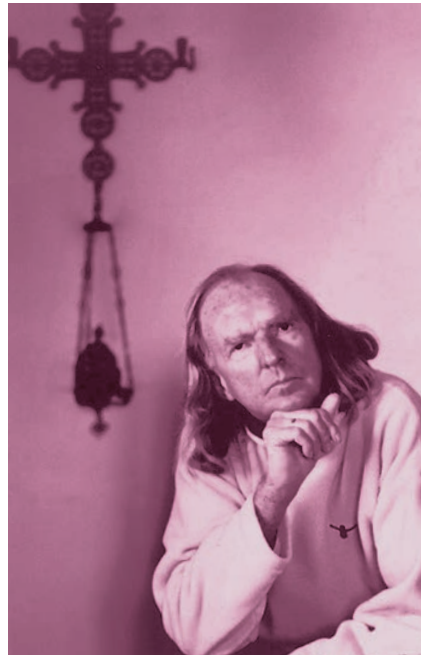


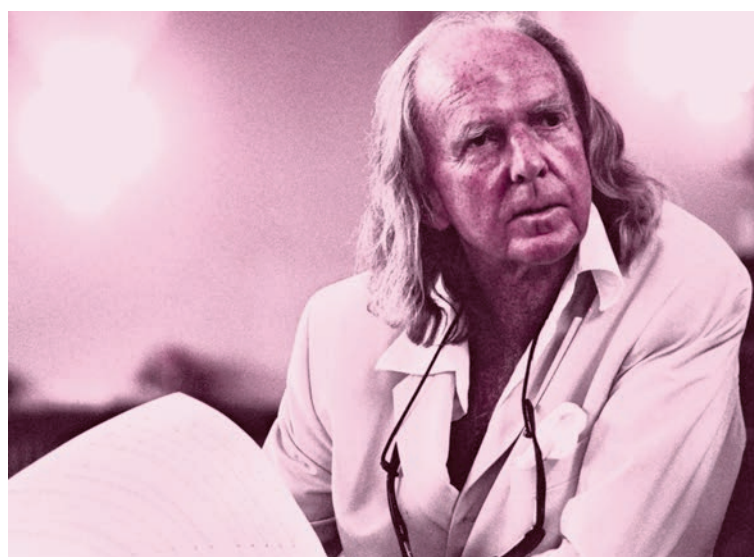
The essential John Tavener



A guide



Mary of Egypt, from the premiere production at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1992 directed by Lucy Bailey



John Tavener was knighted for his services to music in the Millennium Honours List in 2000,

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The essential John Tavener

A guide

'The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write'
William Butler Yeats

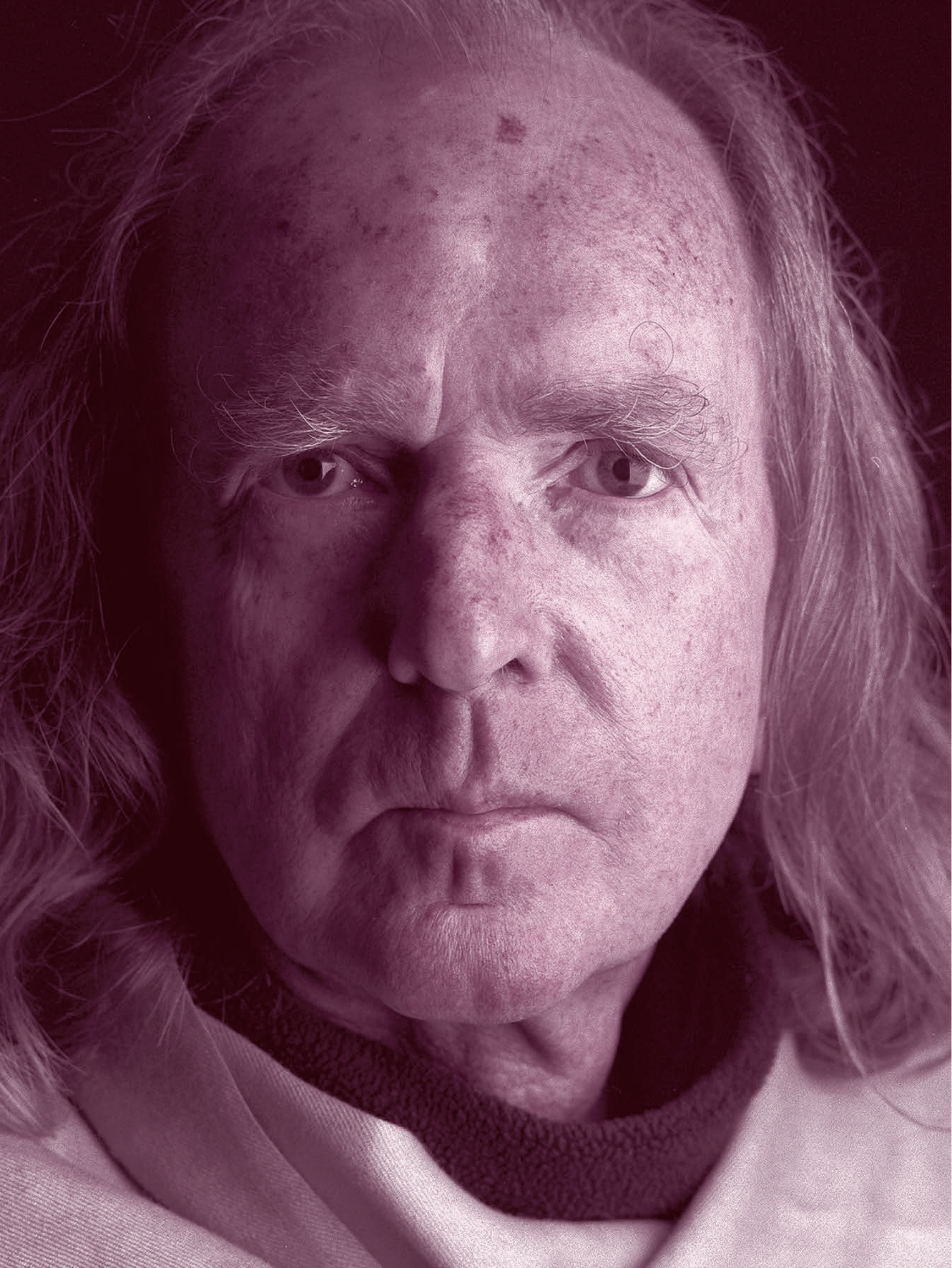
John Tavener has called Yeats 'the supreme artist of the 20th century', and throughout this guide we shall see why the poet's desire to connect with a reality beyond our material existence resonates so deeply with the composer, and the inextricable impact Tavener's own spiritual explorations have had on his life and work.

