

THE FIRST APOSTLE

An Oratorio

Music and libretto by
David Evan Thomas

Including selections from

The King James Version of The Bible
The Gospel of Mary of Magdala

And based on the work of

Mary Carolyn Davies
H.D. (Hilda Doolittle)
Heracleides
Karen Holman
J. Pittman McGehee

Program Notes and Texts

Program Note

"The interesting thing about Mary Magdalene...." The professor paused. I was about to hear what I had sought, an elusive truth revealed by a member of The Jesus Seminar, that estimable think-tank devoted to the study of early Christianity. "The interesting thing, is that we know so little about her." That sentence—that lacuna—provides the context for the musical work you are about to hear, as it does for countless other works of the imagination, from the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* to *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Da Vinci Code*. We still know so little about her.

The First Apostle began in the mind of Keith Weber, who wrote to me two years ago after pondering an article by Joan Acocella in *The New Yorker* which reviewed the more recent scholarship on Mary Magdalene. I was intrigued, and started exploring the literature. I found a fine oratorio by Massenet and many beautiful poems by George Herbert, Rilke, Pasternak, Tsvetaeva and others. But I couldn't use any of them, based as they were on the assumptions about Mary Magdalene articulated by Pope Gregory in 594 CE: "that the woman Luke called a sinner and John called Mary was the Mary out of whom Mark declared that seven demons were cast." The Magdalene has long been an passive object and a silent one, certainly not a source of vision. More recently-unearthed sources, however, like the Gospel of Mary, discovered in 1886, and especially the texts found at Nag Hammadi in 1945 (the so-called "Gnostic Gospels") offer a different view: that Mary Magdalene was a favored disciple of Jesus, a visionary, a link in the prophetic tradition. She fully deserved the epithet *apostola apostolorum*: the Apostle to the Apostles.

A reference to Mary Magdalene in the medieval hymn "Victimae paschali laudes" offered a musical cornerstone. Those words—"Dic nobis, Maria, quid vidisti in via?" (Tell us, Mary, what you saw on the way)—and its chant melody provide much of the material for Part I. The perspective of The Illuminator, a monk seated before his manuscript, is delicately sketched by poet Karen Holman. We are then drawn into what is familiar and agreed upon: Mary Magdalene's witness to the Resurrection.

Part II jumps to the child's point of view, then to Mary's predicament, tellingly expressed in J. Pittman McGehee's poem "He Vanished." Through Mary's vision of Christ and the assurance that "ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus," the congregation is invited to participate in the revelation.

Part III considers the many representations of the Magdalene in art, before discarding them in favor of Hilda Doolittle's image of one who "carries a book." The final plea for vision resolves to a quodlibet: the three hymns—"Victimae," "Canonbury" and "Slane"—woven together.

The First Apostle is dedicated, with sincere thanks, to Birgitt Van Wyck. I add my appreciation to the choral forces of Christ Church Cathedral, Robert Simpson, Canon for Music, the fine soloists and instrumentalists, and especially, Keith Weber.

David Evan Thomas

THE FIRST APOSTLE

PART I – Gospel

MONKS (OFFSTAGE)

(Sung in Latin)

*Victimae paschali laudes
immolent Christiani.
Agnus redemit oves:
Christus innocens Patri
reconciliavit peccatores.*

*Mors et vita duello
confluxere mirando:
dux vitae mortuus,
regnat vivus.
Dic nobis Maria,
quid vidisti in via?
Sepulcrum Christi viventis,
et gloriam vidi resurgentis:*

(Translation)

Christians, to the Paschal victim
offer your thankful praises!
A lamb the sheep redeemeth:
Christ, who only is sinless,
reconcileth sinners to the Father.

Death and life have contended
in that combat stupendous:
the Prince of life, who died,
reigns immortal.
Speak, Mary, declaring
what thou sawest, wayfaring:
"The tomb of Christ, who is living,
the glory of Jesus' resurrection;

CHORUS

We have seen her, we have seen her the world over: the Great Sinner, the Washer of the Feet, the Washer of the Savior's feet, the Myrrh bearer.... We have seen her, yes, we have seen her the world over. Yes.

ILLUMINATOR

I was working on my illuminated manuscript transliterating the song of the goldfinch. I could see one perched on the feeder filled with thistles and thorns. Goldfinches symbolize gratitude for the Passion of Christ, his crown of thorns. I took some liberties...

I painted the breast and back of the goldfinch with gold leaf although its feathers are really yellow. I painted its black mask, wings and fearless eye with lacquer.

ILLUMINATOR

In my Book of Hours, God is blue, plays a flute and is as entangled with Mary Magdalene as the flowering, twining vines in my illuminations.¹

CHORUS

A witness to the Cross,
a witness at the Tomb,
a witness, a witness, a...

