This fascinating volume draws together contributions from a wide range of theologians and practicing musicians to consider the ways that theology and belief can interact with the practice and appreciation of music, to mutually invigorating effect. It is an impressive and exciting achievement and I am sure it will be read eagerly by all those for whom music can illuminate the sacred.

—Dr. Jeremy Thurlow, University of Cambridge

Our contemporary culture is communicating ever-increasingly through the visual, through film, and through music. This makes it ever more urgent for theologians to explore the resources of art for enriching our understanding and experience of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Annunciations: Sacred Music for the Twenty-First Century, edited by George Corbett, answers this need, evaluating the relationship between the sacred and the composition, performance, and appreciation of music.

Through the theme of ‘annunciations’, this volume interrogates how, when, why, through and to whom God communicates in the Old and New Testaments. In doing so, it tackles the intimate relationship between scriptural reflection and musical practice in the past, its present condition, and what the future might hold.

Annunciations comprises three parts. Part I sets out flexible theological and compositional frameworks for a constructive relationship between the sacred and music. Part II presents the reflections of theologians and composers involved in collaborating on new pieces of sacred choral music, alongside the six new scores and links to the recordings. Part III considers the reality of programming and performing sacred works today.

This volume provides an indispensable resource for scholars and artists working at the interface between theology and the arts, and for those involved in sacred music. However, it will also be of interest to anyone concerned with the ways in which the divine communicates through word and art to humanity.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher’s website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com.

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.
15. Music at the Borders of the Sacred: Handel, Elgar and Poulenc

Michael Downes

In the course of an interview with Jonathan Arnold, Rowan Williams discusses his reactions to a performance of Claudio Monteverdi’s *Vespers* in the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford:

Both in Britain and on the Continent, from about 1590 onwards, liturgical music becomes something very different. It attracts a kind of theatrical surround to it, and Monteverdi’s *Vespers* is one of the great examples of that. I’d say much the same of Purcell’s proto-oratorios […] the writing is theatrical and virtuoso, in a way that for Palestrina and Byrd, would be unthinkable. These are show pieces and you may say that it is for the glory of God but it’s not liturgical in the same way […] those are works that translate much more readily to the secular stage or the concert hall than Tallis and Byrd.¹

Williams goes on to identify a series of works — the Masses of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Joseph Haydn, and the Requiems of Johannes Brahms and Gabriel Fauré, among others — in which, although liturgical or scriptural texts may be set, ‘the [musical] architecture dominates everything else and architecture of the liturgy disappears’.² But although such works ‘don’t really seem to work as liturgy’, nor are they straightforwardly ‘secular’, they can evoke responses from the listener that are ‘spiritual’ and ‘aesthetic’.³ Whether such responses are produced on any given occasion will depend on the location and manner of the performance, as well as on the musical and religious proclivities of the individual listener. Nonetheless, by virtue of their ambivalent relationship to the category of ‘sacred music’, such works can tell us

much about music’s capacity to evoke a spiritual response, however that is defined or understood.

The same is true, this chapter will argue, of a group of works that do not set liturgical texts and are not intended for performance in a religious building or during a religious ritual, but nonetheless engage with spiritual concerns in a way that goes beyond mere choice of text. By considering the lives of George Frideric Handel, Edward Elgar and Francis Poulenc — three composers with strong religious interests who were not primarily composers of sacred music — and by considering works in which they seem to explore religious concerns in a particularly personal way, this chapter will explore the peculiar interest of music that occupies a liminal position: music that we cannot, without qualification, define either as ‘sacred’ or ‘not sacred’.

I. Handel: Jephtha

Although relatively little is known about Handel’s intellectual or religious interests, his biographers concur that he was ‘truly pious’, particularly later in life.4 William Coxe wrote that ‘he frequently declared in conversation, the high gratification he enjoyed in setting the Scriptures to music’.5 John Hawkins, who knew him well, recorded seeing him ‘on his knees, expressing by his looks and gesticulations the utmost fervour and devotion’.6 Hawkins adds, however, that although Handel was a Lutheran by birth:

‘he was not such a bigot as to decline a general conformity with [the religion] of the country which he had chosen for his residence […] he would often speak of it as one of the great felicities of his life that he was settled in a country where no man suffers any molestation or inconvenience on account of his religious principles.’7

This suggests an ability to empathize with a range of religious views rather than holding to a single doctrine, an ability that surely served him well in the oratorios that constitute his most important settings of scripture, notwithstanding the excellence of his liturgical music.

