

Article

A Choral Meditation: Fusing Past and Present in the Sacred Music of Eoghan Desmond

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Abstract: Choral music and the sacred have been intertwined since the Middle Ages. With the increasing secularisation of society, it is notable that the sacred choral canon continues to expand and attract audiences in religious and secular spaces, underlining the enduring importance of tradition and the human desire to search for something beyond our existence. The practice of setting sacred texts to music abounds in the work of contemporary composers, continuing the historic tradition into the present day via a wide range of compositional and stylistic approaches. In his sacred works, Irish composer Eoghan Desmond achieves a sound that fuses the past and present, exhibiting both the visceral and meditative aspects associated with the texts that he sets. This article focuses on the composer's choral work *Nothing in Vain* (2021), a setting of John Henry Newman's 'A Meditation on Trust in God'. Through critical score analysis, I highlight Desmond's ability to reflect Newman's devotion to God and to evoke a sense of the spiritual through his formal organisation and application of harmonic, rhythmic, and textural techniques, drawing on influences from the Renaissance tradition, the contemporary style of ambient music, and the work of well-known composer James MacMillan. Desmond's synthesis of ancient and contemporary compositional practices invites all listeners to engage in this musical meditation and contemplate the message of the spiritual text.

Keywords: choral music; sacred music; Eoghan Desmond; Newman; meditation; prayer; Christianity; spirituality; music and text; analysis



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1. Introduction

The Scottish composer James MacMillan (b. 1959) has observed how music 'seems to share a veritable umbilical link with the sacred' (MacMillan 2009). This is particularly apparent in choral music, given the synthesis of music and text, and the rich tradition of sacred music produced by composers since the Medieval era. With the increasing secularisation of society, it is notable that the sacred choral canon continues to expand and attract audiences in religious and secular spaces. In the last half-century, the development of digital technology and streaming platforms has resulted in a new, expanded listenership for sacred music, from Renaissance polyphony through to the more homophonic sonorities prevalent in contemporary choral composition. Some contemporary composers have effectively integrated Medieval and Renaissance influences into their own twenty-first-century musical language, combining the past and present in their communication of the spiritual. Notable composers in this regard include Arvo Pärt (b. 1935), Henryk Górecki (1933–2010), John Tavener (1944–2013), and James MacMillan, all of whom have been influenced by archaic musical techniques, as well as being guided by their own religious faith. In his description of these 'spiritual composers', MacMillan acknowledges their common 'love of ancient church music and a desire to look back at the ancient tradition of Christian music' (MacMillan 2000, p. 17). Reflecting on the polyphonic music of composers such as Palestrina and Tallis from centuries past, he contends that these pioneers continue 'to provide an ideal for composers even today who want to handle [. . .] complex music, but yet music which has the possibility of speaking fluently to the human heart' (MacMillan and

McGregor 2010). As Jonathan Arnold contends, music ‘meets a deep and intrinsic human need for the spiritual, mystical, transcendent, or unearthly’, and the synthesis of sound and spiritual text continues to indulge this need in contemporary society (Arnold 2016, p. 151). The interaction between the past and present, the traditional and contemporary, within sacred music is strongly evident in the Irish composer Eoghan Desmond’s setting of John Henry Newman’s *Nothing in Vain* (Desmond 2021).

2. Eoghan Desmond

Eoghan Desmond (b. 1989) is a composer whose expanding sacred output reveals the ‘unbroken tradition’ of setting religious texts for choral forces (Arnold 2016, p. 145). Unlike the ‘spiritual composers’ highlighted by MacMillan, Desmond does not speak openly about his religious beliefs. However, it may be argued that his experience as a professional bass-baritone within the cathedral choral tradition has significantly influenced his compositions, with the majority of his oeuvre steeped in sacred themes. His settings of predominantly English sacred texts demonstrate a strong connection to choral music of the past, with their modal sound worlds, intricate polyphony, and symbolism demonstrating a desire to continue the rich tradition of sacred composition into the present day, reflecting MacMillan’s vision of rooting oneself ‘in something very deep culturally and spiritually’ (MacMillan 2000, p. 17). His works have been performed by ensembles such as Chamber Choir Ireland, the BBC Singers, Christ Church Cathedral, The Sixteen, and the Chapel Royal of HM Tower of London, establishing Desmond as one of Ireland’s leading sacred composers, with his oeuvre continuing to expand and attract audiences in recent years.¹ His attentive consideration of each sacred text’s subtext is illustrated in his innovative synthesis of archaic and contemporary musical devices, which not only manifest the character of each piece but reside beneath the music’s surface, encapsulating the significance of the choral tradition and its power to communicate spirituality beyond the written word.

