

ANGELS UNAWARES

SUNDAY 22 MARCH 2026

SISTINE CHAPEL
VATICAN CITY



ANGELS UNAWARES

James MacMillan, composer
Robert Willis, librettist

Harry Christophers, conductor
The Sixteen
Britten Sinfonia
Elizabeth Watts, soprano
Matthew McKinney, tenor

Message from John Studzinski KCSS, KSG, CBE Founder & Chairman, Genesis Foundation

THE PRESENCE of angels is not confined to such sacred and sublime surroundings as the Sistine Chapel.

Wherever we are, at every moment, and even if we are not conscious of their presence, angels are by our sides. An angel can be our dedicated guardian – our personal adviser, protector and spiritual partner – or it can be a messenger from God, a prophet or even a warrior. Whatever their mission, angels exist at the crucial point where divine power interacts with human free will, as we are called upon to recognise truths, make choices and follow paths that will change our lives.



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For millennia, the world's cultures and religions have acknowledged and wondered at the existence of angels. They have appeared in sacred writings and, often to spectacular effect, in artistic interpretations. But considering angels' ubiquity, and their closeness to us, we can be surprisingly slow to acknowledge them – let alone celebrate the role they play as our enablers, and how much they help us achieve.

In a setting that is both physically and spiritually incomparable, this first performance of *Angels Unawares* brings together words, music and performers of a calibre to meet and satisfy the highest expectations. It is being filmed for future broadcast, so that the work's message can resonate strongly and durably to millions of people around the world. Further performances, this year and in years to come, will reaffirm its capacity to communicate to hearts, minds and souls.

Above all, *Angels Unawares* gives us, and future audiences, an opportunity to honour the angels that watch over us and to prepare to welcome the angels we might meet.

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Message from Cardinal Vincent Nichols Archbishop Emeritus of Westminster

A REPEATED phrase in the poetry of Robert Willis, to whom *Angels Unawares* has been dedicated, poses the question "How could I not have known?"

This evening the question is posed to each of us with regard to the action and grace of God in our lives. So often, we are unaware. Later we say: "How could I not have known?"

In Catholic teaching angels are spiritual beings, with intellect and free will, created by God to serve as God's messengers and to worship, adore, God without end. They bring to us God's protection. They guide and help us by their presence. Each person is given a Guardian Angel, as a manifestation of God's love for each and every human being, to protect and shepherd us personally. Our understanding of angels prompts us to care for those most in need, reflecting in our actions something rightly called 'angelic'. In the vision and understanding of St John Henry Newman, our Angel watches over us even as we are prepared to be taken into the fulness of God's presence in heaven. Angels are without bodily form, but may indeed appear in human form and are often depicted thus, and in a variety of ways.

Angels appear here in the Sistine Chapel. In the fresco of the Last Judgement they are in the top corners, bearing the instruments of Christ's death for our salvation. Most dramatically they also appear at the centre of the painting, below the triumphant figure of Christ, summoning the dead with trumpets and holding books for their judgement.

It is an immense privilege for us, as members of the audience, that the world premiere of *Angels Unawares* is being performed here this evening. On behalf of so many I offer sincere thanks to all in the Holy See and the Vatican City who have made this historic event possible.

We all offer our thanks, prayers and expressions of support to our Holy Father Pope Leo XIV for his ministry and for his vision in seeing this performance as an opportunity to touch the hearts and souls of so many people around the world, with renewed awareness of the love of God in their lives, often in ways unseen, and for which we are called always to give thanks.

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ENCOUNTERS WITH ANGELS UNAWARES

Angels Unawares is an oratorio filled with encounters that were not expected, could not have been prepared for. On discovering an empty tomb, Mary becomes aware that she is not alone; in the beautiful poetry of Robert Willis, “Two angels gently asked me why I wept/Their words of comfort causing me to turn.” She turns.

And we turn. The poetry of Robert Willis and the music of James MacMillan have created a work that makes these encounters profoundly moving, returning us to stories and images that we may already know but are here renewed.

Robert was a friend for a very long time. Alongside the Three Choirs Festival in 1991 there was an arts festival in the cloisters of Hereford Cathedral where I sat making pots on a potter’s wheel. There was a board of them for sale and they remained defiantly unsold. And a tall man in a cassock came and watched and tilted – Robert tilted very well – over my ungainly pots and introduced himself as the new Dean of Hereford and we began our long conversation.

There are few people who mapped the world like Robert Willis. I think of the Mappa Mundi in his first beloved cathedral of Hereford, the great thirteenth century imaging of the world, the known and the unknown and the partly known, the hoped for and the imagined. All the edges of the world are here and no part of creation is excluded. It centres on Jerusalem. And there are angels. One guards the Garden of Eden, others lead the righteous towards heaven. Guarding and leading are powerful actions of care; these are not static, minatory statuary figures but active, involved presences.

It matters deeply that it should be angels at the heart of this beautiful oratorio. Angels thread Robert’s life. In the stained-glass windows of his second, beloved cathedral of Canterbury, where he was Dean for twenty-two years, angels appear again and again. He showed me the window of the Magi fast asleep in a rather grand bed as an angel hovers over them protectively. And the intensely affecting image of the Resurrection where two angels flank the risen Christ.

As a poet and a musician, Robert brought image and sound together day after day, the grounding of his life in the daily office, his pleasure in the unfolding of the year in liturgy. For Robert knew about sound within a church, a cathedral, how a building is brought alive by singular and choral voices. He knew that sacred places hold centuries of prayer, and demand to be filled and refilled by prayer, by voice. In *Angels Unawares*, Robert’s profound attunement to music and to words finds its most complete summation.

