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## The Ritual Music of John Tavener

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John Tavener made a tremendous impression with his first major work, *The Whale*, in 1968.<sup>1</sup> Like the public image of its composer, the music was colourful and unpredictable, and it caused a lot of excitement. Tavener has produced no other work that has had quite so wide an appeal, but several pieces have aroused more than specialist interest, especially *Ultimos ritos* on its television in 1974, *Thérèse* when it was staged at Covent Garden in 1979, and *Akhmatova: Rekviem* in performances at the Edinburgh Festival and the Proms in 1980. However, though Tavener has never stopped writing, nor felt that his inspiration was flagging, he has become increasingly indifferent to publicity. This is partly the result of a deepening commitment to Christianity, which has led him to set himself squarely against fashion. What kind of music has he been writing recently and how can it be judged?

Tavener's fundamental impulse to compose has remained unchanged. He has always needed the inspiration of words, and these have been almost exclusively religious. The only significant exceptions are two settings of love poetry: *Sappho: Lyrical Fragments* (1980) for two sopranos and string orchestra; and the song cycle *To a Child Dancing in the Wind*<sup>2</sup> again for soprano, to poems by Yeats, which is the most recent work he has completed. But even in these secular pieces there is strong evidence of the techniques that shape his sacred writing: in *Sappho*, the repeated intoning of the same phrase, which creates a sense of distance in time without diluting the intensity of Sappho's love; in the Yeats songs, vocal phrases that are reminiscent of the chant idiom on which his sacred style is partly based.

Tavener's constant recourse to poetry has given him fluency in writing for voices, the medium with which he feels most comfortable, and in which he has achieved his widest expressive range. Much of his music has featured solo soprano parts, some of them highly virtuosic, some deliberately restricted in compass and contemplative in style. In works such as *In alium* (1968) and *A Celtic Requiem* (1969) the soprano line is extrovert and dramatic—*In alium*, for instance, uses a high *f*<sup>3</sup> sharp—and is supported by lush harmonies which Tavener says were influenced by Messiaen.<sup>3</sup> As his introversion increased, this rich and brilliant vein declined, and has now totally disappeared: the title role of *Thérèse*, for example, though still very much a coloratura part, is noticeably more sober than those of the earlier works. Tavener claims that in *Akhmatova: Rekviem* (1979-80) he discovered a new lyrical style, which he has been refining ever since. The Yeats cycle shows the latest stage in this process: the line is indeed lyrical, but it is at the same time condensed and austere, with a sparse and intimate accompaniment provided by flute, viola, and harp.

Since he composed *Akhmatova: Rekviem* Tavener has converted to the Russian Orthodox faith and has devoted himself almost entirely to setting texts connected with the Orthodox Church and its teachings. Recently he has built several pieces round texts that consist of a single word—*Doxa* (1982), for instance, enshrines the Orthodox concept of glory.

(This is essentially the same technique that he used in *Nomine Jesu* (1970), which reinforces the impression that his approach to composition remains fundamentally constant.) A similar idea is pursued in some textless pieces, sections of which symbolise different religious concepts: the organ work *Mandelion* (1981) is based on a series of iconic images, including the Annunciation, the Flight into Egypt, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection; the music is held together by means of a twelve-note set derived from chant.

The ritual element of the Orthodox liturgy has affected the character and even the construction of Tavener's music at every level. Superficially the influence is obvious. A ritual makes its effect by repetition and by a dramatic ethos which it inspires but does not control; its component actions are discrete—there is no attempt at development of ideas, and no fixed duration. The music Tavener has written under this influence, like much of the medieval and Renaissance sacred repertory, seems understated; the drama is left to the imagination of the listener rather than overtly expressed. A simple example is *The Great Canon of the Ode of St Andrew of Crete* (1981). The text consists of 25 short verses, between which Tavener has inserted the refrain 'Have mercy upon me, O God', in a regular sequence of English, Greek, and Old Church Slavonic. The refrain is set to a succession of sonorous chords for mixed choir; each repetition is pitched a semitone lower than the last, so that as a whole the work presents the impression of a long act of prostration, which is entirely suitable to the text. The words of St Andrew are sung by a solo bass in chant style. The length of the piece is determined purely by the length of the text; there is no development at all of musical material.

