

‘Roll over, Handel’: Paul McCartney’s Ecce Cor Meum and the English Oratorio Tradition

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In 2007, a full scale oratorio for soprano, mixed choirs, and symphony orchestra composed by former Beatle Sir Paul McCartney was voted Classical Album of the Year in the Classical Brit Awards. The work, entitled *Ecce Cor Meum* (that is, ‘Behold My Heart’), was not McCartney’s first attempt at composing in the ‘classical,’ or ‘serious’ manner (we shall use the term ‘classical’ here in its broad, general sense, in contrast to ‘popular,’ and not as referring to the classical style of Mozart or Haydn as defined for instance by Charles Rosen¹). He had previously composed three other works: the *Liverpool Oratorio* (1991), *Standing Stone* (1997) and *Working Classical* (1999). However, *Ecce Cor Meum* was more ambitious than these. Written over a long period of time (8 years), its composition was interrupted by the illness of McCartney’s wife Linda and completed after her subsequent death. It is imbued with spiritual and emotional overtones which betray the composer’s genuine sadness and quest for healing through art.

It would be easy to dismiss the work offhandedly as the production of a ‘pop’ artist unqualified for serious composition in such a genre. The work is, indeed, of unequal and—by the standards of learned music writing—average quality. Conversely, some might argue that McCartney is a true genius with a great melodic gift, as evinced by his amazing career as one of the greatest and most successful song writers alive, and that his oratorio taps into his apparently easy and natural ability to craft pleasing tunes. Leaving aside such outbursts of subjective appreciation, it seems relevant to ponder on the very nature of McCartney’s endeavour and to try to account for it. Why would a pop-singer embark on such a venture? How well- or ill-equipped can he be thought to have been for the task? What particular resonance can such a work have on today’s British classical music scene? What can explain the success the work has met with? Above all, why did McCartney choose such a format—that of the oratorio—for this work? What does this choice reveal about the importance of the genre in British musical culture? We intend to address some of these issues in this paper. We shall suggest that the success of the work had to do less with its intrinsic musical qualities—pleasant though it may be—than with its inscription within an ideological framework originally moulded by the Handelian oratorio and its importance in terms of British national identity and that McCartney’s decision to compose such a work can be read

¹ Charles ROSEN, *The Classical Style*, London: Faber & Faber, 1971.

as an attempt to acquire a kind of social and artistic distinction as a ‘serious’ composer that is ripe with ideological undertones.

Commission and Performance

Ecce Cor Meum was commissioned by Anthony Smith, president (1998-2005) of Magdalen College, Oxford. As the CD’s liner notes make clear, Anthony Smith hoped that the work would be ‘a choral piece which could be sung by young people the world over—something equivalent to Handel’s *Messiah*.’² The daunting reference made to Handel’s most popular oratorio indicates that Paul McCartney was explicitly aligned with the great eighteenth-century German-born composer and that the intention was that the wide gap between ‘classical’ and popular music should be as much as erased.

Originally, the opening performance of *Ecce Cor Meum* was to coincide with the dedication of a new concert hall at Magdalen College. Unfortunately, due to the illness of McCartney’s wife, the work was not ready on time. Linda McCartney died of cancer in April 1998 and McCartney stopped working on the composition of the piece for a couple of years. It was later resumed and a first version was performed in the Chapel of Magdalen College and the Sheldonian in Oxford in 2001, then a revised version was premiered at the Royal Albert Hall on 3 November 2006. The one-hour long work in 5 movements (‘Spiritus,’ ‘Gratia,’ ‘Interlude,’ ‘Musica’ and ‘Ecce Cor Meum’) was performed by the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields conducted by Gavin Greenaway with soloist Kate Royal (soprano) and a DVD of the concert was made (EMI DVD 5099950073399), while a CD of the work (EMI CD 094637042328)—recorded at the famous Abbey Road studios in London and, for the organ part, the Tower of London—was subsequently issued by EMI Classics. The work was also given a performance at New York’s Carnegie Hall on 16 November 2006, with Kate Royal, the Concert Chorale of New York and the American Boychoir, and the Orchestra of St. Luke’s, conducted by Gavin Greenaway. The CD’s liner notes and DVD, showing some of the rehearsals and interviews of McCartney, provide interesting information on the composer’s intention, the rationale of the work and the composition process.

As Steve Hickens remarks about the footage of the premiere, ‘At the beginning of the film, before the performance begins, the composer enters the Royal Albert Hall and is greeted like, well, a rock star.’³ A ‘serious’ or ‘classical’ composer though he may have wanted to appear to be or eventually to become, McCartney exists in the public eye first and foremost as a ‘pop’ icon and one of the problematic issues in his attempt is the inevitable conflict between the two musical worlds that, by his moving from the one to the other, he seems to have wanted to bring closer together. In an interview back in 1968, here is what Paul McCartney explained about classical music:

² Paul MCCARTNEY, *Ecce Cor Meum* CD liner notes, London: EMI Classics, 2006, s.p.