Tavener has always been adamant that one should listen to what he writes 'as pure music,' and indeed he has been more successful than many contemporary composers in capturing the ear of the general public. This would seem to be due in large part to the fact that, although on paper the ideas Tavener seeks to express are often obscure and complex, they concern all humanity at a fundamental level - one often beyond our conscious understanding, if not our recognition. Tavener's own love of music began in a largely unstructured manner, being as a small child fascinated by elemental sounds and preferring improvisation to methodical piano practice. He has said that music for him is about 'the magic of the sound, the mystery of the sound. It's nothing intellectual; I don't think it has ever been intellectual with me. It was this mystery, and my ear was picking up this wonderful music.'

However, if one does wish to understand the complex and interlaced influences behind Tavener's compositions, one can find the intellect being engaged to an exhausting degree. Almost all of Tavener's work has been inspired by either the spiritual or the poetic, or both, and in a manner as fluid as his childhood improvisation. The materials from which he works are to Tavener second nature, but to the rest of us often somewhat impenetrable - hence his delivery of them to us as music. This guide aims to present and clarify these influences and their role in Tavener's musical evolution, providing an overview of his life and work and, it is hoped, rendering the source material accessible without detracting from its profundity. For although it is music first, Tavener would wish that in understanding the origins of his work, the eyes of an audience might be opened to another perspective on their world: one that looks beyond our immediate reality, and our differences.

The guide is not intended to be read in a linear fashion but dipped into where interest and need dictate. It examines a range of works representative of the various times, beliefs and purposes in and for which Tavener has written and presents their relationships without undue complexity, in order to give a comprehensive impression of his life's work.

Each piece may fall under one or many *Categories*, and each category represents a facet of Tavener's spiritual evolution as it relates to his music. These are explained in the first section, with each entry followed by a list of all the relevant works included here. *The Works* are then discussed in chronological order and are supported by a *Glossary* explaining some of the more obscure terms and references. Lastly, the *Index by Ensemble Type* allows those seeking works for particular forces to quickly discover which of those included might be appropriate.



About John Tavener

John Tavener was born in Wembley Park in Middlesex on 28 January 1944. He was educated at Arnold House and Highgate, where he was a music scholar. During childhood he showed a deep affinity for elemental sounds and for music, though less for its formal study, preferring to improvise on the piano. As a choirboy at Arnold House he wrote several carols and hymns, influenced by his Presbyterian upbringing, but his first significant piece was a Duo Concertante for trombone and piano in 1958. Other works written prior to his scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music in 1962 include *Credo* (1961), a setting of *Genesis* (1962) and *Three Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, completed in 1962 but not premiered until 1964. These early works show the incipient - and enduring - influence of Stravinsky. By this time Tavener was under the tutelage of Lennox Berkeley and David Lumsdaine at the Academy, and only two years away from writing the work that would bring him the attention of a much wider audience: this was *The Whale* (1966), premiered in 1968 by the London Sinfonietta at their inaugural concert and released on The Beatles' Apple Records label.

Tavener's musical education took place in the midst of Modernist fervour. It was a movement of which he felt an instinctive and increasing mistrust, and although *The Whale* was inevitably influenced by the direction in which its young composer had been encouraged, it also contained a certain degree of satire and left Tavener further convinced of his need to find a musical language founded in something deeper than fashionable idiom. Through the composition of *In Alium* (1968), *Introit for March 27, the Feast of St John Damascene* (1968), *Celtic Requiem* (1969), *Coplas* (1970), *Nomine Jesu* (1970) and *Ultimos Ritos* (1972), Tavener was seeking a measure of immutability in both subject matter and manner of expression. Although all of these works were inspired by the mystical aspects of Roman Catholicism, his interest in tradition had led Tavener to believe that the Western Christian Church was a corrupted and corrupting force, having been beguiled by the same notions that had precipitated what he saw as the erosion of Western art and culture. Tavener's last work written under the influence of Roman Catholicism was *Thérèse*, composed in 1973 but not premiered until 1979, by which time Tavener had become an Orthodox Christian.