This is a straightforward case; I detect a more subtle ritual influence in some of Tavener's other recent pieces, where he achieves a pervading stillness by means that most composers would use to develop their ideas. In *Doxa* (1982) for double choir the mathematics of composition are immanent. The piece is cast in five massive blocks. The bass pedal notes sung in each block by choir I combine to form the first five notes of a melody that constitutes the only material of the piece: the other voices of choir I sing this melody (sometimes in retrograde form) over and over at different speeds, none of which is faster than very slow minims; choir II follows in strict canon at the distance of a bar, though the two middle voices are exchanged. There is not a note in the piece outside this scheme, yet the music has strong affinities with *The Great Canon*. It is my impression that the character and impact of the music depend very little on the details of the scheme; much more important are the sonorities of the five blocks and, particularly, the silences between them, which are very carefully marked and, as Nicholas Kenyon has pointed out, are as important as the music itself.<sup>4</sup> The same could be said often of pure ritual.

Tavener says that in *Doxa*, written for the Tallis Scholars, he came as close as he has ever been to the music of his near namesake, the great Renaissance composer, from whom he claims descent. But he does not need unaccompanied choirs to create these effects. In *Towards the Son* (1982)<sup>5</sup> he writes for symphony orchestra, though he excludes the upper strings and adds four bowed psalteries and an exotic percussion section; voices are included only in the last few bars, where three solo trebles, off stage, sing a Greek text. Despite the difference in forces, *Towards the Son* has a block-based construction that is in essence very similar to that of *Doxa*. A twelve-note row generates twelve sections; each of the notes

of the row, taken in succession, forms the pedal note for one section. But here not every note is controlled by the scheme—a modal scale is heard throughout in counterpoint with the twelve-note theme—and this freer construction is matched by the more colourful scoring. There is also a greater variety of activity over the pedal notes than in *Doxa*, though some of the same procedures are used, notably the playing of the main theme at a number of different speeds at once. The scheme allows something of a sense of movement within each section, but the overall effect is still static. Towards the end, after the twelve sections have been played out, a climax occurs in which the row and its twelve progeny are reviewed in concise form; but even here the excitement is generated not through musical development but by the sheer weight of repetition.

It is interesting that Tavener's approach to 'intellectual music' is suspicious; indeed he hopes to achieve an eschatological music by renouncing intellectualism. This may sound strange coming after analyses of *Doxa* and *Towards the Son*, but Tavener maintains that his structural formulae have in large part become intuitive, a means to an expressive end. He refers to the reception given in London to the first performances there of music by Arvo Paart, one of the few 20th-century composers whom he admires: the critics were bored by its simplicity. It is this very simplicity in Paart's music—what Tavener calls its 'stripped quality'—that draws him.

In a more general way he feels out of sympathy with those composers who seem to have it on their consciences that they must express violence. In a social climate in which music is often the vehicle for political statement Tavener's preoccupations have put him very much out on a limb. The text of *Akhmatova: Rekvien*, for example, which is a poem by the acmeist poet Anna Akhmatova, has profoundly political undertones, yet Tavener chose it for its expressive qualities and because he found that he could adapt its quasi-liturgical construction to his own art by interpolating phrases of genuine liturgical text. He was neither unaware of, nor unresponsive to, the element of protest in the poem, but his purpose in setting it was entirely spiritual.

Reactions to the first performance of *Akhmatova: Rekvien* were more extreme than ever before in Tavener's experience: it was hailed by some as a masterpiece, but roundly condemned by others. Its detractors found their fears realised in his next work, *Prayer for the World* (1981), which was written for the John Alldis Choir and is scored for 16 solo voices. Tavener's own account of this piece as the most extreme example of its kind in his oeuvre justifies Paul Griffiths's comment that the composer had 'gone beyond audiences and criticism into his own rite'.<sup>6</sup> Some indication of the mood of the music is given by markings such as 'Still, with great inner intensity' and 'Sudden changes of time or dynamic should be avoided'. The insuperable difficulty with *Prayer for the World* is that it is, on the one hand, unsuitable for the commercial concert hall, but on the other much too demanding for most church and cathedral choirs. The love poems of Yeats helped Tavener out of this dilemma, for they suggested a more approachable form of musical expression; but he has not yet settled the question of how worldly he is prepared to be.

