



# Annunciations

Sacred Music for the Twenty-First  
Century

EDITED BY GEORGE CORBETT



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George Corbett (ed.), *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0172>

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ISBN Paperback: 978-1-78374-726-9

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-78374-727-6

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-78374-728-3

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-78374-729-0

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 978-1-78374-730-6

ISBN XML: 978-1-78374-731-3

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0172

Cover image: Don Simone Camaldolese. Frontispiece from a Choir Book, ca. 1390. Ink on vellum, 59.4 x 44.8 cm. (irregular left edge). Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn Museum Collection, X1015.

Cover design: Anna Gatti.

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## 2. The Surrogate Priest: Reflecting on Vocation with Welsh Composer Paul Mealor

*Margaret McKerron with Paul Mealor<sup>1</sup>*

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‘Music,’ wrote Martin Luther, ‘is the art of the prophets; it is the only other art, which like theology, can calm the agitations of the soul’.<sup>2</sup> ‘Whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to [...] [influence] the emotions, inclinations, and affections that impel men to evil or good,’ he reflected, ‘— what more effective means can you find than music?’<sup>3</sup> Luther’s theological vision of music is counter-cultural to the more secular environment of contemporary music-making. As award-winning Welsh composer Paul Mealor comments, ‘It is not an easy thing to stand up and say that you are a Christian in the twenty-first century — especially in the arts’. Mealor nevertheless feels that claiming his identity and vocation as a Christian *and* a composer is significant in understanding their mutual relevance in his own life and work. In this chapter, he shares — for the first time — how an unusual introduction to classical music, a near-death experience, and a longstanding love of Anglican liturgy dovetailed when he began to perceive that his calling to compose music was one of ‘surrogate priesthood’. Through music, Mealor believes that a

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1 The material for this chapter was gathered, arranged, and edited by Margaret McKerron. It is based upon original material developed by Paul Mealor for a presentation ‘On Setting Religious Texts’ for the Institute for Theology, Imagination, and the Arts (ITIA) research seminar (3 February 2017) as well as further conversations at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland.

2 Martin Luther, *The Life of Luther Written by Himself. Collected and Arranged by M. Michelet* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1904), p. 7.

3 Martin Luther, ‘Preface to Georg Rhau’s *Symphoniae Lucundae*,’ in Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 53: Liturgy and Hymns, edited by Ulrich S. Leopold (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1965), p. 323.

composer may offer listeners the opportunity to encounter the divine: whether by communicating a sense of God's transcendence, or being; or by creating space for responses of praise, yearning, lament, or even anger. Through music, moreover, a composer may comfort and caution, foster stillness and action, be prophetic and facilitate prayer. By divulging his compositional process and philosophy behind three choral works — 'Salvator Mundi: Great Love' (2011), 'O vos omnes' (2011), and his setting of the 'Stabat Mater' (2009) — Mealor explains that his music is in constant dialogue with that surrogate-priestly calling. Through these examples, he shows how fruitful the interchange between music and theology can be.

## I. Developing a Sense of Vocation

Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins suggests that God's revelation may emerge gradually, 'stealing as Spring', or with the sudden force of an 'anvil-ding'.<sup>4</sup> Listening to Mealor share his personal history, one sees how his personal vocation emerged with the character of both. When his motet 'Ubi caritas' was performed in the Royal Wedding ceremony of His Royal Highness Prince William and Catherine Middleton in 2011, the composer achieved worldwide fame in classical music circles.<sup>5</sup> The first step towards his emerging vocation, however, is a humble and curious story.