The genre of English oratorio was effectively invented by Handel: the first such work is generally considered to be Esther, which was composed for James Brydges (later Duke of Chandos) and premiered in about 1720 at Cannons, his country residence. At this time Handel was mainly concerned with Italian opera; he would dominate the London stage for the ensuing decade with works such as Giulio Cesare, Tamerlano (both 1724) and Rodelinda (1725). From the early 1830s, however, shifts

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7 Ibid.
in audience tastes; attacks on Italian opera by figures such as Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift and John Gay; antagonisms within Handel’s company; increasing competition from other promoters; and restrictions on theatrical performances during Lent, prompted Handel to investigate English oratorio as an alternative form of entertainment. His revival of Esther for the King’s Theatre in 1732 — his first presentation of an English oratorio for public performance — sparked off a sequence of over twenty such works, though it was not until 1741, with Deidamia, that Handel completely abandoned Italian opera.

Handel’s English oratorios were mostly premiered at either the King’s Theatre or Covent Garden Theatre in London — with the famous exception of Messiah, first performed in Dublin in 1742. Messiah is also exceptional among the oratorios for not assigning its soloists named roles and not explicitly following a single continuous narrative. These are characteristics displayed by most (though not all) other oratorios, many of which drew their stories from the Old Testament. One of the most succinct definitions of the ‘Old Testament oratorio’ genre came from Newburgh Hamilton, librettist of Samson (1742), in his preface to the printed wordbook for that work: ‘Mr Handel had so happily here introduc’d Oratorios, a musical drama, whose subject must be Scriptural, and in which the Solemnity of Church-Musick is agreeably united with the most pleasing Airs of the Stage’. \(^8\)

Hamilton points to the synthetic nature of the genre: forms of solo song, which Handel had brought to near-perfection in his operas — aria (particularly da capo) and recitative (both secco and accompagnato) — are juxtaposed with choruses that are far more extended and dramatically significant, as well as ‘solemn’, than anything found in Italian opera.

In most of the oratorios (again, Messiah is the exception rather than the rule), the chorus represents different bodies of people at different points in the drama. In Samson, for example, it represents Israelites, Philistines and Virgins. Although the choruses draw on ‘the Solemnity of Church-Musick’, they are often highly theatrical too. Paradoxically, the fact that the oratorios were not staged or costumed allowed Handel to give his choristers a bigger and more varied role in the action, characterizing them musically without any of the staging complexities that this would have involved in an opera. Although singers do not seem to have acted their roles, this does not mean that the visual presentation of the oratorios was neglected. The premiere of Deborah, in 1733, featured what David Vickers describes as ‘an ambitious element of special decor and lighting especially for the occasion’, and was praised by the Daily Advertiser as ‘the most magnificent that has ever been exhibited on an English Theatre’. \(^9\)

However, the main stimulus to the audiences’ imaginations came from the scene descriptions and stage directions published in the wordbooks and written out by Handel in his

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manuscripts. As Vickers notes, these descriptions allowed composer and audiences alike to construct ‘an imaginary theatre of the mind’.  

Completed in August 1751 and first performed the following February, *Jephtha* was Handel’s last oratorio (discounting the 1757 revision of *Triumph of Time and Truth*) and his last major work of any kind. The librettist was Thomas Morell, a classical scholar and Church of England minister who had also provided Handel with libretti for *Judas Maccabaeus, Joshua, Alexander Balus* and *Theodora*; the last was notably unusual for being drawn from a religious novel rather than scripture. The story of *Jephtha* was taken from Judges 11, but — perhaps because of the sparseness of the biblical story and its problematic nature for a conventional Christian such as Morell — he supplemented it with elements from other sources. The most important of these works is *Jephthes, sive votum*, a Latin play written in the 1540s by the Scottish humanist, George Buchanan. Whereas in Judges Jephtha is the only named character in the story, in Buchanan there are several others, some of whom find their way into Morell’s libretto: these include Storgè, Jephtha’s wife (her name derived from a Greek word signifying affection between parents and children); and Iphis, the daughter whom Jephtha promises to sacrifice (her name clearly recalls that of Iphigenia, Euripides’ similarly fated eponymous heroine). *Iphigenia in Aulis* itself, which Morell had recently translated for performance at Eton College, is another important source — as is the libretto for Giacomo Carissimi’s 1640s oratorio *Jephthe*. In addition, Morell also drew on writers, including Milton, Pope and Joseph Addison, for seven specific lines that are marked as quotations in the printed libretto.

