

JOHN TAVENER

Song for Athene • Svyati and other choral works

Choir of St. John's College, Cambridge
Christopher Robinson



John Tavener (b. 1945) Song for Athene • Svyati and other choral works

John Tavener studied at the Royal Academy of Music with Sir Lennox Berkeley and David Lumsdaine. In 1968 his dramatic cantata *The Whale* took its audience by storm and led to his music being recorded on The Beatles' Apple label. Since that time Tavener has continued to show an originality of concept and an intensely personal idiom, making his a voice quite separate from those of his contemporaries. Over the years, the contemplative side of his nature has led him in more spiritual directions and his commitment to the Russian Orthodox Church, which he joined in 1977, is now evident in all his work.

In an interview published in his recent book *The Music of Silence*, Sir John Tavener wrote: "If you listen to the music of the East, somehow the divine is already there. *It is* – which is a parallel with the eternal 'I am.'" What this means in practical terms is that Tavener, in aiming at writing music suitable to convey the theology and the spirituality of the Orthodox Church, to participate in some way in that "eternal 'I am'", creates music of what one might call "dynamic stasis". In other words, the long phrases of eastern chant (of various traditions), the harmonic transparency and the stillness of his work runs counter to what the composer sees as the more "active" spirit of western sacred music; nevertheless, Tavener's western background inevitably and naturally plays its part, and the unique sound of the fusion of these two is characteristic of all of the works on this disc.

God is with us, which has the subtitle "A Christmas Proclamation", is a good example of this approach. Written in 1987, its text is an adaptation of part of the service of Compline, as celebrated on Christmas Eve in the Orthodox Church. Its powerful chant-like melodic lines celebrate the Incarnation using words originating in the Old Testament prophecies. Essentially a simple three-part structure, refrains framing a highly ornamented central tenor solo, there is an unexpected

transformation at the end, when Tavener introduces the – western! – organ to reinforce the massive sound required from the choir announcing the birth of Christ.

Song for Athene, which has become one of Tavener's best known pieces since it was sung at the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, takes as its text a mixture of Shakespeare (specifically *Hamlet*) and the Orthodox funeral service. The work, originally written in 1993, is typical of Tavener's rich choral sound, its peals of "Alleluia" increasing gradually in volume and impinging further on the listener's consciousness. In both these works, the choral writing carries resonances of renaissance polyphony (though it is far from contrapuntal in construction) and of the English cathedral tradition but transmutes them into something quite different, and quite recognisably by Tavener.

Love bade me welcome, a setting of George Herbert made in 1985, in spite of its evocation of Orthodox chant in its melodic style, is also characterized by a very English reticence, eschewing detailed word-painting, which paradoxically permits a tremendous intensity and identification with the awe at the mystery of the "divine condescension" of Love. English poetry, by William Blake, also elicits a similarly instinctive and effective response in *The Lamb* and *The Tiger*. The former, also from 1985, was made famous by the choir of King's College, Cambridge by its inclusion in the annual Service of Nine Lessons and Carols, might almost be described as a (sacred) lullaby, built on a lyrical idea and its inversion. The latter, dating from two years later, is, appropriately, a dazzling, fiery evocation of the "fearful symmetry" of this symbol of the energy of God's creation; it includes a masterstroke in the quotation of the music for *The Lamb* at the words "Did he who made the lamb make thee?"

Tavener's *Magnificat* and *Nunc dimittis Collegium Regale* of 1986 were also written for King's College, Cambridge. Although they were intended for the

Anglican liturgy, they make exceptional use of the *ison* (drone) of Greek Orthodox tradition, and in the *Magnificat* Tavener includes the *troparion* to the Mother of God, "Greater in honour than the Cherubim, and glorious incomparably more than the seraphim, thou who violate didst bring forth God the Word, and art indeed the true Mother of God: thee do we magnify". This is inserted after each verse of the text, according to Orthodox usage. Increasingly rich scoring is used for each verse, and the *troparion* is set with particular exuberance. By contrast, the *Nunc dimittis* is a sparer, more restrained setting, though showing a similarly imaginative use of colour.

Two Hymns to the Mother of God date from 1985. The first sets part of a text taken from the Liturgy of St Basil the Great, celebrated on the Feast of St Basil and on the Sundays of Great Lent, speaking of the cosmic power of the Mother of God, her in whom "all creation rejoices". Tavener sets it as a double choir canon, with striking passing dissonances, to magical effect, and formally it is tripartite. The second hymn takes a text from the Feast of the Dormition (falling asleep) of the Mother of God, in which the Virgin addresses the Apostles and Christ, repeated three times in varying scorings. *Funeral Ikos* is one of Tavener's most serenely beautiful works. It sets words from the service for burial of priests. The music, austere and hypnotic, repeats six times in different vocal combinations, until the whole text is covered. Each section is demarcated by an 'Alleluia': the texts of Orthodox funeral services express not only the awareness of the transitory nature of mortal life ("Where then is comeliness? Where then is wealth? Where then is the glory of this world?"), but a clear hope and belief in life after death.