³ Steve HICKENS, <http://www.sequenza21.com/cdreviews/2008/07/dvd-paul-mccartney-ecce-cor-meum/>, accessed on 8 March 2011.

I was always frightened of classical music and I never wanted to listen to it, because it was Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, and big words like that, Schoenberg... I always used to think of it, that's very clever, all that stuff—but it isn't, and it's just exactly what's going on in pop at the moment. Pop music is the classical music of now.⁴

Not only did he then perceive classical music as something intimidating and awesome, a frightening world dominated and made inaccessible by the figures of great composers, but he also attempted to redeem or upgrade pop music by defining it as ‘the classical music of now.’ The difficulty or ‘cleverness’—as he put it—of classical music was made light of so as to assert that, after all, all music is ‘equal’ (even though some works may be a little more so than others!) based upon the same principles, and that, simply, pop music had now acquired a status equivalent to that of the serious classical compositions of the past. Slightly arrogant though it may appear to have been, this statement probably revealed that classical music was then perceived as being out of touch with the taste, needs and demands of a whole generation, while the extraordinary fame of a few pop artists, their daring antics, and their often ‘revolutionary’ stance aligned them with the great classical musicians of yesterday as imagined through a romantic representation. In any case, McCartney’s position at the time was certainly not one of reverence towards orchestral composition in a classical idiom but, on the contrary, one of dismissal.

If one now turns to the premiere of *Ecce Cor Meum* at the Royal Albert Hall, one discovers a very different man indeed. Just before the concert, McCartney is heard declaring: ‘This is the first real performance—it is the Albert Hall, after all, a historical place.’⁵ He says he is also particularly glad that the recording of the organ should have taken place in the chapel of the Tower of London, another historic place. Sir Paul now refers not to the present, but to history. The move from the world of pop to that of the classical oratorio seems to have been accompanied by a desire to be part of a tradition rather than to create a new, modern one. In a span of about 30 years, McCartney has consciously evolved from a rejection, to an embracing of tradition and its symbols. His work was deliberately ‘written in the style of sacred English choral music, a tradition dating back 500 years.’⁶ In order to do so, while at the same time retaining his status as a pop star, a free, independent spirit and a non-academic musician, McCartney had to operate at several compositional, but also ideological levels.

Composition and Reception

First, the method of composition requires some attention. As he clearly and candidly explains himself, McCartney cannot *write* music. Though melodies and harmonies do come to him easily, as his many songs testify, he has not mastered the craft of

⁴ Paul MCCARTNEY, 1968 interview, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CtnXnWpC9GE>, accessed on 7 March 2011.

⁵ Paul MCCARTNEY, *Ecce Cor Meum* EMI DVD 5099950073399, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxLEfufW0r4>, accessed 7 March 2011.

⁶ 14, NPR.org, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6506936&ps=rs>, accessed 7 March 2011.

transcribing them in a written form. As is the case with many popular artists, his music entirely depends on its vocal and instrumental performance, unmediated through any written score. Previously, for the composition of his first oratorio, he had resorted to the assistance of a competent professional musician who could transcribe his ideas, as he explained in an interview in 1990: 'I need to work with someone who's very good... I'm basically doing most of the writing and he's actually doing the notation.'⁷ Interestingly, McCartney used the term 'writing' when writing the music was precisely what he did not do—but this is the verb many popular musicians use when talking about their albums, especially when they also write their lyrics. He probably felt, albeit unconsciously, that the term carried greater weight, conferring more respectability to his own input in terms of invention or creation: classical music thus appears to be defined—in the collective perception people have of it—as primarily *written* music (partly erroneous though such a conception may be, since improvisation has always played a great part in the fabric of classical music, in particular in the Baroque period, as evidenced in Handel's organ concertos, for instance⁸). It is the classical composer's ability to formalize and, as it were, 'freeze' his music once and for all, that contributes to both its permanence and his respectability, the latter being precisely what McCartney was hankering for in his attempts at composing 'serious' music.

For *Ecce Cor Meum*, McCartney resorted to modern technology instead of an amanuensis: he used a computer linked to a synthesizer with a MIDI keyboard which enabled him to play the music, then hear what it sounded like and finally produce the score automatically thanks to the computer program. He explains:

Apart from some piano lessons when I was a child, I've never had a lesson in composition or notation—and if you haven't had the lessons you have to figure everything out for yourself. But then, if you haven't been taught anything and have a happy accident you're more likely to recognise it. Sometimes you can have a happy accident in writing music and people say 'Well, you mustn't double the third.'⁹ And when people told me that I said 'Are you kidding? Get out of my way, I'm going to double them all!' Being told what not to do made me want to do it more.'¹⁰

Characteristically, then, McCartney asserts here his freedom and originality, turning his technical handicap into an advantage: the only criterion of assessment of the quality of his music that he goes by is his own gut feeling. Classical rules of composition are dismissed as being beside the point and the invisible hand of his better judgment is deemed sufficient to validate his invention. Convinced that the people at Magdalen who had commissioned the work 'wanted something different

⁷ Paul MCCARTNEY, 1990 interview in Ames, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8aDWybd_m8.

