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Ikon of Light
John Tavener

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Two Hymns to The Mother of God

Today the Virgin

The Tyger

The Lamb

Eonia

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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, specifically those inspired by his faith, and these were 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.

We were privileged that Sir John was present when we made this recording and we are honoured to be re-releasing it as a tribute to his life and work.

Harry Christophers.

“I consider Ikon of Light to be one of my most important works. My memories of the past since being ill are somewhat hazy, but I recall the splendour and magic of the sound of The Sixteen at the recording, and in particular, at hearing them sing Eonia for the first time. Heartfelt thanks to Harry Christophers and The Sixteen.”

Sir John Tavener
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.

Rhiannon Mathias © 2003
Standing 6ft 4inches tall, with impossibly long limbs, shoulder-length white hair and a gaze fixed firmly on another world, Sir John Tavener was a man apart. It’s hard to imagine the composer of the mystical, transcendent Protecting Veil or Funeral Ikos eating toast for breakfast or going to the supermarket. And yet, in an almost 50-year career defined so strongly by spirituality and mysticism, Tavener worked not only with nuns and priests but with Björk and The Beatles, and produced Mercury Prize-nominated music as well as an eight-hour Vigil. Yet Tavener’s wasn’t so much a life of paradox as one of flux – caught between currents of the spiritual and the commercial, the human and the transcendent, Eros and Thanatos.

But it wasn’t always that way. The image that sums up the composer’s middle-class, North London childhood is of the young Tavener jumping rhythmically up and down on car catalogues strewn across the floor, chanting “Big car, little car. Big car, little car”.

Yes the ritual Tavener, fascinated by repetition and incantation, might possibly (if fancifully) be glimpsed here, but more interesting perhaps is the boyish love of the vehicles themselves. It was a love that persisted well into adulthood, taking Tavener from a much-beloved Armstrong Siddeley Sapphire through many Bentleys before illness and old age finally stilled his passion. It seems incongruous, but it’s just one hint among many that there was more to the man than the incense-scented mythology that grew up around him and his work.

Yet Tavener’s unusual talent was always evident, as the composer himself acknowledged. “The purpose of my life is to write music. I have been clear about that from the start. Perhaps even as early as three...” A fully-fledged prodigy, he was able to improvise at the piano in the style of Bach and Beethoven, and having heard any piece once could reproduce it perfectly. His confidence equalled his talent; the teenage composer once walked unannounced into the offices of Faber & Faber to demand that the notoriously protective T.S. Eliot grant Tavener permission to set one of his poems.

After musical apprenticeships in the National Youth Orchestra and at Highgate School, where he was a music scholar, Tavener’s career really began at the Royal Academy of Music. It was here that he encountered Australian composer David Lumsdaine, who introduced Tavener to the modernist techniques and sound-world that would define the composer’s early works.

It was with Lumsdaine’s help and support that Tavener produced The Whale – the fantastical cantata that would launch his career so spectacularly when it was released on The Beatles’ Apple label in 1970. Sticking two fingers up at the avant-garde pretensions of the classical scene with his irreverent giant whale, there was little in the young Tavener (a self-confessed “angry young man”) to suggest the mystical peace and simplicity ahead.

The 1970s were a period of conflict and uncertainty for Tavener, who married, quickly separated, and struggled to produce music of value after the premiere of his first opera Thérèse at the Royal Opera House. In 1977 he converted to Orthodoxy – the first step in a spiritual exploration that continued until his death in November 2013. The conversion, together with a life-altering encounter with Mother Thekla – a nun at the enclosed Orthodox Monastery of the Assumption in North Yorkshire – ushered in the radiant simplicity and spiritual conviction that would define Tavener’s second stylistic phase.

It is this period that generated Tavener’s best-loved works, and created the style for which he is best known. The Lamb is an exquisite exercise in simplicity, distilling music down to the same allusive essence as Blake’s verse, while Two Hymns to the Mother of God discovered similar fragile beauty, prompted to new intensity by the death of Tavener’s beloved mother. 1984’s Ikon of Light extended these techniques, creating an extraordinary musical meditation, a ritual grasping after the ineffable in sound.

