ESSAY · A DIALOGUE

Text to Be Set

After the Mass of the great commandment, five people stay behind in the choir loft. The homily told them to love the one beside them. A double fugue made by rule showed them the second commandment beginning like the first. They set the two side by side, and find out what each can do that the other cannot.

Richard Verver · October 2026

Persons of the dialogue

- **Declan,** the parish's choir, all of it: one cantor
- **Margaret,** the organist, who studied counterpoint and has sung the *St Matthew Passion* twice
- **Father Anselm,** who preached
- **Lena,** seventeen, who serves at the altar and writes code
- **Mr. Okafor,** a retired electrical engineer, who stayed behind to fold the hymn boards

Scene: A choir loft in a Toronto parish, after the ten o'clock Mass of the thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A. The Gospel was Matthew 22:34–40, the great commandment. On the music stand is a printed score, three pages, of a double fugue called On These Two Hang. Its free voices are marked "text to be set".

The persons are invented. The dead are quoted, and only with a source. Scripture is the King James Version, and the Latin is the Vulgate's.

I. Six notes

The church below is empty. Declan stands alone at the music stand and sings six notes on the words Diliges Dominum: E, E, D, G, E, C. Margaret comes up the stairs with her music bag.

Margaret. That's not in the hymnal.

Declan. It's the first six notes of the great commandment. The vowels make them. *I, i, e, o, i, u*: mi, mi, re, sol, mi, ut.

Margaret. Josquin's trick.

Declan. Josquin's trick. He got a whole Mass out of a duke's name.

Father Anselm comes up behind her with a cup of coffee, and Lena, still in her server's alb. Mr. Okafor is folding the hymn boards by the rail.

Father Anselm. I heard that from the sacristy. Was it the Gospel?

Declan. The first half. Listen to the second.

He sings Diliges proximum: the same six notes, and then a different ending.

Lena. Same notes.

Declan. Same vowels. "Diliges Dominum." "Diliges proximum."

Mr. Okafor. *(without looking up)* "And the second is like unto it."

Father Anselm. I preached on that this morning. I said that he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And I said the neighbour is not an idea. He's the man in the pew beside you who sings flat.

Margaret. That was a good homily.

Father Anselm. It was a short one. A homily has to send people home to do something. I told them to love the one beside them, starting with the flat one. *(To Declan.)* Your music doesn't tell anybody to do anything.

Declan. No. It can only show.

Lena. You didn't say anything about the law hanging, Father.

Father Anselm. I said the law was summed up in two commandments.

Declan. Matthew says it hangs. The Vulgate says *pendet*. The whole law hangs on two commandments, and a few days later the one who said so hangs on the wood.

Father Anselm. *(after a moment)* That would have been a better homily.

Margaret. It would have been a longer one.

II. Made by rule

Margaret. I want to say something unkind, Declan, and then something kind.

Declan. In that order.

Margaret. You didn't write that fugue. A program did. You gave it some words and some rules, and it went looking. I studied counterpoint for four years, and the first thing my teacher said was that the rules will never write a line for you. They only tell you which lines you may not write.

Lena. That's what it does, though. It's a beam search. For the free voice it tries every next note, throws out any that break a rule, scores the rest, and keeps the best few. Then the next note, and the next. At the end it checks every half note against every other voice.

Margaret. Keeps the best by what?

Lena. By a score. Contrary motion is good, a big leap costs, ending on a perfect consonance is required —

Margaret. And who wrote the score?

Lena. We did. Out of Fux.

Margaret. Then it's Fux's fugue.

Declan. He'd be glad to hear it. Do you remember how the *Gradus* is written?

Margaret. In Latin. Vienna, 1725.

Declan. As a dialogue. A master called Aloysius, who stands for Palestrina, and a pupil called Josephus, who is Fux himself. The pupil brings an exercise, the master marks it, the pupil tries again. The rules don't come down on a table of stone. A man who loves the music hands them to a man who wants to.

Margaret. And Josephus gets it wrong.

Declan. Over and over. That's the book.

Mr. Okafor. Does the machine get it wrong?

Lena. Not that way. It isn't able to write a parallel fifth. It doesn't even want to.

Margaret. That's my unkind thing. A line that can't be wrong isn't the same as a line that's right. A parallel fifth isn't a sin against arithmetic. It's two voices collapsing into one: two that ought to be two, sounding as one by accident. Each voice has to stay a voice, and the voices have to agree. Every rule in the book is one of those two.

A pause.

Father Anselm. Say that again.

Margaret. Let each voice be itself; let them sound well together. All the rest of Fux hangs on — *(She stops.)* Yes. I heard it as I said it.

Mr. Okafor. And now the kind thing.

