Newly recorded in the round and in surround sound, Thomas Tallis’ 40-part motet, Spem in alium, forms the centre-piece of this dazzling CD.

Under the theme, ‘Music for Monarchs and Magnates’, The Sixteen draws together music by Tallis, Byrd, Gibbons and Thomas Tomkins, some of it never before recorded, some indeed not performed since the time of its writing. Alongside the usual 40 voice setting of Spem in alium is an English version of the same work, Sing and glorify, which was adapted to an English text for King James I to honour his son Henry, the newly-annointed Prince of Wales. With cornetts, sackbuts, dulcians and organs in place of some voices, this is a glorious complement to the usual version.

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This programme was conceived back in 1994 as a 50th birthday tribute to John Tavener. It followed a performance for the City of London Festival of his *Ikon of Light* set alongside Tallis’ great 40-part motet, *Spem in alium*. The venue was St Paul’s Cathedral and the experience was incredible. Tavener himself was quite overwhelmed not only to hear his sustained choral writing resounding around the dome but also to witness the lingering effect of the silences that so often characterise his music. It was a perfect setting where both audience and performers were involved in a quite unique vocal experience.

A few days later in the very different acoustic of St Jude’s, Hampstead Garden Suburb in North London, I recall his immense presence at the recording sessions. He was most jovial, relishing our birthday tribute to him; his height and long greying locks cut an impressive figure combined with his ability to absorb us all in his Orthodox faith.

Almost ten years later, in May 2003, we were invited to Valery Gergiev’s Moscow Easter Festival. The concert was in celebration of Tavener’s works and specifically those inspired by his faith and contrasted with the work of his Russian forbears (Rachmaninov, Kalinnikov and Chesnokov) – two very different traditions and a great honour for us too because, in a way, we had completed the circle.

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John Tavener occupies a controversial position in Western music. His desire to create musical ikons for a time in which he believes ‘man has lost his belief not only in God, but also in himself’ is provocative. Such a fervent ideology questions the function of music and its relevance to society at large and brings this debate out of academic circles and into a wider, public arena. The unprecedented success of Tavener’s *The Protecting Veil* perhaps testifies to the ‘modern’ need for a spiritual haven, away from the oppressive mechanisation of industrial capitalism.

Born in London in January 1944, Tavener showed his musical talents at an early age. He studied with Sir Lennox Berkeley and David Lumsdaine at the Royal Academy of Music and won several major prizes for composition. With the premiere of his cantata, *The Whale* (1968), Tavener revealed himself as one of the most original and independent composers of his generation.

Part of the attraction of Tavener’s music must surely arise from its symbolic nature, a reflection of his Orthodox faith. In a society dominated by rational, scientific advancement, technological change, and a fetish for fact, Tavener’s music depends less on explicit concepts than on simplicity, ritual and mythology. But if a composer chooses to channel his religious inspiration through his music, it does not necessarily make him a musical saint in a modern world. The effectiveness of music must always depend on its intrinsic craft, sincerity and quality; that particular debate is always between the composer and his audience.

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**THE SIXTEEN**

**SOPRANO**

Fiona Clarke
Ruth Dean+
Sally Dunkley+
Patricia Forbes+
Nicola Jenkins+
Carys Lane
Katie Pringle*
Alison Smart*
Libby Crabtree

**ALTO**

Natanya Hadda*
Deborah Miles-Johnson
Michael Lees+
Philip Newton+
Christopher Royall+
Susanna Spicer*
Caroline Trevor+

**TENOR**

Simon Berridge
Peter Burrows+
Philip Daggett+
Robert Johnston
Neil MacKenzie+
David Roy++
Matthew Vine

**BARITONE**

Matthew Brook
Roger Cleverdon*
Robert Evans
Michael McCarthy*
Jeremy White

**BASS**

David Bevan*
Jeremy Birchall*
Simon Birchall+
Robert Macdonald+
Timothy Jones+
Christopher Purves+
Francis Steele+