⁸ See DUBOIS, 'The Socio-Cultural Semiotics of Handel's Organ Concertos', *BIOS Journal*, 2010 n° 34, pp.68-81.

⁹ Paul McCartney probably refers to the doubling of the fifths, not the thirds—a slip that confirms his ignorance of the classical rules of music.

¹⁰ Paul MCCARTNEY, *Ecce Cor Meum* CD liner notes, *op.cit.*.

otherwise they wouldn’t be asking [him]’,¹¹ McCartney wants both to have his cake and eat it—to be both a serious composer and a dilettante, and to compose a classical oratorio while retaining the privilege of remaining unchained by the rules of classical composition. The track is a narrow, difficult one, which may account for some of the shortcomings of the piece. At the same time, however, it may conversely remind one of the way his illustrious model—Handel—was praised in the eighteenth century precisely for his ability not to abide by the rules but to transgress them through his inventive genius. For Handel’s first biographer, John Mainwaring, for instance, musical genius—as opposed to simple talent—was defined by the musician’s ability to free himself from the rules of composition:

*And a foreigner, who would make a figure in the profession, ought to observe [these characteristics] with the greatest exactness, because they are such as cannot be marked, or written, or even described. So little are they to be learnt by rule, that they are not unfrequently direct violations of rule. I am at a loss what to call them, unless they are certain beauties and delicacies in sentiment and expression, which are only to be caught from long habit, and attentive observation.*¹²

For Mainwaring, the ‘violation of rules’ was part and parcel of what constituted the musical sublime. Contrary to other artists, what made Handel remarkable was not his strict adherence to the ‘established rules and principles’ upon which music is founded, rules that are ‘derived from experience and observation,’ for such ‘a clear comprehension of those rules, and the ability to apply them, are called knowledge.’ What marked Handel out was his ability to

*depart from the common rules, and please us the more by such deviations. These must of course be considered as bold strokes, or daring flights of fancy. Such passages are not founded on rules, but are themselves the foundation of new rules.*¹³

Whether McCartney’s ‘daring flights of fancy’ may prove the foundation of new rules is of course debatable. What is however striking is the—probably unconscious and fortuitous—similarity with Handel’s past reputation in McCartney’s attempt at claiming his right as an artist to transgress the accepted laws of music and invent his own individual path, in the name of his independence and unquestioned sense of what is right.

It is noticeable however that, even though he asserts his rights to such creative freedom, McCartney carefully avoids sounding arrogant about his composition. He candidly admits, for instance, that his using a computer had a direct impact on the way he was to compose his oratorio. The third and central movement of *Ecce Cor Meum* is an instrumental piece, entitled ‘Interlude (Lament)’, with a solo oboe part. The reason for the choice of the oboe appears to be directly linked to the fact that McCartney was using a synthesizer while composing. He explains:

¹¹ *Ibid.*.

¹² John MAINWARING, *Memoirs of the Life of the Late G.F. Handel*, London, 1760, p. 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 160-3.

I was composing at a synthesizer, where you find yourself using what you like. It may be that on a synthesizer a solo violin is a terrible sound, so you avoid using it, whereas a real solo violin is a beautiful sound, but you can't stand the scratchiness in the meanwhile. The oboe had a beautiful sound on the synthesizer, so I found myself using the oboe a lot more than I might have done otherwise.¹⁴

Music is barely an *imagined* thing for McCartney, but rather a *realised* one. He needs to hear the actual sounds of instruments and the notes performed to have direct access to the music and hear whether it sounds as he wants it to. The composition process is therefore entirely dependent on performance, even if at a later stage the computer enables a reworking of the orchestral accompaniment texture or the introduction of elements of polyphony, inner parts in the harmony, etc. In any case, whatever complexity the score may contain does not seem to have been conceived initially but rather gradually attained thanks to the equipment at the composer's disposal.

Critical response to the work was mitigated. Whereas Pedro Blas Gonzalez thought that 'The final result is a complex, serious piece that serves as a testament to [McCartney's] ability to compose moving, beautiful music',¹⁵ Steve Hickens drily underlined the technical limitations of the work:

The melodies in McCartney's hour-long Ecce Cor Meum ... are not nearly as memorable as those in his best songs. It seems as though he had a preconceived notion about what "classical" melodies should sound like and how they should be shaped. He wrote accordingly, and the result is somewhat forced and artificial.

