



# Annunciations

Sacred Music for the Twenty-First  
Century

EDITED BY GEORGE CORBETT



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# 12.1. Musical Arguments and Gender Performance (Song of Songs 3.6-11)

*Kimberley Jane Anderson*

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Oscar Wilde's tutor at Oxford was reported to have answered a suffragette student's question about the essential difference between men and women with an amusing double entendre: "Madam, I cannot conceive".<sup>1</sup> The idea of 'annunciation' as a metaphor for a human, holistic reception (and conception) of the divine in Christian meditation, should surely be applicable to all. Nevertheless, such an image contains an inherent biological incongruity for almost half of the human population. Mysticism is known to have opened remarkable spaces in which women, historically constricted in other spheres of life, were able freely to decipher, receive, and even dominate discourse (for instance, the formidable case of Teresa of Avila). However, the receptive, mystic posture ultimately represents a *retreat* from power. While there have been many examples of religious men honouring such an act of annunciation/renunciation, the traditional 'masculine' role, which has been projected across Western society for generations, demands a different pattern of behaviour. Compelled to present and perceive themselves as strong and independent, certain generations of men might understandably have trouble in finding a way for authentic religious self-expression. There is currently a documented disparity between the genders in religious commitment, and I have wondered for a while about the influence and function (or dysfunction) of projected role models in this situation.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Donald Christopher Nugent, 'There Was a Feminine Mysticism', *Mystics Quarterly*, 14 (1988), 135–42 (p. 135).

2 See, for example, Callum G. Brown, 'Men Losing Faith: The Making of Modern No-Religionism in the UK, 1939–2010', in *Men, Masculinities and Religious Change in Twentieth Century Britain*, ed. by

Contributing to a piece of art seemed like an interesting method of exploring these gendered tensions further, especially in a project based on the theme of ‘annunciation’. For my proposal, I tried to find an Old Testament passage which reflected this tension: an image of a man struggling against himself to accept (or reject) the overpowering embrace of the Almighty — whether that was God Himself or religion. Two possibilities sprang to mind: the story of Jacob wrestling with God in Genesis, and the approach of a mysterious bridegroom on his wedding day, in Song of Songs 3.6-11. I hoped that a culturally relevant, well-executed piece might contribute to general understandings of whichever biblical passage was used. The biblical content was intended to serve flexibly as a script — providing an immediate framework to our creation — but also required the capacity to be influenced, or even determined, by a much broader narrative. Thus, when provided with the chance to develop this proposal into a brief for one of the six composers, I resolved to prioritize understanding the cultural situation before turning to the question of staging the biblical passage. This chapter will cover those two issues respectively before discussing the profound effect of the collaborative process on the final product.

## Exposition I: Religion in Culture and the Performance of Masculinity

In creating my proposal, I had a certain picture of masculinity in mind, which would create the aforementioned tensions about encountering God. Beginning my doctoral research into rock music, I thought of the persona projected in some Rolling Stones songs: enjoying (albeit, perhaps, with some irony) a sense of individual power in rebellion against all the social norms which represent God (‘Sympathy for the Devil’), and only showing vulnerability on rare and specific occasions (‘Angie’).<sup>3</sup> This image tallies somewhat with what I observed during part-time work as a bartender in Scotland, seeing people at their extremes. Of course, the idea of gender is rightly being interrogated in mainstream culture today, and this role is not a particularly healthy one to inhabit.<sup>4</sup> And yet, for all its faults, I did have some sympathy for this type of character, especially with regards to religion.

It would have been easy (though not very original) to psychoanalyse and deconstruct ‘fragile’ masculinity when discussing its relationship to religion, but it seemed plausible that some religious institutions might also provide a problematic image of gender.

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Lucy Delap and Sue Morgan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 301–25; Thomas G. Long, ‘Why Do Men Stay Away?’, *The Christian Century* (20 October 2011), <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-10/why-do-men-stay-away>

3 The Rolling Stones. These songs, and many others which provide a fuller picture of the persona discussed, can be found in *The Complete Collection 1971–2013* (iTunes, 2013).