Margaret. The kind thing is the six notes. Nobody chose them. Declan didn't, the program didn't. The vowels did. "Diliges Dominum" and "Diliges proximum" have the same vowels, so they get the same

notes, so the second subject begins exactly like the first. And Matthew says, "the second is like unto it." The machine heard what the Latin already said.

Lena. It only matched vowels.

Margaret. So did Josquin, and nobody calls that a coincidence.

Father Anselm. *Secundum autem simile est huic.* Like it. Not the same as it.

Declan. It is the same for six notes, and then it goes its own way. That's what a fugal answer is: the subject again, at another place, bent where it has to bend to fit.

Mr. Okafor. The same circuit on a different supply.

Father Anselm. So the program kept the law. I would like to know what it thinks the law hangs on.

Lena. It doesn't think.

Father Anselm. Then I'd like to know what the people who wrote it thought. Wait here. I have a book.

III. The Fathers

Father Anselm comes back up the stairs with a heavy book, the Catena Aurea in the old Oxford translation, a ribbon at Matthew 22.

Father Anselm. Thomas made this for a pope. Every verse of the Gospels, and under each verse a chain of the Fathers saying what it means, one link after another. I read it on Saturday nights, and then I preach something shorter.

Lena. Why a chain?

Father Anselm. Because no one link holds the weight. Here is our verse: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." First Augustine: "'Hang,' that is, refer thither as their end."

Declan. As their end.

Father Anselm. Not hang as a coat hangs on a peg. Hang as a road hangs on where it's going. Every precept in the Law is on its way to love, the way a sentence is on its way to its full stop. Then Raban: "For to these two commandments belongs the whole decalogue; the commandments of the first table to the love of God, those of the second to the love of our neighbour."

Mr. Okafor. Two tables. Two subjects.

Father Anselm. This next one goes under Chrysostom's name, though it isn't his. Lena, this one's yours. "But who loves man is as who loves God; for man is God's image, wherein God is loved, as a King is honoured in his statue."

Lena. So the neighbour's the statue.

Father Anselm. The neighbour is where the King has chosen to be honoured. You cannot bow to the King and kick the statue on your way out.

Margaret. Read Hilary. Hilary is always difficult.

Father Anselm. Not this time. "That the second command is like the first signifies that the obligation and merit of both are alike."

Margaret. Alike. Not the same.

Declan. Alike for six notes.

Father Anselm. And Origen at the end of the chain: whoever has fulfilled what is written about the love of God and of neighbour "is worthy to receive from God the great reward, that he should be enabled to understand the Law and the Prophets."

Margaret. That's backwards.

Father Anselm. Is it?

Margaret. No. It's how counterpoint is learned. You don't understand the rules until you have sung lines that keep them. Josephus understands at the end of the book, not the beginning.

Declan. Here's what I can't get past. The program knows none of this. It has never heard of Augustine. It took vowels and rules, and it found the second like the first. And it found something else. Matthew keeps the cry in the words it was cried in, and the Vulgate spells them out: *Eli, Eli, lamma sabacthani.* Five a's and an i. Fa, fa, fa, fa, fa, mi. The cry hangs on fa, a half step above home, and falls to mi, the final, where the mode comes to rest.

Mr. Okafor. Hangs.

Margaret. That's a coincidence, Declan. The vowels of an Aramaic sentence in a Latin spelling, put through a Renaissance composer's trick. You can't build on that.

Father Anselm. She's right. I couldn't preach it.

Declan. I wouldn't preach it either. I can only sing it, and let you hear it, and not tell you what it means.

Father Anselm. That's the difference between us, then. The Fathers had a reason for every link in the chain. You have a rule, and sometimes the rule lands where they did.

Mr. Okafor. "Every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old."

Father Anselm. The book is old. The program is new.

Mr. Okafor. And the treasure is the same treasure.

IV. From within

Mr. Okafor. May I say what I heard? I don't read music. I read circuits. In the middle, a ticking came in under the voices, and then the bells and the ticking took turns, one bar each.

Declan. The bells and the wheel.

Mr. Okafor. That is a flip-flop. I built thousands of them. Two states, and it holds whichever it was given until the clock says change. It's the smallest memory there is. One bit.

Lena. That's what we called it.

Mr. Okafor. I liked the clock. I want to say that, because I think some of you didn't. The clock is good. It keeps its law perfectly and it isn't proud of it. Then the voices went away, at the darkness, and there was nothing left but the clock. That was the worst sound in the piece. Not the cry. The clock with nothing else.

Declan. "Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land." The clock isn't the darkness. Nothing but the clock is.

Mr. Okafor. And then it stopped. At "it is finished" it stopped, and I thought the power had failed. Then three bars of nothing at all.

Father Anselm. The tomb. The Catechism calls it God's great sabbath rest.

Mr. Okafor. I've spent forty years listening for the moment a machine goes quiet. I never once thought it was resting.

