

Judas mercator pessimus

Owain Park

The textual origins of *Judas mercator pessimus* lie in the Responsories of the Maundy Thursday tenebrae service. The text has only been set a handful of times by composers, most notably Gesualdo and Victoria. It is an amalgam of Gospel texts and images about Judas and Jesus, along with some questionable medieval translation of Judas' familial name 'Iscariot' as 'sachar', meaning 'mercenary' or 'merchant', considered apt given Judas' cupidity in selling Jesus for thirty coins. The work was commissioned by Stephen Layton and the Choir of Trinity College Cambridge for evensong on Sunday 16th February, 2014, and is scored for unaccompanied SATB divisi choir, and SATB semichorus.

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Judas mercator pessimus
osculo petiit Dominum
ille ut agnus innocens
non negavit ludae osculum.

Judas, the vile merchant,
required a kiss from the Lord
who, like an innocent Lamb,
did not deny the kiss to Judas.

Denariorum numero
Christum ludaeis tradidit.

For a large amount of denarii,
he betrayed Christ to the Jews.

Melius illi erat
si natus non fuisset.

It would have been better for him,
had he not been born.

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Short Programme Note

Judas Mercator pessimus begins as quietly as possible, slowly growing out of a single note in an unhurried and foreboding beginning. The music gently expands and contracts in a 'calling' gesture – perhaps more of a choral whisper – from nothing, containing flickering memories of a distant past. Short interjections from the semichorus call to mind Jesus' despair at the betrayal, but the main choir's continuing pursuit of one harmonic plateau signifies the acknowledgement of his fate.

The more reflective mood will be returned to, but there follows a passage of angst, containing jagged rhythms and clashing harmonies. This continues to set the first line of the text, another side to the "vile merchant," only hinted at during the first section. After a series of phrases that grow and then die down again, rushing lines of fast moving notes travel through the choir, leading up to the apex of this section. As the climax is reached, so it dies down again, the semichorus eventually relinquishing their hold on their dissonant harmony.

A more gentle and solemn mood is now portrayed, the change of text apparent. A mixture of humming and singing to words creates an eerie effect, added to by the return of an earlier plainchant theme, "melius illi erat si natus non fuisset." The passage has a descending feel, which is eventually completed by very low bass notes purring underneath phrases passed around the choir. These phrases turn into chaotic repetitions of "Christum ludaeis tradidit," portraying the anger felt by those close to Jesus, then and now. The climax of the entire work is the moment when every voice in the main choir converges to sing "tradidit," from whence follows a sudden release, before the entire world shouts at Judas in a last gasp attempt to save

the Son of Man. In the last few moments, glimmers of hope are heard, but still mingled with sadness. The piece eventually peters out to nothing, the betrayal encapsulated in silence.

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Long Programme Note

Judas mercator pessimus begins as quietly as possible, slowly growing out of a single note that is peppered by flickerings of a nearby key, evoking fragments of a distant memory. The chord gradually grows in size, gently pleading, though still charred by the flickering flames of the alterior tonality, giving the music an uncomfortable and foreboding feel. The alto of the semichorus sings a melismatic line, which is the disguised plainchant theme for “*melius illi erat.*” The importance of semitonal relationships in this work is emphasised by the entry of the full semichorus, who sing an open fifth that sits tugging against the chord sounding in the main choir.

The texture gradually diminishes back to the opening single note, before a similar passage ensues, though with the resulting chord greater in span. The alto of the semichorus freely sings the second half of the plainchant theme, “*si natus non fuisset,*” before the bass of the semichorus preludes a later theme in a similarly melismatic fashion. The semichorus are now more insistent with their other-world tonality, before the soprano sings the entire “*melius*” plainchant theme over a suspended upper-voice minor chord. During this, the choir gradually falls away, before a more resolute passage begins.

Jagged figures in the second choir are set against longer notes held by the first choir, highlighting the clashing disparity of the semitone. The semichorus reveal a semitonal theme that is later to come, but first in, bar 36, crashing waves of sextuplets pass through the second choir. All the while, there are interjections from the semichorus, again fixed down a semitone, fighting with the “*Judas*” text. After this a swift build up climaxes at bar 37, with the semitonal theme exploited in the upper voices moving in four parts, whilst the sextuplet waves and jagged rhythms appear in the tenors and basses. The tension keeps building as the first choir land on a chord that is almost instantly collided with by choir two. However both sections of the main choir converge on the same minor chord as the semichorus fade away; whilst they resolutely still fight with their different tonality, the anger has passed and a more reflective mood is at hand.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the betraying kiss is afforded only one sentence (Matthew 26:49). It seemed fitting to mirror this depiction of events in the next section, which is shorter, quieter and more reflective. Over a pedal middle C, the text “*osculo petiit Dominum*” unfolds, with the harmony again emphasising a semitonal relationship, though not in such close proximity as before. In the main choir, there is a mixture of text and humming, which creates an eerie effect. Within this, the tenor of the semichorus sings the “*melius*” plainchant theme. Next comes a series of descending phrases based upon chromatic dissonance in the lower voices, perhaps depicting the slow descent to the tomb on the word “*Dominum.*” This is followed by a subtle quote of John Tavener’s *The Lamb*, heard in the alto one part on “*ille ut agnus innocens.*” After two short reflections in the semichorus, the text “*non negavit ludae osculum*” is sung by the tenors and basses, but only once: a reflection of the one kiss it took to betray Jesus. However,

the alto soloist offers a distant echo in a last gasp compound semitone figure that falls onto a B-flat. This figure can be heard in the next section.

The full choir now have a short, menacing unison phrase, “denarium numero,” a melodic theme both quoting the earlier semichorus bass melisma, and foreseeing the eventual use as the main “Judas” theme. Over a low, resounding bass note, the “osculum” compound semitone motif is now heard within “Christum Iudaeis tradidit,” the phrase having a falling contour arriving on the final word. In the alto ones in bar 77, a new rhythmic idea is heard, onto which all parts will eventually converge for the inevitable climax. For now, whilst this rhythmic motif is being passed around the choir, more upward sweeping phrases are again heard, reflecting, albeit briefly, the moments before the kiss. The main “Judas” theme of this section, the melody for which was precluded in “denarium numero,” begins strongly in the second altos, and is passed to the first sopranos and finally lands in the first tenors. Whilst the primacy of this theme is important, it is somewhat submerged in the chaos of the main choir and semichorus: busy, cluttered and angry.

When all parts have converged onto accented triplets for “tradidit,” there is a sudden release onto a suspended chord in the semichorus, which, as the semitone chordal shift has been approached from below as opposed to from above, feels like an escape from the relentless pounding of the triplets just before. However, the main choir bring this back down to earth with sudden and furious interjections: “JUDAS MERCATOR PESSIMUS,” refusing to give up on the lower tonality. Meanwhile, the soprano of the semichorus quotes for the final time the plainchant theme, “melius illi erat si natus non fuisset.” After this floated quotation, the upper voices of the main choir almost inaudibly join the chord held by the semichorus, but, in the unusual manner after the earlier release, the lower voices enter with a poignant major chord, the harmony now shimmering with added notes. Interestingly, Judas was the only disciple to be called “friend” by Jesus. Despite the betrayal, there is hope for sinners, and even as the lower voices’ shimmering major harmony shifts back down a semitone, it does create a major/minor mix, with the major inflection residing slightly longer in the sound than the minor. The music then condenses, gradually subsiding until only the opening note is heard, before petering out to nothing.

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