ILLUMINATOR

According to the Gospel, Mary of Magdala came early on the first day of the week, when it was yet dark, to the sepulcher, and saw the stone taken away. (Gospel of John, Chapter 21)

MARY MAGDALENE

Oh, they have taken away the Lord out of the sepulcher, and I know not where they have laid him.

CHORUS

The watchmen that go about the city found me:
to whom I said, saw ye him whom my soul loveth?

I will arise now, and go about the city in the streets,
and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth:
I sought him, but I found him not. (Song of Solomon 3:2-4)

MARY MAGDALENE

I sought him, but I found him not. [Weeping]

¹Karen Holman, from "Hagiography," from *Sentence: a Journal of Prose Poetics*, No. 5, Firewheel Editions: Danbury, 2007. Used by permission.
²Psalms of Heracleides, from *A Manichaean Psalm-Book, Part II*, ed. CRC Allberry, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer GmbH, 1938. Used by permission.

TWO ANGELS

Woman, why weepst thou?
Whom seekest thou?

MARY MAGDALENE

Oh... [weeping]

JESUS

Woman, why weepst thou?

MARY MAGDALENE

Oh sir, because they have taken my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.

JESUS

Woman, why weepst thou? Whom seekest thou?

MARY MAGDALENE

Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.

JESUS

Mary.

MARY MAGDALENE

Rabboni... Master!

JESUS

Mary, Mary, know me, but do not touch me.
Dry your tears, and know that I am your master,
only do not touch me, for I have not yet seen my father's face.

CHORUS

Your god was not taken away; your God did not die; but mastered death, even the death of the cross.

JESUS

I am not the gardener.
I did not appear to you until I saw your tears and grief for me.

CHORUS

Your god was not taken away; your God did not die;
but mastered death, even the death of the cross.

JESUS

Cast away this sadness. Carry my word to these lost orphans.
Hurry with joy, hurry to the eleven.
Mary, Mary, know me, but do not touch me.
Dry your tears, and know that I am your master,
Say to them, "Arise, your brother calls you."

JESUS

CHORUS

If they disregard me as brother, say, "It is your master."
If they disregard me as master, say, "It is your Lord."

Arise, your brother calls you.

CHORUS

Arise, your brother calls you.
If they disregard me as brother, say, "It is your master."
If they disregard me as master, say, "It is your Lord."

JESUS

If they are not moved, call Simon Peter.
Say to him, "Remember my words on the mount of Olives."²

²Psalm of Heracleides, from *A Manichaean Psalm-Book, Part II*, ed. CRC Allberry, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer GmbH, 1938. Used by permission.

CHORUS

"In those days, the sun shall be darkened,
and the moon shall not give her light,
and the stars of heaven shall fall,
and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken.

CHORUS/JESUS

And then shall they see the Son of man
coming in the clouds with great power and glory." (Gospel of Mark: 13:24-26)

MARY MAGDALENE

I have seen the Lord, and he has spoken unto me.

I know that my Redeemer liveth,
and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. (Job 19 : 25)

For now is Christ risen from the dead,
the first fruits of them that sleep. (I Corinthians 15:20)

CHORUS

I know that my Redeemer liveth,
and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth.

* * *

PART II – Vision

TREBLE CHORUS

Christ said "Mary," as he walked within the garden
The morning that he rose from death, calm and free of pain;
The wounds in his hands and his side no longer burned him.
He that once had been a man was a God again.

Christ said, "Mary," as he walked within the garden.
All in his triumphing, back from the dead,
With the wind upon his cheek, while the world was new to him,
"Mary" was the first name he ever said.

All the Marys of the world, let us pray together now,
(*Soli*) Mary Schwartz, Mary Brown, and Mary Rosenstein,
Little Mary Donnelly, Mary Holt and Mary Hull,
Mary Olsen, Mary Morse, all in a line.

(*Tutti*) Since it is the Easter-time, and little bells are ringing,
Let us walk in still pride, with lifting of the head,
For when he had risen from the grave, as all the world knows,
"Mary" was the first name that God ever said. (Mary Carolyn Davies)

MARY MAGDALENE

He vanished. My soul left empty
like the tomb. "Do not hold..."
the sound of his
words, were powerful like
the sea when her tide
flows away.

He must be found,
He must be found in the
vacant place, not behind the
rock, but within the heart.

Edged out of the world
on a tree, like the first
at Eden—now a new
creation—a new way to
be known in the deep.

The man disappears as
the divine reappears in-
side those who have
the eye to see.

Where to go with this
wealth that holds no earthly
value? Can I slide
seamlessly back into my
ordinary life? How to serve
him now?

