonant, poetically and dramatically. Poetically, it is the shadow side of the incarnation: a virgin birth in opposites with not God but human evil as the “father” – a sort of negative-print of the Nativity. Dramatically, it has tremendous power and intrigue: a human clone born into a Germany obsessed by genetic experimentation and theory; or a virgin birth in a Germany where so many were praying for divine deliverance. For different reasons and with different intentions, this mother and child would be hunted.

Either way, the power of the story, the fascination of the relationship between mother and “cloned” child, and the gathering pace of genetic research towards its holy grail (or ultimate blasphemy) of human cloning combine to make *Parthenogenesis* a very live story. At the first meeting of our Theology Through the Arts “pod” group, I told James

MacMillan and Rowan Williams the Hanover story and all three of us felt it opened up strong possibilities for us. After many hours of wide-ranging conversation, a shape began to emerge, and I was able to start work on the libretto.

*Parthenogenesis* is a small-scale, intimate music-theatre piece, comprising three voices – soprano, baritone and actress/speaker. It takes the dark parallelism of the Hanover event with the incarnation back a stage further, to the annunciation. The soprano voice is that of Kristel – mother-to-be of the clone-child. She knows nothing of what is to happen to her. The baritone voice is that of Bruno, a flawed, falling, ambiguous angel; in love with Kristel and with the world. The spoken female voice is that of Anna, the imagined voice of the future clone-child, bitter and torn apart by her origins, by her status as her mother’s *doppelgänger*.

On one level it is a story of seduction, but through the angel’s lust for the world, Kristel’s pity for him, and Anna’s bitter commentary on this dark

parodic “nunciation”, *Parthenogenesis* also explores questions of identity and the roots of individuality. In the tension between a pure, angelic plane and the messy, risky business of human life and death there is a metaphor for the genetics debate, in which utopia offers the end of illness, deformity, even of death; but at the cost (at least) of freedom, diversity and risk.

*Parthenogenesis* explores some of the questions of liberty and control, life and death, utopia and dystopia, which circle around the breathtaking developments of modern genetics. Everyone agrees that the pace of science is outstripping the rest of the culture in absorbing and responding to these developments, which raise profound philosophical, theological and human questions. The extraordinary Hanover story – irrespective of its documentary truth or falsehood – provides a metaphor and a focus for us to enter some of this territory.