

Music A Level Unit 2: Composition Agnus Dei

Brief: Write an Agnus Dei for a modern Choral Requiem Mass to be recorded for a live album by a professional choir.

This piece was recorded at my choir's concert on 18th March. It is important to note that while the choir did an amazing job, there were some intonation problems and some parts of the score as written were sung differently on the day. Having said this, the ambience of the church and the choir sound still managed to capture the intentions of the piece. For a more accurate version of how the piece should move harmonically, I have attached my Sibelius audio files as well.

Genre: Contemporary Choral Music.

- I have been inspired to compose this genre of music due to the fine balance between complexity and serenity that this genre creates. This complexity is from adventurous use in harmony and tonality as well as through-composed structure with the changing text.
- My influences include but are not limited to Gejlo, Whitacre, Runestad, Rutter, and Tavener. It is important to recognise that modern composers are inspired by earlier choral composers especially those of the romantic and early 20th century periods and thus I have also been inspired by French and German romantic choral music such as Fauré, Brahms and Bruckner.
- This piece is an 'Agnus Dei,' which means Lamb of God. This is the sacrificial lamb which represents the blood of Jesus when he died for our sins. Therefore, this piece must have a sense of emotivity, melancholy and yearning.
- I have written this piece for my choir, which although amateur sings to a high quality. With this in mind, I had my choir in mind when writing each part. These examples include:

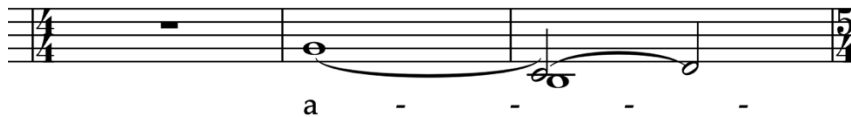
do - na no-bis pa - cem ag-nus de - i

do-na no-bis do-na no-bis pa - cem ag - nus de - i

This is the tenor part at bars 50-54. You will notice that it is demanding being in a high tessitura with the high Ab however, my choir has a strong tenor section of which some are

professional singers and so I knew this would work and have the climactic effect I was trying to achieve.

We also have a large alto section who create a beautiful sonority in a low tessitura so I had this in mind when writing this piece as can be seen here in the Coda:



Due to our conductor's expressive approach to conducting, the piece has been composed such that it is open to his interpretation such as through the use of rubato. This has been inspired both by having my choir perform this piece, but it is also a common feature of contemporary choral music.

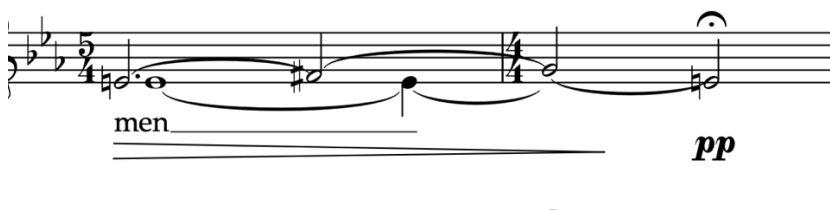
My programme notes during the performance of this piece were as follows:

"When I was assigned my final music A level composition, writing a choral piece for Concordia immediately sprang to mind despite the challenges of writing such a complex style of music and that choral music is very different from my normal compositions. The humanistic sound of voices in harmony means this style feels so personal to me and so to try and do it justice has been very difficult. Having been inspired by some of my favourite choral composers from Whitacre and Gejlo to Brahms and Bruckner, like them I wanted to strike a delicate balance between the complexity of choral music but also its serenity. It has been a pleasure to hear Concordia sing this piece as well as seeing Jack's interpretation and I want to thank the choir for sticking through the unusual 8-part harmonies and for giving me the opportunity to have my piece debuted on my 18th birthday."

Melody:

Like much modern choral music, this piece is more harmonically driven than melodically driven. However, there are melodic lines inspired by choral composers.

- Some melodic lines are built off modes. This is perhaps most clear with the use of the Lydian mode in melodic lines such as in bar 69 in the 1st altos where the raised 4th in the melody is inspired by Britten's 'Festival Te Deum,' where he uses the Lydian scale to create a heavenly effect.