The twelve parts of *Angels Unawares* are written in Miltonic blank verse, with the half rhymes and echoes of The King James Version of the English Bible of 1611, its cadenced pacing and nuanced change of register. We move between the heavens and the earth, between Old and New Testaments. We meet Abraham, Tobias and Ezekiel, hear the Song of Nathanael, the Song of Mary of Magdala, the Song of Peter and the Vision of John. Here are painful encounters, estrangement, challenge – and solace. Here is the cry of imprisonment and fear, of desolation. And here is the contingent, unexpected encounter – the hand or voice leading you up, or away, or back, the strangers revealing themselves as angels. For in the beautiful words from Hebrews that give the title to this oratorio, “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”

Worlds are not separated: we are on the threshold and can never know who will cross into our lives. Robert asks this question:

“How could I not have known?
The angel walked beside my every step
And calmed my fears and cheered my nervous heart.

I took him as a simple human friend.
How could I not have known?”

And – because Robert loved animals – he adds that:

“The dog, I felt, had known it all along
How could I not have known?”

This question is the heart of this work, as it was the heart of Robert’s life and ministry. His welcome to those who came to the Deanery, and that of his partner Fletcher, was limitless. Robert saw God’s grandeur in this welcome: in not needing to control but allowing those who came into his life to be themselves. At his final evensong at Canterbury, I saw a queue of hundreds of people around the cloisters waiting to hold his hands. I saw him see each person in turn, saw him listen.

Angels Unawares is an extraordinary gift from Robert and from James. It will endure – because here is music and poetry on the threshold of what we know, what we love, what makes us fearful and what we hope for, welcoming us.

Edmund de Waal, CBE

Message from Sir James MacMillan CBE

ANGELS UNAWARES was commissioned by the Genesis Foundation for Harry Christophers and The Sixteen. I composed it in 2024-25 and it is scored for soprano and tenor soloists, choir and chamber orchestra. The orchestral scoring is for two trumpets, timpani, harp and strings. The work, lasting about 70 minutes and made up of twelve short movements, is a setting of a substantial poem by Robert Willis, who served as Dean of Canterbury Cathedral from 2001 to 2022 and passed away in October 2024, shortly after completing the text. The score is dedicated to his memory.

The first six movements, making up Part 1, are all based on encounters with angels in the Old Testament; the last six, making up Part 2, are all based on New Testament encounters. These encounters are all unexpected and mysterious contacts with angelic presences.

There are many people in today's world who are fascinated and beguiled by the idea of angels, and they run like a significant theme throughout the Judeo-Christian legacy.

The title comes from a passage from The Epistle to the Hebrews, thought to have been written by St Paul: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." (Hebrews 13:2)

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The title of the work comes from a passage from The Epistle to the Hebrews, thought to have been written by St Paul: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." (Hebrews 13:2)

I set this passage right at the start of the first movement as it encapsulates the overall theme and mood of the entire piece. At its core it is an encouragement to show kindness to strangers as a spiritual discipline, an appeal to treat all individuals with dignity and compassion, recognising that every encounter with another person could carry a significance (maybe even supernatural) that is deeper than is apparent on the surface. There is an added layer of mystery to the verse, implying that angels might be present in everyday life, unnoticed.

The work grew out of an ongoing conversation I have had with John Studzinski, the philanthropist and supporter of the arts, who has been a significant mentor and advisor in my work. And the piece is the latest in a series of works I've composed which have angelic themes, such as the apocalyptic *Seven Angels*, the Christmas motet *And lo, the angel of Lord came upon them* and the more mysterious *Who Are These Angels?*

ANGELS UNAWARES

JAMES MACMILLAN, 2026

ROBERT WILLIS, 2023

COMMISSIONED BY THE GENESIS FOUNDATION
FOR HARRY CHRISTOPHERS AND THE SIXTEEN

Angels Unawares

PART 1

I. The Exile from Eden

for choir

II. Abraham and the Three Visitors

for soprano soloist

III. Jacob and the Ladder Reaching to Heaven

for choir

IV. The Song of Tobias

for tenor soloist

V. Elijah and the Still Small Voice

duet for soprano and tenor, with choir

VI. Ezekiel's Vision

for choir

PART 2

VII. Gabriel's Message

duet for soprano and tenor, with choir

VIII. Temptation in the Wilderness

for choir

IX. The Song of Nathanael

duet for soprano and tenor, with choir

X. The Song of Mary of Magdala

for soprano soloist and choir

XI. The Song of Peter

for tenor soloist and choir

XII. The Vision of John

All

I. The Exile from Eden

The glory of Creation once was sung
By angel choirs rejoicing in God's work,
Their music filled the blue expanse of sky
And brought sweet harmony to light on Earth.
Unfolding through the long slow beat of time
From Heaven to Earth an easy traffic passed.
Angelic forms the paths of Eden traced
Keeping good company with humankind,
Till Satan as a serpent discord wrought
With apple from the Tree of Knowledge brought,
Causing an exile from that garden fair.
With flaming swords the mighty Cherubim
Guarded the pathway to the Tree of Life.

II. Abraham and the Three Visitors

In noontide shade beneath the Mamre Oak
The Patriarch rests and muses in the heat,
His old eyes sheltered from the desert sun
Perceive a movement in the shimmering light
And in his resting mind perception forms
Awakening certainty of guests divine.
The old man runs as best he can and bows
Beseeching these strange guests to be refreshed,
With hospitality set out beneath the trees,
Water to wash their feet and food and drink,
Before continuing on their unknown quest.
This Visitation brought a gift divine,
News of a 'Child of Promise' now received.
Two angels sat with Abraham and ate
He realised that God was in the third.
That done they rose to go, the promise given.
The Lord Himself stayed with the Patriarch
To make His purpose for His servant clear.
The two angelic beings must go on
In awful judgement of the Cities of the Plain.

III. Jacob and the Ladder Reaching to Heaven

Through barren desert lands was Jacob sent,
Through unknown countries on a holy quest,
Sent by his father, there to find a bride
Among the daughters of his father's kin.
Night fell upon his journey and he stopped
To make his bed alone in strange terrain.
Stones lay around him sharp and keen and rough,
Save one much smoother as a pillow set.
He lay to sleep, his mind alive with fears,
Alone and nervous of his brother's wrath.
Then as he slept he dreamed a vivid dream,
A ladder stood beside him where he lay,
Its top reached way up into heav'n itself
And angels were descending to the Earth
As though conveying all the grace of Heav'n
And soothing mind and body as he slept.
But more than this, they took his thoughts and prayers
Ascending by each rung to God most high
Who leaned from heaven to bless him with a gift,
The land where now he lay and slept and dreamed.
By him would nations of the Earth be blessed
And God would see these promises fulfilled.
So Jacob woke and knew this awesome place,
The Gate of Heaven where angels came and went
Bringing God's promises to him on Earth
Returning with new prayers to Heaven sent.

