

Maundy Thursday: Tenebrae and Britten Sinfonia

Tenebrae
Britten Sinfonia
Nigel Short conductor

- Edmund Finnis** (b.1984)
Hymn (After Byrd) (2023) 5'
- Gregorio Allegri** (1582–1652)
Miserere · text: Psalm 51 12'
- Tomás Luis de Victoria** (1548–1611)
from Tenebrae Responsories (1585) · Lamentations of Jeremiah the Prophet, and Responsories 12'
- Amicus meus osculi me: Nocturn II for Maundy Thursday
Judas mercator pessimus: Nocturn II for Maundy Thursday
O vos omnes: Nocturn II for Holy Saturday
Sepulto Domino: Nocturn III for Holy Saturday
- Samuel Barber** (1910–1981)
Adagio for Strings (1936) 10'
- INTERVAL
- James MacMillan** (b.1959)
Seven Last Words from the Cross (1994) 45'
- i. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do · Luke 23; Palm Sunday Exclamation;
Good Friday Tenebrae Responsories
 - ii. Woman, Behold thy Son! ... Behold, thy Mother! · John 19
 - iii. Verily, I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in Paradise · Luke 23; Good Friday Versicle
 - iv. Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? · Matthew 27
 - v. I thirst · John 19; Good Friday Reproaches
 - vi. It is finished · John 19
 - vii. Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit · Luke 23

James MacMillan's *Seven Last Words from the Cross* was commissioned by BBC Television for broadcast during Holy Week in 1994, and has become one of his most critically acclaimed and frequently performed works. It is scored for choir and string orchestra, and is preceded tonight by a sequence of shorter works presenting each of these groups individually and alternately.



The two instrumental works for strings both began life as movements of quartets. In **Samuel Barber's** only string quartet, composed in 1935–6, the famous Adagio's long, lyrical lines are surrounded by faster, more rebarbative music. But it is in Barber's version for string orchestra, premiered by Arturo Toscanini in 1938, that the piece has become best-known, thanks in part to its association with occasions of national mourning (such as the funeral of John F. Kennedy) and its use in films such as *Elephant Man* and *Platoon*. *Hymn (after Byrd)* is an arrangement of the penultimate of the five movements of **Edmund Finnis's** 2018 String Quartet No.1 'Aloysius', the first of three he has so far composed. It draws on William Byrd's setting of the 5th-century hymn, 'Christe, qui lux es et dies' (Christ, who is light and day), described by Finnis as 'a prayer for Light within the darkness': its 'falling and rising contours ... became integral to my work on the quartet as a whole, as did the mental image of the setting and rising of the sun'.

All tonight's unaccompanied choral music was produced in Rome for Holy Week services. The Spanish-born **Tomás Luis de Victoria** was sent by the Church at 17 to study in Rome, where he met Palestrina and became one of the city's most successful composers. Each of the 18 Tenebrae Responsories traces events in the Passion of Christ and follows the same six-part musical structure, with fewer voices employed for the central passage and the opening sections repeated at the end. This evening's selection comprises the sequence's first two responsories, sung on Maundy Thursday, followed by two of the Easter Saturday pieces. **Gregorio Allegri's** Miserere, meanwhile, was probably composed during the 1630s for Holy Week services in the Sistine Chapel, but many of the things we now associate with it – including the famous top Cs – were not written down by Allegri: he expected his singers to improvise the florid ornamentation that so entranced Mozart, and it was only in the later 20th century that a generally accepted version of the score was produced.



Jesus' seven 'last words' – strictly speaking, sentences or sayings – have been juxtaposed in meditations, sermons and music since the 16th century. The sayings are drawn from all four Gospels (the fourth, generally given in Hebrew, quotes Psalm 22 and appears in slightly different versions in *Matthew* and *Mark*), and their arrangement into the now familiar sequence typifies the desire to 'harmonise' the Gospel stories into a single, consistent narrative:

1. *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*
2. *Woman, Behold Thy Son!...Behold, Thy Mother!*
3. *Verily, I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in Paradise*
4. *Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani (My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?)*
5. *I thirst*
6. *It is finished*
7. *Father, into Thy hands I commend my Spirit*

James MacMillan's cantata complements the Gospel words with relevant liturgical extracts in both Latin and English, the texts often unfolding simultaneously but at different speeds. This device, together with Macmillan's eloquent writing for the strings, and a musical language that references multiple styles from Bach chorales to traditional Scottish laments, makes *Seven Last Words* a multi-layered and richly rewarding work. The seven movements were originally broadcast on separate evenings, and can be experienced as self-contained reflections on the words concerned, each with a distinctive texture and sound-world, but the thematic cross-references and the cumulative power the movements create when heard in sequence make the cantata much more than the sum of its parts.