As to the other niceties of 'classical' composition, McCartney falls back on the standard tools of the inexperienced composer's pedals, sequences, and ostinatos. In this way his melodies are given the means to play out into a lengthy composition. The harmony, rhythm, and orchestration of the piece are pretty standard late 20th-century neo-tonal, with a hint of English pastoralism.¹⁶

Even more savagely, R. J. Carter demolished the work in the following terms:

When I first began listening to Paul McCartney's latest release, I had four immediate thoughts, in the following order:
 1. *Whose funeral are we attending?*
 2. *I'd better get some more coffee.*
 3. *Why am I giving an oral report to my high school Latin class in just my underpants? Didn't I graduate, like, twenty years ago?*

¹⁴ Paul MCCARTNEY, *Ecce Cor Meum* CD liner notes, *op.cit.*.

¹⁵ Pedro Blas GONZALES, 'McCartney and *Ecce Cor Meum*,' *Blue Coupe* magazine, 18 April 2007, <http://bluecoupe.blogspot.com/2007/04/mccartney-and-ecce-cor-meum.html>, accessed 18 March 2011.

¹⁶ Steve HICKENS, *op. cit.*.

4. *Wow, where did the time go?*

Ecce Cor Meum, Latin for ‘Behold My Heart’, is a special kind of release. It’s the kind of release that says, ‘I’m so bloody rich I can indulge my whim to put out albums of any kind just because I no longer care if they make money.’ There’s not really any other plausible explanation for this orchestral set of dirges, requiems and pastoral passages, punctuated with mostly unintelligible lyrics chanted, canted, and reverently intoned. ...

In the final track, you can actually come to understand a bit of the lyrics, as the female soprano warbles out, ‘Here in my music I show my heart.’ That’s funny. I would have thought that, if anywhere in his music we’d seen Paul McCartney’s heart, it would have been in ‘Silly Love Songs’, not in this somber faux-Mozartian drama.

*If this is the new state of Macca’s heart, Heather must have really made a bloody mess of it. She may have dethroned Yoko Ono as the female to have wreaked the most havoc on The Beatles.*¹⁷

Though somewhat less scathingly, other writers also underlined the disappointing result of McCartney’s attempt at dabbling in serious symphonic and choral music and the rather mediocre quality of his own lines ‘about truth, about love, about honesty, about kindness’.¹⁸ On the occasion of the New York Premiere of the work, the *New York Times* commented:

In ‘Messiah’ land, however, he finds himself occupying alien territory. The bigness of the McCartney sensibility lies in its smallness. Increasing the weight it carries does not make it deeper in quality. Rather it sinks both music and message into a kind of viscous sentimentality.

*Using a vocabulary of singing strings, pounding timpani, brass flourishes and virtuoso outbursts from the organ, the Paul McCartney we value translates poorly. The native wistfulness becomes portentous, the irony oratorical and overly sweet, the brevity of song form stretched beyond its bounds into tedium.*¹⁹

Evan Sawdey followed suit:

Yet during all of this (and in-between releasing his pop albums), the main criticism still remains a stinging one: he’s Paul McCartney—King of the Pop Song, not the Orchestra Pit.

... Unfortunately, such lofty ambitions—despite well-phrased and quite-glowing liner notes by Peter Quantrill—fall short in the long run. Though McCartney is very much not a classical composer, this may be the closest he gets to sounding like one. Opening number ‘Spiritus’, in its lengthy 12 minutes, somehow manages to imitate just

¹⁷ R. J. CARTER, *Music Review*, October 24, 2006, <http://www.the-trades.com/article.php?id=4912>, accessed 7 March 2011.

¹⁸ Paul MCCARTNEY, *Ecce Cor Meum* EMI DVD, *op. cit.*, accessed 7 March 2011.

¹⁹ *The New York Times*, 16 November 2006.

about every style in classical music, right down to a creeping oboe that sounds like it wandered away from Peter & the Wolf. When it comes to the far-better realized 'Musica', not only are we treated to the lovely voice of soprano Kate Royal, but we get a section that actually ties together melodically. Unfortunately, there are multiple moments where McCartney sounds less like he's composing a classical work as he is a film score (and one to some lightweight romantic-drama, at that).

... Ecce Cor Meum's largest fault is staggeringly large: a sheer lack of focus. Messiah and Mozart's Requiem are staples to this day largely because of the focus—very direct tellings of the story of Jesus, or sheer cathartic mourning. Ambitious in scale and scope McCartney is not. He was never a truly astounding lyricist, and here delivers movement after movement of generic 'We Are the World'-styled sentiments.