IV. The Song of Tobias

How could I not have known?
The angel walked beside my every step
And calmed my fears and cheered my nervous heart.
I took him as a simple human friend.

How could I not have known?
By Tigris I obeyed his strict command
To take the fish and save its inward parts
For healing and protection in our quest.

How could I not have known?
He brought me to my father's cousin's house
Whose stricken daughter was to be my bride,
His action freed her from the demon's curse.

How could I not have known?
Returning home, blessed with abundant wealth,
And Heaven's gift of Sara, my new bride,
He once again instructed me for good.

How could I not have known?
My father's eyes he told me then to heal,
His happiness to me was Heaven's gift.
My friend came in and stood before us then.

How could I not have known?
And only then, shining with Heaven's light,
Declared himself the Archangel Raphael
Before he vanished straightway from our sight.
To God be glory everlasting day and night
The dog, I felt, had known it all along.
How could I not have known?

V. Elijah and the Still Small Voice

Fresh from Mount Carmel and his contest there,
Confronted by the rage of Jezebel,
Elijah fled, his heart now full of fear,
To desert places south of Judah's land
Beyond the borders of cruel Ahab's realm.
Defeated and exhausted he sat down
Beneath the shelter of a Juniper
And there he begged the Lord that he might die.
Alone and in despair he lay and slept
His life seemed over and its purpose gone
Until awakened by an angel's touch
And voice which said to him, "Arise and eat!"
He saw a cake fresh-baked on glowing coals
And pitcher full of water freshly drawn.
He ate and drank and felt his strength return.
Once more he slept and once more felt the touch
And heard the angel's voice, "Arise and eat
Or else the Way will be too far for you!"
Again he ate and drank, then rose and walked
For forty days to Horeb, Mount of God,
Where was a cave to shelter in and rest.
This time he heard his name, "Elijah!", called
By stronger angel's voice, "What brings you here?"
He said, "I have been jealous for the Lord
But now this faithless people seek my life."
"Go, stand before the Lord", the voice replied
And on the mount the Lord passed by in wind,
In storm, in earthquake and in mighty fire.
Then came a still small voice which said to him,
"Return upon your Way". It was the Lord:
"Once more renew your task, but not alone.
Go, find Elisha. Call him from the plough.
He will complete the work which you do now."

VI. Ezekiel's Vision

By Babylon's waters we sat down and wept,
I and my people far from our own land.
For five and twenty years we dreamed of home
And of our ruined Temple all restored.
Beside the River Chebar's flowing course
An angel in my vision came to me
And showed me our own Temple now restored.
But from the East, towards the rising sun,
Fresh waters from the altar flowed quite free;
We stood outside and watched the river flow.
The angel with a measuring line at hand
Caused me to walk a thousand cubits east.
The river swelled and now was ankle deep,
A thousand more and water reached our knees
And then beyond it grew too deep to cross.
But where the river flowed all life would thrive.
Trees grew where barren deserts were before,
Fish filled its waters, creatures of all kinds
Inhabited its banks, and in its reeds
Birds nested safe, for where the river came
Waters which had been poisonous were made fresh.
"And it shall come to pass", the angel said,
"That where the river flows lands will be healed,
And on its banks the trees will bear their fruits.
Their leaves will never fade and month by month
New fruit will ripen and all creatures feed.
The leaves shall be for healing and for strength,
For where the river flows all life shall thrive."

VII. Gabriel's Message

First to the old priest, Zechariah by name,
The angel Gabriel with God's message came
Of child who would be born and blessed by God.
At which the old man questioned Heav'n's intent
And Gabriel struck him speechless from that hour,
For Heaven's messenger must be believed.
Elizabeth conceived within her womb
And in the sixth month Gabriel came again
This time to Nazareth, to Mary there,
She would conceive and bear her first-born son.
Like sunlight through the magnifying lens
Of Mary's heart the angel's message came,
Quick kindling from the earthy tinder there
The brightness of a new celestial flame.
"How can this be, I am a virgin", Mary said.
"This work is of the Spirit", he replied,
"Your son shall be called holy, Son of God".
"Behold the handmaid of the Lord", she said,
"According to your word, let it be so".
The angel left her then and she alone
Felt need of one to share and comprehend
The deep abundant joy which filled her heart.
She travelled then to see Elizabeth
Whose understanding soul proclaimed her blessed.
And Mary glorified the Lord and thus rejoiced
In God's own plan the angel had proclaimed
And sang aloud "Magnificat" clear voiced.

VIII. Temptation in the Wilderness

In desert place the Fallen Angel lies
Waiting with mask of light and tempting tongue,
So subtly with temptations fair and apt
To lure the righteous from the path of light.
Thus with temptations honed and shaped unique
The Tempter stole upon the Word made flesh,
Stealing into the heart of his intent
To give Himself for sake of humankind.
Thoughts which deny the true humanity
And offer painless ease, fame, glory, power
With words of scripture shaped by Satan's tongue
But met each time and countered and seen off.
Until at last the false one was despatched
And angels came to minister instead,
Arming the Son of Man with Heaven's gifts,
"Get thee behind me, Satan!" said with force.
But words like these must needs see constant use,
Temptations came even from the Apostle's tongue
Ere victory at Golgotha was won.

