

Choral Review

Empathy and Musical Dialogue in James Buonemani's *Missa Miamiensis*

by Emerson Eads

James Buonemani's *Missa Miamiensis* (1993) occupies a distinctive place within the contemporary choral canon. Reverent without being doctrinal and rhythmically vital without diminishing its gravity, the work is deeply rooted in ancient tradition while speaking in an unmistakably modern musical language. Scored for choir, soloists, organ, piano, soprano saxophone, and field drum, *Missa Miamiensis* invites conductors to engage the Mass, not merely as a liturgical form, but as a profoundly human act—one shaped by dialogue, tension, and a shared search for mercy and peace.

The title itself offers a revealing point of entry into the composer's intent. Buonemani has explained that the work took shape during a 1993 sabbatical in Miami, and he recalls a formative conversation with organist Bill Trafka that encouraged him to think about naming practices in the manner of Herbert Howells. Howells frequently distinguished sacred works through Latin titles that referenced either their intended venues or the locations of their composition—*Collegium Regale*, for example (literally “the King’s College”), a collection of choral service settings written for King’s College, Cambridge—thereby anchoring universal liturgical texts in specific sites of memory, labor, and lived experience. In adopting the title *Missa Miamiensis*—“the Mass from Miami”—Buonemani initially signaled little more

than the work's geographic point of origin. Yet the decision to name the piece after its place of composition ultimately does more than label: it situates the Mass within a tradition in which “where” a sacred work is written quietly shapes “what” it comes to mean. At the same time, the understated specificity of *Miamiensis* offers a kind of strategic modesty: rather than announcing itself as a “Mass for...” something—war, peace, the armed man, or any other explicit program—its title slips gently beneath the rhetoric of monumental, agenda-bearing Masses, inviting the listener to discover its expressive and ethical claims from within the music itself.

Across its four movements—“Kyrie,” “Gloria,” “Sanctus/Benedictus,” and “Agnus Dei”—Buonemani animates the Ordinary through contrast: separation and unification, movement and stillness, exuberance and restraint. Recurring musical ideas such as chant, ostinato, and incipit gestures function as ethical and expressive signposts, inviting performers and listeners alike into participatory engagement. Conductors should consider the work, not only for its musical richness, but for its capacity to foster communal listening and reflection among contemporary ensembles and audiences.

Kyrie: Dialogue and Distance

The “Kyrie eleison,” the only Greek text in the Latin Mass, opens the work with a clear nod to antiquity. Buonemani’s chant-derived melody, cast in the Dorian mode, situates the listener within the long arc of sacred tradition. Yet the opening gesture resists homogeneity. Basses and tenors are separated from the treble voices, creating a spatial and registral division that emphasizes dialogue rather than unanimity. Mercy, in this context, is something requested across distance.

This separation persists until the entrance of the soprano saxophone and mezzo-soprano soloist on “Christe eleison.” Their appearance functions as a

point of mediation, prompting the eventual unification of upper and lower voices in the returning “Kyrie eleison.” The movement concludes with the same unbroken pedal ostinato with which it began—a gesture less of momentum than of continuity, linking the present utterance to centuries of prior supplication.

From a pedagogical perspective, the “Kyrie” demands restraint and patience. Conductors must resist teleological drive; the ostinato serves as memory, not propulsion. Successful interpretation depends on cultivating sustained line, modal clarity, and a disciplined sense of temporal spaciousness.

Gloria:

Exuberance and Interruption

If the “Kyrie” is contemplative, the “Gloria” is kinetic. The tenor soloist opens with a florid incipit—“Glory to God in the highest”—reminiscent of the illuminated letters of medieval manuscripts. The choir’s *a cappella* response, “and on earth, peace,” arrives in stark contrast, reframing proclamation through vulnerability and restraint.

What follows is propelled by shifting meters and dance-like rhythms, as piano and organ trade pulses that slip fluidly between duple and triple groupings. Buonemani repeatedly arrests this exuberance, drawing the ensemble inward into moments of supplication. The movement thus oscillates between celebration and humility—between communal affirmation and the intimacy of collective plea.

The “Gloria” concludes in D major with an extended “Amen,” yet the final cadence is gently unsettled by the soprano saxophone’s inflection of the minor seventh. Even at the moment of apparent arrival, resolution is tinged with ambiguity; certainty remains provisional. For conductors, the movement is a tour de force for both pianist and organist—demanding endurance and virtuosity (including moments of near-pyrotechnic pedal work). It is also, by most standards, the most technically challenging movement of the Mass, requiring rhythmic coordination, stylistic agility, and a disciplined approach to balance so that kinetic energy never overwhelms textual clarity.

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Sanctus and Benedictus: Ascent and Foreshadowing

The “Sanctus” parallels the “Gloria” through its opening incipit, this time entrusted to the soprano saxophone and answered by the treble voices. The soprano soloist extends this gesture upward, supported by a rolling field drum that evokes the celestial imagery of assembling angels and archangels. The climax—a trio involving low choir voices, saxophone, and percussion—grounds transcendence in physical sound, reinforcing the Mass’s emphasis on embodied experience.

The “Benedictus” turns inward, introducing a quintuplet ostinato in the piano that is later reinforced by the organ. Though understated, this texture serves a crucial structural role. The ostinato remains unresolved, anticipating its more consequential function in the final movement. Conductors should attend carefully to balance and pacing here, allowing the repetition to accumulate meaning without becoming inert.

Agnus Dei: Difficulty as Meaning

The “Agnus Dei” returns to the chant material of the “Kyrie,” now reharmonized and presented *a cappella*. While the familiarity of the material offers reassurance, the technical demands placed on the choir intensify. The second invocation of the prayer is led by the soprano soloist and builds toward a climactic plea that tests range, blend, and endurance.

The reentry of the saxophone, piano, and organ introduces the quintuplet ostinato first heard in the “Benedictus,” now transformed into a four-measure vamp that expands and contracts. This motion resists triumphalism, creating instead a space for sustained reflection. The final return of the chant leads to a radiant close in A major. Peace, here, is not granted abruptly; it is approached gradually, through persistence and trust.

The difficulty of the “Agnus Dei” is thus expressive rather than incidental. Buonemani suggests that peace—musical or human—is not easily attained but must be cultivated through patience, discipline, and dialogue. For performers, the physical demands of maintaining long line, stable intonation, and delicate balance become inseparable from the work’s ethical argument. Conductors may also consider antiphonal

placement of the soloists to heighten the spatial resonance of the room, while drawing the listener’s ear toward the movement’s underlying dialogue: heaven and earth, living and dead, visible and invisible.

Programming with Intention

Missa Miamiensis encourages conductors to move beyond binary distinctions between tradition and innovation. Its strength lies in its ability to employ ancient forms in service of contemporary questions: how communities listen, how joy and grief coexist, and how mercy is sought without assurance of response.

For ensembles willing to engage deeply with text, texture, and meaning, Buonemani’s *Missa Miamiensis* offers more than a compelling concert work. It becomes an act of communal listening—an invitation to place oneself within a tradition that values attentiveness, vulnerability, and shared responsibility. In Italian, to be in *buone mani*—“in good hands”—is to be held in care. In Buonemani’s Mass, mercy and peace become those hands, emerging through voices that listen to and sustain one another. In this sense, choral music is not merely a vehicle for meaning, but a practice of trust—one that invites performers and listeners alike into a shared, human search for grace. Perhaps there has never been a more fitting time to return to this Mass—and to give it the performances it quietly demands. ■

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References

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