Father Anselm. The nineteenth psalm does what your piece does, Declan. It starts with the machine. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork." The sun goes round its course "as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race." Then, without warning: "The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul." Half the psalm is the sky keeping its law, and half is a man keeping his.

Margaret. But only one half is converted.

Father Anselm. That's my point. The sun keeps its law from outside. It cannot do otherwise. The prophet promised a law kept from inside: "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts." Thomas says the New Law is chiefly the grace of the Holy Spirit itself, given within. Your program keeps Fux the way the sun keeps its course. Beautifully. From outside.

Lena. We could put it inside, sort of. You can train a model on a person's voice. Declan could sing for twenty minutes, and the program could sing all four parts as him. A choir of Declans.

Margaret. God help us.

Declan. It would be my voice, if I gave it, and if I said yes to it. But it would sing things I never sang. It would be the machine singing in my voice. Not me singing.

Margaret. Could anyone hear the difference?

Declan. Not with their ears.

Father Anselm. Here is where I win something back, I think. The music shows a law being kept. It cannot tell anyone to keep it. Look at the word you carved your six notes from. *Diliges.* Not "love!" It's the future. "Thou shalt love." You will love. It's a command and a promise at once, and you can only promise something to someone. A homily is allowed to say "you". Your program has no second person. It has no future tense either. It only has the next note.

Margaret. And Tallis: "If ye love me, keep my commandments." Love first, then keeping.

Father Anselm. And the reason it can be commanded at all. Benedict wrote it: "Love can be 'commanded' because it has first been given." "We love him, because he first loved us." The sun was given its law. We are given a love, and then asked.

Mr. Okafor. The clock can be commanded all day long. It can't be asked.

Declan. That's why I sing, I think. The program sang it perfectly. I chose to sing it, flat in two places. Nobody had to.

Father Anselm. You did have to. You just weren't made to.

V. Text to be set

Declan opens his folder on the stand. The others gather round it.

Declan. Here's what I haven't solved. The two subjects have words, because they were carved from words. But the free voices, the ones the program found to go against them, have none. They sing "ah". The score says so over every one of them: *text to be set.*

Margaret. A contrafactum, then. New words to music that already exists. The old composers did it all the time.

Lena. Which words?

Father Anselm. I'd give them the one we sing on Holy Thursday, the night he washed their feet. *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.* Where charity and love are, God is there.

Margaret. *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor.* The love of Christ has gathered us into one.

Lena. Will the vowels fit the notes?

Declan. They don't have to. That's the thing. The subjects came out of the words. The free voices came out of agreeing with the subjects. Nobody carved them. So the words go on afterwards. They have to be fitted to a line that's already there.

Mr. Okafor. That's us, isn't it.

Declan. Say more.

Mr. Okafor. We weren't carved out of the commandment. We came after it, and we have to fit to what's already there.

Father Anselm. Now I'll take my homily back, if I may. In your music the next voice agrees with yours because a rule makes it agree. It can't do otherwise. The program threw out every note that didn't. In the next pew there's no such rule. The man beside you can sing flat, or not sing, or not come. And you're to love him anyway. Not because he fits. That's the hard part, and it's the only part I'm really for.

Margaret. Fux does allow a dissonance, eventually. Not in first species. Later, if you prepare it and resolve it.

Lena. Is that confession?

Father Anselm. *(laughing)* Don't let me preach that one either.

Margaret. I mean it, though. The rules don't forbid the clash forever. They ask you to carry it, and bring it somewhere.

Father Anselm. Then the text to be set isn't in your folder, Declan.

Lena. Where is it?

Father Anselm. Downstairs, at ten o'clock, every Sunday. Sitting in the pews. We're the text, and it's still being set.

VI. My end is my beginning

Lena. Can I tell you the thing I noticed? Nobody's said it yet. The very end. The bass goes F to E.

Declan. The phrygian cadence.

Lena. Fa to mi. That's the cry. That's "lamma sabacthani": it hangs on fa and falls to mi. The last thing the piece does is the cry again.

Margaret. With the third raised.

Lena. With the third raised. Same half step, and then the light comes on.

Declan. And it opens on an open fifth on E in the organ, the household hanging on it. It ends on E. It doesn't go anywhere. It goes all the way round.

Margaret. Machaut wrote a song like that. *Ma fin est mon commencement, et mon commencement ma fin.* My end is my beginning, and my beginning my end. Two of the voices are each other backwards, and the tenor is the same either way. You can read it from the last note and lose nothing.

Mr. Okafor. Mary, Queen of Scots had it embroidered on her cloth of state. *En ma fin est mon commencement.* An Englishman saw it hanging over her in 1569, when she was already a prisoner.

Father Anselm. And she was right, though not the way her jailers would have thought.