Following his conversion in 1977, Tavener produced a slew of works heavily influenced by Orthodox liturgical texts, Russian and Greek writers and themes, and the Orthodox tone systems, including *A Gentle Spirit* (1977), *Kyklike Kinesis* (1977), *Liturgy of St John Chrysostom* (1977), *Palintropos* (1978), *Akhmatova Requiem* (1980), *Funeral Ikos* (1981), *Prayer for the World* (1981) and *Ikos of Light* (1984). During this period, Tavener had largely cut himself off from the contemporary music scene, withdrawing into himself and his faith in the hope of achieving a clarity worthy of his preferred subjects.

In 1984, Tavener read William Blake's poem *The Lamb* and instantly wrote the three-minute choral work of the same name that was to

HRH the Prince of Wales and John Tavener at the premiere of *The Beautiful Names*, Westminster Cathedral, London, 2007



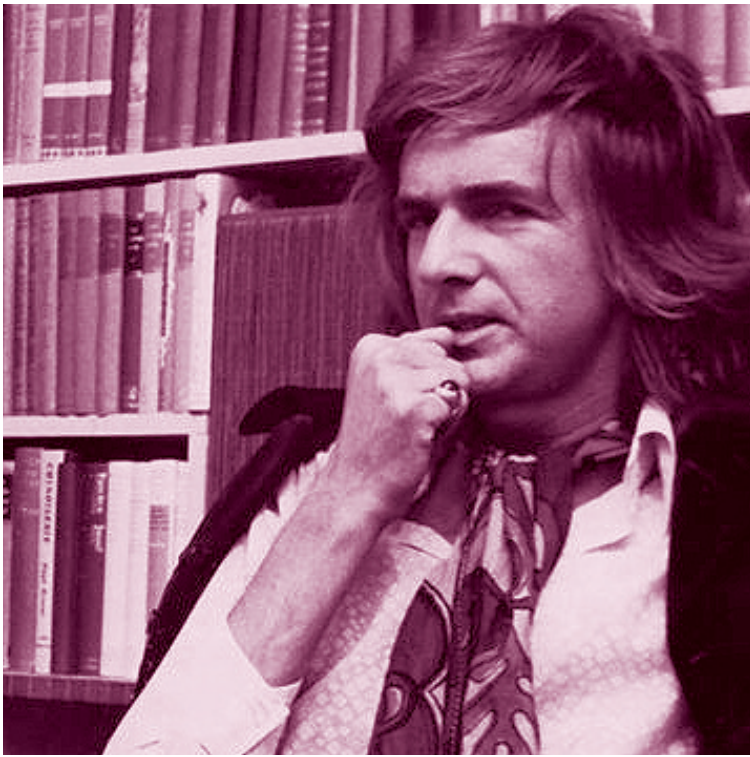
return him to the kind of popularity he had renounced following *The Whale*. This was one of many works that Tavener wrote ‘spontaneously’, feeling that the music was given to him by a separate agency. By this point he felt closer to finding a ‘voice’ that, paradoxically, was not his own but which allowed some greater force to be expressed through him. Major works composed during the remainder of the 1980s and into the 1990s include *Sixteen Haiku of Seferis* (1984), *Orthodox Vigil Service* (1984), *Panikhida* (1986), *The Protecting Veil* (1988), *Eonia* (1989), *Resurrection* (1989), *The Repentant Thief* (1990), *The Last Sleep of the Virgin* (1991), *Mary of Egypt* (1991), *Akhmatova Songs* (1993), *Song for Athene* (1993), *The Myrrh-Bearer* (1993), *Agraphon* (1994), *Diòdia* (1995), *Eternity’s Sunrise* (1997), and *Mystagogia* (1998). In the closing minutes of the 20th century, Tavener premiered his work *A New Beginning* before thousands gathered in London’s Millennium Dome. He received a knighthood in the Millennium Honours.

Throughout his life Tavener has suffered periodically from extreme ill health, one serious instance occurring in the 1970s, another in the early 1990s and another in the mid-2000s. In between he continued to write pieces strongly influenced by Orthodoxy and by literature. Increasingly, he became fascinated by the writings of metaphysicians such as Ananda Coomaraswamy, René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, as well as the Sufi poets Rumi and Ibn Arabi. The Universalist teachings of these writers, and a growing interest in Hinduism, have shaped Tavener’s compositions of the early 2000s. Though he is still an Orthodox Christian, the Universalist belief that all organised religions are simply different interpretations of the same underlying forces has informed most of Tavener’s work of this period and beyond. Significant post-millennial works include *Ikon of Eros* (2000), *Hymn of Dawn* (2002), *Lament for Jerusalem* (2002), *Mahashakti* (2003), *Supernatural Songs* (2003), *Schuon Lieder* (2003), *Atma Mass* (2003), *The Beautiful Names* (2004), *Lalishri* (2006), *Sollemnitas in Conceptione Immaculata Beatae Mariae Virginis* (2006), and *Requiem* (2007).

