

Ancient Echoes: Stylistic Influences in Healey Willan's Liturgical Music

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Healey Willan, sometimes given the moniker "the Dean of Canadian composers," was actually British by birth. Born in 1880 in London, he was already a well-established organist and church musician by the time he emigrated to Canada at the age of 33 to take up appointments as head of theory at the Toronto Conservatory and organist of St. Paul's Church, Bloor Street (Bryant, 1972, p. 14). He is, of course, best known as the long-time precentor, that is, director of liturgical music, at the high-Anglican church of St. Mary Magdalene, Toronto, a position he held from 1921 until his death in 1968 (Clarke, 1983). It was specifically for the magnificent acoustics of this church that a great deal of Willan's liturgical music was written.

Willan's early compositions, up to about 1916, reflect the absorption of chromatic harmonies of the nineteenth century; they recall both Charles Stanford and, in the case of his organ works, Max Reger (Brown & Bryant, 1992). He was a self-admitted Wagnerian (Clarke, 1983, p. 10) and even harboured ambitions of performing the piano works of Brahms, which he studied as a youth (Brown & Bryant, 1992).

By contrast, his liturgical compositions, shorter works intended for use at specific services, are very different in style and show much earlier compositional influences; they illustrate what seems to be a conscious attempt to belie the lush chromatics of Romanticism in favour of the modality of Gregorian plainchant and the textures of Renaissance polyphony. Nowhere are these more strongly reflected than in his Masses and motets.

Willan's love of plainchant, probably established early in his life, took tangible form with his membership in the London Gregorian Association in 1910; he was also encouraged by the Gregorian chant revivalist Francis Burgess. Later, Willan cofounded the affiliated Gregorian Association of Toronto with a mandate to promote the use of plainchant in the city; this society was active until the early 1980s.

Willan's Masses

Willan composed several Masses, mostly for Communion services. Some are Latin works for unison voices with organ, including the Masses for St. Peter, 1927, and for St. Theresa, 1930. Others have English text settings, such as St. Mary Magdalene, 1928, and St. Hugh, 1935, while still others were intended for the Lutheran use. Willan also wrote 14 English settings of the *Missa brevis*, which, in the Anglican rite, is often used during Holy Communion. In these short Masses, Willan sets the Kyrie, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei texts polyphonically; the remainder of the liturgy was often sung to the appropriate plainchant by the congregation at St. Mary Magdalene (Clarke, 1983). While many of these polyphonic settings use melodies deliberately reminiscent of plainchant, two are based on actual chants: *Missae breves* nos. 4 and 12.

Missa brevis No. 4 has as its inspiration the hymn *Corde natus ex parentis*, commonly translated "Of the Father's love begotten," written by Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, a Roman citizen and a Christian poet of the late fourth century (Campbell, 1908). But the music here is from an eleventh century trope of the Sanctus of the Roman Mass, with the text *Divinum mysterium*, a title by which the tune is now fairly widely known in modern hymn books. In the Kyrie of his *Missa brevis* setting, Willan's approach to the plainchant is not merely to relegate it to a single voice with accompaniment, though he is known to have occasionally used this technique, but rather to set the notes of the chant across all the voices with each part at some point taking up fragments of the melody, in the manner of a fifteenth century paraphrase Mass. When one hears this work, and others like it by Willan, one cannot help but recall some of the compositional methods used by composers of late Medieval and early Renaissance Europe, particularly the generations of Guillaume Dufay and, later, Josquin Desprez. These composers experimented with what had become, even by then, an old-fashioned technique, that is, *cantus firmus*, or direct incorporation of a preexistent melody, often a chant, into a polyphonic composition. Josquin, like Willan almost 500 years later, was not content with simply stating the chant melody in a single voice (an approach already 500 years old by his time). Hence the birth of the paraphrase Mass with fairly equal distribution across the parts of the melody, which was itself often ornamented and modally adjusted (Atlas, 1998). Example 1 shows an excerpt from a quintessential paraphrase Mass by Josquin: the first section of the Kyrie from his *Missa pange lingua*, introduced by its chant, a hymn, with text by Thomas Aquinas, sung at Vespers on Corpus Christi (Atlas, 1998, p. 302).

Example 1a: *Pange lingua gloriosi* (plainsong hymn).

Example 1b: Josquin DesPrez (c. 1450-1521), *Missa pange lingua*, Kyrie (opening).

