

GILES SWAYNE
STATIONS OF THE CROSS

SIMON NIEMIŃSKI
ORGAN

THE ORGAN OF
ST MARY'S METROPOLITAN
CATHEDRAL, EDINBURGH

Giles Swayne (b. 1946)

Stations of the Cross
Books I & II

Simon Niemiński *organ*

The Organ of St Mary's
Metropolitan Cathedral, Edinburgh

About Simon Niemiński:

'A superlative performance of the highest quality'
The Organ

'[...] performed with taste and sensitivity. There is a lot of poetry here.'
American Record Guide

Book I

1. Jesus is sentenced to death

His back torn by scourges, his head crowned with thorns, Jesus is dragged before Pontius Pilate and condemned to death.

[4:50]
2. Jesus takes up the cross

A heavy cross is laid upon the bruised shoulders of Jesus, who slowly sets forth on the road to Calvary amidst the jeers of the crowd.

[2:13]
3. The first fall

Weakened by loss of blood, Jesus falls under the weight of the cross.

[2:20]
4. Jesus and his mother

Jesus is met by his mother, who pours out an impassioned lament. He continues on his way.

[5:10]
5. Simon of Cyrene

Jesus' strength fails him, and he is unable to continue. The soldiers seize Simon of Cyrene and force him to help Jesus carry the cross.

[4:18]
6. Veronica

As Jesus continues towards Calvary, covered with blood, a woman in the crowd, moved with compassion, wipes his face with a clean cloth.

[3:51]
7. The second fall

Exhausted by loss of blood, Jesus falls to the ground for the second time.

[7:52]

Book II

8. The women of Jerusalem

[5:00]

At the sight of Jesus' sufferings, some women in the crowd were so touched by sympathy that they wept for him. Jesus said to them: "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me: weep for yourselves and for your children."

9. The third fall

[3:13]

Just before he reaches the place where he is to be crucified, Jesus falls for the third time – to be dragged up again and forced on by the guards.

10. Jesus is stripped of his clothes

[4:33]

When Jesus arrives at the place of execution, the guards prepare to crucify him. His clothes are ripped from his body, and he stands naked in front of the crowd.

11. Jesus is nailed to the cross

[2:49]

The cross is laid on the ground, and the guards seize Jesus and fix him to it by driving large nails through his hands and feet.

12. Jesus dies on the cross

[3:43]

Jesus has been hanging on the cross for several hours. After he has pardoned his executioners and entrusted his mother to the care of John, he bows his head and dies.

13. Jesus' body is laid in his mother's arms

[2:47]

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus take the body of Jesus down and put it in Mary's arms.

14. Jesus' body is laid in the tomb

[7:40]

The body of Jesus is taken away from Mary and laid in the tomb by his disciples. The tomb is sealed with a large stone.

Total playing time

[60:28]

All tracks are world premiere recordings

Stations of the Cross

In 1955, when my parents sent me to a Catholic boarding-school run by monks, the Stations of the Cross (fourteen meditations on the crucifixion of Jesus, based on the medieval Latin *Stabat mater*) were performed regularly during Lent. To a nine-year-old boy far from home these images of torture and death were grim and terrifying, and their plainchant cadences pervade my memory of those years of privileged incarceration.

It took decades to throw off this early indoctrination, which I have always seen as an abuse of adult power, and which planted in me a deep dislike of authority. So it may seem surprising that, although I am now a contented atheist, I should turn to the story of Christ's passion and death so many years later – three times in all between 2002 and 2010.

It isn't really all that surprising. People sometimes ask me why I set religious texts if I regard religions as mere myths – myths designed, more often than not, in order to keep the gullible under the thumb of a powerful élite. My answer to this question (which I also ask myself) is that myths contain metaphors which are deeper and wider than their literal narratives, and which embody our common humanity. There is

no need to be religious to be moved by the story of Jesus. Strip away the millennia of doctrinal obfuscation and you find a tale of self-sacrifice which, though itself derived from earlier myths, still has the power to move us – all the more so because, once Christianity was adopted by the Roman Empire, it became the carrier of European culture (at its best and worst). We are not moved by the *St Matthew Passion* because we believe Jesus was a god, but because the story touches us as fellow-humans, and because Bach was a uniquely gifted musician with a profoundly human imagination. It is also worth saying that piety and religious orthodoxy are no guarantees of good art, and frequently result in work of deadly mediocrity. A free spirit is almost always a good thing.