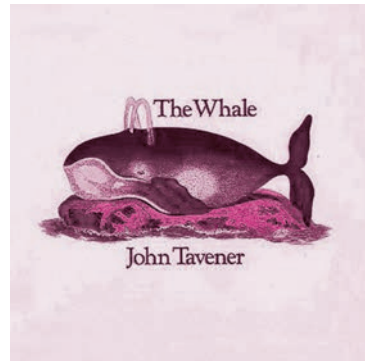
Emergency heart surgery in Switzerland, followed by many months in intensive care subsequent to the completion of *Towards Silence* in 2007 halted his progress for a time, as well as causing him to withdraw somewhat from spiritual themes. Weighed by extreme weakness and disillusionment, Tavener drew much comfort and inspiration from the poetry of the English metaphysical poets, from Shakespeare, from the love of his family, from the landscape of Scotland - which he has begun to visit regularly - and from a certain liking for the latter works of Elliott Carter. He has also returned to his love of Tolstoy and of what he feels is the almost cosmic prowess and play of Mozart, as well as to the poetry of the Carmelite St John of the Cross, and he continues to be deeply influenced by Hindu metaphysical thought. Some of the resulting works are *Three Shakespeare Sonnets* (2010), *La Noche Oscura* (2012), *Three Hymns of George Herbert* (2012), *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (2012), and *The Play of Krishna* (in progress - ‘Love Duet’ premiered 2013).

Tavener is currently preparing *Flood of Beauty*, a setting of the Saundarya Lahari, a Sanskrit poem concerning Tavener’s perennial theme of the Eternal Feminine; and *Requiem Fragments*, concerning another: beauty in death. He is also developing music based on Scottish folk songs.





The Whale, Tavener's first commercial recording, released on The Apple label, founded by The Beatles



Early works

For as far back as his memory extends, Tavener has been drawn to elemental sounds, which at three he would recreate for his grandfather in performances that gave way, over years, to increasingly sophisticated improvisation. Strong early musical influences were Stravinsky and the brilliant characterisation of Mozart: though Tavener had heard and been struck by earlier Stravinsky, it was a broadcast of the 1956 premiere of *Canticum Sacrum* from St Mark's Basilica in Venice that truly captivated the young musician and turned him into an aspiring composer. Also at the age of 12, Tavener visited the Glyndebourne Festival for the first time with close family friend Lady Rhoda Birley. Though prior experiences of opera had left him unmoved, Tavener was overwhelmed by a performance of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, which he felt was a 'total' experience, the stylised, pantomime nature of *Singspiel* and its archetypal characters appealing to his burgeoning sense that the immutable was best captured by a somewhat ritualised form of expression.

As an adolescent these interests intensified and were directed into the composition of a Duo Concertante (1958) for trombone and piano for his headmaster, as well as performances with a chamber group comprising fellow Highgate School students, for whom Tavener wrote the first of what was to become *Three Holy Sonnets* (1962). A later role as organist and choirmaster at St John's Presbyterian Church in Kensington put the nascent composer in contact with a young woman who brought to his attention the Roman Catholic faith and the poetry of the Carmelite St John of the Cross, with its themes of transcendent love, and who elicited the first glimmers of Tavener's reverence for the Eternal Feminine.

While studying under Lennox Berkeley at the Royal Academy of Music, Tavener met the Australian composer David Lumsdaine, a former pupil of Berkeley's who was to become a great influence on Tavener after offering to teach him *gratis*. Lumsdaine 'opened the doors of Modernism' to Tavener, who recalls that his teacher also 'told me I would close 95 per cent of them. He was right; I did.' Notable early works include *The Cappemakers* (1964), *Ultimos Ritros* (1972), *Little Requiem for Father Malachy Lynch* (1972), *Thérèse* (1973), and of course *The Whale* (1966), the dramatic cantata written on the brink of Tavener's realisation that what he wished to express would never conform to formalist convention. Consequent to an encounter with John Lennon, *The Whale* was released on The Beatles' Apple label, yet despite this early taste of sensation, Tavener proved no more interested in pursuing popular attention than in toeing a stylistic line with which he felt manifestly at odds.

Three Holy Sonnets

1962, 15' Soloists and orchestra

The Whale

1966, 32' Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Further works

Cain and Abel (1965)

Introit for March 27, the Feast of St John of Damascus (1968)

In Alium (1968)

Celtic Requiem (1969)

Catholicism



Ultimos Ritos

1972, 50' Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Little Requiem for Father

Malachy Lynch

1972, 13' Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Thérèse

1973, 110' Opera

Sollemnitas in Conceptione Immaculata

Beatae Mariae Virginis

2006, 100' Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Further works

Coplas (1970)

Nomine Jesu (1970)

Atma Mass (2003)

Missae Brevis (2005)

La Noche Oscura (2012)

John Tavener's youth was no more or less infused with religion than any other pupil of Highgate, a public school near his family's home in London. It was not until he became organist at the Presbyterian St John's Kensington, and commenced studies under Lennox Berkeley at the Royal Academy of Music in 1962, that the space in his life accorded to religion began to deepen and to extend in the first of many directions: toward Catholicism.

Though the ground for spiritual enquiry had in Tavener always been naturally fertile, the seeds were most memorably sown by two people. Lennox Berkeley, was himself Catholic, and although teacher and pupil only ever discussed religion in Berkeley's 'vague, shy, aristocratic way', his gentle guidance left a deep impression. This impression was soon brought vividly to life by the Roman Catholic daughter of one of the Presbyterian congregation who one day, arriving unannounced at the Tavener home, bestowed on the young composer crosses and items acquired during her missions throughout Mexico and South America before declaring that she had fallen in love with him, yet had only that day enrolled to become a nun.

Inevitably, Tavener was stirred to learn more and began a friendship that further exposed him not only to the Roman Catholic faith, but to the poetry of St John of the Cross, with its themes of transcendent love; to the 'primordially moving' Maundy Thursday service and the music of Tomás Luis de Victoria; and most significantly, to the concept of a reality beyond our own. Catholicism became central to Tavener's life and work, in which he says that he began 'to think that liturgy as drama and drama as liturgy were the only means of expression.'