The 1989 premiere of The Protecting Veil propelled Tavener into limelight even brighter than that surrounding The Whale. Commissioned initially by Steven Isserlis, this ecstatic, meditative work for cello and strings resonated with a public hungry for emotion, for faith, propelling it up the charts and leading to a Mercury Prize nomination – an award normally reserved for pop music. The work was also the first substantial collaboration between Tavener and Mother Thekla, whom he once described as “the most remarkable woman I have ever met.” From this early role, shaping and inspiring works, she quickly became confidante, confessor and librettist, putting into words, “the thoughts of his music”.
If the 1970s were Tavener’s dark decade, the 1990s were the reverse. The composer met and married Maryanna Schaefer, fathering the children he never thought he’d have, explored new spiritual influences from Sufism and musical influence from India, and produced a sequence of major works. Although barely five-minutes in length, it was the elegiac Song for Athene that would become the most celebrated, brought to new prominence when performed at Princess Diana’s funeral. This short work distilled a nation’s grief into simple eloquence, and established Tavener’s reputation beyond doubt.

Dogged throughout his life by ill health, suffering a stroke in his thirties, undergoing heart surgery in 1991 and surviving a major heart attack in 2007, Tavener’s life was poised always at the edge of death, peering over the edge of the abyss, just as his music has occupied that transitional space between light and dark. This idea took literal form in 2002 with The Veil of the Temple. An eight-hour Vigil, described by the composer as “the biggest thing I have ever done”, it announced a new departure in Tavener’s development.

Muscular and resonant, thickly affirmative where once the music was fragile, this new style coincided with other departures – a permanent rift with long-time collaborator Mother Thekla, and an embracing of a broader range of spiritual influences. It’s a style that represented a third major stage in Tavener’s musical development, that shaped works such as the Lament for Jerusalem and the instrumental Towards Silence, and one that persisted until his death.

Audiences followed Tavener through his musical evolution, and have re-embraced and returned to his music at every stage, from the violent experimentation of The Whale through his white simplicity to the all-embracing unity of his mature works. Why? For Mother Thekla the answer was simple. “It reminds them of a time when they did believe in something.” A prophet in a secular age, a commercial composer driven by spirituality, an ascetic car-fanatic; as we mourn his passing, we’re still no closer to unravelling the contradictions at the core of Sir John Tavener.

Alexandra Coghlan © November 2013

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.

Alexandra Coghlan © November 2013
The Lamb and The Tyger

Tavener’s setting of The Lamb, from William Blake’s Songs of Innocence, dates from 1982 and has since become one of Tavener’s most popular and frequently performed pieces for unaccompanied choir. Its simple, haunting melodic line (characterised by a major/minor harmonic ambiguity) and its serene sense of timelessness beautifully convey the sentiments of Blake’s words. The Tyger, from Blake’s Songs of Experience, was composed in 1987, and captures the mystery and imagery of the text in more colourful and complex musical terms. The dense contrapuntal melodic lines and omnipresent drone (the forest?) of the first four verses are inspirationally offset in the fifth by the sudden pianissimo quotation from The Lamb. Thereafter, all ends in quiet, awesome mystery.

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)
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 five canonic repetitions of the single word Dhoxa (Glory), each punctuated by a silence. The second movement continues with the second utterance of the word Dhoxa.

Movement three 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 timelessness and the eternal); the string trio responds from a distance; the choir follows 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 strettto (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.”

Ikon of Light

Fos I, Doxa (Movement 1)
Fos (repeated 6 times)
Dhoxa
Light
Glory

Doxa (piu intensita) (Movement 2)
Dhoxa (repeated 4 more times)
Glory

Trisagion I (Movement 3)
Aghios o Theós, Aghios iskhyrós, Aghios athánatas, eléison imas.
Holy God, Holy and strong, Holy immortal, have mercy upon us.
Mystic Prayer to the Holy Spirit  
(Movement 4)

Elthé to fos to alithinón.  
Elthé i évnios zoí.  
Elthé to apokekríménon mistirión.  
Elthé o akatonómastos thısavrós.  
Elthé to a nekfríton prághmá.  
Elthé to akatanóiton prósopo.  
Elthé i a idhios aghalasía.  
Elthé to anésperon fós.  
Elthé pandon ton mellióndon so thine alithini prozdhokia.  
Elthé ton kiménon i éghersis.  
Elthé ton nekron i a nástasis.  
Elthé o dhinatós o pandai pion ke metapión ke allión mono to vóulesthe!  
Elthé o aóratos keanafís pándi keapsilafístos.  
Elthé i aíménon ametakinitasékathí' ōran ōlos metakinóumenos ke erkhónomenos prosimás tous en to adhikímenous, o iperáno pándon ton ouránón.  
Elthé to peripóthiton onoma ke thríóumenon, lalíthine dhe par' i món óper is i ghnosthíne ópios i potapós ōlos iminameridhektón.  
Elthé i évnios khará.