In the story in Judges, the central incident is the vow that Jephtha makes to God in order to secure victory in battle:

> And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, / Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD’S, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.  

The first thing that Jephtha sees when he returns from battle is his daughter, his only child, so he is forced to sacrifice her. She goes into the mountains for two months to ‘bewail her virginity’, but on her return, her father ‘did with her according to his vow which he had vowed: and she knew no man’. This causes a problem for Morell, since it presents the God of the Old Testament in a particularly harsh light: unlike in other comparable narratives (Abraham and Isaac, Saul and Jonathan), Jephtha’s daughter is not spared. Of course, Morell was by no means the first writer to grapple with this issue. Several previous apologists for the Old Testament had argued that Jephtha’s daughter was not sacrificed, including the influential medieval rabbinic commentator David Kimchi (1160–1235). In Deborah Rooke’s words:

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11 Judg 11.30-31. All biblical citations are taken from the King James Version, unless otherwise noted.  
12 Judg 11.39.
The Hebrew conjunction that is translated ‘and’ in the phrase ‘and I will offer it up as a burnt offering’ can also be translated ‘or’; so what Jephthah meant was, ‘… whatever comes out … shall surely be the Lord’s, or I shall offer it up as a burnt offering’ […] So Jephthah cannily hedges his bets, and says, ‘If whatever comes out is not suitable for sacrifice, then it shall be dedicated to the Lord, but if it is suitable, then it shall be sacrificed.’ Hence, when Jephthah’s daughter comes out to meet him, because she is not suitable for sacrifice she is dedicated to the Lord in some other way, and this, according to Kimchi, meant that she became a celibate recluse. 13

Although Morell followed Buchanan in many respects, including the naming of the characters, he departed from him by ensuring that his Iphis was saved from death. This interpretation was influenced not only by the apologists, whose work he knew well, but also by Euripides. Morell’s dramatic turnaround is effected by an Angel who appears to explain to Jephtha that he has misunderstood his own vow. Jephtha had vowed in Act I Scene 4 that ‘What, or whoe’er shall first salute mine eyes, / Shall be forever Thine, or fall a sacrifice.’ ‘Forever thine’ seems quite clearly to offer an alternative to death, but Jephtha himself inexplicably either forgets this or fails to understand it until Act 3 Scene 1 when the Angel tells him:

Rise, Jephtha, and ye rev’rend priests, withhold
The slaught’rous hand. No vow can disannul
The law of God, nor such was its intent
When rightly scann’d; yet still shall be fulfill’d.
Thy daughter, Jephtha, thou must dedicate
To God, in pure and virgin state fore’er,
As not an object meet for sacrifice,
Else had she fall’n an holocaust to God.
The Holy Sp’rit, that dictated thy vow,
Bade thus explain it, and approves thy faith.

Although Morell’s strategy is understandable as an attempt to exonerate the God in whom he believed — and whom he felt obliged to defend against what he felt to be the dangerous arguments of the Deist movement that was gaining influence at this time — it created a dramatic problem. If we, unlike Jephtha, interpret his vow logically, we are denied the dramatic tension of believing that Iphis will die; if we take Jephtha’s anguish at his daughter’s impending death at face value, then the intervention of the angelus ex machina risks retrospectively devaluing the heartfelt music that Handel gives him. This aspect of Morell’s work attracted harsh criticism from earlier Handel scholars. Winton Dean wrote, in 1959, that he ‘fails, and comes near to wrecking the oratorio […] his attempt to render the story palatable to Christian ears falsified it’. Paul Henry Lang wrote in 1967 that ‘while the original story presented the librettist with a fundamentally simple and logical dramatic situation […] Morell sentimentalized it

[...][he] was in a double dilemma, which he did try to solve in a Christian spirit — and he failed dismally'.