Tavener is now working on 'a large-scale paraliturgical drama', based on Byzantine texts, for Winchester Cathedral. The character of the work is foreshadowed in *The Whale*, but the presentation will be less flamboyant and the moral stance more sober. Tavener has been courageous to follow his star into these unfashionable areas of thought; his whole-

hearted commitment to a spiritual music in a largely secular time is its own justification.

- 1 *The Whale* is to be revived at the Royal Festival Hall on 23 October 1983; it will be performed by the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, conducted by Richard Hickox.
- 2 The first performance of the Yeats song cycle will be given by the Sioned Williams Harp Trio with soprano soloist at the Little Missenden Festival on 16 October 1983.
- 3 All quotations come from conversations between the composer and the author.
- 4 *The Times*, 14 September 1982, p.12
- 5 The first performance of *Towards the Son* will be given by the City of London Sinfonia, conducted by Richard Hickox, in the Queen Elizabeth Hall on 15 November 1983.
- 6 *The Times*, 1982.

## Works

A selective list of Tavener's works to 1980 may be found in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*; his music is published by J. & W. Chester, from whom further details may be obtained.

- Akhmatova:** *Rekvien* (Anna Akhmatova), dramatic soprano, bass, orchestra, 1979-80; first performed by Phyllis Bryn-Julson, John Shirley-Quirk, BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Gennadi Rozhdestvensky, Usher Hall, Edinburgh, 20 August 1981
- Sappho:** *Lyrical Fragments* (Sappho), 2 sopranos, small string orchestra, 1980; first performed by Bronwen Mills, Janis Kelly, Academy of London, conducted by Richard Stamp, Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, 25 April 1981
- Risen!** (from the Liturgy of the Announcement of the Resurrection celebrated on Holy Saturday in the Orthodox Church), chorus, SATB, orchestra, 1980, written for the rebuilding of the Great Hall of Bedford School; first performed by Bedford School Choir and Orchestra, conducted by Andrew Morris, Bedford School, 19 October 1981
- The Great Canon of the Ode of St Andrew of Crete** (St Andrew of Crete, Ode I), bass, chorus SSAATTBB, 1981; first performed by Winchester Cathedral Choir, conducted by Martin Neary, Winchester Cathedral, 23 July 1981
- Prayer for the World** (Hesychast prayer), 16 solo voices, 1981; first performed by John Alldis Choir, Round House, London, 11 October 1981
- Funeral Ikos** (St John of Damascus, troparia), chorus SATB, 1981; first performed by Tallis Scholars, conducted by Peter Phillips, Keble College Chapel, Oxford, 1 December 1981
- Trisagion**, brass quintet, 1981, written for the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble
- Mandelion**, organ, 1981; first performed by Peter Sweeney, St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, 27 June 1982
- Doxa**, choruses SATB, SATB, 1982; first performed by Tallis Scholars, conducted by Peter Phillips, Wigmore Hall, London, 12 September 1982
- Lord's Prayer** (English and Old Church Slavonic), chorus SATB, 1982; first performed by Tallis Scholars, conducted by Peter Phillips, Wigmore Hall, London, 12 September 1982
- The Lamb** (William Blake, *Songs of Innocence*), chorus SATB, 1982; first performed by Winchester Cathedral Choir, conducted by Martin Neary, Winchester Cathedral, 22 December 1982
- Towards the Son: Ritual Procession** (Trisagion), 3 boys' voices (off stage), strings, trombone, percussion, 1982
- He hath Entered Heaven**, trebles, optional handbells, 1982-3, written for the 50th anniversary of the consecration of the chapel of Lady Margaret Hall; first performed by Lady Margaret Hall Chapel Choir, Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, 16 January 1983
- To a Child Dancing in the Wind**, (William Butler Yeats), soprano, flute, viola, harp, 1983