Ecce Cor Meum remains an enjoyable experience, regardless. It shows McCartney maturing as a composer, but still not crossing that line from "good" to "great" (or universally accepted like Messiah, for that matter).²⁰

And Michael Church concurred:

Then, after a snatch of Stravinskian woodwind and a blast on the organ, we were in full polyphony; the orchestration was deft. Bach, Dvorak, Bruckner, Vaughan Williams, John Rutter - as the kaleidoscope turned, echoes came from all sides: it was immaculately performed, but a bit like being in an art gallery full of fakes. So where was it going? ... Occasionally this had the artless simplicity of vintage Beatledom but for the most part it was sententious: lines like 'Without truth false shades nothing else remains' would have been better unheard. Once or twice a melody surfaced, before being swallowed up in the easy-listening soup.²¹

The work, in other words—and understandably so—failed to deliver what it promised. But then a question remains: how can one explain the fact it was acclaimed as it was, given a Classical Brit Award, and performed in such prestigious places as the Royal Albert Hall and Carnegie Hall? Is McCartney's name the only explanation for the apparent success of such a flawed composition? Or is there perhaps a deeper, sociological and ideological reason for it?

²⁰ Evan SAWDEY, 8 November 2006, *PopMatters*, <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/paul-mccartney-ecce-cor-meum>, accessed 7 March 2011.

²¹ Michael CHURCH, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/reviews/ecce-cor-meum-royal-albert-hall-london-422915.html>, accessed 7 March 2011.

The Oratorio Ideology and the ‘Promsification’ of Classical Music

As we have already mentioned, the original idea of the commission was for McCartney to create a work that would be ‘something equivalent to Handel’s *Messiah*.’ It is therefore the inscription of *Ecce Cor Meum* within the tradition of the English oratorio originally founded by George Frederick Handel that must be investigated. As is well-known, the Handelian oratorio was born out of a very specific cultural context which should be quickly summed up. It was originally conceived as an alternative to Italian opera—supported by the aristocracy—that had become the object of intense criticism on social, political and ideological grounds. ‘Genteel’ people were hankering for a new musical and theatrical genre that would reconcile devotion with entertainment. The oratorio was thus envisaged as a way to ‘moralize’ the British stage.²² Formally speaking, it deftly blended elements derived from the purely English tradition of the Anglican verse Anthem—which implied extensive use of a choir—with the operatic *aria da capo*, so that Handel called his oratorios ‘sacred dramas.’ Moreover, the organ concertos performed by Handel himself between the parts of the oratorio added elements of virtuosity and theatricality, while summoning up images of the church through a process of association of ideas.²³ Gradually in the course of the eighteenth century, and especially after the great Handel Commemoration that took place at Westminster Abbey and the Pantheon in 1784 and the following years, Handel’s oratorios became synonymous with British national identity, patriotism and civic pride,²⁴ as evinced by the construction of massive organs in the town halls of large cities across the country, intended in particular to accompany the huge choral forces assembled on given occasions to sing sections from the said works. In the eighteenth century, the Handelian and post-Handelian English oratorio was fundamentally Christian in outlook. Later emulated by a host of English composers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including Elgar, Walton, Tippett and Britten, to name but a few, the genre created by Handel was replete with extra-musical meaning that seemed particularly appropriate to enable the coming together of the British people in the quasi-hymnal celebration of national feelings.

In many respects, McCartney’s oratorio is closely embedded in the Handelian oratorio tradition. Like its avowed model, it is written for the combined forces of orchestra, choir and solo vocal parts (even if the latter is reduced here to its bare essentials, i.e. one soprano). It is in a way quite revealing that soprano Kate Royal

²² See Ruth SMITH, *Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-century Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 1995, 17.

²³ See Pierre DUBOIS, *op. cit.*

²⁴ See Charles BURNEY, *An Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster Abbey and the Pantheon in Commemoration of Handel*, London, 1785; William WEBER, ‘The 1784 Handel Commemoration as Political Ritual,’ *Journal of British Studies* No. 28, January 1989, 43-69; Thomas MCGEARY, ‘Music, Meaning, and Politics: The 1784 Handel Commemoration Reconsidered,’ in *Göttinger Händel-Beiträge* Vol. 9, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002; DUBOIS, « Art et nation: la commémoration de Haendel en 1784 ou l’institution d’un rituel patriotique », in « Art et Nation en Grande-Bretagne au XVIIIe siècle », ed. Suzy Halimi, *Revue française de civilisation britannique*, vol. xiii, n° 4, 2006, 45-58.