4 The term ‘gender performance’ was coined by Judith Butler, in her influential work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), first published in 1990. The documentary *The Mask You Live In*, directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom (The Representation Project, 2015), covers a basic history of gender expectations, the harm this can do to men and ways of tackling it.

Certainly, accepting God as Almighty undercuts the idea of individual strength, as Christ's self-emptying (Philippians 2) exemplifies; this practice should be non-negotiable in the Christian faith. Yet some sociological studies suggest that traditional Christianity may accommodate, and even contribute toward, a 'strong' understanding of masculinity through modelling a superlatively dominating structure.<sup>5</sup> Reading the anecdotes of youth and childhood experiences in church — which were in different ways traumatic — the theme emerged that men renounced their faith not because it was not 'manly' enough, but because the masculinity modelled by preachers and role models was itself dysfunctional: 'postures of manipulation and control', bullying, non-egalitarianism and repression, and a strange combination of different, contradictory pressures.<sup>6</sup> By opposing feminism and radical politics, some churches alienated men as well as women in their old-fashioned authoritarian structures. As one participant describes in a particularly memorable anecdote, even young boys were motivated to defy this institution rather than emulate it:

[The brethren] put up a tin hut, next to one of our out-farm properties, and they would preach. We were sent there and this guy would, you know, [talk about] hell, damnation, and we were determined we would not go up to the front you know, and be saved. And I remember sitting holding the seat so I wouldn't get up, and that was more out of embarrassment, shyness, but also [a] message that we didn't agree with this stuff.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps this sympathetic portrayal of how, even from a young age, men (and women) can feel attacked and belittled by authoritarian religious figures would have provided enough cultural context for our piece. Yet, scandalized by these ills, I felt compelled to ask how this social pattern of domination could have developed. I therefore turned to explore whether these mishaps in Christian culture were doctrinally encouraged. Despite strong emphasis throughout the Bible that equality with God is not 'something to be grasped', there is evidence for a hierarchical gender structure which prioritizes male leadership in both Old and New Testaments.<sup>8</sup>

In Ephesians, women are told to be 'subject' to their husbands, as the Church is to Christ: 'the husband is the head of the wife' (Ephesians 5.23-4).<sup>9</sup> A similar relational model can also be perceived in the creation story, particularly as it is represented in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. As the primal couple are introduced, Adam is said to have been made 'for God only'; Eve, 'for God in him'.<sup>10</sup> The natural spiritual leader is Adam, who is responsible for human communication with God. Angels converse, through sublime speculative reason, with Adam alone, and Eve prefers to wait for her husband to convey the information to her (VIII.39-57). Gender roles are defined in opposition to

5 Brown, 'Men Losing Faith', pp. 301-25.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 321.

7 Wilson Dillon, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 307-08.

8 See Philippians 2.6; Matthew 16.23.

9 Throughout this chapter, the English Standard Version of the Bible (ESV) is used unless stated otherwise.

10 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by John Leonard (London: Penguin Books, 2003), IV.299.

one another: Adam's masculine appearance 'declar'd/ Absolute rule' (IV.300), whereas Eve's 'wanton ringlets [...] impli'd/ Subjection' (IV.306-08).

