

Total performance time: approximately 100 minutes, including a 20-minute interval

## Tenebrae: I saw eternity

### Tenebrae

**Nigel Short** director

#### **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685–1750)

Komm, Jesu, komm, BWV 229 (before 1732)

8'

Text: Paul Thymich (1656–1694), after John 14: 6

#### **James MacMillan** (b.1959)

Tenebrae Responsories (2006):

*No.1 Tenebrae factae sunt*

7'

Text: 5th Responsory at Matins on Good Friday

#### **J.S. Bach**

Jesu, meine Freude, BWV 227 (before 1735)

20'

Text: Johann Franck (1618–1677), after Romans 8: 1, 9–11

### INTERVAL

#### **James MacMillan**

Miserere (2009)

12'

Text: Psalm 50

Tenebrae Responsories (2006):

*No.2 Tradiderunt me*

6'

Text: 7th Responsory at Matins on Good Friday

*No.3 Jesum tradidit impius*

8'

Text: 9th Responsory at Matins on Good Friday

I saw Eternity the other night (2021)

6'

Text: Henry Vaughan (1621–1695)

This performance is being  
recorded live for later release  
as a commercial CD.

#### **J.S. Bach**

Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied, BWV 225 (1726/7)

15'

Text: Johann Gramann (1487–1541), after Psalm 149: 1–3; 150: 2, 6



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J. S. Bach and Sir James MacMillan may stand three centuries apart, but they are connected through a love of writing for choirs and a devotion to writing music for their respective liturgies, the Lutheran and the Roman Catholic. 'Music and spirituality are very closely entwined,' MacMillan has said. 'Some of the great music of our civilization has been written for divine worship.' Like Bach, MacMillan has returned often to the themes of Jesus Christ's Passion and death – what he calls 'those violent days of human history'. We hear his dedication to that story in his *Tenebrae Responsories*. We also hear – though refracted in a very different musical world – the purpose with which he follows in Bach's footsteps. For MacMillan, Bach 'opened up a window on the divine love affair with humanity. The greatest calling for any artist ... is to do the same.'

The warmest and most intimate of Bach's six surviving motets, **Komm, Jesu, komm** is a setting for double four-part choir of the first and last stanzas of a hymn by Paul Thymich written for the funeral of the then Rector of St Thomas's School in Leipzig, whose students Bach had taught since becoming Cantor of St Thomas's Church in 1723. Thymich's hymn is a plea for the Lord to bring the peace that comes at the end of our existence, and quickly sets up an impassioned dialogue between the two choirs. In the first stanza, each line is given its own musical treatment, leading to a rich variety of textures and moods: most remarkably, the final line of the first stanza – borrowed from St John's gospel, 'Thou art the Way, the Truth and the Life', has an elaborate, swinging dance-like spirit. In contrast the second stanza is treated much more economically and directly, in the manner of a chorale.

Just as the end of 'Komm, Jesu, komm' talks of entrusting our spirit to Jesus, the first of MacMillan's three *Tenebrae Responsories* concerns Jesus himself at his Crucifixion commending himself to God after asking 'Why hast Thou forsaken me?'

As befits *Tenebrae*, a service relating to 'darkness' (traditionally, a series of 15 lit candles would be extinguished one by one), MacMillan's **Tenebrae factae sunt** begins in the depths, building a rich choral texture out of which emerges a downward-creeping figure and abrupt, declamatory interjections of 'crucifixissent' ('was crucified') and 'voce magna' ('great voice'). Christ's own words are delivered in highly decorated, almost psalm-like strands, their ornamentation reflecting MacMillan's interest in and admiration for the traditional music of Scotland and Ireland, as well as of the Middle East. The composer's ability to blend the drama of the text with imaginative choral writing continues as the lower voices excitedly announce Christ's second exclamation, in which he finally gives himself up to his Father. A heavenly aura prefigures his words and that exclamation is given an enveloping rising sweep. The end fades into nothingness, as Christ gives up his spirit.

The longest of Bach's six motets **Jesu, meine Freude** is based around six verses of a hymn tune by Johann Franck. The first five verses are alternated with verses from St Paul's letter to the Romans, before the motet is capped off with the hymn's sixth verse. The resulting 11-part structure contains many points of symmetry, allowing the central (sixth) section to carry the key message – of tending to the spirit over the flesh – in the form of a double fugue.

MacMillan's **Miserere** follows a long tradition of choral settings of this Penitential Psalm. Josquin, Palestrina, Gesualdo and Lassus all wrote music for the text, but perhaps the best-known of all is Allegri's, which the 14-year-old Mozart supposedly copied out after hearing it at a service at the Sistine Chapel. MacMillan references Allegri's setting in the use of plainchant. But, he says, 'My version of the chant is harmonized, once in a relatively traditional manner, and then later, ethereally and with floating drones'.

MacMillan's second *Tenebrae Responsory*, **Tradiderunt me** opens with three outbursts of the initial words ('They delivered me [into the hands of the impious]'). There are musical connections with the previous Responsory: a downward motion at 'et non pepercerunt animae meae' ('and spared not my soul') as a counterpart to the upward sweep at 'Tenebrae factae sunt' at Christ's second exclamation; and immediately following this a decorative treatment for 'congregati sunt adversum' ('the powerful gathered together against me').

**Jesum tradidit**, the Ninth Good Friday Responsory, likewise opens dramatically with three outbursts of 'Jesum' (marked 'anguished'), immediately followed by the most decorative and exotic-sounding of all passages in MacMillan's three responsories, now accompanied by a drone in the basses. The writing here is highly soloistic, one of the many challenges in these pieces, even for the most accomplished choirs. A swooping soprano solo brings an atmospheric close, a soulful, almost birdlike song, that eventually recedes into the distance.

Written to the first stanza of a poem by Henry Vaughan, **I saw Eternity** was given its world premiere by *Tenebrae* in November 2021. It's easy to see why MacMillan would have been attracted to Vaughan's description and separation of two worlds, one representing the vastness of eternity, relating to our souls, the other below, alluding to our everyday mortal lives. MacMillan especially responds to Vaughan's vision of eternity as 'Like a great Ring of pure, endless light'. There is wonder, but there is calm too. Ultimately there is a contrast here of light and dark.

Tonight's programme concludes with Bach's joyous motet **Singet dem Herrn**. Cast in three movements (in the fast-slow-fast pattern of a concerto), the exuberant first movement (Psalm 149) brings writing of astonishing virtuosity in an expression of praise to God that calls for 'Pauken und Harfen' ('drums and harps'). In the serene second movement the two choirs alternate, Choir 2 singing part of a hymn by Johann Gramann, and Choir 1 answering with a freer setting of an anonymous hymn. Both hymns centre on God as the protector of his people. The final movement brings the choirs together in another jubilant expression of praise, ending with 'Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord'.

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I Saw Eternity:

This motet was commissioned for the London Bach Society's 75th Anniversary by Richard Jones, LBS Council Chairman.