By his own admission, Mealor was a 'hyperactive' child. Laughing, he remarks, 'we didn't have medication — or even political correctness — then'. His maternal grandfather, a psychiatrist, suggested music might pacify his untiring grandson: 'I was basically strapped down to a chair and music was played', Mealor recalls. 'As it turned out, it was brilliant for me. It was a great revelation that I could be lost in sound'. The symphonist's canvas was the world — and great ideas, rendered even to the smallest musical brushstroke, captivated the young boy's imagination. The music 'didn't calm me necessarily but it took my focus away from the mundane to something else'. Before he turned ten, Mealor composed his first symphony. Speaking about it now, he admits it was probably not the best work he has produced. Yet, it enabled him to step into 'this great drama and sound'. Mealor found the mystery of music marvellous: 'It is direct, but not direct. It is a language and it is not a language. It is an art and not an art. It is a science and it is not a science. It's a great contradiction, like prayer.' The comparison between music and prayer is not incidental — although it took the sudden 'anvil-ding' of a near-death experience to forge the indelible link between Mealor's music and his personal faith.

The watershed moment happened in the Din Lligwy river, in Anglesey, Wales. Then nine years old, Mealor was playing with his elder brother on the riverbank. His brother told him to remain behind while he went upriver, but Mealor decided to go after him. He fell into the water, unable to swim. As he began to drown, sinking in

4 Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', in *Bartleby* < <https://www.bartleby.com/122/4.html> > [accessed 2 April 2019]

5 See Paul Mealor, *Biography* (Paulmealor.com, 2016), <http://www.paulmealor.com/biography/>

and out of consciousness, Mealor remembers not panic so much as a profound sense of comfort. The memory is vivid, but words fail him as he tries to convey how it felt: 'I have spent my whole life trying to intellectualize it, and it has taken me further away from it than when I was child and had no intellect at all', he confesses. The closest description he can muster is the feeling of being 'cradled in beautiful warmth'. For years since he was rescued, Mealor has been transfixed by what was, for him, a divine encounter: 'That's why I sought out music, and that's why I try to write the particular kinds of harmonies I write,' he says. 'It is trying to reach a kind of surrogate warmth of that [moment] — even though, of course, you can't'. Still, his tenacious search for its source led him to composition — and eventually to realize that music could be a kind of surrogate priesthood for the world.

After his chance rescue by an elderly passerby, Mealor's persistent questions about the spiritual nature of his experience led his parents to make an appointment with the Dean of St Asaph's Cathedral, the local Anglican presence: 'I don't know what they thought', he admits, 'but obviously, they thought they would take me to the only person they knew who might have some answers'. As they were waiting to see the Dean, the choir began rehearsing Orlando Gibbons' 'See, see the Word is Incarnate', a musical recapitulation of the life of Christ. The vastness of the cathedral, the cassocks and gowns donned by the choristers, and the sacred music created a wonderful theatre of sound: 'It was a very spiritual thing,' Mealor recalls, 'it was the first moment that the music I had been listening to as a hyperactive kid and this spiritual experience I had [in the water] suddenly came together'. Encountering a glimmer of that warmth again in the sacred choral music that day was more significant for Mealor than what the Dean later articulated in words. Looking back, he believes, 'it was then that I realized this was what was I was after'.

Not long afterwards, Mealor auditioned for and was accepted as a chorister at St Asaph's Cathedral. Beginning as a treble, he moved through alto, tenor, and bass roles and, subsequently, became a lay clerk. While the experience proved influential for his own compositions, Mealor is clear that 'it was not just the discipline of learning and practice' that made his time there formational: 'I was learning all this craft and learning to interact with people'. He was also becoming more rooted in Christian faith and practice. He reflects, 'There is a certain heartbeat to liturgy, which I love. I did not pursue theological studies at that point, but I was at mass every day because I was singing it. I remember the Dean used to say, "He who sings, prays twice."' 'Of course', he checks himself, 'it was all boys together...so it wasn't all practice and piety; it was a great amount of fun too'. Still, the liturgy — rooted in sacred music — provided a vital window for him into theology and prayer. Mealor even found himself considering the Anglican priesthood. At this point, however, his grandmother facilitated a critical introduction that inadvertently transposed his sense of calling from the traditional, clerical priesthood to the surrogate priesthood of composition.