A silence. Below, the sacristan turns off the lights over the nave, one bank at a time.

Declan. I should tell you why I was up here alone. There's no choir at the ten o'clock any more. There's me. I'm the choir. I could stop. Nobody would mind; the organ would do. But I do choose to sing.

Margaret. We know, love.

Declan. I'm still a mustard seed of one.

Father Anselm. "The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: which indeed is the least of all seeds."

Lena. "But when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof."

Father Anselm. You knew that.

Lena. I serve Mass, Father.

Declan. My end is my beginning. I'll sing it once more and then I'll lock up.

He sings the six notes, Diliges Dominum. Half a note later and a fifth above, Margaret comes in with the second subject, Diliges proximum. Mr. Okafor, who does not sing, hums the low E and holds it. Lena taps the beat on the rail, very quietly: the clock. And Father Anselm, who cannot sing, sings, flat in two places. Nobody stops him.

On the stairs, a woman who came in to light a candle has stopped to listen. None of them knows her name.

Edges and sources

What is invented, and what is not

The church, its ten o'clock Mass, the homily and the five persons are invented. No real priest or parish is meant.

The music is real: *On These Two Hang*, a double fugue for Matthew 22:34–40, whose notes are made by rule. What the persons say about it is true of the track:

- the same six notes for *Diliges Dominum* and *Diliges proximum*, carved from their vowels;
- "lamma sabacthani" on fa, falling to mi, the final;
- the bells and the clock alternating bar by bar, a flip-flop;
- the clock alone at the darkness, stopping at "it is finished", and three bars of rest for the tomb;
- the open fifth on E at the start, and the F–E cadence with its third raised at the end;
- the second subject entering a half note later and a fifth up.

The free voices really have no text yet. Setting *Ubi caritas* to them is the persons' idea, not yet done.

Where the persons go past what is shown

- **Margaret's two rules** ("let each voice be itself; let them sound well together") are her summary of Fux, not his words. His book never says it.
- **The fa–mi of the cry is a coincidence of the rule,** and the dialogue says so. Father Anselm will not preach it, and Declan will only sing it.
- **The clock is not the villain.** The darkness is "nothing but the clock": the shadow cast by the "nothing but", not by the clock.
- **Declan does not condemn a model of a voice.** He says only that it would not be him singing. A voice given with consent and labelled as what it is is another matter, and the household's own rule for voices is on its music page.

What the homily wins

- It speaks in the second person and the future, as the commandment does: *Diliges*, "thou shalt love".
- It can command, because the love was first given.
- It has the neighbour in the next pew, who is not made to agree. The music can show a law kept; only the homily asks anyone to keep it.

Notes and sources

- **Scripture (KJV; the Latin from the Vulgate).** Matthew 22:37–40; 27:45–46; 13:31–32; 13:52; 1 John 4:19–20; John 14:15; Jeremiah 31:33; Psalm 19:1, 5, 7.
- **The golden chain.** Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea* on Matthew (dedicated to Pope Urban IV), in the Oxford translation of 1841–45, edited by J. H. Newman, on Matthew 22:39–40 (text): Augustine, *Quaestiones Evangeliorum* I.33, on "hang"; Raban, on the two tables; Pseudo-Chrysostom, on the king honoured in his statue; Hilary, on the obligation and merit of both alike; Origen, on the reward of understanding the Law and the Prophets.
- **The New Law.** Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II q.106 a.1, that the New Law is chiefly the grace of the Holy Spirit (paraphrased).
- **Love commanded.** Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est* (2005), 14: "Love can be 'commanded' because it has first been given."
- **Holy Saturday.** *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 624, on God's great sabbath rest (paraphrased).
- **The music.** *Ubi caritas et amor*, the Holy Thursday antiphon. Thomas Tallis, "If ye love me" (John 14:15). Johann Joseph Fux, *Gradus ad Parnassum* (Vienna, 1725), a Latin dialogue between Aloysius (Palestrina) and Josephus, described here, not quoted. *Soggetto cavato*, "a subject carved" from the vowels, named by Zarlino (1558) after Josquin's *Missa Hercules Dux Ferrariae*.
- **The end that is a beginning.** Guillaume de Machaut, *Ma fin est mon commencement* (14th century): the cantus and triplum are each other in retrograde, and the tenor is a palindrome (Puzzle Canon). Mary, Queen of Scots: "En ma fin est mon commencement" on her cloth of state, recorded by Nicholas White at Tutbury, February 1569 (Wikipedia).
- **Not quoted, by rule.** The poem that made "my end is my beginning" famous in English, which is under copyright; the phrase is older than the poem, and section VI keeps to Machaut and the Queen. Any modern translation of Fux. Anything of Pärt's.

The essay hangs above the map of the essays rather than in one of its fields, for what it is about. Made by Claude + Richard.

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