Even within orthodox Christianity, there are indications that these gender prescriptions are not always helpful or practicable. Studying *Paradise Lost* — which adds psychological depth to the first man and woman described in Genesis — Kent R. Lehnhof argues that the imposition of Eve's 'hierarchical subordination' pushes her to take the fruit in a subversive act of female initiative.<sup>11</sup> Although this act is viewed negatively, the notion that less is expected of Eve than Adam might in fact be liberating for her. Her freedom from 'Adam's vexed maleness' makes her seem, as Adam himself remarks in the poem, 'in herself complete' (VIII.548).<sup>12</sup> By contrast, in order to truly be a man Adam is expected to perform a masculine role which is constantly in danger of being compromised. As Lehnhof suggests, he must never be overpowered, never subject to his wife, and never caught off guard or out of control; if any of these things happens, he is considered 'effeminate'. Such a role is, understandably, impossible to perform flawlessly. Being 'fondly overcome by Female charm' contributes towards him and his wife committing the first sin.<sup>13</sup> After this occasion, Adam expresses misogynistic sentiment for the first time in bitterness at his wife.<sup>14</sup> It is psychologically understandable that, after this immense failure to live up to the leadership role that he was given, Adam attempts to compensate for this 'effeminacy' by distancing himself from this sex. Perhaps it is also plausible that, due to this constant potential for failure, it becomes unthinkable for a man to let down his guard and show any vulnerability whatsoever, including in a religious context.

The foregoing description perhaps goes some way in illustrating the cultural pressure which has accompanied religious prescriptions of gender roles, at least since Early Modern times when Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*. However, further interrogation of the creation story in Genesis highlights that, even within this hierarchical social structure, there are small pockets where male vulnerability might surface, particularly in the context of marriage. Instances such as Adam being created first, and the referral to Eve as his 'helper' (Genesis [Gen] 2.20), might be taken to suggest that he is dominant and she is subject to his authority. Yet, when Adam is first brought to life, God says that 'It is not good that the man should be alone' (Gen 2.18); perhaps it is significant to note that 'aloneness' is never said to limit womankind. In a poetic phrase celebrating marriage as a rite of passage, it is *the man* who is said to 'leave his father and mother' in order to 'cleave unto his wife', and 'be one flesh' (Gen 2.24); in this figuration, it is never said that the female needs to find a partner in order to achieve independence from her parents. Furthermore, it is during Adam's passivity ('deep sleep', Gen 2.21) that Eve is created and 'brought unto' him (Gen 2.22), having been formed from Adam's rib (the very term 'Woman' means 'taken out of Man' (Gen 2.23)).

11 Kent R. Lehnhof, 'Performing Masculinity in *Paradise Lost*', *Milton Studies*, 50 (2009), 64–77 (p. 73).

12 Lehnhof, 71.

13 *Ibid.*, 66; quotes Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IX.999.

14 See Milton, *Paradise Lost*, X.867–908.

When Adam sees Eve, he calls her 'bone of my bones' (Gen 2.23). This phrase arguably signifies not only that Eve is derivative of Adam's substance, but that she is like a body part — a bone more core and intimate to him than his own (this use of the preposition 'of' understands it as a superlative, as in 'King of Kings').



Fig. 12.1.1 Michelangelo, *Creation of Eve* (1509–1510). God's creation of Adam first and the referral to Eve as his 'helper' (2.20) might seem to suggest that he is dominant and she is subject to his authority. Yet, when Adam is first brought to life, God says that 'It is not good that the man should be alone' (v.18). Indeed, Adam is more vulnerable than commonly appreciated in the creation narrative.

The image of Eve's creation is compelling. Physically, it could be seen as Adam giving birth: an 'annunciation', of sorts. If conception is generally seen as an act where the male 'adds to' the female and causes her in turn to bear fruit, here is a moment where the male is first 'added to', and a social and emotional reliance accompanies the physical image. This paradigmatic episode contravenes the suggestion that men must be invulnerable; thus, it counters the toxic, masculinist mindsets which might be allowed to exist in some Christian subcultures. The image seemed so strongly and intriguingly related to the image of 'annunciation' that I began to hope to include it in our musical setting. To do so entailed changing the ensemble of characters originally envisaged, making a woman take the place of God in the encounter. This would alter the dynamic of the piece substantially. In its duration of three minutes, some of the ideas from my initial proposal would have to be omitted. Nevertheless, since the passage was from Song of Songs — the Bible's famous marriage poem — it seemed right to give due emphasis to human love in the piece.