As One who has slept (1997) deals with what the composer describes as the "awe, silence and

expectation" which characterize the Liturgy of St Basil celebrated on the morning of Great and Holy Saturday, when Hell is harrowed and death is trampled underfoot by the Resurrection which will be celebrated at midnight. The main choir, which sings the text twice, followed by Alleluias, is "shadowed" by a second, singing a choral drone which moves, in the first section, from E minor to E major and back again, and similarly in the second from F sharp minor to F sharp major and back. The bareness of the musical material in this work is very striking. Tavener's most recent setting of the *Lord's Prayer* (1999) is constructed in a similarly economical fashion, but what strikes one when listening to them is the harmonic ebb-and-flow, the waves of gentle dissonance that give them, far from any Eastern resonance, such a traditionally English sound.

Rather less English, however, is *Svyati*, written in 1995.

This is a dialogue between choir and solo 'cello, built on the text of the *Trisagion* ("Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy upon us"), sung in Church Slavonic, the liturgical language of the Russian Orthodox Church. The 'cello plays long-breathed lines of ever increasing intensity, while the choir solemnly and imploringly intones the petitions of the *Trisagion*. This text occurs throughout the services of the Orthodox Church, including that which is evoked here – the funeral service, when the coffin is taken from the church to the grave. *Svyati* was begun on learning of the death of the father of a friend, Jane Williams, and is dedicated to his memory. The personal grief which seems to be expressed in the song of the solo 'cello is interwoven with the timeless compassion invoked by the choir, the "eternal 'I am'" resounding through the ages.

Ivan Moody

Christopher Robinson

Christopher Robinson has been Organist and Director of Music at St John's College, Cambridge since October 1991. His expertise as a choral and orchestral conductor was already well known following similar appointments at Worcester Cathedral (1963–74) and St George's Chapel, Windsor (1975–91). He has been conductor of the City of Birmingham Choir since 1964 and conducted the Oxford Bach Choir from 1977 to 1997. Christopher Robinson was elected an honorary member of the Royal Academy of Music in 1980 and was President of the Royal College of Organists from 1982 to 1984. He holds honorary degrees from Birmingham University and the University of Central England. In 1992 the Queen honoured him with the appointment of Commander of the Royal Victorian Order in recognition of his work at Windsor Castle.

The Choir of St John's College, Cambridge



The Choir of St John's College, Cambridge, has sung daily services in the Chapel since 1670 and this continues to be its main duty during University term-time. Under the leadership of Dr George Guest (Organist 1951–1991), the Choir earned a world-wide reputation for its unique sound and the quality of its music-making. Recording and concert work became an increasingly important part of its life.

Under Christopher Robinson all these activities continue to flourish. The Choir has in recent years toured Japan, Australia, South Africa, Canada and Holland. Its repertoire

stretches from the fifteenth century to the present day. As well as a large number of commercial recordings, the choir makes several BBC Radio 3 broadcasts of services from the College Chapel each year.

Choristers

John Bambridge
Samuel Durke
Benjamin Durrant
James Geidt
Benedict Giles
William Goldring
Julian Gregory
Benjamin Harrison
Simon Horner

Benjamin Howson
Alexander Jones
Oliver Lepage-Dean
Bernard Keegan-Fischer
Laurence Keegan Fischer
Edward Minton
Nicholas Morton
Brindley Wallis

Choral Students

Jonathan Bungard*
Aaron Burchell
Gabriel Burchell
Ioan Davies
Christopher de la Hoyde
Christopher Gabbitas
Gareth Jones
Andrew Kidd

Edward Lyon
Iain Morrison
Geoff Silver
Edward Walsh
Thomas Williams
Oliver Wright

Robert Houssart, Organ

* Soloist on *God is With us: Christmas Proclamation*

8.555256

1 God is with us

God is with us.

Hear ye people, even to the uttermost end of the earth.
The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.

The people that dwell in the shadow of death,
upon them the light has shined.

For unto us a child is born! For unto us a son is given!

And the government shall be upon his shoulder.

And his name shall be called Wonderful!

Counsellor! The Mighty God!

2 Song for Athene

Alleluia. May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

Alleluia. Remember me O Lord,
when you come into your kingdom.

Alleluia. Give rest O Lord to your hand-maid,
who has fallen asleep.

Alleluia. The Choir of Saints have found the well-spring
of life, and door of paradise.

Alleluia. Life: a shadow and a dream.

Alleluia. Weeping at the grave creates the song: Alleluia.

Alleluia. Come, enjoy rewards and crowns

I have prepared for you.

3 The Lamb

Little Lamb, who made thee?

Dost thou know who made thee?

Gave thee life, and bid thee feed

By the stream and 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, and he is mild,

He became a little child.

I, a child, and thou a lamb, We are called by his name.

Little Lamb, God bless thee!

Little Lamb, God bless thee!