However, towards the end of the 1970s Tavener began to feel the Catholic Church to be prescriptive and the broader tendency of Western Christianity, to 'begin with man, and then aspire toward God', oppressive. On a visit to an Orthodox church, Tavener felt himself for the first time at home, and knew that in this faith he could find the balance of tradition he sought to guide him forward both in life, and in his desire to express metaphysical concepts through music.



The Eternal Feminine

The Protecting Veil

1988, 20' Soloist and orchestra

Mary of Egypt

1991, 100' Opera

The Myrrh-Bearer

1993, 40' Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Schuon Lieder

2003, 60' Solo voice and small ensemble

Sollemnitas in Conceptione

Immaculata Beatae Mariae Virginis

2006, 100' Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

The Play of Krishna

Pantomime opera for narrator, soloists and orchestra

(*in progress*)

('Love Duet' premiered 2013)

Further works

Mahashakti (2003)

Flood of Beauty (*in progress*)

The Eternal Feminine is a concept describing the feminine manifestation of divine energy, and has always had profound significance for Tavener. He claims that his spiritual understanding has been deepened by every woman he has ever known, and that a greater emphasis on the feminine is needed to redress the current imbalance of masculine energy dominating modern culture. In his own music, Tavener strives to balance the masculine and the feminine, and at one time he felt strongly that all his best music was written about the Mother of God, simply because, as he states, 'I love her.'

The form taken by the Eternal Feminine differs among religious traditions, but is common to all. In Western Christianity, this form is the Mother of God, also referred to as the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ; in Eastern Christianity, Mary exists as *Theotokos* ('bearer of God'), but alongside the invariably feminine personification of Sophia, or Holy Wisdom. In Hinduism, the feminine *Shakti* is the primordial creative and motive energy that powers all life, and the word 'spirit' in many languages takes the feminine gender.

Where tradition holds a place of high esteem for the feminine, Tavener feels that, at least in the West, our increasingly secular societies retain little regard beyond the sentimental for feminine qualities, associated as they have been throughout history with negative portrayals of women as weak and incapable of rational thought and action. Though the positive effects of feminism have to an extent shifted these images, Tavener believes that it has in some ways unwittingly perpetuated their connotations in making an enemy of femininity, encouraging women who aspire to equality with men to cultivate their masculine traits rather than emphasise and value the inherent strength of the feminine. Though masculinity and femininity may not meet on equal terms, in almost all ancient traditions they are regarded as equally powerful and necessary to the balance of life.

Many of Tavener's works surrounding this concept and including voice have been written for soprano Patricia Rozario, with whom he first worked on *Mary of Egypt* (1991). Though classically trained in Bombay and London, Rozario is capable of singing microtonally and with a quality that Tavener describes as 'primordial and ecstatic.' Tavener has also represented the feminine with solo cello writing in a number of works including *Kyklike Kinesis* (1977), *The Protecting Veil* (1988), *Akhmatova Songs* (1993), *Requiem* (2007), and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (2012); and with solo violin in *Hymn of Dawn* (2002), *Mahashakti* (2003), and *Lalishbri* (2006).

Orthodoxy



Tavener has stated that he is a Western composer writing within the ethos and framework of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and despite his decades of spiritual evolution, it is still this ethos, which so favours tradition over innovation, that informs his composition today.

‘Innovation’ denotes the invention of something entirely new and though Tavener’s own musical expression of a concept might be unique, it is for him essential that its inspiration originate somewhere far more profound than his own earthly experience.

On first entering an Orthodox church, he felt himself instantly at home, and was received into the Russian Orthodox Church in 1977.

Orthodoxy has since been inseparable from Tavener’s life and work. Following his conversion, he became increasingly convinced that music without a solid basis of tradition could not possibly express anything more than a contrivance of the human ego. If one approaches music as another language of the human soul, then it follows that music likewise requires a connection with something greater than itself. In the Orthodox musical tradition, this connection must be made through the system of eight tones, or sets of harmonised melodies, assigned to various services. In order to work within the tone system, a composer must renounce not only his training within other systems, but his own desire to fabricate entirely new constructions. These strictures are analogous to the painting of icons, which has by definition remained unchanged over its history; these works are not intended to express human emotion or thought unrelated to the divine.

During the first years following his conversion, Tavener withdrew almost totally from the world of contemporary music in an effort to assimilate his faith and access more enduring themes for expression in music. During this time, he became close friends with the painter Cecil Collins, who introduced Tavener to the Sufi poet Rumi; and to the writings of Traditionalists and Universalists René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon, all of whom were to exert a significant influence on Tavener’s work over the subsequent decades.