Such criticisms, though understandable, perhaps underestimate the skill with which Handel translates his libretto into musical drama and disguises what would be fatal flaws in a spoken play. Jephtha’s vow is set by Handel in a deliberately plain fashion, without musical rhetoric or elaborate accompaniment, allowing us to believe that he does not understand what he is saying; it is left to the Israelites in the following chorus (‘O God, behold our sore distress’) to express the fear that Jephtha fails to acknowledge. Another stark juxtaposition of contrasting musical idioms occurs in Act II Scene 3. The joyful, dance-like movement in which Iphis and the Virgins greet the victorious Jephtha is followed by his agonised recitative: ‘Horror, confusion’. Handel also seems to have been aware of the danger that Morell was anachronistically ‘Christianizing’ the story. In a small but highly significant change to the chorus that ends Act II, Handel altered Morell’s ‘What God ordains is right’ in order to quote Pope’s Essay on Man with the words ‘Whatever is, is right’. He then sets this in a highly emphatic fashion, suggesting mankind accepting an implacable Fate and also, perhaps, that he was more sympathetic to the Deist world-view than his doctrinally orthodox librettist. Finally, the sheer musical imagination with which he set Morell’s text allows the drama to transcend the libretto’s limitations. The quartet in Act II Scene 3, where the characters simultaneously express their contrasting reactions to Iphis’ dilemma, is a particular highlight in this respect: it is the only such ensemble in any of Handel’s biblical oratorios and anticipates the operas of Mozart.

As Susan Staves notes, some of Handel’s contemporaries objected to the free-handed way in which he combined the ‘Solemnity of Church-Musick’ and ‘Airs of the Stage’. Hamilton describes how:

... others resisted the oratorios as violating what they considered representational decorums appropriate for religious subject-matter. Not only did they object to representations of scripture in the theater, but they also invoked ideas of musical decorum according to which there ought to be firm distinctions between church, chamber, and theater music.15

But by deploying in this everything that he had learned as a composer of opera, instrumental and church music — as well as of oratorio — Handel opened up a space in which his audiences could think about the character and consequences of God’s decrees in a way that would not have been possible at that time in any other genre.

II. Elgar: *The Apostles*

Although Elgar grew up in a household in which the Catholic Church played a significant role, his parents had very different views on religion, contributing to the conflicted attitude he displayed towards Catholicism throughout his life. In addition to keeping a music shop, Elgar’s father William was organist of St George’s Catholic Church, Worcester, from 1846 — eleven years before Edward’s birth. His interest in Catholicism was purely professional, at least until his deathbed conversion: he routinely went to the pub during sermon, and wrote in 1852 of his dislike for the ‘absurd superstition and playhouse mummery of the Papist’.16 That same year, however, Elgar’s mother, Ann, who had married William in 1848, converted to Catholicism, having initially attended services merely to keep her husband company. She remained a devout Catholic throughout her life and ensured that her children received a Catholic education; there was no Catholic boys’ school in Worcester so Elgar joined his older sisters at the girls’ school at the age of six. William undoubtedly resented Edward’s Catholic education: there is a well-known anecdote about the anger he showed when, during the course of early attempts to write out music in the family music shop, his son produced a Gregorian stave with four lines.

Ann died in 1902, just before Elgar began *The Apostles*, but the pattern of female conversion and commitment to Catholicism repeated itself in Elgar’s own marriage. Caroline Alice Roberts was born in India into a Protestant family distinguished for its military service. A published author eight years Elgar’s senior, she became his pupil in 1886; in the early stages of their acquaintance, he lent her a copy of Newman’s *Dream of Gerontius*. Despite the Roberts family’s disapproval of both the Catholicism and the lower social status of the Elgars, they married in 1889 at Brompton Oratory and Alice converted to Catholicism three years later. She too remained devout for the rest of her life; Elgar, by contrast, experienced increasingly agonizing doubts, which he expressed much more strongly after Alice’s death in 1920.