The use of disjunct leaps helps again to control tension, release and a sense of yearning which is vital for this piece and style. This can be seen at bar 52 with the leap of a 4th to anticipate the forte-fortissimo at bar 54 or at bar 49 to highlight the countermelody and create a sense of textural complexity.



Word Painting:

Choral music is almost always set to lyrics and thus word-painting is very important. This is especially true of sacred music such as this which would be heard in a Mass or a Requiem.


The lyrics of this piece are:

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.	<i>Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.</i>
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.	<i>Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, give us peace.</i>
Post agnum typicum, expletis epulis, Corpus Dominicum datum discipulis, sic totum omnibus, quod totum singulis, eius fatemur manibus.	<i>The typic Lamb consumed, the legal Feast complete, the Lord unto the Twelve His Body gave to eat; the whole to all, no less the whole to each did mete with His own hands, as we confess.</i>

This comes from the traditional Agnus Dei text as well as the addition of a traditional passage of Gregorian Chant.

Some examples of how I set music to this text includes:

Bars	Description	Picture
24-25	<p>Chromatic melody in soprano combined with odd harmony then resolves to represent 'nobis pacem, give us piece.'</p> <p>The sins in the lyrics are represent by the chromaticism to then be resolved to represent the piece.</p>	
26	<p>Syllabic word setting is used here to highlight the insertion of a passage from Gregorian Chant. This is not normally heard in a traditional Agnus Dei. The syllabic setting coupled with the modulation make the lyrics at the forefront here.</p>	
32	<p>This section is sung by the altos due to the warm quality of the mid-to low tessitura. This was important to display the warmth associated with 'God's Own Hands,' and the sense of relief from 'confession.'</p> <p>In addition, the 5 4 here creates that further sense of anticipation to confess through the metric unease.</p>	

40	Bar 40 features a bitonal chord on pecatta, which means 'sins.' This is therefore a more dissonant and unusual harmony.	
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Harmony

Harmony is possibly the most important factor in this piece, and it is largely what drives composition of modern choral music. Therefore, harmony is often characterized by being unconventional with many added notes and extensions especially the 9th, 7th and 11th in various chord voicings. *(More harmonic analysis can be found on the annotated score at the end of this document.)*

I have also used lots of suspensions another common feature of not just modern choral music but all choral music. Some suspensions I have used in my piece include:

- Tritone suspension #4-3 in tenor bar 11.
- 4-3 in soprano bar 23.
- 4 – 3 in Alto bar 2-8 but moves to the tonic to the 7th not the 3rd.
- 9-8 in Alto bar 48

Appoggiaturas are often far more common in modern choral music because they are not prepared. This is true of my piece.

One of the most important factors considered when writing the chord voicings if this piece was the overtone series. Therefore, in order to make sure there is frequency balance written in chords, the largest harmonic intervals should be in the lower voice parts as seen in bar 4:

mf
 1 ahh
 Smallest interval of a major 2nd
 Another interval of a 2nd
 mf
 ahh
 Interval of a major 3rd
 Interval of a semitone (Slight clash for effect within the overtone series)
 mf
 ahh
 Minor third
 Interval of a 4th
 mf
 ahh
 5th (Largest Interval)

Tonality



- Tonality in this piece is at times unclear and abstract and traditional modulation techniques have sometimes been disregarded. Tonality is also heavily characterized by the use of the raised 4th creating a sense of the Lydian mode throughout this piece. This means for example in bars 1- 4 we could either be in an ambiguous Bb Lydian or in F major.