A Gentle Spirit

1977, 45’ Opera

Kyklike Kinesis

1977, 45’ Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Palintropos

1978, 24’ Soloist and orchestra

Akhmatova Requiem

1980, 50’ Soloists and large ensemble

Mary of Egypt

1991, 100’ Opera

Akhmatova Songs

1993, 20’ Solo voice and small ensemble

The Myrrh-Bearer

1993, 40’ Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

The Veil of the Temple

2002, 7 hrs Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Further works

Prayer for the World (1981)

Orthodox Vigil Service (1984)

Resurrection (1989)

Lamentations and Praises (2000)

A Gentle Spirit
1977, 45' Opera

Akhmatova Requiem
1980, 50' Soloists and large ensemble

Akhmatova Songs
1993, 20' Solo voice and small ensemble

The Death of Ivan Ilyich
2012, 25' Soloists and orchestra

Further works
Six Russian Folk Songs (1978)
Akathist of Thanksgiving (1987)
Resurrection (1989)



Russia

Tavener was received into the Russian Orthodox Church in 1977 by Metropolitan Anthony of Zouroz, the Exarch or head of the Church in the West. Tavener describes him as a ‘considerable spiritual force’ and it was with Metropolitan Anthony that the composer first seriously discussed his disillusionment with Roman Catholicism, and the ensuing psychological and spiritual vacuum into which this had thrown him. By contrast with what he had felt as the proselytising of the Catholic Church, his initial conversations with Metropolitan Anthony made only rare mention of God, the priest instead sharing his faith as a series of anecdotes demonstrating the positive effects of Orthodoxy’s sober perspective.

Tavener later gravitated more strongly toward Greece and its own variant of Eastern Orthodoxy, but his conversion to the Russian Church came about for a number of reasons, a compelling one being the relative isolation of the Greek Church in England at that time; with Metropolitan Anthony as its charismatic leader, the service sung both in English and Church Slavonic, and the chant itself more familiar to Western ears, the Russian division felt more accessible to English converts.

Following his conversion, Tavener became deeply interested in Russian culture, reading biographies of Gogol and Tolstoy as well as quantities of fiction by Dostoevsky, and setting Russian folk songs and the Orthodox Liturgy of St John Chrysostom. This latter work was Tavener’s first serious foray into tradition, written without knowledge of the Russian Orthodox tone system, and was suggested by Metropolitan Anthony as what Tavener later speculated was a rather wily means of rapidly increasing the composer’s familiarity with both the liturgy and the concept of tradition. The latter was certainly achieved by the response of the congregation: Tavener’s setting of a sacred text to music of his own invention, outside the traditional Orthodox musical framework, was not met with enthusiasm.

This sudden confrontation with the meaning of tradition caused Tavener to spend a prolonged period unable to write fluently as he questioned the validity of non-traditional art and the egocentric values of Western culture, and sought to understand through experience what tradition is. During this time, Tavener began to travel to Greece, and his association with Greek Orthodoxy strengthened.

Greece

Kyklike Kinesis

1977, 45' Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Palintropos

1978, 24' Soloist and orchestra

Further works

The Immurement of Antigone (1978)

Sixteen Haiku of Seferis (1984)

Eis Thanaton (1986)

Tribute to Cavafy (1999)



Though it was into the Russian Orthodox Church that Tavener was initiated in 1977, it is Greece and its own variant of Eastern Orthodoxy that have played the more conspicuous role in his life and music. The landscape of Greece, to which Tavener has returned countless times over the past four decades to reflect, worship, endure and write, has provided a backdrop of profound beauty imbued with the aesthetic, philosophical and religious traditions of the culture that inhabits it. This culture has offered writers, musicians, thinkers and clerics who have enriched his life and been a steadying comfort.

Many of the authors and poets Tavener most admires - Kalvos, Seferis, Cavafy, Sikelianos, Solomos, Papadiamantis - were active over the past two or three centuries, yet they share the innate sense of tradition so central to Greek culture. Where Western Europe has been repeatedly riven by revolutions, Renaissances and Reformations, Greece has not accommodated - nor in the first place fomented - any such disruptions, leaving intact a lineage that can be traced to ancient civilisation and its enduring concepts. Where Western Europe has largely abandoned religion in favour of the worldly and egocentric, Orthodoxy in Greece remains a way of life as much as a belief. Whatever individuals' ideas about their contemporary culture, there remains a deeply ingrained appreciation, even a reverence, for these bases of the culture as living principles.

Tavener believes that an accompanying familiarity with metaphysics allows Orthodox Christians to 'read' icons in a manner that directly opposes the cerebral dissection favoured by Western art criticism. An icon exists not to be evaluated but to communicate directly to the viewer the essence of the faith, and it is at this very fundamental level that Tavener believes Eastern and Western religious art - and values - diverge: as he expresses it, in the former, one starts with God and aspires toward the phenomenal world; in the latter it is the opposite.

- Three Holy Sonnets**
1962, 15' Soloists and orchestra
- Ultimos Ritos**
1972, 50' Chorus and orchestra/ensemble
- Akhmatova Requiem**
1980, 50' Soloists and large ensemble
- Akhmatova Songs**
1993, 20 Solo voice and small ensemble
- Lament for Jerusalem**
2002, 50' Chorus and orchestra/ensemble
- Supernatural Songs**
2003, 30' Soloists and orchestra
- Schuon Lieder**
2003, 60'
Solo voice and small ensemble
- Further works**
 - The Lamb* (1982)
 - To a Child Dancing in the Wind* (1983)
 - Sixteen Haiku of Seferis* (1984)
 - The Tyger* (1987)
 - Three Hymns of George Herbert* (2012)
 - Flood of Beauty* (in progress)



Poetry

Tavener has throughout his life had an abiding appreciation of poetry, much of which has either found its way directly into his settings for voice, or influenced other works. It offers, by definition, the interaction of words with rhythm and sound, a quality Tavener relishes marrying with music. Though naturally inclined toward contemplation of philosophy and art, Tavener has little time for that which does not concern the sacred (though this is a broader field than its connotations often admit) and claims to enjoy the writings of only three novelists, each of whom shared his Orthodox faith: the Russians Fyodor Dostoevsky and ‘the monumental’ Leo Tolstoy, and the Greek Alexandros Papadiamantis, himself often referred to as the Greek Dostoevsky.