The garden is green in the morning light.
The angels have departed
and I too must leave like
Eve before me.³ And yet...

MARY MAGDALENE

I saw the Lord in a vision:

JESUS

How wonderful you are for not wavering in my sight!

MARY MAGDALENE

Lord, does one see a vision with the soul or with the spirit?⁴

JESUS

MARY MAGDALENE

One does not see with the soul or with the spirit.
Rather the mind, which exists between these two.

If those who lead you say, "See, the kingdom is in the sky"the kingdom is in the sky...
...then the birds of the sky will precede you.

If they say, "It is in the sea"the kingdom is in the sea...
...then the fish will precede you.

JESUS

The kingdom is inside of you,
and it is outside of you.

JESUS/MARY MAGDALENE

For where the mind is, there is the treasure.

JESUS

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

CHORUS

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.
There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free,
there is neither male nor female: (Galatians 3:26-28)

MARY MAGDALENE

I set my table with a
loaf, and a little wine.
Break open a pomegranate
and taste its red seed. I
contemplate an aura of
candles and wait for the
bridegroom to return.
Here and to appear . . .
amidst the aria of
the lily, two trumpets
and a stem.⁵

³J. Pittman McGehee, "He Vanished," Used by permission.

⁴From *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, copyright © 2003 by Polebridge Press. Used by permission.

⁵J. Pittman McGehee, "He Vanished," Used by permission.

TREBLE CHORUS

Solo: Lord, speak to us that we may speak
In living echoes of your tone;
As you have sought, so let us seek
Your straying children lost and lone.

Tutti: O lead us, Lord, that we may lead
The wand'ring and the wav'ring feet;
O feed us, Lord, that we may feed
Your hungering ones with manna sweet.

CHORUS

O teach us, Lord, that we may teach
The precious things which you impart;
And wing our words, that they may reach
The hidden depths of many a heart.

CHORUS & CONGREGATION

Congregation (all sing verse 4) Francis R. Havergal, 1836-1879; Tune: Canonbury

4. O fill us with your full - ness, Lord, Un - til my ve - ry heart o'er-flow In
kind - ling thought and glow - ing word, your love to tell, your praise to show.

* * *

PART III – Illumination

CHORUS

We have seen her the world over:
The Penitent, the Saint, the Anointer, the Woman at the Well.
Yes, yes, we have seen her!
The Anointer, The Penitent, The Witness, The Saint.
We have seen her the world over.
We have scented the oil in the alabaster jar.
We have seen her with pearls and red hair long and curled
We have heard the command— to a girl in a red velvet gown:
russet-red, scarlet-red, flame-red.
Not to touch, not to touch: *Noli me tangere!*
We have seen her on her knees, clasping the Cross.
And we have seen her turned toward a mirrored flame:
Mary with the Skull.
Mary with a Scourge.
Mary in the Desert.
Mary in the Cave.
Mary! Maria! Miryam! Magdala!

ILLUMINATOR

The painters did very well by her;
it is true, they missed never a line
of the suave turn of the head
or subtle shade of lowered eye-lid
or eye-lids half-raised. They never missed
the chance to rend her garment, bare her breast.

CHORUS

Dürer, Titian, Leonardo
El Greco, Fra Angelico, Giotto,
Rubens, Rembrandt, Donatello, Caravaggio.

ILLUMINATOR

The painters did very well by her, it is true,
but she wasn't hieratic,
she wasn't frozen,
she wasn't very tall;
She carries a book but it is not
the tome of the ancient wisdom,
the pages, I imagine, are the blank pages
of the unwritten volume of the new;

CHORUS

She carries a book but not
the tome of the ancient wisdom.

ILLUMINATOR

All you say, is implicit,
all and much more;
but she is not shut up in a cave
like a Sibyl; she is not
imprisoned in leaden bars
in a colored window.

Dic nobis, Maria.

She is Psyche, the butterfly,
out of the cocoon.⁶

CHORUS

1. Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art;
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

CHORUS

2. Be Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word;
I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord;
Thou my great Father, I Thy true son;
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

MARY MAGDALENE, ILLUMINATOR, JESUS

Be Thou my Vision,
O Lord of my heart;

3. Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
Thou mine Inheritance, now and always:
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,
High King of Heaven, my Treasure Thou art.

CHORUS & CONGREGATION

Congregation (all sing verse 4)

Eleanor H. Hull, 1912; Tune: Slane

4. High King of Heav-en, my vic - to - ry won, May I reach Heav-en's joys,
O bright Heav'n's Sun! Heart of my own heart, what - ev - er be - fall,
Still be my Vi - sion, O Ru - ler of all.

⁶H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), from *Trilogy*, copyright ©1945 by Oxford University Press; Copyright renewed 1973 by Norman Holmes Pearson. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.