IX. The Song of Nathanael

Beneath the green-leaved fig tree I would pray,
Beside the shore of Galilee's great sea,
When fishing nets were mended for that day
And shelter needed from the noontide heat.
'Twas there that Philip called me and I came
Smiling at the fantastic claim he made
For Jesus from unlikely Nazareth that day.
"What good could come from there?" it seemed to me.
He brought me on Bethsaida's homely shore
Amidst the places we had known since birth
And stood me in the compass of His gaze
Who likewise smiled and with amusement said,
"Behold an Israelite who knows no guile!"
"How do you know me?" cried my beating heart.
"I saw you 'neath the fig tree", He replied.
I knew Him then to be the One we sought.
"You are the Son of God and Israel's King!"
The words came out unmasked from deep within.
"You say that?" He replied, still with surprise,
"Because I said I saw you in the shade,
Beneath the fig tree's leaves? You shall see more –
See open Heavens and angels sent from God
Ascend and descend on the Son of Man!"
My eyes were opened and new life began.

X. The Song of Mary of Magdala

"I watched life slowly drain upon the Cross
And felt the darkness once more fill my mind,
That ancient darkness, hopeless and profound,
Which His own words of life had freed me from
When mind was filled with Light and heart with Love.
Now it returned, and blotted out that Light
As Life and Love hung dying on the cross.
I watched as Joseph led with tender care
The broken, bleeding body taken down,
Laid carefully in his own sepulchre
And sealed with one huge stone to mark An End.
The darkness once more filled my tortured mind,
Twisted with grief that endless Sabbath day,
Till with the dawn, the first day of the week,
I felt impelled to journey to the tomb.
I found it open, wounded body gone,
Even a place to grieve Him was denied.
In panic, anger, hopelessness I ran,
Ran to the men whom He had called His friends.
Who came and saw, as I, an empty tomb
Then left me in the garden all alone.
The morning sunshine mocked at my despair.
Yet, through my tears, I sensed a presence there,
The dark tomb seemed to shine with Heaven's Light,
A Light quite other than the morning sun,
That spoke of hope, of promises reborn.
Two angels gently asked me why I wept,

Their words of comfort causing me to turn;
The morning sun now shining with new Light.
I heard a voice which simply called my name.
I knew Him then, as Love and Hope returned,
"Rabboni", I replied. All would be well.

XI. The Song of Peter

That Passover when Herod had James slain
He sent armed men to capture me as well.
Cast into prison, guarded day and night,
Bound with two heavy chains I sleepless lay.
After the Feast it was the King's intent
To bring me forth before the hostile crowds
For judgement to be made against my life,
And so for this myself I now prepared.
Meanwhile the faithful followers of the Way,
Hidden behind locked doors prayed urgently,
Though after James's death but little hope
Of my release was in their frightened hearts.
The night before th'intended judgement day
I lay, thus chained, between two prison guards,
Awaiting in the darkness certain death.
A light shone in the cell and I then felt
A touch upon my side as chains fell off
And some new presence raised me to my feet.
A voice of comfort then I heard which said,
"Take shoes and garments now and follow me".
I followed on, still thinking this a dream,
As inner gate and outer opened wide
And in the moonlit street I found myself.
At which the angel took his silent leave.
I knew then, with a certainty past doubt,
The Lord had sent His angel to my aid,
The task was mine now to seek out my friends,
Full of new hope, undaunted, unafraid.

XII. The Vision of John

Behold a door was opened into Heav'n.
I heard the voice of angels round the throne.
Ten thousand times ten thousand and far more,
Too numerous to count them as they sang
Of blessing, honour, glory, power and might,
Salvation to the One upon the throne.
I saw a mighty angel clothed in cloud
A rainbow shone bright colour round his head,
His face was like the sun, his feet like fire.
And there was war in Heaven as Michael fought
With all his angels 'gainst the rebel host
Of Satan and his angels who fought back.
Defeated by th'Archangel's mighty force
And cast out for eternity from Heav'n
The battle now would rage upon the Earth.
I saw then a new Heaven and new Earth.
One of the seven angels came and said,
"Come now and I will show you many things",
He showed me the pure water of new life
As clear as crystal flowing from the throne.
And there beside the stream the Tree of Life,
And from the branches hung twelve kinds of fruit
Its healing leaves bring gifts of precious worth
Of peace to heal the nations of the Earth.

Sir James MacMillan CBE

SIR JAMES MacMillan is one of today's most successful composers and performs internationally as a conductor. His musical language, distinctive for its rhythmic excitement and powerful emotional communication, is flooded with influences from his Scottish heritage, Catholic faith, social conscience and close connection with Celtic folk music.

MacMillan first achieved international recognition following the extraordinary success of *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie*, premiered by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra at the BBC Proms in 1990. Since then his prolific output has been performed and broadcast around the world. Among his major works are the percussion concerto *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel*, which has received close to 500 performances, a cello concerto for Mstislav Rostropovich, and five symphonies. Recent major works include his Percussion Concerto No.2, written for Colin Currie, the Violin Concerto No.2, written for Nicola Benedetti, and the Symphony No.5: 'Le grand Inconnu', a choral symphony written for The Sixteen and premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival in 2019 as part of a major celebratory feature for MacMillan's 60th birthday. Other new works for chorus and orchestra in recent seasons include his *Christmas Oratorio*, premiered by the London Philharmonic in 2021, and *Timotheus, Bacchus and Cecilia*, a celebration of the power of music, premiered by the Cincinnati Symphony and the Hallé Orchestra in 2023-24. His Concerto for Orchestra was co-commissioned by the London Symphony Orchestra – which opened its 2024-25 season with the premiere of the piece – Melbourne Symphony, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Auckland Philharmonia and Singapore Symphony. The premiere at the Vatican of *Angels Unawares* will be followed in June 2026 by the work's London premiere, again performed by The Sixteen and Britten Sinfonia conducted by Harry Christophers.