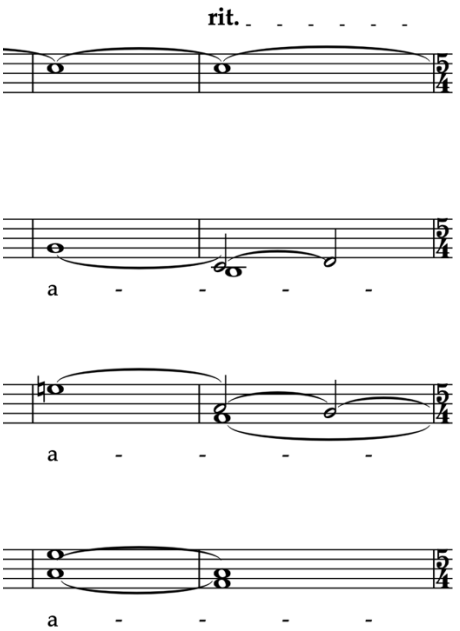
Soprano: p mf pp mp mf p
 mmh ooh mmh ahh mmh
 Alto: ppp mf pp mf p
 mmh ooh mmh ahh mmh
 Piece starting on Bb suggests this is the tonic
 Addition of E natural suggests F major
 Tenor: ppp mf pp mf p
 mmh ooh mmh ahh mmh
 Bass: ppp mf pp mf p
 mmh ooh mmh ahh mmh

Bars	1-10	11-25	26-54	54-63	63-End
Key	Bb Lydian	Ab major or F minor.	Eb/Ab Lydian	C minor	C minor – C Lydian

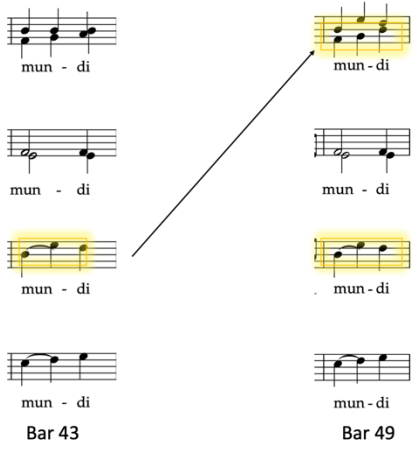
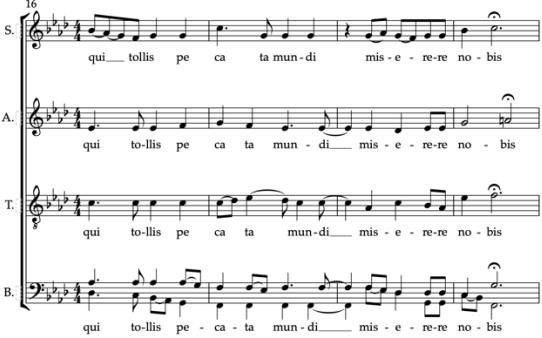
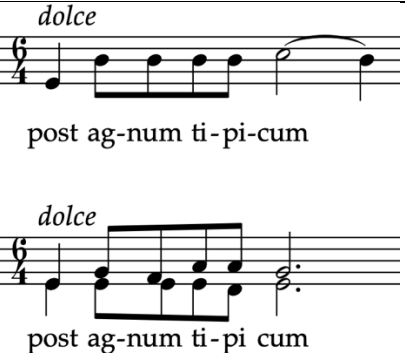
Minor keys are the natural minor as opposed to the harmonic or melodic minor like traditional choral music.


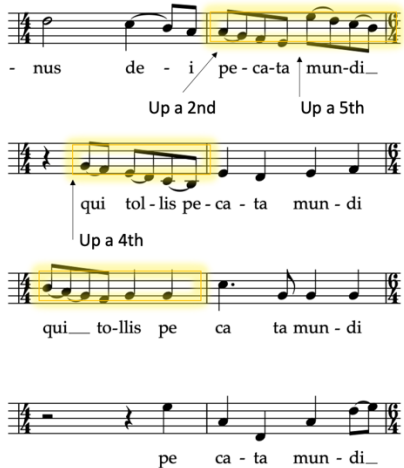
There are other tonal techniques within this piece outlined below:

Bar	Technique	Picture
Bar 19	<p>The phrase ends on an F major chord hinting that this section is in F minor with the phrase ending with a Picardy 3rd in the alto.</p> <p><i>Common for modern composers to modernise traditional choral harmonic rules. This here was inspired by Gjelo's 'the Rose.'</i></p>	
Bar 24-25	<p>Here there is a very unusual way of modulating involving chromaticism. In order to modulate from Ab to Eb instead of traditional ways of modulating to the dominant I have used an A7/9/#11 chord with the #11 being the enharmonic equivalent to the Eb I am modulating too. This involves false relations.</p> <p><i>This technique is inspired by Whitacre's Cloudburst.</i></p>	