The composer has noted his ‘struggle to write in a vacuum. I’m always drawing inspiration from what I’m working on as a singer’ (Dervan 2023). According to Desmond’s biography, ‘Much of his work is focused on achieving a polyphonic fluency where every note in every voice is vital’ (Desmond n.d.). This suggests the significant influence of Renaissance music and its contrapuntal textures on Desmond’s compositions, which is unsurprising given his frequent performance of works from this era. His sacred oeuvre also exhibits the influence of Gregorian chant and modal idioms, as well as the use of symbols embedded in the choral texture, not unlike the work of Renaissance composers such as Josquin and Marenzio, and J.S. Bach from the Baroque period. These techniques are also underlined in the sacred work of James MacMillan, who demonstrates similar approaches of using chant, modal harmonies, numerical symbols, and textural layering in a contemporary sound world, foregrounding the influence of the Scottish composer on Desmond (Kingsbury 2003; see also Cooke 2019). Alongside this traditional approach, Desmond acknowledges the influence of the contemporary genre of ambient electronic music on his compositional practice, with the use of overlapping loops, textural scaffolding, and atmospheric development evident in his work (Desmond n.d.). With this conjunction of musical influences, the composer achieves a sound that fuses the past and present, exhibiting both the visceral and meditative aspects associated with the religious texts he sets. Within *Nothing in Vain*, his textural organisation, harmonic language, and symbolic techniques, such as *Augenmusik*, demonstrate a deep understanding of the spiritual text and its underlying meaning, prompting a musical analysis of this stylistically diverse work.

Nothing in Vain

The choral work *Nothing in Vain* (2021) reveals Desmond’s intricate approach to text setting and his ability to evoke a sense of the spiritual through his formal organisation of harmonic, rhythmic, and textural techniques. This a cappella choral work was commissioned by the Genesis Foundation for English conductor Harry Christophers and his choir The Sixteen and was released as part of the choir’s album *A Meditation* in July 2022.² The

choir's strong affiliation with the performance of Tudor music, Renaissance repertoire, and contemporary composers such as Pärt, MacMillan, Roxanna Panufnik, and Tarik O'Regan underlines their commitment to continuing the historical thread of sacred composition and performance into the present day. Christophers notes how he is 'constantly encouraged by how much the music of the past informs the way we approach new music today' ([New Music n.d.](#)). This is apparent in Desmond's compositional elements, which demonstrate his deep understanding of the sacred choral canon, the influence of Renaissance and contemporary spiritual music, and his inclination to communicate the reverent nature of the text. *Nothing in Vain* is a setting of nineteenth-century theologian and saint John Henry Newman's (1801–1890) 'A Meditation on Trust in God'. Desmond used an adaptation of Newman's text by Anglican clergyman, Robert Willis, which is more suitable for a musical setting due to its stanzaic structure and poetic phrases.

*Nothing in Vain text*³

God has created me to do some definite service—
 Some work which has not been committed to another.
 I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons.
 I shall do good, be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place
 If I do but keep God's commandments.
 Whatever I am I can never be thrown away.
 My sickness, my perplexity, my sorrow may serve God
 Who does nothing in vain.
 When I am among strangers and friendless,
 When my spirits sink and my future is hidden,
 Still I may serve—
 For God does nothing in vain.

Text: Robert Willis, Dean of Canterbury, adapted from *A Meditation on Trust in God*.

3. John Henry Newman

Newman composed this meditation three years after his conversion to Catholicism in 1845, articulating his trusting relationship with God in times of adversity. This conversion resulted in a period of great personal difficulty, in which Newman was rejected by his Anglican family and friends and dismissed from his position as a fellow at Oxford ([Strange 2015](#)).⁴ However, he remained steadfast in his faith, intensifying his commitment to God. The text focuses on the existential question surrounding Newman's purpose in life. In its Catholic context, it constitutes doing good, being 'an angel of peace', and 'a preacher of truth'.⁵ Newman's statement 'I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons' implies that each individual has a unique purpose within the broader, interconnected chain of humanity. Despite his 'sorrow', being thrown 'among strangers and friendless', and the prospect of his spirits sinking, Newman is resolute that God 'does nothing in vain'. The text's devout mantras, demonstrating an unwavering faith in God's plan, are compellingly communicated in Desmond's composition, absorbing listeners in a concentrated musical meditation. The message of maintaining belief in God, another spiritual entity, or one's purpose through life's trials and tribulations, is as pertinent now as it was when it was written, which may help to explain why people remain invested in sacred music despite the increasing secularisation of society. As the founder of the Genesis Foundation, John Studzinski, states: 'Expressing a strong sense of the community of mankind as it reflects on our specific role in life, the Meditation is as relevant to people of faith as to people who profess to no belief at all' ([Genesis Foundation 2021](#)). This is echoed by MacMillan, who contends that 'it attracts people, whether they're believers or not, simply by the drama of its claim [...] that we're all here for a reason' ([Coppen 2021](#)). The following

critical analysis of the musical score will underline specific examples of Desmond's textural, harmonic, and rhythmic processes, drawing on influences from the Renaissance tradition, the contemporary style of ambient music, and the work of composer James MacMillan, in order to discern how Desmond has communicated the meaning and spirituality of Newman's text.