Enjoying a successful career as conductor of his own music and of a range of contemporary and standard repertoire, MacMillan is praised for the composer's insight he brings to each score. The orchestras he has conducted include the Rotterdam Philharmonic, Munich Philharmonic, Danish Radio Symphony, Gothenburg Symphony, Netherlands Radio Philharmonic, Frankfurt Radio Symphony, Hungarian National Philharmonic, St Louis Symphony, Baltimore Symphony, BBC Symphony, BBC Scottish Symphony, Royal Scottish National Orchestra,



Tallinn Chamber Orchestra, New Zealand Symphony Orchestra and NHK Symphony Orchestra. He was Composer/Conductor of the BBC Philharmonic from 2000 to 2009 and Principal Guest Conductor of the Netherlands Radio Chamber Philharmonic from 2009 to 2013.

In 2025-26, as part of his seasonal tenure as the Dresden Philharmonic's Composer-in-Residence, he conducts the orchestra in a choral-orchestral programme including his 1989 work *Cantos Sagrados*. Highlights of his 2025-26 season as a conductor are his *Christmas Oratorio* with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and concerts with the Gulbenkian Orchestra, Iceland Symphony, BBC Scottish Symphony, Flemish Radio Choir and Royal College of Music Symphony Orchestra.

The Cumnock Tryst music festival, which MacMillan founded in October 2014, takes place annually in his native Ayrshire. The festival celebrated its tenth anniversary with the launch of its International Summer-School for Composers, directed by MacMillan and open to young composers from around the world, and went on to win the 2024 Sky Arts Award for Classical Music. The following year it won the Series and Events Award at the Royal Philharmonic Society Awards.

Sir James MacMillan has conducted many of his own works for recordings: for Chandos, BIS, BMG, Challenge Records (his violin concerto *A Deep but Dazzling Darkness* and his percussion concerto *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel* with Colin Currie and the Netherlands Radio Kamer Filharmonie) and Harmonia Mundi (winning the 2016 BBC Music Magazine Award for his recording with Britten Sinfonia of his Oboe Concerto and other works). In 2017, The Sixteen's recording of his *Stabat mater* was nominated for a Gramophone Award and won the Diapason d'Or Choral Award.

The recipient of a Knighthood in 2015, following a CBE in 2004, Sir James MacMillan was awarded The King's Medal for Music in 2025 and was appointed a Fellow of the Ivors Academy in 2024.

The works of Sir James MacMillan are published by Boosey & Hawkes. Sir James MacMillan is represented by Intermusica.

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The Very Revd Dr Robert Willis DL KSTJ

A FINE theologian, hymn writer, and, most importantly to him, pastor, Robert Willis served as Dean of Canterbury for 21 years, running the mother church of the Anglican Communion and the King's School, and advising three archbishops, Parliament and the Crown.

He had previously spent nine years as Dean of Hereford and five as Vicar of Sherborne Abbey. A leading member of the General Synod for three decades, he was entrusted with oversight of the Deans' council of England for over 20 years and acted internationally as a special adviser for the Church of England and local national churches. In addition he assumed senior roles with charitable organisations in such fields as education, the arts, social justice and healthcare.

After his sudden death in 2024, which occurred while he was working at Yale, the Telegraph called Robert Willis "the last of the great deans", though he is perhaps most fondly remembered by a wider public for the Garden Congregation YouTube broadcasts he and his partner made daily during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 1000-plus videos still attract viewers from all over the world and bring many back to faith.

Awarded the Cross of St Augustine by Archbishop Rowan Williams and the gift of a relic from His Holiness Pope Francis in recognition of his work in ecumenism and reconciliation, Robert Willis also received doctorates from a number of universities, including Yale, and the Freedom of the City of Canterbury. As an accomplished pianist, organist, cellist and singer, he assisted in compiling many official hymn books, wrote numerous published hymns, and was awarded a fellowship by the Royal School of Church Music.

His faith was deeply rooted in a Benedictine tradition which recognises the essential nature of creativity and encouragement. When John Studzinski and the Genesis Foundation asked him to write the text of a new work on the theme of angels, to be composed by Sir James MacMillan, he saw immediately that this would connect directly with



his own convictions and beliefs. He found great joy in delving into the Scriptures to explore the meeting points between Heaven and Earth, and in undertaking a deeper contemplation of the responses and feelings of the people involved. At an early stage of his work on the text he realised that its intensity could be heightened through focusing on situations where, initially at least, the holy nature of the visitation was not recognised – hence the title *Angels Unawares*, which is taken from Hebrews 13:2: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares". Hospitality and kindness are also key to the Benedictine ethos and to the way Robert lived his own life.

His faith was deeply rooted in a Benedictine tradition which recognises the essential nature of creativity and encouragement. When John Studzinski and the Genesis Foundation asked him to write the text of a new work on the theme of angels, to be composed by Sir James MacMillan, he saw immediately that this would connect directly with his own convictions and beliefs.

Harry Christophers CBE

HARRY CHRISTOPHERS stands among today's great champions of choral music. In partnership with The Sixteen he has set benchmark standards for the performance of everything from late medieval polyphony to important new works by contemporary composers.

Under his leadership The Sixteen has established its hugely successful annual Choral Pilgrimage, created the *Sacred Music* series for BBC television, and developed an acclaimed period-instrument orchestra. Highlights include an artist residency at Wigmore Hall, a large-scale tour of Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610*, the world premiere of Sir James MacMillan's *Symphony No.5: 'Le grand Inconnu'* at the 2019 Edinburgh International Festival, and a live-streamed performance of MacMillan's *Stabat mater* from the Sistine Chapel. The Sixteen and Harry Christophers have also undertaken extensive tours of the USA and the Netherlands, and will continue to tour the UK with their 2026 Choral Pilgrimage.

Harry Christophers served as Artistic Director of the Handel and Haydn Society in Boston from 2008 to 2022 and is now its Conductor Laureate. He has worked as guest conductor with, among others, the London Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic, the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra and the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie. Christophers' extensive commitment to opera has embraced productions for English National Opera and Lisbon Opera and work with the Granada Festival in Spain and the Buxton and Grange festivals in the UK.

In 2019 Harry Christophers collaborated with BBC Radio 3 presenter Sara Mohr-Pietsch to produce a book entitled *A New Heaven: Choral Conversations* in celebration of The Sixteen's 40th anniversary.