Bar 31	<p>Here, similar to bar 19 the phrase ends with an uplifting chord on a non-diatonic F major. The function of this is that it both portrays the Lydian tonal theme throughout as the A natural is the raised 4th of Eb as well as also concluding the up-lifting lyrics in this phrase.</p>	 <p>31</p> <p>S. quod to - tum sing - u - lis <i>mf</i></p> <p>A. quod to - tum sing - u - lis <i>mf</i></p> <p>T. quod - to - tum sing - u - lis <i>mf</i></p> <p>B. quod to - tum sing - u - lis <i>mf</i></p>
Bar 66-67	<p>There are also non-diatonic chord changes such as here which moves from the I (C major) to an ambiguous version of the bVI chord.</p>	 <p>rit.</p> <p>a - - -</p> <p>a - - -</p> <p>a - - -</p>

Texture

Bar	Description	Score
Bar 43/49	A textural device I have used is octave doubling. For example, the tenor line at bar 43 is then doubled 2 octaves higher by the 1 st sopranos the second time it is heard for emphasise at bar 49 as well as to build tension for the climax of the piece. <i>Inspired by Elgar's 'Nimrod,' which also does this.</i>	 <p>mun - di</p> <p>mun - di</p> <p>mun - di</p> <p>mun - di</p> <p>mun - di</p> <p>mun - di</p> <p>Bar 43</p> <p>Bar 49</p>
Bar	When the main Agnus Dei text is heard I have created a contrapuntal texture to hint to Baroque choral music. This is important as it makes it clear that this piece is still a sacred over secular piece. This can be seen with the use of passing notes.	 <p>qui tollis pe ca ta mun-di mis - e - re-re no - bis</p> <p>qui to-llis pe ca ta mun - di mis - e - re-re no - bis</p> <p>qui to-llis pe ca ta mun-di mis - e - re-re no - bis</p> <p>qui to-llis pe - ca - ta mun - di mis - e - re-re no - bis</p>
Bar 26	I have also played with the SATB arrangement. For example, in order to emphasise the 'Dolce' at bar 26 it is just sopranos and altos singing. This has been inspired by Ticelli's 'Earth Song.' He uses the tenors and sopranos in homophony and a high tessitura to create a sweet Dolce quality to the music.	 <p><i>dolce</i></p> <p>post ag-num ti-pi-cum</p> <p><i>dolce</i></p> <p>post ag-num ti-pi cum</p>

Bar 28	I have also used a homophonic texture at parts to highlight the lyrical content. For example, at bar 28, the lyrics 'Corpus Dominicum' are heard which means 'the Body of the Lord.' This needed to be highlighted as it is lyrical content not normally heard in an Agnus Dei and it is talking about the Lord.	
Bar 22/23	I have used sequential imitation up various intervals through different parts to create textural variety in my piece similar to Runestad's let my love be heard.	

Texture varies greatly within this piece. Like some modern choral music, the most expressive harmony is homophonic. This has been inspired by the Estonian Choral Piece by Pärt Uusberg 'Õhtul' where homophony is used to emphasise the jazz harmony. In my piece I have done this several times with some examples including:

- Gm11 (2nd inversion) chord at bar 2
- C7/11/13 chord bar 4.
- Ab/6/11 chord bar 13.
- A 6/9/b5 at bar 24.
- Fm13 at bar 54.

One textural device I have used is a C pedal in the form of staggered breathing in the sopranos from bars 56-70 for the coda. This has provided me with a grounding for modulations to different keys and chord voicings in a similar fashion to Eric Whitacre's 'Sleep.' The chord progression for the coda over the pedal is:

Ab9	Gm7/11	Eb6/9	Ebmaj7add11	G7/13sus4	C	Abmaj7/9/#11/13	C
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Rhythm

One technique sometimes used in modern chorale music is time signature changes often to complex time signatures. Some examples of this in my piece include:

- 5 4 bars in amongst 4 4 for example at bars 2, 4, 7, 12, 21.
- 6 4 bars adding an extra 2 beats to push the song forward for example at bars 24 and 26. This also anticipates the 3 4 which is the dominant time signature from bar 39.'