4. Score Analysis

4.1. Textural and Harmonic Structures

In *Nothing in Vain*, Desmond prioritises the spiritual atmosphere and context of Newman's meditation, rather than painting specific words through the music. His organic development of choral texture is a notable technique used to enhance the significance of the theologian's words and distinguish between sections of the piece. The importance of texture in composition has been highlighted by composers and scholars alike, with Tom Wilkinson contending that 'it can shape the narrative of a work in myriad ways, the most apparent being its ability to draw the listener's attention to a significant passage of text' (Wilkinson 2019, p. 92). Composer Abbie Betinis also interprets texture 'as a primary story-telling device' in today's choral works (Denney 2019, p. 15). Desmond astutely scaffolds the voices throughout the music, gradually expanding from homophonic to contrapuntal interplay at notable moments of emotional escalation and spiritual significance. This textural framework suggests that Desmond intended to create a contemplative atmosphere, drawing listeners into Newman's meditation, and underlining the saint's unwavering trust and increasing devotion to his Creator.

A notable textural element in *Nothing in Vain* is the homophonic triadic movement in the lower voices, a compositional device that effectively establishes the tranquillity of meditation. This approach is evident in the introduction with the unaccompanied tenor opening the piece, who is joined by the alto and bass in static chordal motion in the subsequent bar. The initial thirty-two bars consist of the homophonic mantra 'God has created me to do some definite service', repeated five times with minimal alterations across each presentation. This consistent repetition invites the listener to consider the existential connotation of the words, whereby Newman, and indeed all Christians, contemplate their purpose in life, reassuring themselves of their value. The first four-bar statement consists of repeated notes forming an A \flat major triad on 'God has created me', initiating the calm, almost austere meditation. A bar of rest follows, offering a moment of stillness before proceeding with Newman's prayer. Philosopher Roger Scruton has outlined how humans have an innate desire to reflect on their 'created state [...] and absorb and [sic] understanding of what it is to be [...] which comes through long moments of quietness, and music is a form of quietness as is religion' (Arnold 2016, p. 129). Although not all music can be recognised as such, the brief moments of silence between phrases in *Nothing in Vain* carry significant meaning, allowing listeners to contemplate the text and comprehend their own existence. Desmond's use of rests is not unlike the choral work of MacMillan, Arvo Pärt, and Alfred Schnittke (1934–1998)⁶, all of whom employ silence and simple harmonic patterns to serve the spiritual manner of their texts and to provide 'a chance to absorb the aural and spiritual impact of the moment' (Muzzo 2008, p. 30; see also Reiff 2020).

The subsequent four repetitions double in length to accommodate the entire phrase ('God has created me to do some definite service'), built on repeated notes with incremental movement within each voice. Calculated control of voice leading is illustrated in the consistent movement through the chords of A \flat , F minor, B \flat , and G minor. A sense of harmonic stasis is created through stepwise or third-interval transitions in the tenor while the outer voices remain unchanged, or vice versa (Table 1). This chant-like *piano mormorando* (soft murmuring) homophonic pattern is effective in establishing an absorbing meditative atmosphere, requiring patience and attentive listening to Newman's reverent words. The unchanging, steady pattern also indicates the impact of ambient music on Desmond, with its focus on the repetition of musical patterns, and its ability to articulate 'a 'narrative' with which we can emotionally (and spiritually) engage' (Cummings 2019, pp. 115–16).

Desmond gradually scaffolds the repetitive texture with the introduction of the soprano's melody above the third recitation (b. 18), slowly building in dynamics and preparing for a modulation to D minor with the presence of A \flat and E \flat . This gradual harmonic shift serves not only to introduce new material but also to guide the listener in the meditation, illustrating the increasing devotion of Newman.