Mealor recalls his grandmother — a survivor of Auschwitz — as direct and tenacious. Living in the same neighbourhood as the acclaimed twentieth-century Welsh composer, William Mathias, she took matters into her own hands: ‘She just knocked on the door of William Mathias, who lived down the road, and said, “You’ve just retired and my grandson needs composition lessons.”’ The great composer agreed to take on the little student, then aged nine. ‘There was no set agenda,’ Mealor remembers: ‘I’d show compositions that I had started, and then he would set me some Bach chorale exercises that I would have to harmonize. We would go through how that works, perhaps do some orchestration [...]. Gradually, it got more and more complicated, but original composition was always going on as well’. By the time Mealor attended the University of York’s music composition programme, he had learned the craft of composition from a master craftsman, including harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration. His vocation was also crystalizing: ‘I certainly felt like I was being asked to something’, but it was no longer clear that this vocation was to be a traditional, Anglican priest. Rather, he felt that ‘what I was able to do was fulfil that calling’ through communicating ‘the sacred through sound’.

For Mealor, composing fulfills his surrogate-priestly calling. Through his music, he can reveal something of who God is, communicate the great stories of the Christian tradition, facilitate prayer, and create rare spaces for wrestling with faith and doubt, triumph and tribulation, love and fear, joy and grief. Mealor observes, ‘The most profound prayers are often those that are meditative. They are not really saying anything in words; it’s more a kind of “open thought”’. Music may thereby articulate the inarticulate cry so often at the root of real prayer: ‘Music works like a language does in many ways, but does not express anything as hard-edged as a language does’. In the New Zealand premiere of his symphony *Passiontide*, Mealor remembers becoming aware of a woman weeping in the audience: ‘She came up to me afterwards and she had had a profoundly religious experience. I talked to her for a long time’. Music fostered an encounter with the divine that was unexpected and revealing; and it also helped her seek a conversation.

Mealor believes that creating — and holding open — that hospitable space may be spiritually fruitful in a different way to that experienced through religious reflection in words, for example, through a sermon. If Luther is right that ‘music is the art of the prophets,’ Mealor maintains that music is an art that can speak of God today to a predominantly secular audience, where a spoken sermon might provoke alienation or indifference: ‘It does a different thing than what words can do,’ he says. To show us what he means, Mealor points to three of his sacred choral works: ‘Salvator Mundi: Greater Love,’ ‘O vos omnes’, and his setting of the ‘Stabat Mater’.

## II. Love’s Endeavour, Love’s Expense

The choral piece ‘Salvator Mundi: Greater Love’ is an extended, musical meditation on what theologian V. H. Vanstone so beautifully describes as ‘Love’s endeavour, Love’s

expense'.<sup>6</sup> His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales commissioned it for the retirement of his former Private Secretary, Dr. Manon Williams, LVO. Using Williams' history of service as inspiration, Mealor grapples with the fact that love is not without cost: the paradigm of Christ's life and death suggest that self-sacrifice may well be 'the ultimate quality of love'.

To open up this idea to his audience, Mealor recalls, 'I decided to set up a bitonality, which in my mind represents suffering'. The choir sings Jesus' words recorded in the Gospel of John: 'Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends' (John 15.12). Arranged as a sustained, hushed processional in G Major, this English setting sits uneasily with the simultaneous Latin setting of the 'Salvator Mundi' prayer in G Minor.

The image shows a musical score for three voices (Soprano, Alto, Bass) in G Major. The score is divided into two systems. The first system is in 6/8 time and the second system is in 3/2 time. The English text is 'Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends' and the Latin text is 'Salvator Mundi, salva nos: Qui per crucem et sanguinem redemisti nos, Auxiliare nobis, te deprecamur, Deus noster.' The score is marked *ppp* and includes the instruction 'like a whisper... a ghost...'. The English and Latin settings are presented side-by-side, illustrating the bitonal relationship between the two languages.

Fig. 2.1 The bi-tonal relationship between the English setting of John 15.12 and the Latin setting of 'Salvator Mundi' evokes a sense of suffering.