So, although repelled by the superstition and bigotry of certain kinds of religion, I can identify with a religious belief which treats the individual decently, has a sensible attitude towards rational thought and science, and has learned to adapt to cultural and social change. Millions of decent, intelligent people practise religion in this way; who am I to turn away from them? When I set a religious text to music, I don't need to believe in its doctrines; but I have to empathise with its language and metaphor so that my imagination can get to work. It



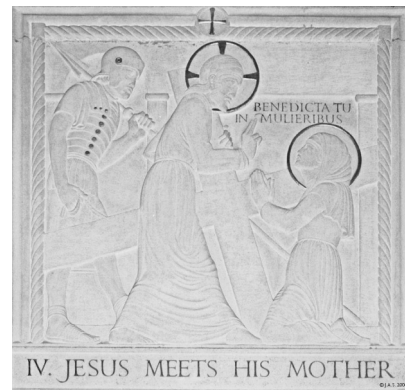
Giles Swayne
Photography: Alice Williamson

is on this basis that I have written religious music for choirs: several settings of the Mass, four of the *Magnificat*, three of the *Nunc dimittis*, many anthems, motets and of course Christmas carols – Jesus' birth, like his death, has an archetypal hold upon our imagination which makes it an evergreen stimulus for musical ideas.

According to Christian belief, Jesus' mother lost her son to a violent death which he endured willingly for his religious convictions. Two thousand years later, men, women and children still die violent deaths in Palestine and Israel – a mere stone's throw from the place where Jesus is said to have been crucified – and their mothers still mourn and bury them. This was the starting-point of my *Stabat Mater*, which was the origin of *Stations of the Cross*. Premiered on 3rd June 2004 at the Bath Festival by the Bath Camerata under Nigel Perrin, *Stabat Mater* is scored for four solo voices and a *cappella* choir, and lasts thirty-five minutes. It puts the crucifixion story into a Palestinian perspective, weaving into it the funeral rites of Judaism and Islam in Aramaic, Hebrew and Arabic.

When I saw Eric Gill's carved stone *Stations of the Cross* in Westminster Cathedral in June 2002, they struck me as a wonderful starting-point for a cycle of organ pieces.

Created between 1914 and 1918, they tell the Passion story in a stylised manner influenced by medieval carving and Assyrian reliefs. Shortly after the premiere of my *Stabat mater* I started work on my own *Stations of the Cross* – a cycle of fourteen movements for organ arranged in two books, each of seven movements. It was commissioned by Cambridge Summer Recitals and Dartington International Summer School. Book I was composed in autumn 2004; Book II in early 2005.



From Eric Gill's *Stations of the Cross*
in Westminster Cathedral
(Photography: J.A. Sutherland)

The *Stations of the Cross*, like the *Stabat Mater* (of which, thematically, they are a mirror-image), are constructed from a series of gradually changing eight-note modes, shaped to create harmonic stability and an audible process of change. Two different modes are used in each movement – the first for an introductory section, the second for the main body of the piece. Both modes are based on the same keynote; these move gradually upwards, rising by a semitone at the beginning of each movement. This increases the sense of harmonic change, and also symbolises Jesus’ uphill journey to death on the Cross. My music is full of patterns of this kind which, though simple and obvious in themselves, can work effectively when combined with other processes.

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Giles Swayne’s *Stations of the Cross* in Context

Exactly a century ago, in 1913, the young Eric Gill was approached to produce the fourteen Stations of the Cross for Westminster Cathedral, the mother church of Roman Catholicism in England and Wales that had opened a decade earlier in 1903. Gill’s stylised, restrained Stations carved from Hopton Wood Limestone

unleashed a storm of criticism from the public at the time, many of whom regarded his work as primitive and ugly. Gill was one of several forward-looking creative artists who had been inspired by *Via Crucis*, fourteen episodes leading to the Crucifixion, and Gill’s uncompromising response is one that finds a clear echo in Swayne’s *Stations of the Cross*. Introducing his work to the parishioners of Westminster Cathedral, Gill wrote that there was no depiction of the crowds in his Stations because ‘we ourselves are the crowd’, the look of the faces deliberately modern, the apparent plainness and lack of traditional Catholic adornment intended to have the strong, clear message of ‘a sentence without adjectives.’ Swayne writes that Gill’s Stations were ‘a wonderful starting-point’ for his organ cycle, and one of the most striking ways in which Swayne’s work reflects Gill’s hundred-year-old conception is by stressing the human dimension of the circumstances of Christ’s Crucifixion. In Gill’s case, he intended visitors to the cathedral to become themselves active participants in the drama as members of the crowd. Swayne creates a similar kind of immediacy and humanity; like Gill before him, he not only avoids any conventional notion of devoutness but also any obvious pictorialism.