who premiered and recorded the work should also be well-known for her performances of Handel, as if a link was intentionally made between her work as a soloist in the baroque and classical repertoire and her participation in McCartney's piece so as to underscore the respectability and acceptability of the latter. There are two choirs, a mixed adult one and a boys' choir (for the recording the boys of Magdalen College, Oxford, and King's College, Cambridge, were used) and this too ties in well with tradition. The distinctive 'English' colour of the boys' voices is unmistakable. Quite significantly, McCartney also included a solo organ part, which he insisted be recorded on a proper pipe organ (that of the Chapel of St. Peter ad Vincula at the Tower of London played by Colm Carey). This organ, built by the Canadian firm Orgues Létourneau in 1999 in a historic case built in 1699 by 'Father' Bernard Schmidt (2 manuals and pedals, 36 stops) seems also, ironically, to link past and present, but of course neither the sounds of the organ nor the writing of the piece have anything to do with Handel's own use of the instrument in his concertos. The meaty organ chords and sonorities have more to do with the English romantic tradition than with the Baroque idiom. What the inclusion of that solo organ part reveals however is how much the instrument has historically become associated with the English oratorio genre, so that its inclusion by McCartney seems to have been almost inevitable, as a recognisable signature or means of generic identification. The tradition has thus undoubtedly been digested and assimilated by McCartney, albeit more or less unconsciously.

Beyond such nods in the direction of the Handelian oratorio, what is really most striking in McCartney's endeavour is its overall gesture and the contradiction it implies. One cannot help having the impression that *Ecce Cor Meum* exists mainly in terms of the intention that prompted it—the decision to commission a famous pop musician to write a 'serious' oratorio for no other reason than some apparent similarity between the fame enjoyed by Handel in his own time and that enjoyed by McCartney in ours. It is as though he *had* to write an oratorio and place himself within a tradition going back to Handel, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Elgar, *et al.* in order fully to attain the status of 'English Musician' for posterity which his work as the author of popular songs could not grant him.²⁵ That— one may aver— was not McCartney's own doing. However, what is puzzling is that, as he moved from one musical world to the other, the edge seems to have been taken off his own composition skills and he was as a result led into very conservative musical grounds.

Ecce Cor Meum is remarkable indeed for its extremely conventional style. It consists in a kind of *collage* of various past musical idioms (as stressed by Michael Church, see quotation above). Yet whereas the visual and musical *collages* in the Beatles' *Sergeant Peppers' Lonely Hearts-Club Band* were innovative and provocative in 1967, at one with the current trends in the visual arts spearheaded by 'pop' artists such as Richard Hamilton, Allen Jones, or Peter Phillips, the admixture of styles in the oratorio seems barely intentional and, the various musical influences being all those of past composers as they are, there seems to be nothing notionally or intentionally original or provocative in the use made of them, unless the composer

²⁵ Of course, Haydn and Mendelssohn were not English but it should be remembered that their great oratorios, such as *The Creation* or *Elijah*, were greatly influenced by Handel's own oratorios and the composers' discovery and experience of oratorio performances in England.

aimed at musical all-inclusiveness. As for the libretto—also a *collage* of Latin and English—it remains rather vague and mawkish, awash as it is with the expression of sentimental and pseudo-philosophical generalities.

*Spiritus, help us
Spiritus, help us to learn
Teach us to care
Show us how to share our love
...
Take away love and we are ruined
Take love away and we are lost
...
Life aboard this fast revolver still remains a magic mystery
Loud reports of anger fill the pages of our history
...
Whether we are strong or are weak
Whether we are foolish or we are wise
We all seek the treasures hidden within love
We all seek the pleasures of love
Etc.*

Interestingly, the oratorio is not ‘sacred’, though it is a ‘spiritual confession’, as McCartney explains:

Religious conjures up pictures of us and them—my god’s better than yours. And religion, the way I was taught it, had a lot of uncomfortable things in it, wrath and punishment and original sin, that I’m not very happy with. So I didn’t want to say God instead of Allah. Your god’s probably as good as mine. But I’m very comfortable with the idea of it being viewed spiritually.²⁶

Whereas the Handelian oratorio was originally conceived essentially as a sacred drama, based upon the scriptures and intended to be—in the words of Winton Dean²⁷—a ‘supplement to the liturgy,’ McCartney’s work belongs in a totally different age, in which traditional religious beliefs have long since been eroded and multiculturalism has modified British society—even prompting Prince Charles to declare in an interview that, were he to become King, he would wish to become ‘the defender of Faith’ as opposed to simply the ‘defender of *the* Faith’.²⁸ McCartney’s work intends to be all-inclusive, both musically and ideologically. It is, in other words, aimed at a potentially large audience and intends to be far less socially exclusive than classical oratorios were wont to be. The very fact that the composer himself should come from the world of pop music signals that he conceives a classical work as one accessible to all kinds of people, whatever their religious

²⁶ Paul MCCARTNEY *Ecce Cor Meum* CD liner notes, *op.cit.*.

²⁷ Winton DEAN, *Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, London, Oxford U.P., 1959.