From the score, we can observe that the isolated entry and sustained conclusion of the tenor's Eb, leaving it in brief isolation in bar 4, creates the image of a cross with the other voices (Figure 1; 'God has created me'). This appears to be a deliberate structural device used by Desmond, given its four consecutive occurrences and his similar textural presentation in other sacred works, including *Aestimatus Sum* (2021) and the first, sixth, and seventh movements of his Irish-language elegy, *Amra Choluim Chille* (2019). Its presence suggests the influence of Renaissance music, as the cross was a popular form of *Augenmusik* ('Eye Music') to reflect Christian themes at this time (Fitch 2020, p. 216). Desmond appears to be embedding a level of narrative that is not immediately apparent to the listener but is discovered upon score analysis. The overarching subject—Newman's trust in God's plan—within the texture is pivotal in the composer's work, aligning with his professed dedication to 'go past the surface' and consider 'something below' (Contemporary Music Centre 2021). Beyond the simple homophonic harmonies of the introduction establishing a prayerful ambience, the very symbol of Christianity resides in the texture, further accentuating Newman's faith. On the surface, the tenor's unaccompanied entries with *tenuto* accents on 'God' emphasise the focal point of the text—God, the creator—and Newman's devout reflection on his faith and purpose.

The image shows a musical score for four voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The Soprano part is mostly rests. The Alto, Tenor, and Bass parts enter with the text 'God has created me,'. The Tenor part has a prominent Eb note in bar 4, which is highlighted by a red box. The Alto and Bass parts also have red boxes around their entries. The score includes dynamic markings like p, pp, and p mormorando, and articulation like tenuto accents.

Figure 1. Cross structure in *Nothing in Vain* (bb. 1–9). © 2021 Eoghan Desmond. Reprinted with permission.

Each new section within Desmond's sacred work is characterised by harmonic changes, creating an evident distinction between verses or textual ideas. The gradual tonal shift that occurs with the introduction of the soprano melody above the harmonic tapestry of the opening signals the work's first significant modulation, which is confirmed in bar 34. The tenor's rising phrase of G–A \flat –B \flat in bar 33 leads to a homophonic D minor chord, with subsequent natural accidentals confirming the modulation to D Aeolian mode. This tonal transition coincides with the text 'Some work which has not been committed to another', declaimed twice by the alto–tenor–bass (ATB) voicing at a *mezzo-forte* dynamic, descending in parallel harmonies (Figure 2). This cogent communication of text, emphasised by the *tenuto* accents on the words 'not been committed', underlines the meaning of Newman's statement and the spiritual realisation of the speaker's unique role that 'has not been committed to another'. According to James MacMillan, this line 'grabs the listener by the throat' (Genesis Foundation UK 2021), and Desmond illustrates his understanding of the gravity of the phrase through his tonal transformation and accented homophonic repetition of text, which reinforces Newman's message that all have a special purpose in life.

Table 1. Homophonic harmonic progression changes and cross structure.

No. of appearances.	1				2						3								4								5						
Bars	1	2–3	4	5	6–8	8	9	10–11	12	13	14–15	15	16	17–18	18	19	20	21–22	22	23	24–25	25	26	27	28–29	29–30	31–32	32	33				
Soprano																	Soprano counter-melody																
Alto		C				C	C		D	D	Bb	C	C		D	D	D	Bb	C	C		D	D	D	Bb	C	C	D	D	D			
Tenor	Eb	Eb	Eb		Eb	F	F	F	D	D	Eb	Eb	F	F	F	G	D	D	Eb	Eb	F	F	F	G	D	D	Eb	Eb	F	F	G	G–A–Bb	
Bass		Ab				Ab	Ab		Bb	Bb	G	Ab	Ab		Bb	Bb	Bb	G	Ab	Ab		Bb	Bb	Bb	G	Ab	Ab	Bb	Bb	Bb			




 = Cross structure.  = Individual note change.  = Change from previous appearance.

Figure 2 shows a musical score for the piece "Nothing in Vain" (bb. 31–39) by Eoghan Desmond. The score is for four voices: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The music is in 4/4 time and features a modulation in measure 36. The lyrics are: "work, some def-i-nite ser-vice, Some work, Some to do some def-i-nite ser-vice, Some work which has not been com-mit-ted to an-oth-er. Some work which has not been com-mit-ted to an-". The score includes dynamic markings like "mf" and "mp".

Figure 2. Modulation in *Nothing in Vain* (bb. 31–39). © 2021 Eoghan Desmond. Reprinted with permission.

4.2. Symbolic Ostinati

Harmonic ostinati or repetitive patterns play a significant role in inflecting the litany of devotions in Newman's meditation. The alto, tenor, and bass repeat phrases in chordal patterns within each section, evoking an impression of focused contemplation (bb. 1–33; 40–67; 68–87; 88–150). This is a common technique used to convey the text's character in Desmond's sacred and secular compositions, occurring in *In Monte Oliveti* (2021), *Aestimatus Sum*, and *Comrades* (2019). The underlying harmonic ostinati in *Nothing in Vain* engender a sense of concentration in prayer, which often involves continuous repetition of religious supplications. James MacMillan displays a similar compositional approach, such as in *Divo Aloysio Sacrum* (1991), *7 Last Words from the Cross* (1995), and *A Child's Prayer* (1996).⁷ MacMillan has noted how the repetition of a simple idea that forms patterns within a work, such as a set of chords, 'can focus attention and create atmosphere giving a bedrock of sounds from which other things emerge' (Ratcliffe 1999, p. 38). This stance may have influenced Desmond's practice of sacred text setting, given his experience of being mentored by MacMillan while writing *Nothing in Vain*, as well as performing his music as a chorister. This direction could also have emerged from Desmond's doctoral studies with Professor Phillip Cooke, a sacred music composer and James MacMillan scholar.⁸ Repetitive musical backdrops also reflect the impact of ambient electronic music on the composer, with atmospheric looping and textural superimposition central to this genre. The intense nature of Newman's meditation illustrates the effective use of repetitive harmonic