6

45

Full Score

poco accel.

mun-di

S. *f*

- bis ag-nus de-i Qui to-lis pe-ca-ta mun-di

A. *f*

no-bis ag-nus de-i qui to-lis pe-ca-ta r

T. *f*

no-bis ag-nus de-i qui to-lis pe-ca-ta

B.

Here the bar of 5 4 creates a sense of urgency by skipping a beat to portray the lyrics and the building dynamics. This is especially apparent where from bar 39 it is a steady 3 4. My use of time signature changes has been inspired by Herbert Howells 'A Spotless Rose' where he uses unusual time signature changes to word-paint and create a sense of metric ease. In my piece this technique has been used especially at the end as this is the most relaxed part of the piece:

Other rhythmic techniques I have used include:

- Accelerando bar 9, bar 46,
- Ritardando bar 2, 67-End.
- Syncopation and dotted rhythms bar 16-17.
- Tied Notes – bar 17-18, bar 20, bar 32.

Sonority/Instrumentation

Some instrumental techniques in this piece inspired by model choral music are:

- The use of vocables like 'mmh,' 'ooh' and, 'ahh' sounds at the start. A typical feature of modern choral music. In my case it was inspired by the beginning of Runestad's 'Let My Love Be Heard.'

I have also used tessitura of vocal parts for effect for example:

- Low 2nd bass tessitura 'growl,' e.g., bar 17 and bar 28.
- High tessitura to create a climactic sound in the tenors and sopranos bar 53.
- Alto, tenor, and bass in a low tessitura at bar 67 for the deep unintelligible cluster chord. (Purposefully meant to create frequency clashes in the overtone series.)

A final technique I have used is staggered breathing in the soprano inverted pedal from bar 56 to bar 70. Common in modern chorale music.

Structure

This piece is like much choral music largely through composed with the driving force of the structure being the musical story through the rising and falling of tension. This technique to structuring my piece was inspired by Eric Whitacre's process of writing music.

Structure has also been largely set by the lyrical content. The sections with more tension and drive tend to be emphasising the 'Agnus Dei,' (Lamb of God) which this piece is about. This is not just a feature of modern religious choral music but all religious choral music.

Bars	Section	Details
1-12	Introduction	Composed of 'mmh' and 'aah' to set the mood.
13-25	A Section	Lyrical driven to emphasise the main 'Agnus Dei' text.
25-36	B Section	New Lyrical content with a new key. This section is more piano dolce to allow for the increase in section C.
36-54	C Section	Return to the 'Agnus Dei content.' Pulse clearer and dynamics and tempo increase throughout this section towards the forte-fortissimo chord at 54 which is the climax of the piece.
58-End	Coda	The 'Amen Section' where the energy is most subdued made clear by the quiet dynamics, and fragmented homophonic phrases.

Score

Agnus Dei

Adagio molto legato

A

Score for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass parts. The tempo is Adagio molto legato. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: mmh ooh mmh ahh mmh. Dynamics include *p*, *mf*, *pp*, *mp*, and *ppp*.

Score for Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), Tenor (T.), and Bass (B.) parts, starting at measure 6. The tempo is Adagio molto legato. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: ooh mmh ahh ag - nus. Dynamics include *mp* and *mf*. The section ends with the instruction *poco accel.*. Annotations include: "Addition of the minor 9th" pointing to the Soprano part at measure 6, and "Intonation Issues on recording" pointing to the Soprano part at measure 7.