**MEMBERS OF THE DUKE QUARTET**

**VIOLIN**

Rick Koster

**VIOLA**

John Metcalfe

**CELLO**

Ivan McCreedy

*Two Hymns to the Mother of God, The Tyger and *Ikon of Light* +The Lamb

Rhiannon Mathias
Two Hymns to the Mother of God

*The Hymn to the Mother of God* and *Hymn for the Dormition of the Mother of God* date from 1985 and are dedicated to the memory of the composer’s mother. The first is a setting of a text from the Liturgy of St. Basil which speaks of the cosmic power of the Mother of God in whom ‘all creation rejoices’. Scored for double choir and marked ‘With awesome majesty and splendour’ its radiant, chordal canonic textures recall the sound world of the *Ikon of Light*, of a year earlier. The second hymn, marked ‘Solemn, quiet and tender’ takes its text from the Vigil Service of the Dormition (or falling asleep) of the Mother of God, in which Mary bids the Apostles to travel from the ends of the earth to bury her body in Gethsemane. The text is repeated three times beginning quietly, with each repetition growing progressively more rich and complex in sound.

**A Hymn to the Mother of God**

In You, O Woman full of Grace,  
The angelic choirs,  
And the human race all creation rejoices.  
O sanctified Temple,  
Mystical Paradise,  
And glory of Virgins.

**Hymn for the Dormition of the Mother of God**

O ye apostles,  
assembled here from the ends of the earth,  
bury my body in Gethsemane:  
And Thou my Son and God, receive my Spirit.

**The Lamb**

Little Lamb, who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?  
Gave thee life, & bid thee feed  
By the stream & o’er the mead;  
Gave thee clothing of delight,  
Softest clothing, woolly, bright;  
Gave thee such a tender voice,  
Making all the vales rejoice?  
Little Lamb, who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?  

Little Lamb, I’ll tell thee,  
Little Lamb, I’ll tell thee,  
He is called by thy name,  
For he calls himself a Lamb.  
He is meek, & he is mild;  
He became a little child.  
I, a child, & thou a lamb,  
We are called by his name.  
Little Lamb, God bless thee!  
Little Lamb, God bless thee!

William Blake (1757 - 1827)
The Tyger

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night.
What immortal hand or eye could frame
thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burned the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? And what dread feet?

What the hammer? What the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp?
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

William Blake (1757 - 1827)

The Ikon of Light

The Ikon of Light was composed in 1984 and is a setting of the extraordinary Mystic Prayer to the Holy Spirit by the great mystical Orthodox poet, St. Simeon the New Theologian. It is not for nothing that this choral work has been described as one of Tavener’s most mystical works, for the symbolism that it embraces is at once very simply, and yet paradoxically, very complex to understand. St. Simeon’s Mystic Prayer speaks of the concept of ‘uncreated Light’, a term that refers to the uncreated energies of God, and which is neither a physical light nor a purely metaphorical light. As Father Kallistos Ware has written it is “a light that can be seen by a man through physical eyes, provided that his senses have been transformed by divine grace” and that as a concept it “lies beyond the imagination, it belongs to the infinite and the eternal where human speech can only point or hint.”

In his marvellously luminous setting Tavener attempts to do just that, and asks that the work “unfold as a ritual in musical terms, attempting to express the inexpressible”. The work falls into seven clearly defined movements, and is scored for double choir and strong trio, the latter of which should be heard at a distance from the singers and whose contributions can be thought of as ‘the soul yearning for God’, Tavener’s ritual treatment of the subject matter is nowhere more clearly in evidence than in the striking first movement: six luminously harmonized repetitions of the single word FOS (Light), each progressively more intense and longer in duration, are offset by six pianissimo utterances from the string trio. The final repetition of the word FOS dissolves seamlessly into the second movement where the previously static, chordal harmonies of the choir give way to six canonic repetitions of the single word DOXA (Glory), each punctuated by six silences.

Movement three (tenors and basses only) is a setting of the frequently used Byzantine hymn, Trisagion (Holy God, holy and strong) and is specified by the composer to be sung in the manner of Byzantine chant. It is repeated twice with a central response from the string trio. In the fourth and central movement of the work lies St. Simeon’s Mystic Prayer to the Holy Spirit. It consists of five sections: a simple melodic idea, (characterized by a descending five note scale) is varied, repeated and passed among the voices over an ever present vocal drone (as a device the drone is frequently used by Tavener to represent timeless and the eternal); the string trio responds from a distance; the choir follow the same procedure as in section one, only here the material is inverted (i.e. the descending five note scale now becomes an ascending five note scale); the string
trio responds from a distance; voices and string trio combine in luminous fulmination, with the melodic material stated in stretto (fugue). The movement closes with a climactic statement of the theme marked radiant with joy. Movement five (Trisagion II) relates to movement three (Trisagion I), this time with added sopranos. Movement six (Fos II) is a varied repetition of movement one (Fos I). The work closes in a blaze of light with the movement headed EPIPHANIA (literally, shining forth), which is closely related to the second movement (DOXA), for as the composer states "without Doxa (Glory) and Fos (Light) an EPIPHANIA really cannot take place."