Harry Christophers was awarded a CBE in the Queen's 2012 Birthday Honours list. He is an Honorary Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford and of the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, and has Honorary Doctorates in Music from the Universities of Leicester, Northumbria, Canterbury Christ Church and Kent.



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Elizabeth Watts

SOPRANO

WITH A voice described by International Record Review as "one of the most beautiful Britain has produced in a generation", Elizabeth Watts is "now established as one of Britain's leading sopranos" (The Guardian) and "a national treasure" (The Arts Desk). Her debut recording of Schubert lieder for SONY Red Seal, a Gramophone Editor's Choice, was praised for its "milky timbre and interpretative maturity" (FT) and "technical mastery" (Gramophone). Her prolific discography includes Bach cantatas, Strauss lieder, Mozart opera arias, JS Bach's *St John Passion* and *St Matthew Passion* and Mahler's *Symphony No.4*. Most recently, her recording of Britten's *Spring Symphony* with Sir Simon Rattle and the London Symphony Orchestra was named Orchestral Album of the Year by *Classica* magazine.

A former BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist, Elizabeth is much in demand as a recitalist and has appeared in the UK at major venues including Wigmore Hall and the Edinburgh Festival and internationally at the Concertgebouw Amsterdam and in Paris, Madrid and Zurich.

On the concert platform she sings a broad repertoire from Bach to Brahms, Mahler and Strauss, and has appeared with orchestras including the London Symphony Orchestra, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra and Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, working with conductors such as Sir Simon Rattle, Sakari Oramo and Yannick Nézet-Séguin. Highlights include performances at the BBC Proms, Mahler's *Symphonies Nos.2 and 4*, Bach's *Passions*, and Handel's *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* with the Mark Morris Dance Group. Elizabeth's world premiere performance of Richard Blackford's *Songs of Nadia Anjuman*, which she also conducted, received multiple five-star reviews and was named a Concert of the Year by The Times.

Now firmly established as a lyric soprano, she has recently sung such operatic roles as *Aspasia (Mitridate, Garsington Opera)* and the Countess (*Le nozze di Figaro, English National Opera*).

Elizabeth was a chorister at Norwich Cathedral and studied at Sheffield University and the Royal College of Music. Her awards include the Kathleen Ferrier Award, BBC Cardiff Singer of the World Rosenblatt Song Prize, and a Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award. She is an Honorary Doctor of Music of Sheffield University and a Fellow of the Royal College of Music.



© MARCO BORGREVE (WATTS) PABLO STRONG (MCKINNEY)

Matthew McKinney

TENOR

HAILED FOR his 'gorgeous lyric voice' (London Unattached), Scottish tenor Matthew McKinney is quickly establishing a reputation for his nuanced artistry, innate musicality and expressive performance across opera, song and concert.

Winner of the main prize in the 2024 Kathleen Ferrier Awards, Matthew made a principal debut at Glyndebourne in October 2025 in the world premiere of Mark Anthony Turnage's *The Railway Children*, to be followed by a debut with English National Opera in the spring of 2026. Over the course of the 2025-26 season he appears with pianists Malcolm Martineau, Roelof Temmingh, and Dearbhla Collins, and on the concert stage he performs the Evangelist in Bach's *St John Passion* in Paisley Abbey and Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in Ayr, Scotland.

Highlights of recent seasons include: his debut at Carnegie Hall as a song studio artist; Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* as part of the newly compiled work *Do Not Take My Story for a Fairy Tale* for English Touring Opera; Bach's *St Matthew Passion* for Dunedin Consort; covering the role of Bardolfo (*Falstaff*) for Glyndebourne Festival Opera, and taking the roles of Luigino (*Il viaggio a Reims*) and Rustighello (*Lucrezia Borgia*) in new productions for English Touring Opera. Other roles include Tsar Berendey in *The Snow Maiden* (English Touring Opera), Damon in *Acis and Galatea* (Ryedale Festival) and Henrik in *A Little Night Music* (Opera North, Buxton International Festival).



The Sixteen

WHETHER PERFORMING a simple medieval hymn or expressing the complex musical and emotional language of a contemporary choral composition, The Sixteen does so with qualities common to all great ensembles. Tonal warmth, rhythmic precision and immaculate intonation are clearly essential to the mix. But it is the courage and intensity with which The Sixteen makes music that speak above all to so many people.

The Sixteen gave its first concert in 1979 under the direction of Founder and Conductor Harry Christophers CBE. Their pioneering work since has made a profound impact on the performance of choral music and attracted a large new audience, not least as 'The Voices of Classic FM' and through BBC television's *Sacred Music* series.

The voices and period-instrument players of The Sixteen are at home in over five centuries of music, a breadth reflected in their annual Choral Pilgrimage to Britain's great cathedrals and sacred spaces, their regular appearances at the world's leading concert halls, and their award-winning recordings for The Sixteen's CORO and other labels.

thesixteen.com

Highlights include: the world premiere of Sir James MacMillan's *Stabat mater* (at the Barbican in 2016) and a subsequent live-streamed performance from the Sistine Chapel (2018), and his *Symphony No.5: 'Le grand Inconnu'* (2019 Edinburgh International Festival and the Lincoln Centre, New York), both commissioned for Harry Christophers and The Sixteen by the Genesis Foundation; an ambitious ongoing series of Handel oratorios; extensive tours of the USA and the Netherlands, and a specially commissioned series of concert programmes presented by Sir Simon Russell Beale and entitled *A Choral Odyssey*.

THE SIXTEEN

Soprano

Julie Cooper
Katy Hill
Kirsty Hopkins
Alexandra Kidgell
Victoria Meteyard
Charlotte Mobbs
Emilia Morton
Ruth Provost

Alto

Robin Blaze
Daniel Collins
Edward McMullan
Elisabeth Paul
Kim Porter
Anna Semple

Tenor

Jeremy Budd
Tom Castle
Mark Dobell
Oscar Golden-Lee
Steven Harrold
George Pooley

Bass

Ben Davies
Robert Davies
Eamonn Dougan
Tim Jones
Rob Macdonald
Stuart Young



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Britten Sinfonia

BRITTEN SINFONIA creates impactful and inspirational musical experiences through its adventurous programming and innovative formats – such as its immersive Surround Sound Playlist – and through its projects created especially for school pupils, hospital patients and local communities.