Rosary beads. This ritual intimation is further strengthened by the *pianissimo mormorando e poco coperto* (very soft, slightly covered murmuring) instruction, which builds in dynamics with each recurrence and culminates in a *forte* conclusion, suggesting the growing intensity of prayer. The unexpected change to 4/4, as opposed to 7/8, in the final bar of the motif's fifth presentation (b. 87) serves as a structural device, indicating the conclusion of this section and the beginning of new musical material in 3/4. In his analysis of *Divo Aloysio Sacrum*, Stephen Kingsbury contends that James MacMillan's recurring use of seven, five, and three in rhythmic patterns, chords, texture, and metre relates to the recitation of the Rosary and is a conscious decision made by the composer (Kingsbury 2003, pp. 38–39). Similarly, his Piano Concerto No. 3, 'Mysteries of Light' (2008), is also a reflection of the Rosary, with the five sections representing the five Luminous Mysteries (MacMillan 2011). Given his previous repetition of the creed 'God has created me' five times, it could be posited that Desmond was aware of MacMillan's semantic technique and influenced to reflect the Rosary in a similar numerical manner.

The progression of chords in these bars (C minor, F major, A \flat major, and B major) demonstrates their non-functional harmonic nature, with no traditional connection between each adjacent chord.⁹ The B major harmony is the most anomalous within the ostinato, deviating from an expectation of B \flat , the leading chord in C Aeolian. However, the enharmonic connection between the chords of B major and C minor (D \sharp /E \flat) highlights their close proximity, allowing the alto to maintain their note while the tenor and bass resolve by semitone to C minor, renewing the ostinato. The unexpected parallel augmented second ascent from A \flat major to B major is further emphasised with the minor second/false relation between the B \sharp in the bass and the soprano's B \flat creating an uncomfortable dissonance on each appearance of 'nothing in vain'. Although the B \flat could be conceived as A \sharp , constituting a B major seventh chord, the simultaneous notation of the natural and flat B increases the harmonic tension and a yearning for resolution. False relations were frequently applied in Renaissance madrigals and motets for the purpose of expressive text-painting and conveying conflict (Dyson 2001). They also abound in Desmond's choral output, particularly at specific moments of tension, anguish, or unrest, indicating the influence of the past's harmonic nuances on the composer. It is plausible that these specific tonal dissonances serve to communicate the sopranos' expressions of suffering. Despite their 'sickness', 'perplexity', and 'sorrow', they will continue to serve God, 'who does nothing in vain', in the hope of being saved.¹⁰

4.3. Faithful Devotion through Music

The culmination of Desmond's textural layering occurs in the final section, steadily expanding from chorale-like movement to polyphonic interplay (bb. 88–167), reflecting the outpouring of Newman's faithful commitment amidst adversity. An eight-bar SATB homophonic ostinato in dotted minims chants the text 'God does nothing in vain' (Figure 4). A solo quartet gradually enters the texture at individual phases with independent melodic ideas, displaying an impassioned expression of faith and sacrifice, before receding to slow homophony from bar 152, and repeating the assured mantra with the larger ensemble. This approach of 'stratified polyphony', dominant within Renaissance sacred music, is identified by analysts as a common feature of James MacMillan's style and response to sacred texts (Shenton 2020, p. 155; see also Kingsbury 2003). Whether Desmond has been directly influenced by MacMillan in his polyphonic approach is ambiguous but this controlled increase in textural density reflects his meticulous attention to each voice and the impact of early music on his text setting, with independent melodies interweaving within a fluid contrapuntal texture.

96 *ppp*

S&A God does no - thing in vain.

T&B *ppp*

God does no - thing in vain.

Figure 4. ‘God does nothing in vain’ ostinato (bb. 96–113). © 2021 Eoghan Desmond. Reprinted with permission.

The stratified looping of the soloists’ melodic gestures also underlines the presence of ambient electronic music in Desmond’s compositional methods. It is notable that author Simon Cummings has observed the influence of the past on ambient music, comparing its process of overlapping loops:

to the mediaeval practice of isorhythm, in which rhythmic and melodic components (the *talea* and *color* respectively) [...] are continually repeated, their asynchronous nature leading to musical patterns that are continually new yet which arise from a fixed and limited range of possibilities (Cummings 2019, p. 97).