Beyond fiction, Tavener’s tastes tend toward the writings of metaphysicians such as René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Charles Péguy, Adi Shankara, Ibn Arabi and, significantly for a time, Frithjof Schuon. When such metaphysical ideas are expressed poetically, the emotional and musical response is yet more immediate; in distilling its subject to the point of beauty, poetry is capable of lending a sacred dimension to even the lowliest human traits, and many works set by Tavener deal with mortality, suffering, redemption and transcendence. Among the earliest of these were three sonnets by John Donne dealing with mortality, sin, faith and failure. Though only 15 at the time of its setting, Tavener was drawn to Donne’s paradoxically passionate austerity, a quality common to much of the poetry he would be inspired to set over the coming decades. On being introduced to Catholicism, Tavener became enraptured by the poetry of St John of the Cross, with its themes of transcendent love; following his conversion to Orthodoxy, he set works by the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, as well as those by modern Greek poets C.P.Cavafy, Angelos Sikelianos and Giorgios Seferis and the saints Symeon the New Theologian and Andrew of Crete; while Western, sometimes secular writers whose poems have provided a platform for Tavener’s music include Dante Alighieri, T.S.Eliot, William Blake, Frithjof Schuon, Jean Biès and W.B.Yeats, who the composer describes as ‘the supreme artist of the 20th century’.

During Tavener’s latter Universalist years, the Sufi poet Rumi has been a great source of inspiration.

Tavener always endeavours to set texts in their original forms, believing that a language binds any concept it originates to its cultural context. He has therefore set an extraordinary variety of tongues, including Arabic, Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Aramaic, Hebrew and Native American languages.

Beauty in death

Tavener once stated that his subject is 'the sacred in art: art that is *athanatos* - without death, without change, without beginning and without end.' The 'sacred' here is identical with the concept, common to almost all religions, of an ultimate and unchanging reality, from which all living beings originate and to which they return through the death of their physical form. The role of bodily death in spiritual life has always occupied a profound place in Tavener's consciousness, particularly since the first significant religious experiences of his late adolescence. There is no morbidity to be detected in this preoccupation; rather, it is a reverence for death as the gateway to this reality, however it may be called across the various religious traditions.

All these traditions seek to contextualise life within the broader journey of the soul which, when it is separated from its earthly vessel, is also separated from the minutiae of the phenomenal world and opens to a broader truth. It then variously begins again, or ascends to join an eternal enlightenment. In this way, death is not an end but a transition, for better or worse and, in traditions such as Christianity, as dictated by the life lived. A degree of this enlightenment might be achieved during worldly existence if one is able to 'die to oneself' - to discard human cares and contrivances and become a vehicle for this higher entity - and indeed this is the aim of ascetics of any religious order. Death, both to oneself and the world, allows the soul to be, as Tavener puts it, 'more intensely alive' to the truth of existence.

Tavener's own appreciation of death has been moulded and coloured over the decades of his spiritual explorations, and many of his works have this theme in common: *Three Holy Sonnets* (1962) sets John Donne's texts dealing with the Crucifixion and challenging Death itself; *Towards Silence* (2007) is inspired by the French metaphysical author René Guénon's exposition of *Brahman*, the Hindu concept of an absolute reality; *Requiem* (2007) is encapsulated in the statement that, 'Our glory lies where we cease to exist'; and *Ultimos Ritos* (1972), *Little Requiem for Father Malachy Lynch* (1972), *Akhmatova Requiem* (1980), *Eonia* (1989), *Song for Athene* (1997) and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (2012) are all, to varying degrees of explicitness, meditations upon the subject.

Three Holy Sonnets

1962, 15' Soloists and orchestra

Ultimos Ritos

1972, 50' Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Little Requiem for Father Malachy Lynch

1972, 13' Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Akhmatova Requiem

1980, 50' Soloists and large ensemble

Requiem

2007, 35' Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Towards Silence

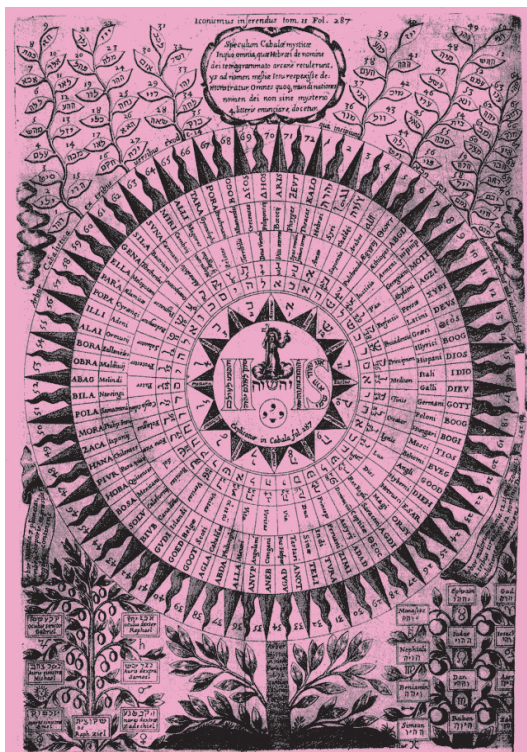
2007, 30' Large ensemble

Further works

Requiem Fragments (in progress)

