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Classical music “unites the generations,” says Sir James MacMillan.

Acclaimed Scottish composer and conductor, Sir James MacMillan appeared at the Edinburgh International Book Festival today to discuss his new book, *A Scots Song: A Life of Music*, with the Episcopal Bishop of St. Andrews, Ian Paton. The pair discussed the inspiration MacMillan has drawn from his faith, how classical music isn't only for the 'elite' and how his coal miner Grandfather inspired his love of music.

“Those of us who are involved in classical music know that is a culture that unites the generations. So aging musicians like myself are very important to young people coming through and if, you know, there are cutbacks and government funding, local council funding the poorest of the poor, the poorest in our society don't get access to music, then that will be a national scandal that will hit the culture very hard.”

When he spoke about the inspiration he feels when he begins to write, MacMillan says that freedom to write what he wants is integral to his process. “To write the music I want to write, I think, I need to be inspired. In the sense that I could never imagine physically trying to write music I didn't want to write.

“For me, it's all encompassing, it's my personality. It's my own soul that is working out and has to be given full vent, and therefore the inspiration has to be acute in every way.”

Another source of inspiration he says, is his Catholic faith, once writing that it's forges a connection between the divine and the human and his feelings towards this have become “more acute over the years” and he believes that the passion and love that musicians, from all walks of life, talk about their creations can dissolve any divide.

“Religion can be quite a divisive thing, especially these days, one way or another. But when we talk about these things in relation to music, the divisions dissolve and we find a common ground and I find that quasi-theological language that many of us will use to account for music as something that we can share.”

MacMillan attributes his foray into music to his Grandfather, a coal miner from Ayrshire, who was musical himself and inspired a young Sir James by buying him his first cornet and supporting his journey into creating music. “He was a coal miner, spent fifty years or more under the ground hacking away at coal and the rest of it, but he had a love for music, any music but he had a love of the classics, of what he knew of them. When I came along he was delighted that I was interested too. He got my first cornet, took me to my first band practice as a Dalmellington (band in Ayr). He got me my first organ tutors and hymn books.

“Kilmarnock in East Ayrshire was full of men and women like my grandfather. There was not a lot of money around. There was genuine poverty in places like Kilmarnock through the twentieth century, and even in my childhood, but these people loved music and they lived for music. Those communities were infused with the search for good amateur music.”

MacMillan shared how his music helped him process the death of his five year old granddaughter, Sara, in 2016, saying, “I was writing music within weeks of this happening and it was inescapable that the experience of that, would leave its mark. I certainly can hear, I think, little Sara, in the silences and I talk about silence in the context of death, and loss, and music towards the end of the book.

“And, well, maybe these things have a huge effect on an artist, on ways we can’t quite fathom to begin with, and I’m sure the experience will have left its mark on me.”