²⁸ *The Telegraph*, 13 Nov 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/theroyalfamily/3454271/Prince-Charles-to-be-known-as-Defender-of-Faith.html>, accessed 18 March 2011.

beliefs or musical knowledge may be. In this respect, the work is perfectly at one with the fundamental rationale of the Proms, staged at the Royal Albert Hall in London where *Ecce Cor Meum* was actually performed. Traditionally, the Proms welcome people from a broader section of the population than those who usually attend classical music concerts—the ‘Prommers,’ i.e. people promenading, instead of sitting, during the concert, paying for cheaper tickets. Traditionally too, the last night of the Proms includes British patriotic compositions such as Edward Elgar’s *Pomp and Circumstance*, Thomas Augustine Arne’s *Rule Britannia*, Charles Hubert Hastings Parry’s *Jerusalem* or Sir Henry Wood’s *Fantasia on British Sea Songs*, etc.

We may suggest, then, that McCartney’s success with *Ecce Cor Meum* can be accounted for mainly in terms of what we dare to call a tendency to the ‘Promsification’ of classical music in today’s British cultural context. As several studies have made clear, while both the standards of musical education²⁹ and public attendance at classical music concerts have generally been going down over the last decades, the Proms are the largest music festival in the world today with constantly rising attendance figures, due mainly to ‘reasonable price, informality and assurance of quality’.³⁰ In the context of conventional high-brow classical venues, the criteria of musical quality are determined by the cultural standards of taste of an educated elite that manifest what Pierre Bourdieu called their ‘social distinction’³¹ through their ready espousal of complex form, demanding listening and radical exposure to ‘high art’. Not so with the Proms, which tend to ‘give the audience what they like’ without taking risks in terms of the possible reception of the works programmed. Though the Proms do not attract radically new socio-economic groups, they are basically a successful *popular* event for the middle-classes.

McCartney’s *Ecce Cor Meum* seems to be the perfect illustration and embodiment of the easy sentimentality that may appeal to Proms listeners. Its success—in the form of the Classical Brits Award—is directly hinged on the ideology of national pride and patriotism that constitutes one of the Proms’ crucial aspects. McCartney himself stands as a symbol of British success and, even if the libretto does not contain elements of jingoism, the oratorio format of the work is redolent of the great celebrations of civic and patriotic pride historically associated with the Handelian oratorio and its nineteenth-century off-springs. Musically speaking, the work is pleasant, with nice, lyrical melodies and appealing orchestration, without any off-putting ‘asperities’. Moreover, it was conceived in the way pop music is generally produced—primarily as a studio concept (with overdubbing and inserted recorded parts) intended for mass production in the form of CD and DVD and subsequently performed live. Finally, it requires huge orchestral

²⁹ See for instance Nigel REYNOLD, ‘Two in Three Pupils Fail to Name One classical Composer,’ *The Telegraph*, 1 September 2002.

³⁰ Bonita M. KOLB, ‘Classical Music Concerts Can Be Fun: The success of the BBC Proms,’ *International Journal of Arts Management*, n° V114, 2005.

<http://srv2.lycoming.edu/~kolb/SucessofBBCProms1998.pdf>; see also ‘Record-breaking season for BBC Proms,’ 13 September 2010, <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-237759974.html>, accessed 19 March 2011.

³¹ Pierre BOURDIEU, *La distinction, critique sociale du jugement*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1979, *passim*.

and vocal powers such as are usually used at the Proms. Demanding, it is not. Nor is it innovative, and there remains for us to see why.

Generic Conservatism

As we hope to have made clear by now, *Ecce Cor Meum* is an admixture of past and present elements as it occupies a kind of intermediate position between past references and a present sociological and cultural context. It both looks backwards to Handel’s oratorios and the British oratorio tradition, and attempts to be a work for today, intended for present-time audiences and meant to be performed, sold and purchased as a modern-day commodity, like any other pop mass-made product. It seems to have the ambition to provide a kind of renewal for a well-established genre, both nodding at tradition while asserting the composer’s new, modern stance as someone as it were disencumbered from the weight and constraints of high-brow classical rules and mores. McCartney is known as someone who contributed—as one of the Beatles—to one of the most radical changes on the musical scene in the second-half of the twentieth century. As an emblem of the ‘Swinging Sixties’ alongside such artists as Bob Dylan or the Rolling Stones, he has come to personify audacity, innovation and rebellion against the accepted cultural codes. But does this apply to his oratorio?

We have already stressed the fact that McCartney’s writing in the oratorio was rather conservative, a collage of past styles and mannerisms. Further, we would like to suggest that three main causes can be put forward for the surprising lack of boldness in his ‘classical’ writing. One obvious reason is McCartney’s (avowed) technical limitations: composing and writing in a new, original style requires a complete mastery of all the tricks and intricacies of the art. Innovation requires utter freedom and there is an inescapable link between one’s formal ease and creative freedom. It is not by being oblivious of the rules of composition, but on the contrary by being thoroughly aware of them that one may, dialectically and paradoxically, free oneself from them.