Rooted in the East of England, where it is the only professional orchestra working throughout the region, Britten Sinfonia also enjoys a national and international reputation as one of today's finest ensembles.

"Innovative as always" (Guardian, 2025), it is equally renowned for the remarkable breadth of its collaborations – from Steve Reich, Mahan Esfahani and Sarah Connolly to Anoushka Shankar, Jacob Collier and Pagrav Dance Company – and for its nurturing of new compositional voices: over three decades, Britten Sinfonia has premiered more than 250 new works.

Britten Sinfonia's main concert activity is in London, Saffron Walden, Cambridge and Norwich, and it also performs in Bury St Edmunds, Ely, Peterborough and Chelmsford. The orchestra often performs at London's Wigmore Hall and appears at UK festivals including Aldeburgh, Brighton, Norfolk & Norwich and the BBC Proms. Its prolific discography features many award-winning recordings on labels such as Harmonia Mundi, Chandos, Warner and Hyperion.

britteninfonia.com



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BRITTEN SINFONIA

Violin I

Zoë Beyers
Marcus Barcham Stevens
Katherine Shave
Clara Biss
Fiona McCapra
Cecily Ward

Violin II

Miranda Dale
Nicola Goldscheider
Suzanne Loze
Anna Bradley
Judith Stowe
Marcus Broome

Violas

Yukiko Ogura
Bridget Carey
Rachel Byrt
Francis Kefford

Cellos

Caroline Dearnley
Ben Chappell
Joy Hawley
William Clark-Maxwell

Double Basses

Benjamin Russell
Phoebe Clarke

Trumpets

Angela Whelan
Heidi Bennett

Timpani

Bill Lockhart

Harp

Sally Pryce

THE SISTINE CHAPEL

Credit: Vatican Museums

The Sistine Chapel is located in the south-west corner of the Apostolic Palace's medieval core and is named after Sixtus IV Della Rovere, for whom it was rebuilt between 1477 and 1480. It is currently entered through a small secondary door in the wall behind the altar, which is reached by descending from the Raphael Rooms or ascending from the rooms of the Modern and Contemporary Religious Art Collection. The official entrance leads to the Regal Hall, where the Pope received ambassadors of the emperor and royalty. The chapel was erected on the site of a probably 13th-century sacellum, possibly from the time of Nicholas III, of which all that remains are some meagre document references.

According to Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) the hall was rebuilt by Giovannino de' Dolci (c. 1435 – c. 1485), to a design by the Florentine Baccio Pontelli (c. 1450-1492), with the dual aim of locating the new palace chapel there and defending the Vatican Palace, as suggested by the severe and massive exterior and the battlements on the upper part, visible from the Sobieski Room and the covered passage that connects it to the Room of the Fire in the Borgo, and, on the lower floor, from the Library's Room of the Tributes. The building contains a basement, a mezzanine and the chapel, with a spacious ceiling extending over it and guards' walkway outside. The mezzanine housed the offices of the *Magistri caeremoniarum* (the Masters of Ceremonies, who would now be called secretaries), including Giovanni Burcardo, who lived during the reign of Alexander VI, Paride Grassi, a contemporary of Julius II and Leo X, and Biagio da Cesena, from the time of Paul III. Apart from some papal functions, the chapel is still used for the conclave that was originally held in the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament in front, frescoed by Fra Angelico (Guido di Pietro, c. 1395-1455) and destroyed under Paul III to extend the Maresciallo Staircase and build the Pauline Chapel.

Michelangelo began painting on this surface, all alone, in summer 1536, completing the immense work (a surface of 200 m2 with 391 figures) in autumn 1541. On 31 October of that year Paul III, who had followed the artist's progress impatiently, celebrated the Solemn Vespers before that extraordinary painting which, as Vasari wrote, "filled [all of Rome] with astonishment and wonder".

The Sistine has a very simple plan. The rectangular hall without apse is 40.23 m long by 13.41 m wide and 20.7 m high. It is roofed by a lowered tunnel vault with lateral discharge vaults corresponding to the twelve arched windows that light the chapel. The paving is in polychrome marble intarsia. A marble screen with grille separates the chancel, reserved for the officiating clergyman, from the place of the worshippers. It was moved back in the 16th century to extend the chancel and was originally joined to the choir: both are adorned with very delicate reliefs on which Andrea Bregno (1418-1503), Giovanni Dalmata (c. 1440 – c. 1509) and Mino da Fiesole (c. 1430-1484) worked.

The wall decorations, with *Stories of Moses and Christ* and *Portraits of Popes*, were carried out by a team of painters made up primarily of Pietro Perugino (c. 1450-1523), site director, Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), Domenico Ghirlandaio (Domenico Bigordi, 1449-1494) and Cosimo Rosselli (1439-1507), assisted by members of their respective workshops, including Filippino Lippi (1457-1504), Piero di Cosimo (Piero di Lorenzo di Chimenti, c. 1462-1521), Pinturicchio (Bernardino di Betto, c. 1454-1513), Bartolomeo della Gatta (Piero d'Antonio Dei, 1448-1502) and Luca Signorelli (c. 1450-1523), the last two responsible for the two final frescoes of the Mosaic series. Pier Matteo d'Amelia (c. 1448-1508) painted a simple starry sky on the vault. The works began in 1481 and were completed in 1482. On 15 August 1483 Sixtus IV consecrated the new chapel and dedicated it to Our Lady of the Assumption. Perugino also painted a lost fresco with the *Assumption of the Virgin*, in which a drawing attributed to Pinturicchio's workshop shows Pope Sixtus IV above the altar, kneeling in prayer with the tiara at his side, surrounded by the Apostles and invested with his supreme dignity by St Peter himself, along with two paintings in the Mosaic cycle and the Christological one, destroyed by Michelangelo (1475-1564) to make way for the *Last Judgement*.



