



# Annunciations

Sacred Music for the Twenty-First  
Century

EDITED BY GEORGE CORBETT



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2019 George Corbett. Copyright of individual chapters is maintained by the chapters' authors.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text and to make commercial use of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

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

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit, <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/994#copyright>

Further details about CC BY licenses are available at, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

For copyright details of all third-party materials, please see the lists of illustrations at the end of each chapter. Copyright of recorded material belongs to the University of St Andrews.

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Updated digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/994#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

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.

All paper used by Open Book Publishers is sourced from SFI (Sustainable Forestry Initiative) accredited mills and the waste is disposed of in an environmentally friendly way.



was exhausting, intriguing and inspiring, and the power of this initial event perhaps overawed my first attempts to find my compositional feet.

On the first day, my theologian-partner, Marian Kelsey, provided me with a document entitled 'Jacob Wrestling: Genesis 32.22-32', which contained information about the biblical context, cultural background, and a section dedicated to 'Possibilities for Musical Exploration'. It also included examples of how the story had inspired poets, artists and musicians throughout history. Initially, the goal was to find a suitable text — whether from the material provided or by composing new words. The original Hebrew material immediately sparked my interest so Kelsey suggested YouTube links for the purposes of aiding pronunciation; she also provided me with a word-by-word breakdown of the literal and poetic translation. In my mind's ear, I could hear complex sounds, antiphony and polyphony alike, multiple time signatures and syncopated rhythms. The enjoyment of finding a musical counterpart, manifested in the freshness of this unfamiliar language, was palpable.

However, allocating sufficient space to each idea proved frustrating. What was wrong? There seemed to be two things inhibiting the flow of composition. First, the specified duration of the piece (three minutes). Typically, my pieces last under ten minutes. Secondly, I felt committed to the high standard demanded by the first meeting. How was I going to achieve this in three minutes? I realized that whilst my initial ideas might have worked on another occasion, they simply were not the sounds suggested to me by the text in this context, and I began to pare away what I considered unnecessary.

During our final Skype interview, I voiced my concerns about the piece and my need for a new approach. I explored Kelsey's motivations for the project: taking theology out of an academic context and into a musical one. She also highlighted a salient attribute about Jacob's struggle: namely, the ambiguity of the protagonists' identity and how that had inspired wonderful interactions and responses in art and literature. I found this very encouraging, and I took the least convoluted poem that Marian had included in her original document ('A little East of Jordan' by Emily Dickinson) and interpolated a small fragment from the original biblical text in English ('Let me go, for the day is breaking'), which summed up the energy of the story in a clear and honest way.

I struggled with many starts and stops (the irony of wrestling with a narrative about wrestling was not lost on me). I began to treat the words more gently and let them guide the music, I tried to help the narrative '*speak*' itself. I began to realise that I needed to develop a deeper and more personal relationship with the text, something that I could feel invested in. The turning point for me came when I thought about my grandmother who was religious and the way she was full of music and stories. She would improvise bedtime stories and I would often have to wake her for conclusions that seldom came. I realized that it was not only the words working with the music but feeling comfortable with the numinous context that bound them together. It turns out that my own sense of religiosity was found through the memory of my grandmother.

The harmonic underpinning of this piece consists of three chords: (1) A minor 7/11. (2) G major 7/9 and D major 7. The first three stanzas of the poem spell out the notes of each of these chords by descending or ascending melodically through them. I used this musical idea to create a homogenous and comfortable texture, allowing the narrative to remain prominent. The departure from this harmonic language occurs with the interpolated words 'Let me go for the day is breaking.' The first three syllables make use of the three chords mentioned above, but the remaining six syllables introduce six new chords. This section is particularly important, and, just as the words are interpolated, so the harmonies and dynamic range hopefully provide the listener with a sense of otherness. The final stanza makes melodic use of the initial three chords as if to consolidate and recapitulate their fundamental character.

The music is not intended to represent the meaning of the text. For example, there is little word painting. The music is there to help frame the meaning of the poem in a way that a declamation of it cannot, whilst still allowing the words narrative supremacy. My interests were concerned with the absorption of the narrative. With this in mind, it was important to use simple cyclical juxtapositions of repeating chords and melodies with sprinklings of dissonance. I hope that listeners will take the time to think about the title, as it encapsulates the soul of my piece. If the listener can imagine or remember the joy of being young and somewhere between sleep and wakefulness in a summer sunset that stains the edges of the curtains with a halo of light whilst your grandmother tells you stories, then he or she will have a sense of my intentions.

The piece is bookended by a vocalization harmonized by human whistling. The beginning and end had to be simple to allow the listener a moment of meditation once the piece had finished. Throughout, the whistling can be heard at moments to depart and compliment the mechanics of the sung melody. At other times they are in unison. Perhaps as representation, this compositional aspect came closest to my experiences of introspection on the TheoArtistry program — inflections of the numinous reveal themselves to be sometimes consonant and sometimes indivisible with, or invisible to, my perceptions of my life. For this reason, I wanted the melody lines of the voice and the whistle to soar with and into one another almost above the composition itself.



Dominic de Grande, 'Whilst falling asleep, Savta told me of Jacob', in *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the 21st Century*, St Salvator's Chapel Choir and Sean Heath, cond. by Tom Wilkinson (Sanctiandree, SAND0006, 2018), © 2017 University of St Andrews. Track 08. Duration: 4.10.

<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0172.32>