2

11

dolce *p* **Andante** *mp* **B**

S. ag - nus de - i Ag - nus de - i

A. ag nus de - i Ag-nus de - i

T. ag - nus de - i Ag-nus de - i

B. ag - nus de - i Ag-nus de - i

Tritone
Suspension #4-3

Now in Ab/Fm

Semitone below
written on recording

Modal bV – F
with a Picardy
third (with 9th)

16

S. qui tollis pe ca ta mun - di mis - e - re-re no - bis

A. qui to-llis pe ca ta mun - di mis - e - re-re no - bis

T. qui to-llis pe ca ta mun-di mis - e - re-re no - bis

B. qui to-llis pe - ca - ta mun - di mis - e - re-re no - bis

20

4-3 Suspension

3

S. ag - nus de - i pe - ca - ta mun - di

A. ag nus de - i qui tol - lis pe - ca - ta mun - di

T. Ag - nus de - - i qui to - llis pe ca ta mun - di

B. ag - nus de - i pe ca - ta mun - di

Ab Major Ib → I7

False Relations Eb and E

New sense of chromaticism in soprano

Imperfect Cadence

C

Semitone lower in live recording

24

S. do - na no - bis pa - cem post ag - num ti - pi - cum

A. do - na no - bis pa - cem post ag - num ti - pi cum

T. do - na no - bis pa - cem

B. do - na no - bis pa - cem

mp

dolce

mp

mp

mp

27

S. ex-ple-tis ep-u - lis Cor-pus Do-mi-ni-cum sic-to - tum om-ni-bus

A. ex-ple-tis ep-u - lis Cor-pus Do-mi-ni-cum to - tum om-ni - bus

T. *mp* ep-u - lis Cor-pus Do-mi-ni - cum om-ni - bus

B. *mp* ep-u - lis Cor-pus Do-mi-ni-cum to - tum om-ni-bus

Appoggiatura Reference from
bar 26

Vague V – Ic chord.
Modern play on
Baroque Cadencing

31

S. *mf* quod to - tum sing - u - lis *dolce* ei - - us *p*

A. *mf* quod to - tum sing - u - lis *dolce* ei - us fa-te-mur man-i - bus *p*

T. *mf* quod - to - tum sing-u - lis *dolce* ei - - us *p*

B. *mf* quod to - tum sing - u - lis *dolce* ei - - us *p*

Another Appoggiatura.
Signifies this section in alto.

D

5

35

S. *p dolce* *mp* *mf*
mur-man-i - bus Ag-nus de - i Ag-nus de - i Qui to - lis

A. *p dolce* *mp* *mf*
mur-man-i - bus Ag-nus de - i ag-nus de - i qui

T. *mp* *mf*
mur-man-i - bus ag-nus de - i qui

B. *mp* *mf*
mur-man-i - bus ag-nus de - i Qui

ii to V chord, imperfect cadence

Bitonal chord. Bb in tenor and bass and
Cm7 in Alto and Soprano

40

S. *mun-di*
pe - ca - ta mun - di mun - di mi-ser-re re no - bis no -

A. *to - lis* pe - ca - ta mun - di mi - se re - re

T. *to - lis* pe - ca - ta mun - di mi - se - re - re

B. *to - lis* pe - ca - ta mun - di mi - se - re - re

6

45

S. *poco accel.* *f* *mun-di*

- bis ag-nus de - i Qui to - lis pe - ca - ta mun - di mun - di

A. *f*

no - bis ag-nus de - i qui to - lis pe - ca - ta mun - di

T. *f*

no - bis ag-nus de - i qui to - lis pe - ca - ta mun - di

B. *f*

no-bis ag-nus de - i Qui to - lis pe - ca - ta mun - di

9-8 suspension in Alto

1st Sopranos doubling repeated tenor melody from bar 42

Word setting changed
in tenor and bass to
create anticipation

Repeated 1st soprano motif

50

S. *ff* *poco rit.* *fff* *Adante* *p* **E**

do - na no-bis pa - cem ag-nus de - i a -

A. *ff* *fff*

do - na no-bis pa - cem ag-nus de - i

T. *ff* *fff*

do-na no-bis do-na no-bis pa - cem ag - nus de - i

B. *ff* *fff*

do-na no-bis do-na no-bis pa - cem ag - nus de - i

7

Another appoggiatura in alto

C major. Creates a sense of release then juxtaposed by deep cluster chord

64 rit.

S. *men a - - - -*

A. *men a - - - -*

T. *men a - - - -*

B. *men a - - - -*

8

68

S. *ppp*
men

A. *pp*
men

T. *pp*
men

B. *pp*
men

Final use of #4 in Alto

Finishes on C major with fading out sopranos