

chilcott a little jazz mass programme notes

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A Little Jazz Mass: Programme Notes for Chilcott's Modern Classic

In the ever evolving landscape of contemporary choral repertoire, few works manage to fuse tradition and innovation with the effortless charm of a jazz infused hymn as seamlessly as **Chilcott's "A Little Jazz Mass"**. This piece, which first premiered in the early 2000s, has since become a staple in both liturgical settings and concert halls, celebrated for its rhythmic vitality, melodic accessibility, and the way it invites listeners into a shared musical experience. Whether you are a choir director preparing to stage this work, a musicologist exploring its place in 21st century sacred music, or a curious listener eager to understand its layers, these programme notes aim to illuminate the background, structure, and performance considerations that make *A Little Jazz Mass* a unique and engaging work.

About the Composer: John Chilcott

John Chilcott, born in 1955, is a British composer and conductor renowned for his contributions to choral and liturgical music. After studying at the Royal College of Music and gaining experience as a church organist, Chilcott's compositional voice emerged as a blend of classical clarity and contemporary flair. His works often feature approachable harmonies, rhythmic drive, and an evident sense of community, reflecting his long-standing involvement in parish and community choirs.

Chilcott's portfolio ranges from simple hymn arrangements to complex choral-orchestral pieces, but his most enduring legacy lies in his ability to write music that resonates with both performers and audiences. "A Little Jazz Mass" epitomises this ethos, offering a fresh take on the traditional mass setting while remaining firmly rooted in the familiar structures of the Ordinary.

Historical Context: The Birth of a Jazz Infused Mass

In the late 1990s, the church music scene in the United Kingdom was experiencing a wave of experimentation. Composers sought to revitalize liturgical music by incorporating elements from popular genres, thereby bridging the gap between sacred tradition and contemporary culture. Chilcott's inspiration for the Mass came from two sources: his personal love of jazz and his desire to create a piece that could be performed by a wide range of choirs, from small parish groups to larger cathedral ensembles.

Chilcott first conceived the idea during a rehearsal of a standard Catholic Mass setting. He noticed that the rhythmic patterns of the choir could be enhanced by jazz syncopation, and he wondered whether this approach could add a fresh dimension to the liturgy. The result was a composition that honours the structure of the Ordinary (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei) while infusing each section with a distinct jazz flavor.

Structure and Musical Analysis

1. Kyrie: A Gentle Swing

The Kyrie opens with a warm, low choir introduction that establishes a mellow timbre. The melody is set in a minor mode, featuring a subtle syncopated rhythm reminiscent of a laid back jazz groove. The harmonic progression is

straightforward, employing a ii–V–I cadence that resolves in a soothing, consonant chord. This opening invites the congregation into a reflective atmosphere before the call for mercy.

2. Gloria: Up Tempo Bebop

In contrast to the contemplative Kyrie, the Gloria bursts into a lively, upbeat tempo. Here, Chilcott introduces a swing feel, with the choir's rhythmic subdivision creating a "four on two" feel typical of bebop. The melodic line is bright and rhythmic, with short motifs that are repeated and varied across the section. Harmonically, the piece leans on extended chords—major 7ths and dominant 9ths—adding richness without compromising clarity.

3. Credo: The Bridge Between Traditions

The Credo acts as a bridge, blending the solemnity of the text with the rhythmic vitality of jazz. The choir is divided into two groups: a soprano and alto ensemble that carries the main melodic line, and a bass and tenor section that provides a walking bass line, echoing the jazz tradition. The harmonic palette here shifts between modal interchange and blues inspired progressions, giving the section an almost bluesy feel while staying true to the text's solemnity.

4. Sanctus: A Jazzy Hymn

The Sanctus is perhaps the most striking section of the Mass. Chilcott writes a soaring, hymn like melody that is set against a syncopated accompaniment. The choir's rhythmic structure is reminiscent of a jazz waltz, with an emphasis on the second beat of each measure. Harmonically, the piece moves through a series of key changes, providing a sense of progression and uplift.

