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An analysis of "Seven Last Words from the Cross" (1993) by James Macmillan

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Description

Title: An analysis of "Seven Last Words from the Cross" (1993) by James Macmillan

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Discipline: Music

Degree Granting Institution: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Degree: A.Mus.D.

Genre: Dissertation

Subject(s): James MacMillan
Seven Last Words from the Cross
James MacMillan is one of the most well-known and successful living composers as well as an internationally active conductor. His musical language is influenced by his Scottish heritage, the Catholic faith, and traditional Celtic folk music, blended with Scandinavian and European composers including Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992), Alfred Schnittke (1943-1998), and Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971). His cantata for choir and strings Seven Last Words from the Cross, was commissioned by BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) television, composed in 1993, and premiered in 1994 by Cappella Nova and the BT (British Telecom) Scottish Ensemble. While this piece is widely admired as one of his best achievements by choral conductors and choirs, it is rarely performed, perhaps due to its high level of difficulty for both the string players and singers. The purpose of this dissertation is to present an analysis of the Seven Last Words from the Cross by James MacMillan aimed to benefit choral conductors rather than audiences. Very little has been written about MacMillan's choral works. My hope is to establish a foundation on which future scholars may expand and explore other choral works by MacMillan. Chapter one provides an overview of MacMillan's life focusing on his religious and political beliefs, education and musical influences, specifically how these characteristics appear in his choral music. Chapter two discusses the development of Scottish traditional music with an emphasis on instrumental, vocal and choral music. By looking at Scottish traditional music, I will examine how aspects of MacMillan's musical language and identity come from traditional music. Chapter three examines the history of the seven last words and passion story, including other settings of this text. This chapter also provides an overview of MacMillan’s piece including the text setting and a translation. Chapter four gives an in-depth analysis of the Seven Last Words from the Cross, examining compositional techniques, harmonic relationships, form/structure, unique features, text treatment, use of traditional or historic elements and comparison with other works. For my research, I used two choral scores (a vocal score and a full score) published by Boosey & Hawkes and two CDs published by the Dmitri Ensemble (April 2014, under the direction of Graham Ross) and, Polyphony (August 2005, under the direction of Stephen Layton).