Whilst the intertwining melodic idioms in Medieval and Renaissance choral music contribute to communicating the essence of a sacred text and immersing the listener in its spiritual meaning, the similar looping practice in today’s instrumental ambient music can carry extra-musical connotations, creating ‘a sonic environment within which contemplation’ can occur (Cummings 2019, p. 115). This fusion of past and present styles in Desmond’s choral sound conveys the effectiveness of both in articulating the spirituality of Newman’s meditative words.

The choral ostinato in the final section of *Nothing in Vain* occurs eight times in succession, forming the harmonic pattern Ab7–Bb9–Cm7–Cm6/5–Ab7–Bb9–Cm (sustained for two bars). There is a palindromic contour in the soprano’s phrase from C to G to C, with the alto intoning a pedal C throughout the chordal progression. The contrary motion between the soprano and bass, coupled with the augmented phrasing of ‘in vain’ in the second half of the pattern, evokes the impression of meditative inhalation and exhalation, and subsequent resolution. Desmond’s repetition of this final line could intend to reassure the soloists and listeners of God’s omnipresence and their unique purpose, regardless of the tribulations they will endure. Through this repetitive harmonic backdrop that transmits the fundamental message of the meditation, the composer illustrates his understanding of Newman’s conversion to Catholicism and an awareness that, throughout this difficult process, his devotion to God remained constant. The tempo indication ‘Relaxed. Assured’ supports this evaluation, forming a steady bedrock below the soloists’ expressions of their adversities, and symbolising Newman’s unwavering faith.

At bar 104, the bass soloist introduces a lament-like melody comparable to plainchant (‘When I am among strangers’). The texture evolves to polyphony at bar 114 with the tenor, followed by the alto in the succeeding bar, forming arching melodies on the text ‘When my spirits sink, and my future is hidden’. The soprano enters the contrapuntal tapestry at bar 125 with the same text. The melodic phrases are defined by descending melismas on ‘spirits sink’ and ‘hidden’, effectively illustrating these words. The voice crossing on the first presentation of ‘hidden’ in the alto and tenor, and tenor and bass, could be interpreted as text-painting, with the lower voice obscuring the word as it ascends within the texture (bb. 117–19; 121–22; Figure 5). ‘[M]y future is hidden’ continues to weave throughout the parts as the devotional statement ‘Still I may serve’ unfolds as a descending four-bar phrase in dotted minims in the tenor (b. 124), echoed by the alto in bar 128. The canonic interchange in this climactic section reinforces Desmond’s ‘obsession with polyphony’ and with achieving a contrapuntal fluency, giving equal significance

to each voice (Contemporary Music Centre 2021). The impassioned, layered melodies intertwine and increase in dynamics within the choral meditation, foregrounding the sacrifices Newman was willing to make to show his devotion to God.

12

112

A. SOLO *mp appassionato*
When my fu-ture is hid - den.

T. SOLO *mp appassionato*
When my spi - rits sink, and my fu - ture

B. SOLO
strang - ers and friend - less, When my

S&A *pp*
God does no - thing in vain.

T&B *pp*
God does no - thing in vain.

120

S. SOLO *mp appass.*
When my spi - rits sink,

A. SOLO *mp appass.*
When my spi - rits sink, When my spi - rits sink,

T. SOLO *mf appass.*
is hid - den, Still I may serve,

B. SOLO *mp appass.*
spi - rits sink, When my spi - rits sink, and my

S&A *p*
God does no - thing in vain.

T&B *p*
God does no - thing in vain.

Figure 5. Voice crossing on ‘hidden’ (bb. 112–127; red box). © 2021 Eoghan Desmond. Reprinted with permission.

Desmond demonstrates a particular proclivity for polyrhythms in this climactic section. This technique, which often conflicts with the notated metre, reflects the contemporary trend of returning to the ‘free rhythms of medieval motet and Renaissance madrigal’, as well as ‘the aesthetic ideals of the age of Bach [...] when the horizontal-linear point of view had prevailed’ (Machlis 1980, pp. 33, 39). Although notated in 3/4, there is a metric conflict between the bass and other soloists above the homophonic ostinato (bb. 137–42). The

idioms descend in pitch and the rhythms augment, a more transparent presentation of compound metre is evident from bar 144. The bass soloist continues to descend in pitch and repeat the penultimate line of text in dotted crotchets, accompanied by the tied dotted minims of the other voices, allowing for a clearer awareness of 6/8. All parts move in dotted minims from bar 152, with several voices sustaining pedal tones as the chords change, repeating or extending ‘nothing’ until bar 159. The slower rhythmic movement and static harmonies establish a renewed sense of calm and assuredness, signalling the conclusion of the meditation. Despite the emotional and personal struggles, the mantra ‘God does nothing in vain’ remains undisturbed, confirming the spiritual tenacity of the believer.