This event, and the almost complete creative block that it produced in Elgar, was only one among several severe challenges to his faith. From childhood he had resented that — due in part to his humble origins, but in particular to his Catholicism — he did not receive the professional opportunities that his talent warranted. Catholic emancipation had happened only in 1829, and Catholics were still not allowed to attend Oxford and Cambridge universities when Elgar was born in 1857; the general perception was that Catholics remained outside the British Establishment. Moreover, religious differences had prevented him from marrying the first woman with whom he fell in love, Helen Weaver, who came from a Unitarian family. As he entered middle age, various upheavals in his emotional life threatened both his faith and his mental stability: a love affair, probably unconsummated, with Alice Stuart Wortley, whom he called his ‘Windflower’ and may well have been the inspiration for his Violin Concerto; probably

other love affairs too, one of which may have produced an illegitimate daughter. Ismene Brown speculates that Elgar’s guilt over his abandonment of this daughter could have caused the depression and nervous breakdown that he experienced while working on *The Kingdom* between 1905 and 1907. Finally, the First World War was a shattering experience for Elgar, one whose aftershock contributed to the absence of major works in the last fifteen years of his life, after the elegiac Cello Concerto of 1919.

Elgar’s loss of faith was certainly apparent from the time of *The Kingdom*, originally planned as the centrepiece of a vast trilogy on religious themes. It was at this time that he stopped regularly attending Mass, and his disillusionment increased sharply following Alice’s death. As he approached death, he said to his doctor, Arthur Thomson, that ‘I believe there is nothing but complete oblivion’. He asked to be cremated, which was at that time prohibited by the Roman Catholic Church, although his wishes were ignored by his daughter Carice who also summoned a priest to administer the last rites. He suggested a few months before he died to his friend, Delius, a well-known atheist, that perceptions of him as a religious composer had skewed his reputation. He described the religious oratorios that Delius had criticized as the ‘penalty of my English environment’ and wrote that ‘it has been a matter of no small amusement to me that, as my name somewhat unfortunately is indissolubly connected with “sacred” music, some of your friends and mine have tried to make me believe that I am ill-disposed to the trend and sympathy of your [Mass of Life].’ By implication, by the time of his death Elgar was much closer to the Nietzschean world-view of Delius’s cantata than to the Catholicism of his childhood.

Unsurprisingly, given his father’s position as organist, and later his own (Elgar took over at St George’s in 1883 following William’s controversial dismissal), there is much church music among his early output. Elgar was strongly influenced by what he heard at St George’s and by the possibilities the church offered. Unusually for that time, Viennese masses were often heard with orchestral accompaniment (nurturing Elgar’s love for the European classical tradition), and visiting operatic soloists — most of whom were Catholic — were often invited to sing. Elgar was also strongly influenced by Gregorian chant, even — perhaps particularly — after he stopped writing for the church. John Butt points out the irony that Gregorian influence led him towards a modalism similar to that of Ralph Vaughan Williams and other contemporaries, but reached from an entirely different starting point: ‘Perhaps, then, part of the very Englishness with which Elgar is so often yoked had its roots in that aspect of his background which was most “foreign” at the time, namely his loyalty to the Pope and the heritage of St Gregory.’ Much of his church music does not survive; there is no

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complete mass setting, for example, though he probably wrote one at St George’s. The Catholic church music that does survive — like the specifically Anglican pieces that he produced between 1897 (Te Deum and Benedictus) and 1914 — is well-crafted but not on the same level as the oratorios, which is where Elgar’s true engagement with religious subject-matter is to be found.

The most significant musical influence on Elgar’s mature choral works — *The Dream of Gerontius* (1900; strictly speaking not an oratorio), *The Apostles* (1903) and *The Kingdom* (1906) — is Wagnerian music drama. By the time Elgar composed those works, he had a deep knowledge of Wagner’s work, which he heard in London in the 1880s and then in Munich and Bayreuth in the 1890s. Wagner’s elevation of the status of opera to ‘music drama’ — from entertainment to something comparable to a religious ceremony — was highly controversial but also opened new possibilities for subsequent composers who wished to explore religious subject-matter outside the confines of the liturgy. The ambiguity of genre was most evident in the case of *Parsifal* (1882), which Wagner described as a *Bühnenweihfestspiel*, ‘Stage Dedication Festival Play’, and which includes a ‘communion’ scene; Elgar saw *Parsifal* twice in 1892 and it is a particularly strong influence on his music.