(Movement 4a)
Elthé to fos to alithinón.  
Elthé i eónios zoí.  
Elthé to apokekriménon mistírion.  
Elthé o akatonómastos thisavrós.  
Elthé o dhinatós.  
Elthé to a nekfríton prághmá.  
Elthé to akatanóiton prósopo.  
Elthé i a idhios aghalasía.  
Elthé to anésperon fós.  
Eltré pandon ton mellándon so thine alithini prozdhokia.  
Eltré ton kiménon i éghersis.  
Eltré ton nekron i a nástasis.  
Eltré o dhinatós o pandai pion ke metapión ke allión mono to vóulesthe!  
Eltré o aóratos keanafís pándi keapsilafístos.  
Eltré i aíménon ametakinitasékathí ōran ōlos metakinóumenos ke erkhónomenos prosimás tous en to adhikímenous, o iperáno pándon ton ouránón.  
Eltré to peripóthiton onoma ke thríóumenon, lalíthine dhe par' i món óper is i ghnosthíne ópios i potapós ōlos iminameridhektón.

(Movement 4b)
Eltré to stéfos to amrándinon.  
Eltré i porfira tou megálou Theóu ke vasiléos imón.  
Eltré i zóni i kristaloidhíi kedhíalithos.  
Eltré toipódhima to aprósiton.

(Movement 4c)
Elthé i vasíllios alourghís ke aftpokrata rikí on das dhexiá.  
Elthé en epóthiseke pothí i talé poroz mou psikhi.  
Elthé o miónos pror mónon, o-ti miónos ími, katháper orás.  
Elthé o kharísanas ek pándon ke piposé me mónon épí tis ghs.  
Elthé o vhenóménon póthos aforós en emi ke pothín se piposé me, ton a prositon pandélós.  
Eltré i pnoi mou ke i zoi.  
Eltré i paramithia tis tainitz mou psikhís.  
Eltré i khará ke i dhóxa, kei dihinekiz mou trífi!

(Movement 4d)
NB: instrumental – no text

(Movement 4e)
Eltré to fos to alithinón.  
Eltré i e ónios zoi.  
Eltré o dhinatós.  
Eltré to apokekrímé non mistirión.  
Eltré to fos to alithinón.

(Translation)
Come, reality beyond all words. Come, person beyond all understanding. Come, rejoicing without end. Come, light that knows no evening. Come, unfailling expectation of the saved.  
Come, the raising of the fallen. Come, the resurrection of the dead.  
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, for your Name fills our hearts with longing and is ever on our lips; yet who you are and what your nature is, we cannot say or know. Come, eternal joy.

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 of true sovereignty.

Come, for my wretched soul has ever longed and ever longs for you. Come, Alone to the alone, for as you see I am alone: you have separated me from all things and made me to be alone upon the earth. Come, for you are yourself the desire that is within me, and you have caused me to long after you, the wholly inaccessible.

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

Trisagion II (Movement 5)
Aghios o Theós, Holy God,
Aghios iskhyrós, Holy and strong,
Aghios athánatas, Holy immortal,
eléison imas. have mercy upon us.

Fos II (Movement 6)
Fos (repeated 6 times) Light (repeated 6 times)

Epiphania (Movement 7)
Epifania (repeated 5 times) Shining forth (repeated 5 times)

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 responds, 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!

Mary, my Bride, O Mary my Bride,
What do I see?
You, a virgin giving birth.
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!  
Alleluia!  

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!  
Alleluia!  

Mother Thekla

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 icon. 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 © 2003

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

The Lamb

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Recording Engineer: Mike Clements  
Recorded at: St Jude’s, Hampstead Garden Suburb, London

Recording Producer: Peter Hayward  
Recording Engineer: Mike Hatch  
Recorded at: St Michael’s Church, Highgate, London

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