In a 'Celtic-adapted' style of plainchant, four soloists (SATB) sing in lament:

Salvator Mundi, salva nos:  
 Qui per crucem et sanguinem redemisti nos,  
 Auxiliare nobis, te deprecamur, Deus noster.

[Saviour of the world, save us, who through thy cross and blood didst redeem us,  
 help us, we beseech thee, our God].

Mealor cites the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius as once saying that 'the symphony is the smallest idea taken to its biggest conclusion.' Drawing inspiration from this compositional philosophy, Mealor uses micro-level structures to increase the macro-level strain. The opening motif is a fractal for the whole piece — a seed of an idea that

<sup>6</sup> William Hubert Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God* (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 2007).

grows, develops, and repeats throughout the remaining musical narrative. Notably, it is a musical crucifix: a technique with roots that reach back to the Baroque period.<sup>7</sup>

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 3/2 time, key of G minor. The melody consists of a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, and a half note D5. The lyrics 'Sal-va-tor mun - di,' are written below the notes. A *pp* dynamic marking is placed above the first staff, with a hairpin crescendo leading to the final note. The second staff is identical to the first.

Fig. 2.2 The opening motif of ‘Salvator Mundi: Greater Love’ is cross-shaped.

Mealor arranges the choir in a clustered major third over a perfect fifth. He comments, ‘On paper it resembles a cross’. Colouring the word ‘love’ in this way intimates love’s expense — represented so vividly and paradigmatically in the Cross.

The image shows three staves illustrating the 'cross-shaped' arrangement of notes for the word 'love'. Each staff shows a cluster of notes on a single staff. The first staff shows a cluster of notes on the second line (F4) and the first space (G4). The second staff shows a cluster of notes on the first space (G4) and the first line (F4). The third staff shows a cluster of notes on the first line (F4) and the first space (G4). The word 'love' is written below each staff. The text 'lost. . .' is written between the first and second staves, and between the second and third staves.

Fig. 2.3 The ‘cross-shaped’ arrangement juxtaposes suffering with love.

Together, these macro and microstructures propel ‘the piece towards an enormous climax. At that point, the soloists and choir rest together in the key of G Major’. As with the resolution of the cross, this musical resolution does not represent the end of the narrative, but the beginning of a new stage in which what has begun is brought to its final and consummate conclusion.

This final section, set in the language of Williams’ native land of Wales, draws from Celtic music’s wellspring. Reminiscent of Scottish Bothy singing, ‘the music evaporates

<sup>7</sup> See also Jasmin Cameron, *The Crucifixion in Music: An Analytical Survey of Settings of the Crucifixus between 1680 and 1800* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), p. 212.

into shimmering lines'. It suggests nebulous swirls of rising incense, flickering flames, or even 'singing in tongues' — the latter of which is associated in the Bible with being receptive to and filled with the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

*P* Solo (*folk-like, freely, a piacere*)

Dy - ma            fy \_\_\_\_\_ ngorch -    - ym - yn    i; \_\_\_\_\_ ar    i \_\_\_\_\_ chwi ga - ru eich -  
 This is            my \_\_\_\_\_ com -    - mand - ment; that ye \_\_\_\_\_ love one an -

Fig. 2.4 The Celtic-inspired arrangement suggests a 'singing in tongues'.

Mealor believes, 'When your life is so filled by the Spirit, you do act differently'. Through the Spirit's indwelling, a person learns to know and walk in God's ways — including being strengthened to love others in the way of God's love. For this final section, Mealor set the text of John 15.13: 'Dyma fy ngorchymyn I; ar I chwi garu eich gilydd, fel y cerais I chwi' [This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you]. Referring to a reality and a mission, it is deeply relational. Mealor recalls, 'I wanted to present a vision of these mystical and powerful words of Jesus Christ'. Through 'Salvator Mundi: Greater Love', he offers audiences the opportunity to experience to some degree the suffering love of Christ for the sake of the world. Not all listeners will make that specific connection — or the further connection, i.e. that Jesus suffered for *their* sake — but that is not the composer's primary goal. Rather, Mealor holds open a space hospitable for deeper contemplation — where '[listeners] can just sit and *be* and let this music get into their hearts and souls without feeling that they should not be there'. With its likeness and unlikeness to language, art, and science, organized sound serves a formidable 'mode of knowing'; its characteristic indirectness may even facilitate greater openness to theological reflection.