In the concluding choral expression of ‘does nothing in vain’ (bb. 143–167), it is significant that the chords of the rhythmically diminishing ostinato (bb. 68–87) return in an altered guise, moving from C minor in first inversion, F major 9, D minor 11 in first inversion, F major 9, A \flat major 7 to G minor 7 in first inversion, resolving to an open C–G dyad on ‘vain’. Disregarding the D minor chord, the progression reflects that of the previous ostinato; yet rather than the B major harmony, the A \flat 7 chord moves to a G minor seventh with B \flat in the bass, the leading tone of C Aeolian, which resolves to an open fifth on C. The more conventional trajectory of this progression indicates a more assured tone, reinforced by the diminishing dynamics and augmented rhythms. After the adversities contemplated by Newman, and all who engage in this meditation, they are approaching internal peace as they conclude with the poised mantra.

It is interesting that the original SATB texture concludes the work on an unresolved C–G open fifth with an added ninth, with the accompanying voices sustaining the pedal open harmony below the soprano’s chant-like melody on ‘God does nothing in vain’ (Figure 7).¹¹ This final melodic statement is characterised by syncopated, tenuto rhythms, concluding on the ninth of the tonic chord (D). The off-set rhythm and lack of a third in the concluding harmony creates ambiguity and could be interpreted as a symbol of doubt over one’s purpose and a struggle to maintain faith in God’s plan. Alternatively, it could serve as a reminder to all believers and non-believers that life is not always straightforward, and that complexities will arise that are not always rectified as expected. The somewhat inconclusive ending aligns with Desmond’s avoidance of strong tonal progressions and interest in exploring ‘suspending harmony, and playing with the expectations that an audience may have’ (Dooley 2016). Despite the unresolved melody, the sustained open perfect fifth beneath the soprano anchors the tonal centre (C) and suggests the stability of Newman’s faith, abiding beneath the challenges faced in life.

Figure 7 shows the musical score for the conclusion of 'Nothing in Vain' (bb. 160–167). The score is for SATB voices. The Soprano part (S) starts at bar 160 with a melody in C minor, marked 'mp' and 'ppp'. The other voices (A, T, B) provide a harmonic accompaniment, marked 'p' and 'ppp'. The lyrics are 'God does no - thing in vain.' followed by a repeat of 'vain.' with a 'nnn.' marking. The score concludes with a sustained open fifth (C-G) and an added ninth (D) in the Soprano part.

Figure 7. *Nothing in Vain* conclusion (bb. 160–167). © 2021 Eoghan Desmond. Reprinted with permission.

As previously noted, Desmond has illustrated the influence of *Augenmusik* on his work, painting the image of the cross through the textural structure in his sacred output.

On closer inspection of the concluding melody, the first four notes—G, F, B \flat , G—resemble the cruciform shape used by J.S. Bach in his religious settings.¹² This motif is identified by an ascent or descent by step, followed by a leap in the opposite direction, before returning to the first pitch by step. Although Desmond's melody returns to the opening note by a minor third, lines bisecting the outer and inner pairs of notes result in the shape of a cross (Figure 8). A similar melodic idea occurs in Desmond's sacred works *A Prayer Before Sleep* (2018) and *Amra Choluim Chille* (2019)¹³, which strengthens the interpretation of this cross figure as a symbol of God or the Christian faith. With this melodic idiom, Desmond could be symbolising the steadfast Catholic faith of Newman, who is resolved to endure suffering and remain committed to God. Where the piece began with a cross-shaped texture and the text 'God', the return of the cross in a melodic guise on the same word concludes this meditation, with Newman and worshippers assured in their beliefs.



Figure 8. Possible cross motif (red) in opening four notes of final melody (bb. 160–162).

5. Conclusions

Desmond's work illuminates the resolute character of Newman's meditation and underlines the composer's ability to capture the experience of prayer through music. The fusion of past and contemporary techniques is evident in his modal inflections, non-functional harmonies, textural scaffolding, ostinati, and polyrhythmic writing, indicating his preference to compose 'music more dependent on form, harmony and contrapuntal textures' (Dooley 2016). The careful construction of simple chordal textures gradually expanding to independent polyphony, and the development of chant-like motives focusing on key elements of Newman's text, effectively illustrates its prayerful message of conviction. Ultimately, the work is steeped in tradition, serving as a link in the continuous chain of sacred music from the Renaissance era to the present day. Through *Nothing in Vain*, we can comprehend the Catholic saint's 'radical choice of God as the ideal of his life [. . .] whom he vividly apprehended in his conscience and who lived in his spirit by grace and faith' (Norris 2010, p. 12). Desmond's interpretation of this meditation highlights choral music's multifaceted capacity to articulate the spiritual within sacred texts and to draw listeners and performers into contemplating the words and their underlying meaning. As theologian Jeremy Begbie contends, in setting a text to music, it is the very difference between both mediums that 'can enable the text to be heard in startlingly fresh ways', inviting listeners to ponder the message it conveys (Begbie 2020, p. 112).