Despite subsequent recognition as a masterpiece, *The Dream of Gerontius* failed at its premiere in Birmingham Town Hall, in part due to woefully inadequate preparation of the chorus and the fact that the conductor, Hans Richter, received the score only the day before the first orchestral rehearsal. The choice of such a conspicuously Catholic text also proved controversial: changes to the text were demanded before the work was performed at Worcester Cathedral. However, the Birmingham Festival maintained its faith in Elgar and commissioned him to write a large choral work on a religious theme for the 1903 festival. He had nurtured the idea of writing a work on the subject of the Apostles since childhood, when a schoolmaster impressed him by describing Jesus’s followers as ‘poor men, young men, at the time of their calling; perhaps before the descent of the Holy Ghost not cleverer than some of you here’. Under Wagner’s inspiration, he now conceived the idea of a trilogy of oratorios, taking the story from the calling of the Apostles through the founding of the early Church before dealing in the final panel with the Last Judgement. In 1902, Elgar heard *Parsifal* again and the first three operas of the *Ring* in Bayreuth, where he had been invited by Hans Richter, who was sharing the conducting that year with Siegfried Wagner. In July he wrote to Ivor Atkins, organist of Worcester Cathedral, that ‘I am now plotting GIGANTIC WORK’.

Elgar decided to follow Wagner’s example by creating his own libretto but, instead of writing it from scratch, he assembled it from the Bible, taking verses out of their original context to form a series of tableaux. Jesus himself became a relatively marginal figure, as Elgar focused on the ‘flawed’ characters of Peter, Judas and Mary Magdalene. The portrayal of Mary Magdalene, which includes an episode where she

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expresses shame about her former life using exclamations from the Old Testament and Apocrypha, is inspired in part by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s ‘The Divine Tragedy’. Mary’s music, meanwhile, is influenced by Wagner’s portrayals of the Venusberg in Tannhäuser and of Kundry and the Flower Maidens in Parsifal. Perhaps the most interestingly portrayed character, however, is Judas, to whom Elgar always had a particular attraction, as he revealed in 1904:

I was always particularly impressed with Archbishop Whately’s conception of Judas, who, as he wrote, ‘had no design to betray his Master to death, but to have been as confident of the will of Jesus to deliver Himself from His enemies by a miracle as He must have been certain of His power to do so, and accordingly to have designed to force Him to make such a display of His superhuman powers as would have induced all the Jews — and, indeed, the Romans too — to acknowledge Him King’.  

Judas’ flaw, according to the Richard Whately/Elgar view, lies in his limited and materialistic view of Jesus’ mission, not in a desire to destroy Jesus. Elgar encapsulates this by attributing to Judas in Tableau IV, ‘The Betrayal’, words from the Wisdom of Solomon 2, which express a materialistic view of life and scepticism about the idea of an afterlife (in the Bible this text is preceded by the words ‘And the ungodly said’): ‘Our life is short and tedious, and in the death of a man there is no remedy; neither was there any man known to have returned from the grave. For we are born at all adventure, and we shall be hereafter as though we had never been’.

This passage draws from Elgar some of his greatest and also most theatrical music: Judas’ words are surrounded by wisps of string and woodwind sound, as if endorsing his view of the insubstantiality of human existence. Meanwhile choral groups successively represent worshippers singing a psalm within the temple and the baying crowd calling for Jesus to be crucified. The intensity (even sympathy) of Elgar’s engagement with the most flawed figure in the story of the Apostles, combined with a dramatic sweep and an ability to convey multi-layered action — strengthened by his study of Wagner — allow him to create a structure in which both the desire for faith, and the challenges to it, are powerfully revealed.

III. Poulenc: Dialogues des Carmélites

Like Elgar, Poulenc received very different notions of religion from the two sides of his family. His father, Emile, director of the family pharmaceutical business that eventually became the giant Rhône-Poulenc, was from a devout Catholic family in Aveyron in southern France; his mother Jenny, née Royer, came from a Parisian family of artist-craftsmen of bohemian outlook who took little interest in organized religion. Poulenc regarded this dual heredity as the key to his musical personality: he associated

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23 Wisdom of Solomon 2.1b-2.
his deep Catholic faith with his Aveyronais roots and attributed his artistic interests to his mother’s family. It became a critical commonplace to speak of the co-existence of contradictory forces in his music, in an attempt to understand the wide divergences of style and character it revealed. This idea was most influentially formulated in Claude Rostand’s July 1950 article for *Paris-Presse*, in which he wrote that there were ‘two people [deux personnes] in Poulenc: the monk [le moine] and the ragamuffin or street-urchin [le voyou’].