In terms of musical evocations of the Stations of the Cross, Franz Liszt’s *Via crucis* (‘The Way



Simon Niemiński

of the Cross', 1878) is a striking series of reflections in the composer's most experimental late style, whether in its original version for choir and organ, or in Liszt's own purely instrumental transcription for piano. Half a century later, Marcel Dupré produced a series of carefully planned improvisations, first heard in public in 1932, and subsequently notated. These were published as *Le Chemin de la Croix* ('The Way of the Cross', 1932), a cycle of fourteen pieces lasting about an hour. Dupré's work had been inspired by a series of reflections, first published in 1914 as *Le Chemin de la Croix*, by the French writer Paul Claudel. The influence that Dupré's large multi-movement cycle had on his favourite pupil, Olivier Messiaen, is clear, especially in the organ works that that Messiaen produced in the 1930s (notably *La Nativité du Seigneur* and *Les Corps glorieux*) and later (*Méditations sur Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité*, 1969; *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, 1984).

Giles Swayne's musical background has links with this tradition. He attended Messiaen's composition class at the Paris Conservatoire in 1976–7, and there's an influence of some aspects of Messiaen's musical language apparent in Swayne's *Stations of the Cross*, not because he imitates Messiaen's sound, but through a similarly bold, colourful,

non-traditional style of organ writing. Swayne himself has written of his encounter with Messiaen, and of the important distinction between them in terms of different approaches to religious subject matter: 'I studied with Messiaen and have a great regard for him – with some reservations when he disappears into Catholic religiosity. It's important to understand that my interest in the Passion of Jesus (and therefore in the Stations of the Cross) is not religious but human.'

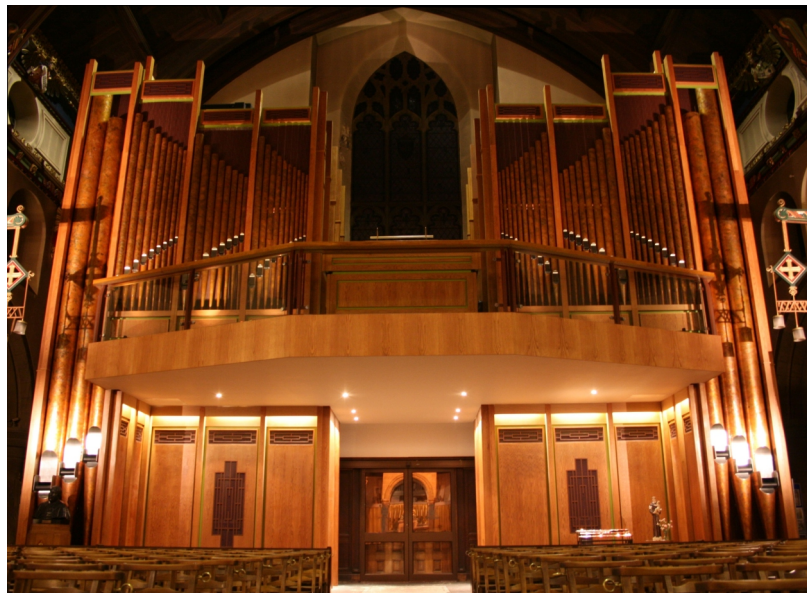
Swayne's music, then, is about a human drama, a personal tragedy, rather than being a devotional meditation on Christ's Passion. This needs to be stressed for a couple of reasons. First, there's the inevitable association of the organ with sacred spaces, with church building, and thus with conventional religious practice, but Swayne's *Stations of the Cross* is a work of startling dramatic rather than explicitly religious impact. Second, the influence of Messiaen was not the pious, devotional aspect of his organ music, but his use of the instrument for experimentation. Messiaen once called his organ at La Trinité his 'laboratory' and for an expression of uncompromising modernity. Swayne's own music is entirely individual, but it shares with Messiaen the idea of exploring the potential of the organ to express new and innovative musical ideas. In his *Stations of the Cross*,

those musical ideas evoke something that Messiaen himself usually shied away from in his own compositions: the depiction of human suffering and pain. Swayne's other musical 'model' is Johann Sebastian Bach, and particularly his two great Passions. Bach's supreme achievement is to draw listeners (and performers) into the searing drama of the Passion narrative through making it a very human story – something that clearly appealed to Swayne at a profound level, and inspired his own approach in *Stations of the Cross*.