## Exposition II: Staging the Encounter in Song of Songs 3.6-11

In the Christian tradition, the enigmatic yet sensual marriage poem *Song of Songs* has been understood as an allegory for Christ's love for the Church (wherein Christ is the bridegroom, and the Church the bride), or for God's love for the human soul. In these allegorical interpretations, gender is a contentious issue: readers have historically been instructed to imagine themselves (regardless of gender) as the bride, awaiting Christ, the (divine, almighty) bridegroom.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, the bride's emotional experience is prominent throughout the poem, making her the more obviously sympathetic character. The male character is more remote, but the passage in question, Song of Songs [Song] 3.6-11, is one of the few passages where he is described, alone, and psychological readings no longer seem implausible. Although "Solomon" is provided as a name for him in the text, and indeed included in the title of our piece, it is doubtful that the character is meant to be understood as a close representation of the famous biblical king. For our purposes he is more helpfully understood as an "everyman", with a focus on personal relationships: I therefore refer to him as the "bridegroom" throughout.

For this passage, parallels have been drawn between the bridegroom approaching his wedding and Christ going to fulfil His destiny in sacrificial death.<sup>16</sup> The wounding of Christ, typologically associated with the passage through the purple and red garments in which the bridegroom is dressed, has been iconized in homoerotic ways; his penetration places him in a potentially feminine role.<sup>17</sup> The passage therefore functioned fairly well as an example of masculine 'annunciation' (or 'anti-annunciation'): in submitting to the will of God, Christ showed Himself in a vulnerable, perhaps even emasculated, light, even to the point of death. My initial idea for staging the passage played on this Christological picture, but placed a more anxiously masculine character in his position. He would enter expecting conflict with this system that subjugates men, and the encounter with God might amount to his sense of self cracking under this majestic weight. This could be due to the fragility of his own (precarious) masculinity, but it is also believable that the system which is supposed to represent God is the real antagonist.

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15 For a helpful, though sceptical introduction to the mystic, allegorical reading of the passage with emphasis on the 'gender-bending' implications of such an act, see Stephen D. Moore, 'The Song of Songs in the History of Sexuality', *Church History*, 69 (2000), 328–49.

16 These parallels were introduced to me in John Donne's sermon 'Denmark House, some few dayes before the body of King James removed to his Buriall, Apr, 26. 1625', in *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. by George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1953–1962), VI, pp. 280–91. This sermon is also interesting because it attaches the Christ symbolism to the figure of King James — a human, although a king supposedly by divine right, also with rumoured homoerotic tendencies.

17 For a discussion of the (homo-)eroticisation of Christ's wounds, see Richard Rambuss, *Closet Devotions* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1998).



Fig. 12.1.2 Gustave Surand, *Eve in Eden* (1932). The enigmatic yet sensual marriage poem *Song of Songs* has been understood as an allegory for Christ's love for the Church (wherein Christ is the Bridegroom and the Church is the Bride) or for God's love for the human soul. The bride's eager anticipation is prominent throughout the poem. The bridegroom is more elusive, but appears in 3.6–11.

With the idea of including a female lover in the piece, however, it became imaginable to turn to a more literal reading of *Song of Songs*, with a more positive outcome for the main character, falling in love as Adam does in Gen 2. In addition to this softer plot, this second structure was appealing for its attribution of power to women: it was unconventional to present the woman as being 'born' rather than giving birth, transforming the man rather than herself being transformed by him. Furthermore, if the woman might seem to take the place of God in this new version of the bridegroom's story, it may be appropriate to interpret this exuberant, vulnerable expression of human love as a representation — or 'sacrament' — of divine love. Ellen F. Davis suggests that *Song of Songs* represents a reconstitution of Adam and Eve's relationship, which was corrupted in the Fall, and a 'healing of the deepest wounds in the created order'.<sup>18</sup> In the context of considering masculinity, this marriage points not only towards the healing of his need to be invulnerable, but also towards reconciliation in his relationship with women and, ultimately, with God.