As with Elgar, too, much in Poulenc’s life challenged his faith. He was emotionally scarred from rejection by his childhood friend Raymonde Linossier — the only woman he ever wanted to marry — and then her death in 1930. He suffered depression from the late 1920s, and his behaviour exhibited a manic-depressive cyclical pattern thereafter. His emotional life was complex and closely bound up with his creativity, involving the birth of an illegitimate daughter in 1946 as well as several long-standing relationships with men. Though homosexual activity was not prohibited in France at this time as it was in the UK, the Catholic Church’s official opposition to homosexuality meant that Poulenc’s orientation was nonetheless a source of tension. As for Elgar, too, war was a devastating experience: he spent most of the Second World War at Noizay in the German zone of occupation and opposed the Nazis through his work with the Front National des Musiciens. Several of his friends either died in concentration camps or were executed for Resistance activities, and Poulenc experienced a further series of traumatic bereavements in the following years.

But unlike with Elgar, personal and professional difficulties led Poulenc back to a strong, if never straightforward, affirmation of his Catholic faith. The moment of reconversion was prompted by a terrible accident experienced by a fellow composer, as he later explained:

> The casual indifference of my mother’s family led me, quite naturally, to a long period when I ignored religion. From 1920 to 1935 I was, I confess, very little concerned with matters of faith. In 1936, a crucial date in my life and in my career, I […] asked Pierre Bernac to drive me to Rocamadour, which I’d often heard my father talk about. This pilgrimage site is in fact quite near Aveyron. A few days earlier I’d just heard of the tragic death of my colleague Pierre-Octave Ferroud. The terrible decapitation of this composer who was so full of energy dumbfounded me. As I meditated on the fragility of our human frame, I was drawn once more to the life of the spirit. Rocamadour had the effect of restoring me to the faith of my childhood […] The same evening […] I began my *Litanies à la Vierge Noire* for female voices and organ.

Having composed no religious music until that point, the *Litanies* opened the way for a steady flow of religious choral works in the remainder of Poulenc’s life — including some of the most significant twentieth-century contributions to the religious choral

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repertoire. Other important works comprised the Mass in G (1937), the Stabat mater (1950–1951) for soprano, mixed chorus and orchestra, the unsanctimonious and joyful Gloria (1959–1960) and the terse and musically advanced Sept répons des ténèbres (1961–1962).

But his most substantial and, in the estimation of many, greatest post-war work was the opera Dialogues des Carmélites. Both libretto and music had a complex genesis. The story of the Compiègne Carmelites, martyred in the aftermath of the French Revolution, was first told by Mother Marie of the Incarnation of God, who survived the Terror and lived until 1836. Publication of her Relation led to the beatification of the nuns in 1906. In 1931, the story was turned into a novella entitled Die Letzte am Schafott (The Last to the Scaffold) by the German Catholic convert Gertrude von Le Fort. The heroine Blanche de la Force, who joins the order to find refuge from her terror at the outbreak of the Revolution, was her invention — the similarity of the names suggests autobiographical identification. In 1947, the Austrian priest and French Resistance fighter, Father Brückberger devised a cinematic scenario based on Le Fort’s novel and engaged the French novelist Georges Bernanos to write the dialogue. Just as Le Fort had written herself into her heroine, so Bernanos — then suffering from terminal cancer — concentrated on the dying Prioress’ crisis of faith, giving her his precise age (fifty-nine) to underline the connection. Bernanos’s work was deemed uncinematic and the film was never produced. However, when his friend Albert Béguin — literary executor and Swiss-born Catholic convert — found it in Bernanos’s papers after his death, he assembled it for publication and gave it the title by which it (and the opera) is now known. Deemed, again, unsuitable for cinematic use, it was mounted as a stage play; first, in Zurich in 1951, in German, and then in its original language in Paris the following year, where it received three hundred consecutive performances. Poulenc saw it there on two occasions though did not immediately recognize its operatic potential.