As music appeals not only to the head but also to the 'emotions, inclinations, and affections', it can be an effective means of being united with Christ in his suffering. Luther, as noted above, believed that these three human characteristics 'impel men to evil or good'. With this in mind, then, the missional content of Jn 15.13 is provocative. Jesus commands that his disciples embody the reality of his love in their broader relationships. He intends that their experience of his love may impel them to greater love for one another. By wedding a form evocative of the Spirit with Jesus's words of command in this final section, Mealor accomplishes something unexpected. Together, word and form help listeners connect obedience to the command of 'greater love' with union with Christ through the Spirit.

Structurally, Mealor also connects Williams' legacy of service to the reality of self-sacrificial love: the divine love that she recognizes as ultimately supporting and giving her service character. Even if her image is not perfect, it is this Love that her love images.

<sup>8</sup> For biblical verses on speaking in tongues, cf. Mark 16.17; Acts 2.4; 19.6, 1 Cor 12.8-11; 14.2, 27-28.

If one person's self-sacrificial service can serve as a 'fractal' for the character of divine love, so too can music. 'Meaning is more profound than what can be accomplished in words', Mealor reaffirms. By engaging tacit and experiential ways of knowing, organized sound fosters insightful theological and personal connections that might not be made (or might not be as easily made) in other more discursive modes of knowing. A composer may therefore help reframe how his audience attends to the world in fresh and even countercultural ways. For Mealor, music's potential for reorienting head and heart to the love of God, for weaving together personal and cosmic narratives, is one key way in which it may act as a kind of 'surrogate priesthood' for the world.

### III. Praying for Peace in Troubled Times

Music also provides a means through which listeners may attend to realities in life that so often leave them struggling for words. C. S. Lewis writes, 'Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains'.<sup>9</sup> Confronting pain and sorrow may therefore mean confronting God: in heartbreak, in anger and lament, in desperation, or in hope. To explore the sense of encountering God in the midst of suffering, Mealor turned to a Latin responsory based upon Lamentations [Lam] 1.12, entitled 'O vos omnes'.

In the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Lamentations bewails God's desertion of Jerusalem and its consequent fall to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. 'The book paints a picture of the Holy City, Jerusalem, in sorrow and desolation', the composer explains. Jerusalem is personified: 'She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her' (Lam 1.2).<sup>10</sup> To those that pass by, she calls: 'Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger' (Lam 1.12). Even though 'O vos omnes' is based upon this text, Mealor says that his setting tries to 'concentrate on hope and the power of suffering to illuminate and make sense of our relationship with God'. 'Only by understanding the true nature of pain', he says, 'can we be fully set free from it'. Hope glimmers not in turning *away* from suffering, but in turning *towards* it. In 'O vos omnes', a personified Jerusalem thus bids:

O all you that walk by on the road, pay attention and see,  
 If there be any sorrow like my sorrow.  
 Pay attention, all people, and look at my sorrow,  
 If there be any sorrow like my sorrow.

In Mealor's setting, a solitary, tubular bell calls audiences to 'solemn meditation on this ancient text and prayer for peace in troubled times' — much as a bell might call monastic communities to the Daily Offices of Prayer. As the bell continues to toll in the piece, it marks the passage of time whilst perhaps also reiterating the summons. By employing

<sup>9</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), p. 91.