18 Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000), p. 231.

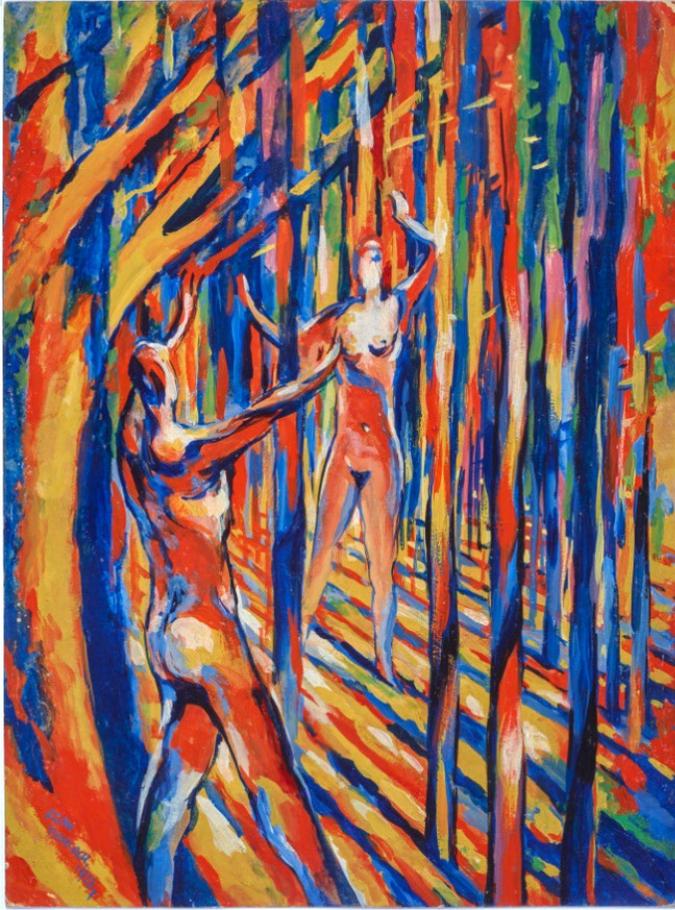


Fig. 12.1.3 Egon Tschirch, *Cycle of Paintings, 'Song of Songs', no. 10* (1923).

I incorporated these potential associations into a brief for my composer, which challenged him to consider how such a bridegroom might feel on the day of his wedding. Perhaps the piece could display two contrasting sides to the bridegroom: one more exterior and the second more intimate. When he first appears, 'with pillars of smoke', surrounded by men bearing swords, dressed for battle, the character referred to as 'Solomon' is performing a ceremonious role. This powerful, almost hubristic description of the bridegroom's appearance, arguably conforming to a typical masculine persona, could be conveyed by a rhythmic ostinato, loud dynamics and raw timbres. In a second section of the piece, however, I suggested that we might try to give a voice to this man, reaching for his more hidden feelings as he discovers — and is overwhelmed by — love. For these purposes I tentatively proposed that Adam's speech about being disarmed at the sight of Eve, in *Genesis* or in *Paradise Lost*, might be incorporated into our libretto.

## Development: Collaboration

The main reason for depicting the creation of Woman was because, ostensibly, in the context of a patriarchal tradition, it seemed to offer a challenge to the idea that men must always maintain an act of superiority and strength. Nevertheless, I became concerned that, in this scenario, the challenge to gender pressures was arguably too subtle. For this depiction to work, the bridegroom would most likely have to be heterosexual to fall in love with a woman. There was a risk that the heterosexual romance narrative, understood without sufficient nuance, might reduce the bridegroom's struggle in identity and spirituality to the anxieties of an inhibited, 'fragile' masculinity. In the context of *Song of Songs*, a book which accommodates queer readings well, this seemed particularly incongruous (the ornate description of the bridegroom in this passage is clearly ripe for an epicene portrayal). With such concerns in mind I emphasized my openness to alternative ideas when handing over to the composer.