Around this time, Guido Valcarenghi, director of the Milan-based publishing house Ricordi, invited Poulenc to compose a ballet for La Scala on the life of St Margaret of Cortona. Uninspired by this idea, Poulenc instead proposed an opera on a ‘mystical’ theme. Valcarenghi suggested adapting the Bernanos play as a source, an idea whose appeal grew on Poulenc as he reread the text:

I had decided to consider the matter later, when I got back to Paris, but then, two days later, right in the middle of a bookseller’s window in Rome, I saw Les Dialogues which seemed to be waiting for me [...] I bought the book and decided to read it again. So I sat down on the terrace of the café ‘Tre scalini’ on the Piazza Navone. It was ten o’clock in the morning. At midday I was still there [...] At half past midday I was drunk with enthusiasm, but there remained the acid test: could I find the music for such a text [...] At two o’clock I telegraphed to M. Valcarenghi, true psychic that he was, that I would write the Dialogues.26

26 Ibid., pp. 56–57.
Composition proceeded quickly and the piece was completed in 1956, although the première was postponed until the following year because of legal wrangles over the rights to the text.

Work on Dialogues coincided with another period of personal turmoil for Poulenc. Alongside other attachments, he had been in a relationship since the late 1940s with a man ten years younger than himself, Lucien Roubert. In February 1955, Poulenc learned that Roubert was suffering from tuberculosis; he died in October, just as Poulenc was finishing the fair copy of the vocal score. In August Poulenc wrote a letter to his friend, the singer Pierre Bernac, which, if not strictly accurate about biographical details (the work was begun in Noizay, not Lyons, and it was not finished by this point), is revealing about his relationship to the theology underpinning the story:

I have entrusted him to my sixteen blessed Carmelites: may they protect his final hours since he has been so closely involved with their story. Indeed I began the work at his side, in happiness, in Lyons in August 1953. After all the torment, which I need not describe to you, I have just finished the work, at his side, during the last days of his earthly life. As I wrote to you once before, I am haunted by Bernanos’ phrase: ‘We do not die for ourselves alone … but for, or instead of, each other.’

This allusion to the Catholic doctrine of ‘mystical substitution’ is sung by Sister Constance. She makes a crucial intervention in Act III of the opera by claiming that it was her vote that prevented the sisters from accepting the acting Prioress’ proposal that the nuns should martyr themselves: she says she has now reconsidered, and so the sacrifice can be made. In fact, the dissenting vote belonged to Blanche, with whom Poulenc seems to have strongly identified.

‘Mystical substitution’ refers to the idea — propounded from the start of the twentieth century by Catholic writers such as J. K. Huysmans, Léon Bloy and Jacques Maritain — that a saint, following the example of Christ, can ‘substitute’ him or herself for a sinner who would otherwise be damned. The sinner would then be vicariously redeemed, in Richard D. E. Burton’s words, ‘thanks to the mysterious “reversibility” of merits and to the solidarity of the saints working in communion with each other for the salvation of sinful humanity’. Poulenc was acutely aware both of his own sinfulness, at least in relation to orthodox Catholic doctrine, and of the large numbers of friends and associates who had ‘sacrificed’ themselves — or so it seemed to him — so that he could live and compose. Uppermost in his mind at this time was not just Roubert but also Pierre-Octave Ferroud, whose death had led directly to his renewed embrace of the Catholic faith. It is telling that Poulenc changes the ending of Bernanos’s text so that Sister Blanche voluntarily mounts the scaffold to be executed by the guillotine rather than dying at the hands of the mob. By making this change, Poulenc not only clarifies that she is sacrificing herself for the benefit of others, but also makes the manner of her

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28 Burton, Outlines, p. 95.
death — decapitation — the same as that of Ferroud, whom he believed responsible for his own conversion.  

*Jephtha,* *The Apostles* and *Dialogues des Carmélites* are liminal in relation to the borders not only between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’, but also between ‘staged’ and ‘concert’ music, and ‘oratorio’ and ‘opera’. *Jephtha* and *The Apostles* are oratorios that come close to opera (particularly in the scenes highlighted above); *Dialogues des Carmélites* is an opera whose static, tableau-like quality sometimes brings it close to oratorio. All these pieces contain characters whose faith is tested or breaks; these musical portrayals are enlivened and deepened both by resonances with the personal struggles of the composers concerned and by the engagement of composers and librettists in the theological debates of their own time. The performance and reception of these works can only benefit from being ‘theologically informed’; while the appreciation of the particular qualities of such liminal works, and the contribution they make to our understanding of religious experience, will in turn enrich our understanding of the broader relationship between music and the sacred.

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29 *Ibid.*, p. 96: ‘The life and, above all, the death of Blanche de la Force becomes a manifesto for the doctrine of mystical substitution [...] when set to music by Poulenc [it is given] its most moving, as well as its most coherent, expression.’