William Blake

4 The Tiger

Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright

In the forests of the night,

What immortal hand or eye

Dare 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?

Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright

In the forests of the night,

What immortal hand or eye

Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

William Blake

[5] Magnificat

My soul doth magnify the Lord; and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour;

Greater in honour than the cherubim, and glorious incomparably more than the seraphim;

thou who inviolate didst bring forth God the Word, and art indeed the Mother of God: thee do we magnify.

For He hath regarded the lowliness of His handmaiden.

For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

For He that is mighty hath magnified me, and holy is His name.

And His mercy is on them that fear Him, throughout all generations.

He hath showed strength with His arm:

He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He hath sent empty away.

He remembering His mercy hath holpen His servant Israel, as He promised to our forefathers, Abraham and His seed, forever.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.

Amen.

[6] Nunc Dimittis

Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word.

For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people, to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of Thy people Israel. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

[7] Funeral Ikos

Why these bitter words of the dying, O brethren, which they utter as they go hence? I am parted from my brethren.

All my friends do I abandon, and go hence.

But whither I go, that understand I not, neither what shall become of me yonder; only God, who hath summoned me knoweth.

But make commemoration of me with the song: Alleluia. But whither now go the souls?

How dwell they now together there?

This mystery have I desired to learn, but none can impart aright.

Do they call to mind their own people, as we do them?

Or have they forgotten all those who mourn them and make the song: Alleluia.

We go forth on the path eternal, and as condemned, with downcast faces, present ourselves before the only God eternal.

Where then is comeliness?

Where then is wealth?

Where then is the glory of this world?

There shall

none of these things aid us,

but only to say oft the psalm: Alleluia.

If thou hast shown mercy unto man,
O man, that same mercy shall be shown thee there;
and if on an orphan thou hast shown compassion,
the same shall there deliver thee from want.
If in this life the naked thou hast clothed,
the same shall give thee shelter there, and sing the psalm:
Alleluia.

Youth and the beauty of the body fade
at the hour of death,
and the tongue then burneth fiercely,
and the parched throat is inflamed.
The beauty of the eyes is quenched then,
the comeliness of the face all altered,
the shapeliness of the neck destroyed;
and the other parts have become numb,
nor often say: Alleluia.

With ecstasy we are inflamed
if we but hear that there is light eternal yonder;
that there is Paradise,
wherein every soul of Righteous Ones rejoiceth.
Let us all, also, enter into Christ, that all we may cry
aloud thus unto God: Alleluia.

Two Hymns to the Mother of God

⑧ Hymn to the Mother of God

In you, O Woman full of Grace
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.
In You, O Woman full of Grace, all creation rejoices.

⑨ Hymn for the Dormition of the Mother of God

O Ye Apostles

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.

⑩ Love bade me Welcome

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sinne.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack'd any thing.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkinde, ungrateful? Ah my deare,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

George Herbert

11 As one who has slept

As one who has slept
The Lord has risen
And rising he has seen us
Alleluia (*six times*)

As one who has slept
The Lord has risen
And rising he has seen us
Alleluia (*six times*)

12 The Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in Heaven
Hallowed be Thy name
Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done
On earth as it is in Heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those who trespass against us
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil
Amen

13 Svyati

СВЯТЫЙ БОЖЕ,
СВЯТЫЙ КРѢПКИЙ,
СВЯТЫЙ БЕЗСМЕРТНЫЙ,
ПОМИДУЙ НАСЬ.

Holy God,
Holy and Strong,
Holy and Immortal,
Have mercy upon us.

The Bible



8.555256

STEREO

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John TAVENER

(b. 1945)

**Playing
Time**
69:58

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Choir of St John's College, Cambridge • Christopher Robinson

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|------------|---|-------|
| 1 | God is with us: Christmas Proclamation | 5:22 |
| 2 | Song for Athene | 5:36 |
| 3 | The Lamb | 3:46 |
| 4 | The Tiger | 5:17 |
| 5-6 | Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis | 10:29 |
| 7 | Funeral Ikos | 7:11 |
| 8-9 | Two Hymns to the Mother of God | 6:22 |
| 10 | Love bade me welcome | 4:51 |
| 11 | As one who has slept | 4:17 |
| 12 | The Lord's Prayer | 3:29 |
| 13 | Svyati "O Holy One"
(with Tim Hugh, Cello) | 13:18 |

John Tavener is one of contemporary music's most distinctive and recognisable voices, writing deeply-felt compositions of instant magnetism and lyrical intensity inspired by a strong Greek Orthodox faith. At the very heart of his work is sacred choral music, a genre in which Tavener has established considerable fame with contemporary classics such as *The Lamb* and *Hymns to the Mother of God* as well as the elegiac *Song for Athene*. *Svyati*, for cello and chorus, takes the form of a musical incantation against the hushed voices of the choir. This rarely-heard masterpiece sees Tavener deploy an unusual combination of musical forces to powerful and moving effect.

**MADE IN
HONG KONG**

NAXOS

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naxos.com**