Stuart Beatch's depiction of the bridegroom is, as he notes, a conscious 'misgendering' of the original text. The question 'Who is this' refers to a female voice in the Hebrew text. However, our final piece not only appropriates this question for a male character, but endows him with free, feminine traits. A climbing, shimmering melody seems to evoke the passage of the bridegroom through the hills 'with pillars of smoke'.<sup>19</sup> The kind of man depicted is not a violent or threatened one, but more undefined; he is young and aware of the gravity of this ceremonial situation, but certainly not feeling the need to act to a powerful, superior role. Rather than fleeing questions about identity, the implication is that the bridegroom asks them openly. With a shifting modality (Lydian and Mixolydian), and the absence of a fixed key, the first section is poised in a realm of potent ambiguity.

Alongside this 'misgendered' depiction, Beatch took up my suggestions for the second part of the piece, which introduces a woman as the bridegroom's love interest. The *Paradise Lost* text Beatch adopts explicitly gives 'Woman' as the 'name' of the beloved figure who shares such a rare emotional bond with Adam. Although the Genesis passage celebrates the creation of 'male' and 'female', and their difference is important to maintain, I felt somewhat uncomfortable presenting a heterosexual marriage as the solution for a character who was suggestively queer. In our first meeting, Beatch and I had discussed the potential for depicting conflict or encounter with Sonata form: a first theme is countered by a second in a kind of contest, with the victor shown to dominate in a final section. But was this heteronormative ending really something to be presented triumphantly? Discussing this with the other theologians and composers post-premiere, I was not the only person to notice the potential awkwardness of overwriting a queer character with a heteronormative narrative, and in a musical form which arguably has a history of gender violence.<sup>20</sup>

19 The text here is from the Authorised (King James) translation of the Bible, which is used in Stuart's final composition.

20 For an account of gender violence in Sonata form, see Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

Nevertheless, in Beatch's choral piece, the definiteness in Milton's words is softened. With a series of shifting, unpredictable cadences, the piece's second section conveys a quivering, innocent kind of excitement, alongside momentary self-consciousness. Perhaps, due to the presence of female voices as a prominent part of this harmonic mass, there is less of an impression that these words are direct speech, or even speech at all. Rather than being attached to a calculated character performance, Adam's words are painted as impulsive, immediate answers to timeless questions of being and identity through indefinite cadences, rising and falling in a way that imitates the unpredictability of human emotion. Whereas traditionally one side of the thematic dichotomy in a Sonata form is typically restated triumphantly, Beatch's ending conveys an air of mystery rather than closure: no possibility is eliminated and no rules are enforced. With gravity, but with none of the pomp that could have been imagined in the marriage of a king, a new key is reached in the last chord of the piece. Perhaps this modulation signifies that the character is more aligned with a liberated present/future than a repressive past in terms of gender identity.

## Recapitulation

One of my main concerns with the collaboration was the over-interpretation and over-determination of the artistic interpretation of the passage. Having written some music myself, perhaps that experience caused me to overstep my role as theologian. Beatch might have had more freedom if I had been more circumspect, driving less towards an 'argument' or artistic vision (they seem to be much the same thing, interestingly) and providing more of a commentary and some open-ended suggestions. Yet, this has never been how I have started writing academic work, either. It is not, in any case, unprecedented to have a composition that bears traces of multiple parties with different ideas who each had shares in the creative process. Whimsically, it is possible to wonder whether the two voices in the Sonata — expressive of strong, yet sometimes mysterious male and female characters — may have reflected parts of the personalities of the two collaborators. Beatch's is a personality that I hope I can continue to get to know in an ongoing friendship which has grown from this partnership.

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