

Music Review

# A New Scottish Concerto, Dressed Up and Dreamy

Daniel Barry for The New York Times

Philadelphia Orchestra: Charles Dutoit, conductor, with Vadim Repin, violinist, in James MacMillan's new Violin Concerto at Carnegie Hall. **By STEVE SMITH**

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During the 1990s the Scottish composer [James MacMillan](#) was promoted widely as the [brightest hope of his generation](#): a creator who replaced modernist aridity with communicative directness. His initial promise has been borne out since in a diverse body of substantial works — including multiple symphonies, concertos and operas — through which he has grappled fruitfully with the contrasting tugs of modernity and history, Celtic folk traditions and Roman Catholic convictions.

In Britain and Europe Mr. MacMillan is a figure of considerable prominence. In the United States, though, his reputation still rests largely on two relatively early pieces: “The Confession of Isobel Gowdie,” a turbulent symphonic saga, and “Veni, Veni, Emmanuel,” an ingenious percussion concerto. Recent works have been slow to arrive and resistant to taking root.

That Mr. MacMillan's new Violin Concerto came to [Carnegie Hall](#) with some fanfare during a concert by the [Philadelphia Orchestra](#) on Tuesday night surely had to do with its prominent advocates: the [violinist Vadim Repin](#), who gave the work's premiere with the [London Symphony Orchestra](#) last May, and the conductor [Charles Dutoit](#), who led the premiere of Mr. MacMillan's Symphony No. 3 in Tokyo in 2003, and brought it to Carnegie Hall with [this orchestra in 2005](#).

The concerto, a 25-minute work in three movements, adheres loosely to historical conventions of form: a crackling opening movement (“Dance”) is followed with a more lyrical section (“Song”) and a finale filled with exuberant display (“Song and Dance”). The solo part's torrential flurries and sweetly spun melodies are custom fitted to a virtuoso like Mr. Repin, to whom the work is dedicated. Mr. MacMillan's estimable mastery of orchestral timbre and effect is evident throughout.

Composed in memory of Mr. MacMillan's mother, who died in 2008, the concerto derives its considerable emotive impact from graceful and grotesque elements juxtaposed with a dreamy illogic. A bubbly Scottish reel breaks out at the first movement's climax. In the second, the winsome solo lines flutter over elegiac oboe, guttural brass and dreamy, tuned percussion; a tender passage for piccolo and piano conjures an Irish folk song.

Tougher to parse is a finale that opens with a gesture [Mr. MacMillan has ascribed to his dreams](#) : over a stolid timpani tread the orchestra's men chant, "Ein, zwei, drei, vier: Meine Mutter, tanz mit mir." ("One, two, three, four: my mother, dance with me.") Brass shrieks, vivacious dance rhythms and a lurid waltz parody ensue; an amplified female speaker, unseen, precedes a final solo cadenza and hammering final flourish.

However wayward the concerto might have seemed in a first listening, Mr. Repin's unshakable bravura and the orchestra's magnificent playing made a compelling case for it. Audience response was rousing and sustained. Mr. Dutoit provided a sympathetic context for Mr. MacMillan's instrumental brilliance and heart-on-sleeve emotionalism, surrounding the concerto with a buoyant account of [Berlioz's](#) Overture to "Béatrice et Bénédict" and a lush, brooding and eloquently molded traversal of [Tchaikovsky's](#) Symphony No. 5.

Taking advantage of what was, almost unfathomably, Mr. MacMillan's first visit, Carnegie Hall featured him in a Making Music program on Wednesday night in Zankel Hall. During a brief, personable onstage conversation he said that what appealed to him about conventional classical forms was the notion of bringing opposed elements like crisis and catharsis into alignment. He was referring to his Piano Sonata from 1985, included in the concert to show his early modernist roots. But his explanation equally suited the Violin Concerto.

Inon Barnatan offered a persuasive account of the sonata, in which two brief pensive meditations surrounded a dense, agitated middle movement redolent of [Berg](#). In the flashier Horn Quintet, a 2007 work heard in its United States premiere, the horn player Eric Ruske evoked the hunt and the battlefield with whooping figures over a writhing entanglement of frenetic strings provided by the Brentano String Quartet. After a glowing, extensive solo by the violist Misha Amory near the work's end, Mr. Ruske left the stage, playing his final calls from a distance.

The program ended with another United States premiere, "Raising Sparks," an intense 1997 sequence of six songs based on poems by [Michael Symmons Roberts](#), inspired in turn by writings of [Menahem Nahum](#), an 18th-century Hasidic rabbi in Chernobyl.

Mr. MacMillan conducted the Zankel Band, an ad-hoc assemblage of superb young New York performers, in music that was ceaselessly inventive, evocative and penetrating. But the focal point was the Italian [mezzo-soprano Cristina Zavalloni](#), whose dramatic delivery and delirious presence turned a compelling composition into a theatrical tour de force.

Midori performs James MacMillan's "After the Tryst" on March 23 at Zankel Hall, Carnegie Hall; (212) 247-7800, [carnegiehall.org](http://carnegiehall.org).