5. Agnus Dei: A Gentle Fade

The final section, Agnus Dei, returns to a softer dynamic. The choir's melody is simple, with a gentle, almost lullaby like quality. The harmonic structure is straightforward, using primarily diatonic chords that resolve in a comforting cadence. The piece concludes with a quiet, sustained chord that allows the audience to reflect on the message of the Mass.

Instrumentation and Choir Requirements

While *A Little Jazz Mass* is primarily a choral work, Chilcott allows for optional instrumental accompaniment to enhance the jazz feel. The recommended instrumentation includes:

- Flute (doubling piccolo)
- Clarinet in B&M
- Alto saxophone
- Trumpet in C
- Trombone
- Double bass
- Drum set (snare, bass drum, cymbals)
- Keyboard (piano or electric piano, optional)

These instruments are not mandatory; many choirs perform the piece a cappella, and the jazz elements are effectively conveyed through rhythmic precision and harmonic choices alone. For smaller choirs, the optional instruments can be omitted without compromising the integrity of the composition.

Performance Considerations

1. Rhythm and Groove

The jazz elements in the piece rely heavily on rhythmic accuracy. Choir directors should emphasize a strong sense of pulse during rehearsals, ensuring that syncopated passages are delivered with confidence. A metronome or click track can be invaluable in maintaining the swing feel, especially in the Gloria and Sanctus.

2. Dynamics and Articulation

Dynamic contrast is essential to highlight the jazz character. The choir should explore a wide dynamic range, from the soft, introspective Kyrie to the exuberant Gloria. Articulation should be clear but flexible; the use of legato in melodic lines and staccato in rhythmic passages will help the choir navigate the transitions between the more lyrical and the more rhythmic sections.

3. Textual Clarity

While the jazz elements add color, the sacred text remains central. Directors should ensure that the words are intelligible, especially during complex rhythmic passages. Clear diction will preserve the liturgical function of the piece, making it suitable for both concert and worship settings.

4. Balance with Instruments

If optional instrumentation is employed, the choir must maintain a balanced blend. The instruments should support, not overpower, the vocal lines. In particular, the saxophone and trumpet lines should be carefully arranged to complement the choir's harmonies.

Audience Reception and Legacy

Since its premiere, *A Little Jazz Mass* has garnered praise from both performers and listeners. Critics have lauded Chilcott's ability to make jazz idioms accessible to a choral setting, and many choirs have reported increased engagement from congregants and audiences alike. The piece has been recorded by several prominent choirs, and its inclusion in contemporary choral anthologies underscores its significance in modern sacred music.

In liturgical contexts, the Mass has been used in both Catholic and Anglican services, demonstrating its versatility across denominations. Its approachable harmonic language and rhythmic vitality make it a favorite for choirs seeking to enrich their repertoire without committing to complex modernist writing.

Practical Tips for Choir Directors

1. Start with the Text: Familiarise the choir with the liturgical text before adding musical layers. A strong textual foundation ensures that the sacred message remains clear.
2. Use a Click Track: In rehearsals, especially for the Gloria and Sanctus, a click track helps maintain the swing feel.
3. Work on Sectional Rehearsals: Break the Mass into its five sections to focus on specific rhythmic and harmonic challenges.
4. Incorporate Jazz Warm ups: Begin rehearsals with jazz warm up exercises to prime the choir's rhythmic sense.
5. Invite a Jazz Consultant: If possible, collaborate with a jazz musician to guide the choir in achieving an authentic groove.

Conclusion

John Chilcott's *A Little Jazz Mass* stands as a testament to the enduring power of music to bridge genres and eras. By weaving jazz rhythms into the familiar framework of the Ordinary, Chilcott offers a fresh, engaging experience for both performers and listeners. Whether performed a cappella or with optional instrumentation, the piece invites

choirs to explore rhythmic vitality, harmonic richness, and the joyful spirit of jazz within a sacred context. As contemporary choral music continues to evolve, works like *A Little Jazz Mass* remind us that tradition and innovation can coexist beautifully, creating music that resonates across time and culture.

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