'Father, forgive them' features a much-repeated cadential figure in the strings; the same sequence occurs in MacMillan's *Tuireadh*, a 'lament' for clarinet quintet composed in 1991 in memory of the victims of the Piper Alpha disaster, and is more distantly related to the opening of the grief-stricken Act III Prelude of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, a work MacMillan acknowledges as one of his most significant influences. Over this figure, sopranos and altos slowly chant Christ's words, while tenors and basses sing the Palm

Sunday Exclamation at a faster pace; Jesus's isolation on the Cross is emphasised by the movement's ending, in which unaccompanied sopranos intone words from the Good Friday Tenebrae Responsories on a single note. 'Woman, behold thy Son' begins, by contrast, with a *fortissimo* setting for full chorus of Jesus's words to his mother. The gesture inescapably recalls the chorales from Bach's Passions; but the disconcertingly long, measured silences that separate each phrase prevent it seeming familiar. The string parts become increasingly frenetic, building to a climax before breaking up into a desolate soundscape of Bartókian pizzicatos, quarter-tone sighs, *col legno* (using the wood of the bow) and *sul ponticello* (playing close to the bridge).

In the third movement, the Gospel text ('Verily, I say unto you ...') is heard only at the end, sung by sopranos at the top of their tessitura, accompanied by violins at an even higher register, as if to enact Jesus's promise of elevation to Paradise. Most of the movement comprises a setting of the Good Friday Antiphon, 'Ecce lignum Crucis' (Behold the wood of the Cross); consoling harmonies suggest intimations of the ascent that is to come, while the instrumental writing is increasingly elaborate, revealing the influence of Britten and Tippett. The fourth movement places an arch-like construction as the apex of the entire piece: it begins and ends with low grumbling from the double basses and bass voices, but rises in the middle to an impassioned lament for full choir, characterised by the highly ornamented vocal lines increasingly prevalent in MacMillan's choral writing, inspired by his discovery of Renaissance music, particularly that of his fellow Scot, Robert Carver (d.1570).

'I thirst' is the bleakest movement: Jesus's two words are sung to bare 5ths in successive voices, while the Latin text from the Good Friday Reproaches is chanted then whispered – entries are staggered, creating a sense of distancing and confusion. The string writing is unremittingly sparse, building to a *tremolo* climax played 'like a violent shuddering'. This prepares the way for the violent opening to 'It is finished', where repeated string chords unmistakably represent nails driven into Christ's limbs. Relief, if not consolation, is provided by the choir's unaccompanied singing of text from the Good Friday Responsories, this time in English to make the message immediately clear. The first movement's *Tuireadh/Tristan* progression returns, first in the strings and then sung by the choir to Jesus's

words, as if to reveal its meaning; but the movement ends as it began, with the strings' graphic depiction of Christ's suffering.

MacMillan returns to the idiom of Bach for the start of the final movement, 'Father, into thy hands'; as in 'Woman, behold thy Son', long silences separate the choir's utterances and heighten the drama. The long instrumental postlude after the Gospel text is perhaps the cantata's most heartfelt music: in MacMillan's words, 'it is inspiring when one witnesses people weep real tears on Good Friday as if the death of Christ was a personal tragedy ... [L]iturgical detachment breaks down and gives way to a more personal reflection: hence the resonance here of Scottish traditional lament music.' The piece ends in the gentlest possible way, with the violins playing single notes a semitone apart at increasingly widely spaced intervals, as if to represent the dying Christ's final breaths.

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Tenebrae

Soprano Ailsa Campbell, Isabella Gibber, Victoria Meteyard, Laura Newey, Anna Semple, Áine Smith, Emma Walshe

Alto Izzi Baine, Eleanor Minney, Elisabeth Paul, Olivia Shotton

Tenor Edward Beswick, James Gant, Carlos Rodríguez Otero, Albert Soriano, Dominic Wallis

Bass George Herbert, Tom Herring, Jimmy Holliday, Angus McPhee, Henry Montgomery

Britten Sinfonia

Violin 1 Marcus Barcham Stevens, Fiona McCapra, Clara Biss, Katherine Shave, Karen Matoba, Cecily Ward

Violin 2 Nicola Goldscheider, Suzanne Loze, Anna Bradley, Judith Stowe, Bridget Davey

Viola Wenhan Jiang, Bridget Carey, Francis Kefford, Matthew Quenby

Cellos Caroline Dearnley, Ben Chappell, Julia Vohralik,

Double Basses Stephen Williams, Georgia Lloyd