Come, all-powerful, for unceasingly you create, refashion and change all things by your will alone.

Come, invisible, whom none may touch and handle.

Come, for you continue always unmoved, yet at every instant you are wholly in movement; you draw near to us who lie in hell, yet you remain higher than the heavens.

Come, unfading garland. Come, purple vesture of our great God and King. Come, belt of crystal set with precious stones. Come sandal that none dares to touch. Come, royal robe and right hand true sovereignty.

Come, my breath and my life. Come, the consolation of my humble soul. Come, my joy, my glory, my endless delight.

Today the Virgin

The Christmas carol Today the Virgin was composed in 1989 and is a setting of words by Mother Thekla with whom the composer has collaborated on numerous works, most notably the opera Mary of Egypt. It consists of six vigorously rhythmic verses with refrains; the four central verses alternate between tenors (Joseph) and sopranos (Mary). Joseph speaks of his bewilderment at his wife’s condition – Mary, my wife. Oh Mary my wife! What do I see? You a Virgin giving birth. Strange mystery! Mary response, explaining: God in his mercy takes flesh in my womb for all the world to see. The opening and closing verses joyfully proclaim the birth of Christ.

Today the Virgin comes to the cave
To give birth to the Word eternal:
Rejoice, O World
With the Angels and the Shepherds
Give glory to the Child!
Alleluia!

Mary my wife, O Mary my wife!
What do I see?
I took you blameless before the Lord
From the priests of the Temple
What do I see?

Rejoice, O World
With the Angels and the Shepherds
Give glory to the Child!
Alleluia!

Joseph the Bridegroom, O Joseph the Bridegroom!
Do not fear.
God in his mercy has come down to earth,
He takes flesh in my womb
For all the world to see.

Rejoice, O World
With the Angels and the Shepherds
Give glory to the Child!
Alleluia!

Mary, my Bride, O Mary my Bride,
What do I see?
Strange mystery!

Rejoice, O World
With the Angels and the Shepherds
Give glory to the Child!
Alleluia!

Joseph the Bridegroom, O Joseph the
Bridegroom!
Do not fear.
God in his mercy has come down to earth,
He takes flesh in my womb
For all the world to see.

Rejoice, O World
With the Angels and the Shepherds
Give glory to the Child!

Warned by the Angel we believe
That Mary gives birth inexplicable
To the infant, Christ, our God.

Rejoice, O World
With the Angels and the Shepherds
Give glory to the Child!

Mother Thekla

Whether it’s dusk
or dawn’s first light
the jasmin stays
always white.
He asked for bread and we gave Him a
stone...
Do whatsoever He bids you
Lord, have mercy.

Remember me, the thief exclaimed...
The house where I was born...
This night in Paradise

Whether it’s dusk
or dawn’s first light
the jasmin stays
always white.

Angelos Sikelianos/Trans. P. Sherrard

Eonia – The Jasmine

Eonia was composed in 1989 as a memorial tribute to the composer’s friend, the painter Cecil Collins. Its gentle stillness and simplicity and the composer’s request that it be sung with “no expression” reflect the qualities of a perfect ikon. Tavener explains: “Eonia is a ‘Haiku’ or ‘fragrance’. I opened the Collected Poems of Seferis and found ‘The Jasmine’. At the same time I was talking to Mother Thekla; I read her ‘The Jasmine’ and she continued in English, then in Slavonic and then in English. It was almost like dictated writing. I was mourning my dear friend, Cecil, and Eonia is a fragile tribute to the man I loved, and his fragile, beautiful and iconographical art”.

Michael Stewart

Producer: Andrew Keener
Engineer: Mike Clements
Recorded at St. Jude’s,
Hampstead Garden Suburb
The Lamb
Producer: Peter Hayward
Engineer: Mike Hatch
Recorded at St. Michael’s Church, Highgate
CD mastering: Julian Millard
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