

# A ringing coda: the music at the Queen's funeral was both solemn and sublime

As well as the time-honoured 18th-century Sentences and familiar hymns, Westminster Abbey heard superb new work by Judith Weir and James MacMillan



Westminster Abbey organist Peter Holder rehearsing. Photograph: Jonathan Brady/PA

-Tim Ashley, Mon 19 Sep 2022, The Guardian

The Queen's state funeral was a thing of musical contrasts. Outside in the streets were the skirl of bagpipes, tolling bells, massed bands, tramping feet and solemn marches by Beethoven, Chopin and Mendelssohn, as immense processions slowly wound their way through London. Inside Westminster Abbey, the pomp was tempered by reflection on a long life and reign, interwoven with British choral music from the 17th century to the present day, sung by the choirs of Westminster Abbey and the Chapel Royal, St James Palace, conducted by the Abbey's director of music, James O'Donnell.

The continuity of tradition predictably hung heavy over the event. The content of the haunting Sentences, sung as the coffin was brought into the Abbey, has remained unchanged for royal and state funerals since the 18th century; their composer was William Croft, then the Abbey's organist, though in deference to his great predecessor, Henry Purcell, Croft also retained the latter's Thou Knowest, Lord, the Secrets of our Hearts, written for the funeral of Mary II in 1695.

Thereafter the anthems, psalms, hymns and organ music are a matter of choice. The hymns included The Lord's My Shepherd, I'll Not Want, a favourite of the Queen and sung at her wedding, while Vaughan Williams's O Taste and See was written for her coronation. One of the anthems, meanwhile My Soul There Is a Country, setting poetry by Henry Vaughan, was taken from Songs of Farewell by [Hubert Parry, a favourite composer of the King](#). The organ music before the service, played by Peter Holder and Matthew Jorysz, paid tribute to former Masters of the Kings or Queen's Music, including Elgar, Malcolm Williamson and Peter Maxwell Davies, while Bach's Fantasia in C Minor, at a bit of a tangent from the rest of it all, formed the recessional voluntary.

There was also, however, new music: a setting of part of Psalm 42, Like as the Hart Desireth the Water-brooks, by [Judith Weir, current Master of the King's Music](#); and the anthem Who Shall Separate Us From the Love of Christ by [James MacMillan](#). Weir's psalm is astonishingly beautiful, as slowly shifting chords and harmonies suggest the soul's longing for God in the contemplation of eternity. MacMillan's composition is in some respects more volatile, his anthem opening with upper voices hovering over a sustained bass drone, before the music escalates towards a sequence of ecstatic alleluias and comes to rest on a quiet Amen. Both pieces deserve to be heard beyond their immediate context.

You couldn't, of course, fault how any of it was done. Sacred music often sounds its best sung by choirs who perform it in an ecclesiastical setting throughout the course of the liturgical year. The Sentences were touching (it's hard not to be moved by the Purcell), the anthems wonderfully focused and controlled. Too much of the organ music at the start was either obscured by TV commentary or vanished altogether as cameras cut away, though Holder's playing of the Bach at the close was magnificently imposing and sombre.