



Patron: Her Majesty the Queen

## Press Release

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### ROYAL PHILHARMONIC SOCIETY ENGLISH VISIONARIES DAY

**Composer James MacMillan discusses whether “the idea of a free-spirited artist is a myth” in keynote address**

**Saturday 26 January at 2.30pm, Queen Elizabeth Hall  
(part of Southbank Centre’s *Rest is Noise Festival*)**

**Does religious thought liberate or shackle the imagination? Today, do we treat ‘faith’ as something of a dirty word when it comes to music and the arts?**

In the keynote address at the Royal Philharmonic Society’s “English Visionaries” day at London’s Southbank Centre on Saturday (26 January), Composer **James MacMillan** takes Edward Elgar’s *Dream of Gerontius* as a starting point to explore what place faith and mysticism has in artistic vision.

Quoting poet Michael Symmons Roberts, he explains; *“There’s a popular view, influenced by Romanticism, that only the pure, unfettered imagination can produce the great work. Poets should not be religious, or overtly political, or committed to anything much outside the poetry. Poets should be freewheeling, free-thinking free spirits. As if that meant anything.”*

Turning to Edward Elgar, he comments: *“Since the composition of Gerontius, commentators have fallen over themselves in an attempt to paint Elgar’s Catholic faith as weak or insignificant. ... Elgar was to suffer for his courageous vision as performances of the Dream were banned as “inappropriate” in Gloucester Cathedral for a decade after the premiere, and performances in places like Hereford and Worcester were only permitted with large sections of the text bowdlerized, with much of the ‘objectionable’ Catholic dimension removed. It is thought by some that the vehemence of the reaction impacted greatly on the composer, even to the extent of him gradually losing his faith over the rest of his life. He may also have been seduced by the fame and praise that came his way in the wake of his more secular instrumental works that turned him into a national*

*treasure. Proclaimed as 'quintessentially English' he became a totem of nationalism. Enjoying all that, why go back to the depredations of Catholic martyrdom? But it was from this religion of martyrs and saints that Elgar drew his most unfettered freedom to visualise a work of greatness."*

Pointing to a range of modernist composers, including Stravinsky, Messiaen, Gorecki and most recently Jonathan Harvey and John Tavener, MacMillan argues that *"far from being a spent force, religion has proved to be a vibrant, animating principle in modern music and continues to promise much for the future. It could even be said that any discussion of modernity's mainstream in music would be incomplete without a serious reflection on the spiritual values, belief and practice at work in composers' minds"*.

**The lecture is given as part of RPS200, a year of special events throughout 2013 celebrating the Bicentenary of the UK's oldest concert society, the Royal Philharmonic Society.**

The RPS day on English Visionaries at the Southbank Centre also features a discussion on the *Edwardian Aesthetic* with composer **Anthony Payne**, writer and journalist **David Nice** and academic **Dr Heather Wiebe**, and a new film installation that brings together a range of young musicians to voice their thoughts and visions for the future of music.

#### Box Office

**Tickets for James MacMillan's Royal Philharmonic Society Lecture, priced £5 - £10, can be booked at [www.southbankcentre.co.uk](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk)**

**For further press information/press tickets please contact:  
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**Full details of Royal Philharmonic Society Bicentenary events at [www.rps200.org](http://www.rps200.org)**