



Annunciations

Sacred Music for the Twenty-First
Century

EDITED BY GEORGE CORBETT



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12.2. Composer's Reflections

Stuart Beatch

For the past three years, my experience as a composer has been almost exclusively in sacred choral music. I am hard-pressed to explain precisely why this has happened; religion has always been a part of my life, but my music for a long time had been secular, inward-looking, personal and self-referential. My fascination with sacred music was sparked in 2013, when I began my formal composition studies and simultaneously joined an Anglican cathedral choir. Submerging myself in the Anglican choral tradition, I realized that there is a direct emotional impact and harmoniousness in this music which is both unapologetic and inspiring. I soon found myself writing simple psalm settings for choir, lengthy collections of chants and hymns, and complex 'choral meditations' like *Pange Lingua* and *Resurrectio*. While postgraduate studies have put this passion on hold, I have continued to await eagerly the next chance to explore religiosity in music.

I have begun with this biographical sketch for two reasons: to offer a background as to why I participated in this project, and to affirm that contemporary music still has important things to say about religion. Fascinated by sacred music, my interest and skill have always been focused on religion as a medium for music, *not vice versa*. My principal concern as a composer is to write music, so one simply uses the text to serve those needs; in this way, I was treating the religious subject as just a singular trait of the text. This only reinforces the notion that I am not a theologian, and perhaps echoes the sentiments of other composers in this project. Thus, I was eager to collaborate with an expert as a way of challenging myself. It is not enough to use these texts on a literal level; one must understand the scholarly discourse, the context (both in *and* out of the Bible), and the deeper structure of a given sacred text in order to imbue a musical setting with a truly holistic meaning. To that end, I wanted to create more meaningful music that engages with religious themes in all their complexity.

The composers were welcomed to St Andrews in November 2016 for a preliminary conference, as well as an initial meeting with our theologian partners — in my case, Kimberley Jane Anderson. We were to investigate Song 3.6-11. However, prior to the conference, I had not been given guidance on how these collaborations would materialize, nor a hint as to how to interpret the scripture provided. This certainly coloured our first meeting, as we approached this excerpt from opposing sides. Naturally drawn to the salient textual elements — the beautiful language, the lush imagery, the formal elegance — I bypassed the chance to draw any deeper meaning. In contrast, Anderson was focused on the absence of male voice and agency in the excerpt, and the idea of ‘masculine annunciations’ (clearly the far more imaginative approach). We proceeded in engaging conversations on the context of this excerpt within the *Song of Songs*: how music has the potential to capture and represent masculine identity, and how this might be augmented through additional texts to expand the overall meaning of the work. A project like this requires careful contemplation and the slow digestion of varied thoughts, lest it run the risk of overloading with information and possible avenues. It was only after returning home that our collaboration, which would eventually become ‘The Annunciation of Solomon’, would truly start to take shape in my mind. I began plotting out the form of the piece, thinking of what the harmonic language would require, and getting my thoughts in order.

However, the most effective component of any collaboration — one which was used in this project — is a firm schedule of periodic meeting points. While composition is inherently an internal artistic act, it must be regularly informed by external dialogue if collaboration is to be effective; this proved crucial at several key points in my work with Anderson. Prior to writing the piece, we had been exploring the idea of incorporating additional text to provide a literal voice for the bridegroom, who is otherwise silent throughout our passage from the *Song of Songs*. It seemed, at first, an intriguing idea to highlight the potential connection of Solomon as a Christ figure, but through our discussions, we realized it was far more complex and interesting to call instead upon the voice of Adam.¹ This decision fundamentally altered the dialectic of the piece and how I approached the musical content. It was also through these discussions that we decided what sections of the original text would be used; six whole verses of scripture were simply too much to pack into a three-minute anthem. Anderson was sensitive to these matters, and we decided to pare the text down to its core essentials: the outer two verses.

A major difficulty that faces a collaborative effort like this is defining individual roles; however, I found our dialogue to be more beneficial when we broke down these barriers. Anderson, being trained in music, was attuned to issues of harmony, form, and text-setting. While she was apprehensive about commenting on musical issues at first, the feedback she gave *beyond* theological matters was useful. Indeed, even in a

1 See Genesis 3 and John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by John Leonard (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. viii.

collaboration where there is no shared knowledge base, it would be advisable for both members to engage respectfully in both sides of the discussion. Some musical issues might be beyond the reach of a non-expert, but even simply listening to a computerized version of the music and commenting on how it sounds in relation to the theological goal has major potential to liberate new avenues of discussion.