Example 2a: *Divinum mysterium* (Sanctus trope, eleventh century).

Example 2b: Willan, *Missa brevis* No. 4, Kyrie (opening).

Willan's Motets

While still in England, Willan was greatly influenced by Sir Richard R. Terry who was at the cutting edge of a movement to revive the performance of sixteenth century choral music. As organist of Westminster Cathedral in London, Terry edited performing editions and led groundbreaking performances of early music within the Roman Catholic liturgy.

Willan made no secret of his own admiration for Renaissance composers. When he toured with his famous St. Mary Magdalene Choir in New York City in 1945, his concert repertoire included music by Byrd, Palestrina, Philips, and Vittoria, as well as selected Russian liturgical pieces and, of course, his own Masses and motets.

With the exception of a few miscellaneous examples, Willan's motets fall into four major collections:

- *Six Motets*, published by W. H. Gray in 1924
- *Eleven Liturgical motets*, published by Oxford University Press between 1928 and 1937
- *Seven Works of Renaissance Masters*, edited and adapted by Willan and published by Flammer, New York, in 1938, including sixteenth century motets by Adrian Batten, Vincenzo Ruffo, King John of Portugal, Jacobus Gallus, Giovanni Croce, and Hans Leo Hassler
- *Seven Late Motets*, published by Concordia, 1949-1951

Willan was a musical chameleon, capable of writing comfortably in the style of Elgar or William Byrd. However, in the 11 liturgical motets, he seems to have hit his musical stride and successfully combined elements of historical style with his own personal expression. A theatrical composer at heart, Willan needed to create a fitting accompaniment to the mystical drama of the Eucharist at the Church of St. Mary Magdalene where the liturgy expressed a rare synthesis of discipline and extravagance in ritual and music. Echoes of Palestrina and Byrd surface regularly in these motets through strict imitative counterpoint, modal harmonies, and flexible phrases married to the rhythms of English speech.

Motet No. 7, "Lo, in the time appointed," is the most overtly contrapuntal of the set, offering an exposition in classic Palestrina style. To illustrate strict sixteenth century

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Excerpt 5: Willan, Motet, "I beheld her, beautiful as a dove" (excerpt).

First (1st time)

Soprano: Who is this that com - eth up from the de - sert like a

Alto: Who is this that com - eth up from the de - sert like a

Tenor: Who is this that com - eth up from the de - sert like a

Bass: Who is this that com - eth up from the de - sert like a

Second (2nd time)

Soprano: wreath of sweet smoke a - ris - ing from frank - in - cense and myrrh?

Alto: wreath of sweet smoke a - ris - ing from frank - in - cense and myrrh?

Tenor: wreath of sweet smoke a - ris - ing from frank - in - cense and myrrh?

Bass: wreath of sweet smoke a - ris - ing from frank - in - cense and myrrh?

Example 5: Willan, Motet, "I beheld her, beautiful as a dove" (excerpt).

Finally, Willan leaves no doubt at all about the influences on his motet style with one particular example of a direct quotation in a Christmas setting. In Motet No. 10, "Hodie, Christus natus est," the musical homage to the late sixteenth century Dutch composer, Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, is obvious. As Examples 6 and 7 demonstrate, Willan borrows Sweelinck's work in the initial phrases of this motet.

Excerpt 6: Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621), Motet, "Hodie, Christus natus est" (excerpt).

Soprano I: Ho - di - e, ho - di - e, Chris -

Soprano II: Ho - di - e, ho - di - e, Chris -

Alto: Ho - di - e, ho - di - e, Chris -

Tenor: Ho - di - e, ho - di - e, Chris -

Bass: Ho - di - e, ho - di - e, Chris -

Soprano I: lux na - tus est.

Soprano II: lux na - tus est.

Alto: lux na - tus est.

Tenor: lux na - tus est.

Bass: lux na - tus est.

Example 6: Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621), Motet, "Hodie, Christus natus est" (excerpt).

Example 7: Willan, Motet, "Hodie, Christus natus est" (excerpt).

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Palestrina

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Sweelinck

"Hodie, Christus natus est." *Vox Neerlandica: vijf eeuwen gemengd koor, a cappella.* Loosdrecht, Holland: Harmonia, 1995.

Willan

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I beheld her, beautiful as a dove. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1928.

Lo, in the time appointed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1929.

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