<sup>10</sup> Biblical references throughout are to the New Revised Standardised Version (NRSV).

the ‘cross chord’ as well as cruciform micro-arrangements similar to those found in ‘Salvator Mundi: Greater Love’, Mealor sustains a solemn, contemplative mood. The text is set in English and Latin, with a final verse from Psalm 133 in Hebrew: ‘hinneh mah towb mah na’iym yashab ach gam yachad’ [Behold how good, and how pleasant it is, for brothers to dwell together in unity].<sup>11</sup> Here, Mealor seems to suggest that the suffering world needs us not to turn away from, but rather to pay careful attention to, each other.

Mealor remarks, ‘As we pay attention and see, the music climaxes into a triumphant F sharp major key (bar 28)’. For Schubert, the key of F sharp major represents ‘triumph over difficulty, [a] free sigh of relief uttered when hurdles are surmounted; [an] echo of a soul which has fiercely struggled and finally conquered’.<sup>12</sup> This encouraging moment is not a final victory though, but rather a breath of success before approaching the next hurdle. When the work resolves in bar 49, it ‘resolves on the dominant (C sharp)’. It is a highly significant, but perhaps surprising, choice for the concluding chord. Mealor explains, however, that C sharp ‘has a tritone relationship to the opening, G’ — a discordant interval traditionally known as the Devil’s interval (or ‘*diabolus in musica*’).<sup>13</sup> For him, this concluding chord intimates that the work of Christ is not yet finished: ‘The life of Christ is needed to complete the “word”’.

Mealor thus gestures towards another paradox at the heart of Christian faith — that Christ has conquered on the cross, yet Christians await his coming again for the final consummation of all things when ‘[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes, Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’<sup>14</sup> In the intervening time, the suffering of the world needs to be lamented, lifted up, and offered back to the God who created and loves it. From bar 24 onwards, therefore, Mealor has ‘the soloists echo and imitate the chiming bell’, imagining humanity responding to the call to pray for — and share — one another’s joys and tribulations. This harks back to Mealor’s message, expressed in Psalm 133, that pain is better alleviated through togetherness than withdrawal; its consistency throughout the piece is perhaps an indication that this experience should not be subdued. So, through ‘O vos omnes’, Mealor shows us how the surrogate priesthood of music can ‘calm the agitations of the soul’, opening space for listeners to lament suffering, to feel sorrow, and to turn to God in prayer for the salvation of the world.

## IV. Personal Devotion

When asked to identify which piece has been the most personally significant, Mealor points to his choral setting of the thirteenth-century Latin poem ‘Stabat Mater

11 Transliterations are taken from James Strong, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Updated and Expanded Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007).

12 Cited in James Webster, *Haydn’s ‘Farewell’ Symphony and the Idea of Classical Style: Through Composition and Cyclic Introduction in His Instrumental Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 117.

13 For more on the ‘*diabolus in musica*’, see Paul Griffiths, *The Penguin Companion to Classical Music* (London: Penguin Group, 2005), p. 223.

14 Revelation 21.4.

Dolorosa' [The mournful mother was standing]. Attributed to Jacopone da Todi, the poem depicts Mary's suffering as she witnesses the crucifixion of her beloved son.<sup>15</sup> According to the composer, 'The Stabat Mater is this cry out into the darkness by the Virgin Mary in seeing her son dying on the cross'. By sharing in her profound sorrow, listeners can participate in something of 'the spiritual and emotional bond that unites Mary — and all Christians — to the death of her Son'. Theologically, Mealor believes that the sequence 'teaches us that the crown of eternal life in Heaven can be reached when we each choose to share with Our Lord in His suffering and death on the cross at Calvary'. The mournful mother, then, shows us how to grieve.

After his paternal grandmother was diagnosed with terminal cancer, Mealor found unexpected comfort in Catholic liturgical readings: 'For the first time in my life, I was experiencing what real death is — death of someone I actually really cared about,' he recalls. With Western culture so heavily invested in minimizing the realities of death and dying, processing grief can be a difficult and lonely experience. Many people do not know how to respond, and so their instinct is to *turn away* from suffering or death as quickly as possible. In the 'Stabat Mater', however, Mealor found someone else who understood the desolation that the death of a beloved one brings. Mary did not turn away from Christ's (or her own) suffering; she stood at the foot of the cross and turned *towards* suffering. In the fullness of time, as John writes, 'he will wipe every tear from their eyes' and 'death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things [will] have passed away' (Rev 21.4).