The three Popes who succeeded Sixtus IV left the chapel as they had found it. His nephew Julius II, though, decided to alter the vault decorations and in 1508, reviving a project developed in 1506, entrusted the task to Michelangelo, who tried in vain to evade the Pope's will. According to sources of the time, particularly Buonarroti's biographer, Ascanio Condivi, a suggestion from Donato Bramante (1444-1514) was behind this, due to envy for a rival, "considering that his main art was statuary" (as in fact it was). Michelangelo began the works on 10 May 1508, initially with the aid of some assistants such as Jacopo d'Indaco (1476-1526) and Francesco Granacci (1469-1543), but whom he dismissed when he had acquired the necessary skills for working in fresco, never before tried. In September 1510 half the vault was finished (from the entrance to the scene with the Original Sin). On 14 August 1511 the Pope obliged the artist to dismantle the scaffolding so he could see the work done so far. In October 1512 the vault was finished and on 1 November, All Saints Day, Julius II inaugurated it with a solemn mass.

In autumn 1533 Clement VII engaged Michelangelo to further alter the decorations of the Sistine and paint a *Last Judgement* on the altar wall. The position of the Judgement, which for liturgical reasons was normally depicted on the entrance wall, is unusual. Once again Buonarroti ended up accepting the task, but did not put his hand to it until 1535, obliged by Paul III, who in the meantime had succeeded Clement VII. On 1 September 1535 the Pope appointed the Tuscan artist "*supremum architectum, sculptorem et pictorem*" of the Apostolic Palace and on 17 November 1536 freed him from the contractual obligations for Julius II's tomb so he could devote himself solely to the Sistine project. First of all, the 15th-century pictures on the wall were destroyed and a cladding of slightly inclined bricks laid. Michelangelo began painting on this surface, all alone, in summer 1536, completing the immense work (a surface of 200 m2 with 391 figures) in autumn 1541. On 31 October of that year Paul III, who had followed the artist's progress impatiently, celebrated the Solemn Vespers before that extraordinary painting which, as Vasari wrote, "filled [all of Rome] with astonishment and wonder".

Genesis Foundation

THE GENESIS Foundation has nurtured the careers of thousands of exceptionally talented artists and creative professionals since it was established by John Studzinski in 2001. Based in the United Kingdom, the Foundation invigorates the performing, visual and literary arts through partnership programmes run by cultural organisations that are highly respected and characterised by outstanding leadership. Participants in Genesis programmes benefit from access to the resources, training, mentoring and networks offered by the Foundation's partners, currently The Sixteen, the Almeida Theatre, National Theatre, Royal Court Theatre, Royal Academy of Arts, William Morris Gallery and Jewish Literary Foundation. The Genesis Foundation's aim is to play a distinctive role in creating the cultural memory of tomorrow.

Over more than two decades, through funding the composition, performance and recording of some 35 new works by both established and emerging composers, the Genesis Foundation has also become one of the UK's principal commissioners of new sacred choral music. Among the commissions that initially shaped the programme are Roxanna Panufnik's *Westminster Mass* (1998) and Will Todd's *Among Angels* (2006). In 2018, the Foundation was invited by the Holy See to present a performance, in the Sistine Chapel, of a major Genesis Foundation commission, Sir James MacMillan's *Stabat mater*. Given by Harry Christophers and The Sixteen with Britten Sinfonia, this became the first-ever concert to be live-streamed on the internet from the Sistine Chapel. The *Stabat mater* represents a landmark in the Foundation's relationship with Sir James MacMillan, which has produced a total of eight commissions, from *Padre Pio's Prayer* (2008) to his monumental *Symphony No.5: 'Le grand Inconnu'* (2019) and now *Angels Unawares* (2026). Sir James has also acted as a mentor to young composers who have received commissions from the Genesis Foundation, among them Ninfea Cruttwell-Read, Alissa Firsova, Millicent B. James, Tõnu Kõrvits, Matthew Martin and Lucy Walker.

The singers of The Sixteen, under their founder and conductor Harry Christophers, have premiered the majority of the Genesis Foundation's commissions. In 2021, a concert inspired by the life and writings of Saint John Henry Newman, *Newman: Meditation & Prayer*, brought the first performances of new pieces by Sir James MacMillan and Will Todd; in 2022, in the context of *A Garland for the Queen*, a tribute to the life and reign of Elizabeth II, Cecilia McDowall's 'O Lord, Make Thy Servant, Elizabeth' received its premiere in the Chapel Royal of Saint Peter ad Vincula, Tower of London.

In 2016, the Genesis Foundation made history by bringing together leaders from the Catholic and Anglican Churches for Vespers at Hampton Court Palace's Chapel Royal; this was the first time that a service according to the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church had been celebrated there since the 1550s. Paying tribute to the rich and turbulent religious history of the Chapel Royal, The Sixteen and the young singers of Genesis Sixteen performed Thomas Tallis's Magnificat, William Cornysh's *Salve Regina* and John Taverner's 'Leroy' Kyrie.

Among further events planned for 2026, the Genesis Foundation's 25th anniversary year, are a celebration at the Royal Court Theatre and the UK premiere of *Angels Unawares* at Cadogan Hall in London on 2 June. The commissioning and performance of sacred music will continue to form a pillar of the Foundation's activities in the coming years.



Harriet Capaldi, Managing Director
John Studzinski, Founder & Chairman

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

His Holiness Pope Leo XIV

His Eminence Cardinal Pietro Parolin

His Eminence Cardinal Vincent Nichols

His Excellency The Most Reverend Diego Ravelli

President of the Pontifical Commission
and Governorate of Vatican City State

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Governorate of Vatican City State

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Premm Design

Angels Unawares has been made possible with
generous support from the Genesis Foundation.

FILMING NOTICE

The concert is being filmed by Ad Lib Productions for future broadcast. If you have any concerns, please talk to a member of the Front of House staff.





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