The collaboration resulted in 'The Annunciation of Solomon', for SSATB choir and organ. The structure of the piece was defined in the end by our choice of text: a binary, or two-part, form. The first section is a lush and flowing (but strictly rhythmic) processional; in the excerpt from *Song of Songs*, this is the march of Solomon to his wedding. At the end of the section, the voices build to a fierce climax on the words, 'Behold, Solomon'² and are broken off by an opposing chord on the organ.³ This leads directly into the second section: the voice of Solomon. The words call upon Adam in praise of Eve's beauty,⁴ and provide the illusive male voice to this moment of marriage. This section sets the words through lush harmonies, seemingly breathless with the brevity of each phrase. The voices once again reach a climax — this time sparkling with joy — and they are again broken off by the organ, now completely in harmony with the voices. I decided to end the piece with a short coda adapted from the final verse of the excerpt: 'Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion'.⁵ The music here is an Anglican chant, a musical form which not only carries deep personal significance, but which also represents a form of community, not unlike the chorales so important to the music of J. S. Bach.

By the end of our collaboration, I was pleased with the piece. It reflects a musical directness and simplicity for which I am always striving, and finds ways to address our original issues in unique ways. However, there are some issues. When I had initially shown the completed work to my husband (a musicologist), he disagreed strongly with our choice of text. Indeed, in considering the integration of Adam's voice into the dialogue of *Song of Songs*, it seems as if the male identity is beginning to subsume and subjugate the female. We were certainly aware of this dynamic at the outset. Even with our original plan in its most innocuous form — finding a way to give the bridegroom a voice — my music ran the danger of charging headstrong into subjugation, and this risk was only augmented by the addition of further masculine text. However, I do not believe my music has entirely buckled to this problem. Consider the opening phrase: 'Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness'.⁶ We know, based on the original Hebrew, that it is referring to a woman; certain translations — such as the Douay-Rheims Bible — even render this verse with the female pronoun. By leaving the verse ambiguous (something already common to most translations), Solomon himself becomes 'perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all powders of the

2 Song of Songs 3.7.

3 A reference to John Tavener's *God is With Us* (1987).

4 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, viii, pp. 494–97, 499.

5 Song of Songs 3.11.

6 Song of Songs 3.6.

merchant'.⁷ We chose to capitalize on this misgendering in the piece so that Solomon's masculinity would be purposefully feminized. Indeed, the female voice is given direct agency at the opening of the piece, since it is the sopranos and altos who first observe and define Solomon's identity.

Coupled with this issue, however, is the interpolation of masculine text. The choice to omit four whole verses of the original excerpt — thus omitting female voice and agency from a considerable portion of the music — is problematic, especially when it is replaced with such strongly masculine words as those of Adam. Although a seemingly minor decision, the implication is both heteronormative and arguably misogynistic, reinforcing the status of man as the sole origin and destiny of woman. There is truth in these arguments; the main flaw of the finished piece was due to an inability to identify the depth of the problem until long after our collaboration was finished. However, the matter was not entirely lost on me while I was composing. In this section of the music, I intentionally aimed to portray this masculine voice through stereotypically 'feminine' music: as mentioned earlier, the harmonies are lush, the phrases are short and breathless, and the rhythms are gentle. Moreover, the literal male voice — that is to say, the men of the choir — sing alone for only two brief moments. Otherwise, the 'male voice' of Adam is always sung by the entire (agender) choir as a method of weakening the otherwise-overt masculinity. This does not completely rectify the problem, but it sufficiently undermines it, in my view, to justify our creative decisions in this collaboration.

In any case, my work with Anderson was an incredibly formative and insightful experience for me as a composer. Perhaps I entered this experience with an illusory understanding of how to render religious texts in music. However, by collaborating directly with a theologian — especially one with shared musical interests — we created what I believe is a unique choral anthem which engages deeply, meaningfully, and respectfully with complex issues of voice and gender in a sacred context. I hope that this type of collaboration carries on and allows for the passionate interrogation of religious themes across all forms of contemporary art in the future.



Stuart Beatch, 'The Annunciation of Solomon', 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 12. Duration: 4.11.

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