Through the eyes of his mother, Jesus' death becomes more poignant. By contemplating Mary's example, Mealor was able to process the grief of his grandmother's death. 'Being able to finish that amongst all [that grief] is probably the most difficult thing I have done so far.' Composing gave some release — and context — for his grief. Music brought the words to life, transforming the medieval hymn to a personal, living prayer:

O thou Mother! Fount of love!  
Touch my spirit from above,  
Make my heart with thine accord:

Make me feel as thou has felt;  
Make my soul to glow and melt  
With the love of Christ my Lord.

Let me share with thee His pain,  
Who for all my sins was slain,  
Who for me in torments died.<sup>16</sup>

When he set out to render the text musically, Mealor made several structural decisions to signify the cost of suffering love. The key signatures were a critical macro-structural — and

15 Robert D. Hawkens, 'Stabat Mater Dolorosa', *The Encyclopaedia of Christianity*, ed. by Erwin Fahlbusch and others, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2008), Vol. 5, p. 185.

16 See Margaret Miles, *Maiden and Mother: Prayers, Devotions, and Songs to Honour the Blessed Virgin Mary* (London: Burns & Oates, 2001), pp. 72–73.

numerological — decision. B $\flat$  major, in which the central elegy is set, provides the harmonic axis of the entire piece. Dissecting this axis is E $\flat$  major in the first and fourth movements, and F minor in the third movement. Connected through the interval of a fifth, these ‘key’ relationships may be rendered in the shape of a cross:

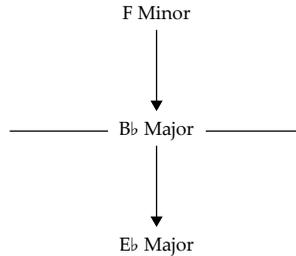


Fig. 2.5 The key signatures of the ‘Stabat Mater’ in cruciform configuration.

Furthermore, ‘each key signature itself relates to the symbol of the cross some other way’. For instance, E $\flat$  major (three flats) and B $\flat$  major (two flats) suggest the five wounds of Christ in the first and second movement. In the third movement, Mealor represents the four points on the cross with F minor (four flats). In the journey from darkness to light, the fourth movement returns to E $\flat$  major set in triumphant mode. With its three flats signifying the triune God, Mealor intimates the promised comfort of a day when pain and suffering will no more triumph. He represents these macro-structural decisions in Figure 2.6.