The second reason for the conventional blandness of McCartney’s oratorio, we aver, has to do with his manifest desire to attain some sort of respectability by merging into an existing tradition. It is rather surprising that he should not have attempted to use some of the musical tools at his disposal as a pop musician. For instance, the orchestral format he chose is absolutely conventional (the same could apply to other parameters of the music, of course, such as vocal intonation, rhythm, etc.). Yet what prevented him from using, say electric guitars, synthesizers, the Hammond organ, or drums, which are constantly used in the sound world of pop music and the blend of which with the symphonic orchestra might have been a way to chart out new musical territories? The idea is not as incongruous as it may sound: in the twentieth century, classical composers such as Maurice Ravel, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Olivier Messiaen, and sundry others among composers of even more experimental music, introduced new instruments—such as the saxophone (heretofore only used in jazz or wind bands) or the Ondes Martenot, to great or special effect. By restricting himself to the conventional orchestra and denying himself the freedom of using what he knows best, McCartney showed his intention

to remain strictly within the confines of some vague idea of what classical music is supposed to be like. Strangely, the Beatles were much bolder when, conversely, they used the sounds of classical music in some of their pop songs, thus broadening perspectives in a way that *Ecce Cor Meum* fails to do.

The third and last reason we would like to suggest is that the genre of the oratorio itself worked against McCartney's formal invention. Because of its historical weight and ideological meaning, which we have analysed above, the oratorio is not amenable to a certain degree of innovation. In art—we are conduced to understanding—the generic format spawns its own constraints and regulations. Because the oratorio carries its own conservative ideological agenda along with it—because it is historically and culturally defined by, and immersed in a complex crux of religion, national identity, and the values of the establishment, it cannot easily welcome sweeping changes. Not surprisingly, most of the attempts by pop artists to write so-called 'rock operas' have proved equally disappointing from the musical point of view. There is a certain imperviousness of genres, in other words. As a genre, the oratorio created by Handel has undoubtedly retained its ability to chime in well with, and to encapsulate some of the values held dear by the national character. However, by choosing such a format for his long 'serious' work, McCartney was almost inevitably bound to end up composing a middle-of-the-road, hackneyed and conservative piece, sadly testifying to the former Beatle being as it were hijacked by mainstream British society in his quest for respectability.

Conclusion

Why, one may ask, devote so many words to a composition like Paul McCartney's *Ecce Cor Meum* if it turns out to be such a mediocre, disappointing piece of work? Why not simply write it off and damn it off into oblivion, while acknowledging that, had it not been bundled together by a celebrity, it would never have been the object of so much attention, or even, for that matter, performed, recorded and given an award? Yet surely our aim in this paper has not been to criticize McCartney's oratorio as a musical critic might have done. The work does have a certain number of merits—some nice melodies, a pleasant orchestration, and it evinces a sweet kind of melancholy, meditative mood, very much in the English pastoral tradition—and no doubt the audience at the Royal Albert Hall genuinely enjoyed the experience. So the perspective we chose was intended to be analytical rather than judgmental. What McCartney's piece reveals is two combined, yet contradictory factors: on the one hand, it testifies to the resilience of the oratorio genre in Britain today; despite the fact that it originated in a totally different social, historical and cultural context, the oratorio has lived on and become a kind of fixture in the British musical landscape because it is pregnant with staple values in terms of national identity. Yet, on the other hand, it appears that the rehashing of these ideological elements—as mediated through conventional aesthetic tropes—more or less prevents the genre from expressing any forward-looking ethos. We have suggested that McCartney's choice of the oratorio format almost inevitably condemned him to resort to a conservative mode of expression which only a composer with far greater technical means at his disposal might have been in a position to overcome or transcend. It is a sad and telling example of the process

whereby the dominant ideological machinery manages to swallow, transform and assimilate artists known and hailed yesterday for their creative originality. It is at one with the phenomenon of ‘Promsification’ of classical music, such as we have described it, which begs the question of the link between mass attendance and musical appreciation. The new British middle-class ‘Renaissance’ of music, which has both spawned the well-attended Proms and been the fertile ground upon which McCartney’s success with his composition was nurtured, may be after all rather a matter of surface than substance, with no real impact upon the actual increase of the general public’s exposure to demanding classical music, which thus remains the preserve of a limited educated, high-brow elite³².

³² I am indebted to Sophie Greiner’s unpublished (Master 1) study ‘Exposure to Classical Music in Today’s Great Britain,’ Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2008. I would also like to thank my friends Brian Robins and Graham Roberts for kindly re-reading the first draft of this article.