Readers are referred to the composer's own detailed musical commentary on each movement of *Stations of the Cross* which can be found at www.resonusclassics.com/swayne-stations-of-the-cross. The following notes highlight some notable features of the work as a whole. In terms of over-arching structure, each piece begins on – or is centred around – what Swayne has called a 'keynote', presented in a rising sequence, the keynote of each movement being a semitone higher than the last. 'Jesus is Sentenced to Death' starts and finishes on a G flat; 'Jesus Takes Up the Cross' begins on a G in the right hand; 'The First Fall' opens with an A flat, and ends with a thunderous pedal chord of A flat and D natural; the gentle opening of 'Jesus and His Mother' begins on an A, the note that is also heard

at the top of the *fff* chord that ends the movement; 'Simon of Cyrene' begins on B flat; the melody in the right hand at the start of 'Veronica' starts on a B which is also the root of the final chord; and 'The Second Fall' begins and ends on C. This procedure is continued in Book II, each movement having a keynote that is one semitone higher than its predecessor, from the C sharp in 'The Women of Jerusalem' to the last movement, 'Jesus' Body is Laid in the Tomb' with its unambiguous and magnificent final G, *fff*, heard across five octaves of the organ.

This process of a keynote rising by a semitone is never used in a formulaic way, but rather it is an expressive – programmatic – device, to symbolize Christ's uphill journey towards his Crucifixion. But the keynotes are also important in terms of the musical substance of each movement. Swayne has devised pairs of 'modes' (or scales) of eight notes each to characterize the harmonic and melodic language of the individual movements, and each of these begins on the movement's keynote. The idea of devising new modes may have echoes of Messiaen's composing technique, but here these modes are used in a quite different way, to produce melodic shapes and harmonies that have quite original contours technique, but here these modes are used in a quite different way, to produce melodic shapes and harmonies that



The organ of St Mary's Metropolitan Cathedral, Edinburgh
(Photography: Simon Niemiński)

have quite original contours.

The movements are sharply contrasted and each also has clear contrasts within itself. The use of keynotes – and of the modes that emerge from them – provides a distinctive musical palette for the melodic patterns and the harmonies of the individual movements. The depiction of these moments in Christ's final journey is powerful, almost theatrical. To give a couple of examples, the central section of 'Jesus and His Mother' is a deeply expressive lament, while the next movement, 'Simon of Cyrene' reveals another important influence in Swayne's *Stations*: the music of Bach. After reaching a climax (a roaring passage on the pedals and descending scales on the manuals in that begin as a furious cascade that gradually subsides), the second part of the movement is a tranquil passage in the style of a chorale prelude, based on the plainchant 'Crux fidelis', decorated by gently arching and leaping phrases that soar about it in the right hand, and underpinned by a tread-like bass.

Swayne's dramatic instincts are demonstrated memorably in 'Jesus Falls for the Second Time', the last piece in Book I of the cycle. (Coincidentally, Swayne's division of his *Stations* into two books of seven movements each is similar to that used by Messiaen in *La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus*

Christ with its two 'septenaries'). In this seventh piece, Swayne follows music that seems to embody raw suffering and pain with a playful, scherzo-like section marked 'Joking Jesus'. This is a reference to Oliver St. John Gogarty's outrageously bawdy verse quoted by James Joyce in *Ulysses* as 'The Ballad of the Joking Jesus', but it's also one that recalls a much more ancient idea, that Jesus – even the suffering, tormented and mocked Jesus – was still able to joke with the crowd, because he knew that he would have the last laugh. This isn't in any way a flippant diversion, but an integral part of Swayne's plan to depict Jesus as a real human being.

The noblest musical tribute in the work comes in the fourteenth and last movement: a full-scale Prelude and Fugue which takes the techniques of Bach's organ writing and reinvents them for the twenty-first century. The Prelude is in a trio-sonata texture, comprising tumbling broken chords weaving a dialogue in all three parts, and finally settling on a long pedal note which remains on its own to lead into the five-voice Fugue with which *Stations of the Cross* ends. This a remarkable achievement, not least because an apparently anachronistic structure – the Bachian Prelude and Fugue – is reworked to provide a stirring climax to an organ cycle that is entirely of Swayne's own time.



Simon Niemiński

Simon Niemiński was born in London and is descended from an unlikely mixture of Edwardian Japanese acrobats, Lancastrian Music Hall artistes and a Polish army veteran. He studied in London at the Royal College of Music, at Cambridge University and as Organ Scholar of York Minster. He is Organist of St Mary's Metropolitan Cathedral, and Director of Music at The Robin Chapel in Edinburgh, having previously been Organist and Master of the Music at St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, where he directed the choir in daily choral services, concerts, recordings and broadcasts.

