

Light is the major theme of this painting.

Welcome, all Wonders in one sight!

Eternity shut in a span.

Summer in winter, day in night,

Heaven in earth, and God in man.

Great little One! Whose all-embracing birth

Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth...



If you are interested in learning more about the work of the Sanders Society, please visit our web-site: [www.sanderssociety.org.uk](http://www.sanderssociety.org.uk) or email the Secretary at [info@sanderssociety.org.uk](mailto:info@sanderssociety.org.uk)

Iain McKillop is a British painter working mainly in the field of Christian religious art, and also painted the Tryptych of The Passion of Christ above the High Altar in the Lady Chapel of Gloucester Cathedral.

## MUSICIANS' CHAPEL ALTARPIECE GLOUCESTER CATHEDRAL



In Memory of Dr. John Sanders,  
Organist and Master of the Choristers  
of Gloucester Cathedral 1967 – 1994.



Painted by IAIN McKILLOP

Welcome to the  
Musicians' Chapel  
of Gloucester Cathedral.  
This leaflet is to give you  
some insight  
and further information  
about the large painting  
over the altar.

THEME :

The annunciation of the news of  
Christ to the shepherds as told  
in Luke 2:8-20.

The story of the shepherds is most meaningful when we consider all aspects of it, rather than just concentrating singly on the angel coming to the shepherds, the angel choir, or the shepherds appearing at the manger. So, in the manner of late mediaeval paintings like Duccio, it depicts the whole Gospel narrative by way of several different scenes.

**1: A central light appears to the shepherds in the night sky**

*“The glory of the Lord shining around them”* (v9). This light takes the form of a cross, illuminating the meaning of salvation through the coming of Christ. It is like a musical overture or thematic statement, giving theme and focus to the whole picture

The Musicians’ Chapel is both a memorial and a place of repose. This image represents a beacon of eternal hope shining out to the departed, to those who mourn them, and those who come to remember. *“In Christ was life and that light was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it”* (John.1:4-5).

**2: Below the cross of light the shepherds receive the message.**

In musical terms this is the first main movement, but it is a rather chaotic movement. The shepherds’ gestures are all out of rhythm. They are afraid, stunned, confused, wanting to protect the sheep, overawed, yet worshipful - all at the same time. Ironically, the calmest characters are the sheep, as though nature is somehow recognising that nature’s source, Christ, is bringing harmony.

This is the message of Romans 8:19-24 about Nature waiting in expectation to be liberated, and also of Isaiah’s prophecy *“the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”* (Isa. 9:2), which the opening of John’s Gospel seems to be echoing. The calm of the sheep recognising their master is, in contrast to what would probably have happened. Unlike the terrified and stampeding sheep in Rembrandt’s etching of The Annunciation, these sheep are a real mangy bunch, not pretty, not idealised ‘baa-lambs’, but real, ugly, sometimes stupid, very ordinary and earthy animals. That is what the Annunciation to the Shepherds contributes to the Christmas story. It grounds it. Christ’s message is coming to ordinary, down-to-earth folk like any of us, ennobling us by showing us that God loves us.

**3: Like wings radiating from the light, the heavenly host appears in the heavens, praising God for this coming great salvation.**

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours”* (v14).

**4: The shepherds, at the Bethlehem manger, adore Christ, playing instruments to him. (right-hand roundel) Mary ponders the meaning of all this in her heart (v19)**

**5: The shepherds are left in the fields “glorifying God for all they have heard and seen” (v20). (Centre)**

This represents a kind of circular argument. The shepherds are ordinary, unworthy and uncertain, but they are made special, worthy and certain by this experience. Their presence highlights the fact that we are to be shepherds too. The symbol of the shepherd in scripture is often used to describe leaders of God’s people who are meant to shepherd, to watch out for and to protect the people. And in musical terms, and like John Sanders, the conductor or musical director is also a shepherd guiding and directing performers through their performance.

*(There are also a few quirky images in the picture, included just for fun).*

In a few mediaeval manuscript illustrations of the scene you will find a shepherd rushing home to fetch his wife to look after the sheep, while he goes to the manger. The artist subverted such stereotyping by placing one of the wives at the manger, playing a small cornet to the child.

The angels are also unusual. How do you paint a 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding of angels if you haven’t seen one? Iain McKillop began to represent them as pillars of light, but felt that, if they had messages to communicate, they would need to develop personalities for themselves. He has made them as intangible as possible, perhaps reflecting something of Van Gogh’s ‘Starry Night’, while depicting disembodied faces actively praising their God. Accompanying the large angel choir, and recalling John Sanders’s intimate relationship with the Three Choirs

Festival, is a full ensemble of angelic spirits, playing both orchestral and ancient instruments. Milton’s *Hymn of the Morning of Christ’s Nativity*, which inspired much of the central imagery, and reflecting the imagery of the Universe in harmony, sings of *“Heaven’s deep organs”* and the *“silver chimes”* of *“ringing Crystal spheres”*, and announcing the Birth. These are portrayed by heavenly versions of the Gloucester Cathedral Organ, restored under John’s supervision, and the Cathedral bells. Rarer instruments include those played by the sculpted angels in the ceiling of Gloucester’s chancel, alongside some which McKillop drew during the 2010 Three Choirs Festival - lutes, cornets. Also included are international, but not exclusively Western, instruments. You will even find angels playing kazoos, traditional bagpipes and a mouth-organ. Sacred music is inclusive. (Some additional brushwork was contributed by John Sanders’s grandchildren)

The story of the shepherds is about Christ coming for all. These are ordinary folk: they play bagpipes, recorders, bodhráin and small mandolins, so why shouldn’t some of the angels have popular taste too? To fit its dedication to a musician and its place in the Musicians’ Memorial Chapel, the painting is attempting to reflect how a composer might approach composing a piece of music. There is colour, rhythmic line, form, light and story, all uniting different musical elements into a whole piece. It is fugue and development, leading the eye from the first scene through others and back to the origin. As in a piece of music, different elements - leitmotifs, colours, and forms - intermingle, interpenetrate, reflect one another and resolve themselves.

The chantry chapel is rather dark so red does not be just a night scene. There are the wonderful colours of the Howells, Sumsion and Brewer windows, so pigment has been used which harmonised and didn’t clash with them. But what colour is the sound the Annunciation? To the artist the choir and orchestra of angels seemed gold, yellows and oranges, representing the glory of the angels’ message. The complementary colours of blues and purples represent their ethereal and mysterious qualities which harmonise with the stained glass: but they are also be shot through with other colours, some symbolic, as in the Sumsion window, some just trying to reflect the glory of Christ.