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Notes

- ¹ Eoghan Desmond emerges from a burgeoning Irish choral compositional environment that consists of internationally recognised composers, including Michael McGlynn, Rhona Clarke, Seán Doherty, Elaine Agnew, and John Buckley. His expanding output of sacred and secular music demonstrates a distinct compositional language that highlights a sensitivity to the texts he sets and the voices for which he is writing, but his work is as yet under-explored from a research perspective
- ² The commission project also involved three other composers who set the same text: Will Todd, James MacMillan, and Lisa Robertson. Desmond's meditative setting contrasts significantly with MacMillan's *Nothing in Vain* for double choir. The eleven-minute work is imbued with the Scottish composer's characteristic traits, such as Celtic ornamented vocalisations, intertwining melismatic passages, antiphonal dialogue between voices, and denser contrapuntal textures.
- ³ Eoghan Desmond. *Nothing in Vain*. 2021.
- ⁴ John Henry Newman describes his initial struggles at converting to Catholicism, his conflict with friends upon conversion, as well as his resolute belief in God's mercy and the Church's teachings, in his letters to figures such as Henry Wilberforce, Miss M. R. Giberne, and Jemima Mozley between 1845 and 1846.
- ⁵ This analysis does not seek to indicate or focus on the composer's religious identity. Desmond has never publicly identified with any particular religious or non-religious community.
- ⁶ James MacMillan's *A Child's Prayer* (1996) and *O Bone Jesu* (2002), and Arvo Pärt's *The Deer's Cry* (2007) and *Nunc Dimittis* (2001) feature multiple rests between and within phrases, as well as extended measures of repeated chords and intervallic entry of voices. Alfred Schittke's *Three Sacred Hymns* (1984) and *Concerto for Choir* (1984–1985) exhibit repetitive patterns and sustained harmonies.
- ⁷ Movement I of *7 Last Words from the Cross* features a repeated cadential figure in the strings. More significantly, Movement VI involves an ATB ostinato on "It is finished" below the soprano melody, similar to Desmond's ATB ostinato in *Nothing in Vain* (as well as in *In Monte Oliveti*, and *Aestimatus Sum*).
- ⁸ Phillip Cooke is a Professor of Composition at Aberdeen University, Scotland, and has published extensively on James Mac-Millan, including the monograph *The Music of James MacMillan* (Cooke 2019). Desmond completed his doctoral studies with Cooke in 2019.
- ⁹ The first three chords are connected through a common component (e.g., C connects C minor and F major) and two pairs of corresponding tones separated by a tone or semitone. If considering this chordal pattern within C minor/Aeolian, F major is the borrowed subdominant from the parallel C major tonality. A \flat major is the submediant within C minor. B major is external to the key, despite the B \natural serving as the leading tone in C minor.
- ¹⁰ A similar ostinato with non-functional harmonies and false relations is evident in *In Monte Oliveti* (2021), which outlines the suffering of Jesus as he contemplates his imminent sacrifice. Given the similarity of thematic content in both texts, this interpretation is plausible.
- ¹¹ The opening four notes of the melody resemble the inflection of Gregorian chant, including 'Haec dies Alleluia', 'Semper laus ejus in ore', and 'Lauda anima mea dominum laudabo', all of which focus on praising God.
- ¹² J.S. Bach's use of the musical cryptogram that spelled his name and reflected the shape of the cross (B \flat –A \flat –C–B \natural) was used in many of his sacred works. There is the possibility that given the sacred context of Desmond's setting, the similar melodic shape in the final phrase also seeks to create the image of a cross.
- ¹³ The opening unison melody on 'Sleep is a death' in *A Prayer Before Sleep* consists of E–D–G–E and returns in the same guise on E or B (e.g., 'rest, great God') throughout Desmond's setting of Thomas Brown's text from *Religio Medici*. *Pseudodoxia epidemica*. Similarly, in the final movement ('Críoch') of Desmond's Irish-language *Amra Choluim Chille*, the first violin's ascending motif in the final section (bb. 130–56) consists of F \sharp –E–A–F \sharp , accompanying the text 'Níl sé d'uiam agam. Ní díscéail' ('My time has run out. Not without tidings!'), which reflects on St Columba's death.

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