Over the airwaves he has featured in programmes including *The Organist Entertains* on BBC Radio 2, to *Choral Evensong* several times live on BBC Radio 3, and *Pipedreams* in the USA. As a recitalist, he has played at venues around the UK, Europe and the USA. His programmes often include unusual but attractive repertoire and it is his aim to play programmes which appeal to organ aficionados and sceptics alike.

His recordings have helped to revive the music of unjustly neglected composers, including releases of the *Promenades en Provence* by Eugène Reuchsel and the symphonies of Edward Shippen Barnes –

American pupil of Louis Vierne. Reviews have included: 'This is a splendid release [...] There is a lot of poetry here.' (*The American Record Guide*) and 'Simon Niemiński's playing is utterly convincing and at one stroke establishes him as a recording artist of the first rank.' (Organists' Review.)

An interest in transcriptions has resulted in recordings of works inspired by Shakespeare, and another of Elgar, including the complete *Enigma Variations* ('Romantic organ playing at its best': *The Organ*). A recording by Simon on the 2007 organ of St Mary's Metropolitan Cathedral was reviewed as a Star Recording in *The Organ* magazine ('[...] a triumph for both organ and organist...').

Other recent releases are of the new organ at First Baptist Church, Abilene, Texas, and the first recording of the restored 1913 Brindley & Foster organ in Freemasons' Hall, Edinburgh. In October 2012 he made his first recordings for Resonus Classics, of Giles Swayne's monumental *Stations of the Cross* for solo organ, and works by Sir Charles Villiers Stanford (including some first recordings.)

www.nieminski.com

**The Organ of St Mary's
Metropolitan Cathedral, Edinburgh**

Matthew Copley Organ Builders, 2007

PEDAL

Contra Violone	32
Resultant Bass	32
Contra Bass	16
Violone	16
Subbass	16
Bourdon	16
Quint	10 2/3
Octave	8
Violoncello	8
Bass Flute	8
Nachthorn	4
Harmonics	IV
Contre Bombarde	32
Bombarde	16
Double Tumpet	16
Bombarde	8
Chalumeau	4
Chalumeau Tremulant	
Pedal Bourdon (Choir)	16

SWELL

Contre Gambe	16
Violin Diapason	8
Viole de Gambe	8
Voix Céleste	8
Bourdon	8
Principal	4
Flûte Couverte	4
Octavin	2
Fourniture	V
Basson	16
Trompette	8
Hautbois	8
Tremulant	
Grave	

GREAT

Double Diapason	16
Bourdon	16
Diapason	8
Viola	8
Flûte Creuse	8
Stopped Diapason	8
Double Quint	5 1/3
Octave	4
Flûte D'Amour	4
Double Tierce	3 1/5
Quint	2 2/3
Fifteenth	2
Plein-Jeu	V
Double Trumpet	16
Trumpet	8
Tremulant	

SOLO

Flûte Harmonique	8
Cor de Nuit	8
Unda Maris	8
Viole Octavante	4
Flûte Ouverte	4
Nazard	2 2/3
Flageolet	2
Tierce	1 3/5
Septième	1 1/7
Rossignol	1
Clarinette	8
Voix Humaine	8
Trompette Harmonique	8
Carillon	
Tremulant	

CHOIR (East end)

Diapason	8
Stopped Flute	8
Principal	4
Cornopean	8
Octave	
Grave	

COUPLERS/TRANSFER

Swell to Great
Solo to Great
Choir on Great
Swell to Solo
Swell to Pedal
Great to Pedal
Solo to Pedal
Choir to Pedal

ACCESSORIES

Great and Pedal Combinations Coupled
Generals on Swell Toe Pistons

96 levels of general pistons
16 levels of divisional pistons
8 general thumb pistons
8 thumb pistons each to Great, Swell and Solo
4 thumb pistons to Choir
8 toe pistons each to Pedal and Swell
Various reversible pistons for couplers, tutti, stepper off

Manual compass: 58 notes
Pedal compass: 30 notes



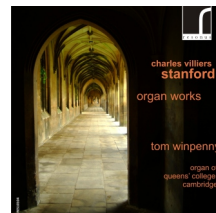
The mobile console of St Mary's Metropolitan Cathedral,
Edinburgh, used in this recording
(Photography: Simon Niemiński)

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Stephen Farr (organ)
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International Record Review

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Assistant Engineer: Steven Binks

Organ prepared by Forth Pipe Organs

Recorded at 24-bit / 96kHz resolution

Cover image: The Gero Cross, Cologne Cathedral (c. 965–970)

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