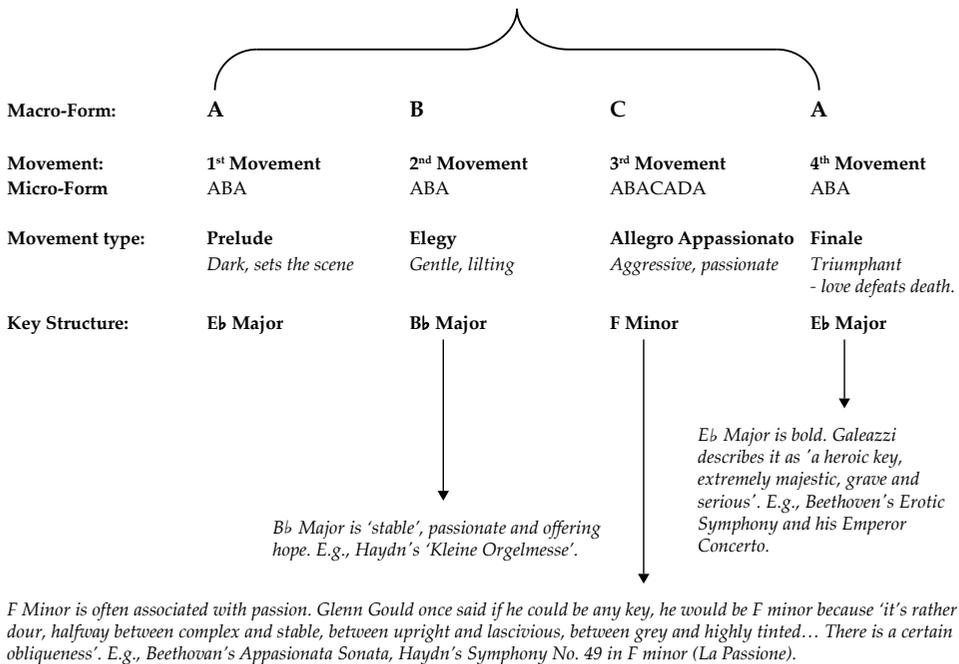


Fig. 2.6 Mealor’s macro-structural outline of his ‘Stabat Mater’.

As Mealor relates, ‘the pre-compositional key-relationship design and structure are not the only “cross”-related semiotics in the piece’. Rather, ‘throughout the entire work, the melodic and harmonic material are closely related to three “cross”-like motifs’, such as these examples found in the first movement:

F Minor Triad with added second (trinity motif) opens the work.

Even though the movement is in the key of Eb Major, it starts in F Minor and doesn’t really properly resolve until the fourth bar — even then we don’t hear a ‘proper major chord’. Rather, it is ‘afflicted’ by a second!

ALTO

TENOR

BASS

Sta-bat ma - ter do - lo - ro - sa jux - ta cru - cem la - cri - mo - sa,

Sta-bat ma - ter do - lo - ro - sa jux - ta cru - cem la - cri - mo - sa,

Sta-bat ma - ter do - lo - ro - sa jux - ta cru - cem la - cri - mo - sa,

Cross motif in men’s voices — basses move upwards in parallel fifths, Tenors move downwards to ‘clashing’ minor second — chord resembles the Cross ‘physically’.

Fig. 2.7 Mealor’s illustration of cruciform motifs present in the first movement of his ‘Stabat Mater’.

Altogether, the arch-shaped design of the work, made possible through mirroring, stratification, and transposition, gives the work a sense of movement. It is as if Mealor is comforting his audience (and perhaps, himself). Death, as horrible as it is, does not have the final word.

Wrestling with mortality through the ‘Stabat Mater’ was a deeply personal process for the composer. Yet, he continues to find its broader appeal fascinating. He says, ‘It is the piece that connects most immediately when people hear it’. His correspondence contains stories of people on their deathbeds who, with their relatives, have found honesty and comfort in listening to his music in their final hours. ‘It was created in that moment [of grief]. Perhaps people can hear that in it’, he suggests. For Mealor, it is one more way in which he can minister to Christians and non-Christians alike in a way that complements — and even opens up space for — participation in a more traditional community of faith.

If music is ‘the art of the prophets’, as Luther wrote, perhaps it is unsurprising that standing up as a composer and a Christian is no easy feat in the twenty-first

century. Prophets have always stood in uneasy tension with their surrounding culture: reminding people of the cost of divine and human love, confronting them with the realities they would rather ignore, and calling for people to find the comfort of reconciliation with their loving God. For those who ask ‘Where are today’s prophets?’, perhaps they might look to those whose dual sense of vocation — the universal call to love God and neighbour, and the specific call to be an artist — enables them not only to engage critically with their surrounding culture, but also to minister to it. While the artistic ministry might be less direct, it is arguably more accessible to those people who are outside (and sometimes inside) traditional, ecclesiastical communities. Less discursive, it may nonetheless involve the whole person by affecting the emotions, creating tacit connections, undermining cultural narratives, and moving the will. Less didactic, it is nonetheless a formidable mode of knowing. As we have seen in the three examples of Mealor’s choral works discussed above, the interchange between music and theology can be fruitful for both the composer and his or her audience. As Mealor comments, ‘theology and music are one. Theology not only inspires the creation, the structure, and the shape of music, but they are inseparable’.

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