The Death of Ivan Ilyich (2012)





A diagram of the names of God in Oedipus Aegyptiacus, 17th century by Athanasius Kircher

Universalism

The Veil of the Temple
2002, 7 hrs Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Lament for Jerusalem
2002, 50' Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Supernatural Songs
2003, 30' Soloists and orchestra

Schuon Lieder
2003, 60' Solo voice and up to 6 players

The Beautiful Names
2004, 35' Chorus and orchestra

**Sollemnitatis in Conceptione
Immaculatae Beatae Mariae Virginis**
2006, 100' Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Requiem
2007, 35' Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Towards Silence
2007, 30' Large ensemble

The Play of Krishna
In progress, Pantomime opera for narrator, soloists and orchestra ('Love Duet' premiered 2013)

Further works
Lalishri (2006)
Requiem Fragments (in progress)
Flood of Beauty (in progress)

Following Tavener's attachment to Roman Catholicism, conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy, and interest in the ideas of metaphysicians such as René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, he arrived at an approach to spirituality most neatly described as Universalism. This acknowledges the similarities between all religious traditions and contends that, as the aim of each is to reunite the human soul with its spiritual origin, this origin must in fact be a single common source that has given rise to different interpretations across human history and culture.

Universalism argues that by emphasising the differences between belief systems, rather than acknowledging their transcendent common core, followers of any one faith are denied true spiritual fulfilment and are instead confined to a cycle of false righteousness, in opposition to the most basic moral tenets of their religion. The idea of an 'eternal religion' was supposedly passed from Plato down through the centuries, eventually reaching Ananada Coomaraswamy, a Ceylon-born scholar instrumental in introducing Indian art and culture to the West; and René Guénon, a French metaphysician who later was initiated into Sufism. Both men adhered to Traditionalism, a kind of Universalist asceticism that encourages detachment from material concerns and the internalisation of the fundamentals of religious belief. Their writings, along with those of the Swiss philosopher Frithjof Schuon, form the basis of the Traditionalist, or Perennialist, school of thought.

Though Tavener remains an adherent of Eastern Orthodoxy, the thoughts of these men resonated deeply with his own, long-pondered feelings on spiritual belief, some of which were the very same that drew him to Orthodoxy in the first place. Universalism opened Tavener to influences and themes he had not yet thoroughly explored, derived most conspicuously from Sufism, Islam as a whole, and Hinduism, and indeed the latter comes closest in its doctrines to acknowledging the commonalities of all world religions, a characteristic which has attracted many artists including W. B. Yeats, the poet most revered by Tavener. Coomaraswamy, Guénon and Schuon drew heavily on Hindu doctrine in formulating their own Traditionalist dogmas.

2007 to 2013

The Death of Ivan Ilyich
2012, 25' Soloist and orchestra

The Play of Krishna
In progress, Pantomime opera for narrator,
soloists and orchestra

Further works
La Noche Oscura (2012)
Requiem Fragments (in progress)
Monument for Beethoven (in progress)



At home in
West Sussex

Following the completion of *Towards Silence* in 2007, John Tavener was taken seriously ill while attending rehearsals in Zurich. For several years he was far too weak to compose, save for a few short pieces, some of which were inspired by poets such as Shakespeare and Herbert, of whose work he was reading a great deal. Also during this period of convalescence, he listened to Beethoven and read Tolstoy, in particular the apocalyptic novella, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Then in late 2011 in a burst of creativity, he wrote a drama based on this story of physical suffering and temporary loss of faith, setting it tersely for baritone, solo cello, strings, timpani and trombones. There followed *Monument for Beethoven*, *Requiem Fragments* and a string quartet among many other works. Tavener has returned to some of his earliest influences, including a love of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* that inspired a work currently in progress, *The Play of Krishna*.

Tavener is at present working on a piece based on Saundarya Lahari, a 100-verse Sanskrit poem praising the goddess Parvati, consort of Shiva; on a work for mezzo-soprano and orchestra, exploring the nature of suffering and existence; and then for light relief, he is looking at Scottish folk material for choir and bells. Scotland has become important for Tavener, and perhaps his late period is inspired by its landscape in the way that works of the 1970s and 80s were inspired by Greece.



Paul McCartney,
John Tavener and
Peter Phillips



John Mark Ainsley, Jiří Bělohávek
and John Tavener at the premiere
of *The Beautiful Names* in 2007

A Gentle Spirit
 Kyklke Kinesis
 Palintropos
 Mary of Egypt
 Akhmatova Songs
 The Veil of the Temple



Akhmatova Requiem
 Orthodox Vigil Service



Prayer for the World
 Resurrection



Mother Thekla

Orthodoxy



Lamentations and Praises
 The Myrrh-Bearer



Mahashakti
 The Protecting Veil
 The Myrrh-Bearer
 Schuon Lieder
 The Play of Krishna
 Flood of Beauty

The Eternal Feminine



Mary of Egypt
 Sollemnitas in Conceptione
 Immaculata Beatae Mariae Virginis
 Requiem
 Akhmatova Songs
 Three Holy Sonnets
 Little Requiem for
 Father Malachy Lynch



Beauty in death



Ultimos Ritos



Towards Silence
 Requiem Fragments



The Veil of the Temple
 Requiem
 Lament for Jerusalem



Universalism



Lalishri
 Towards Silence
 Laila
 The Beautiful Names

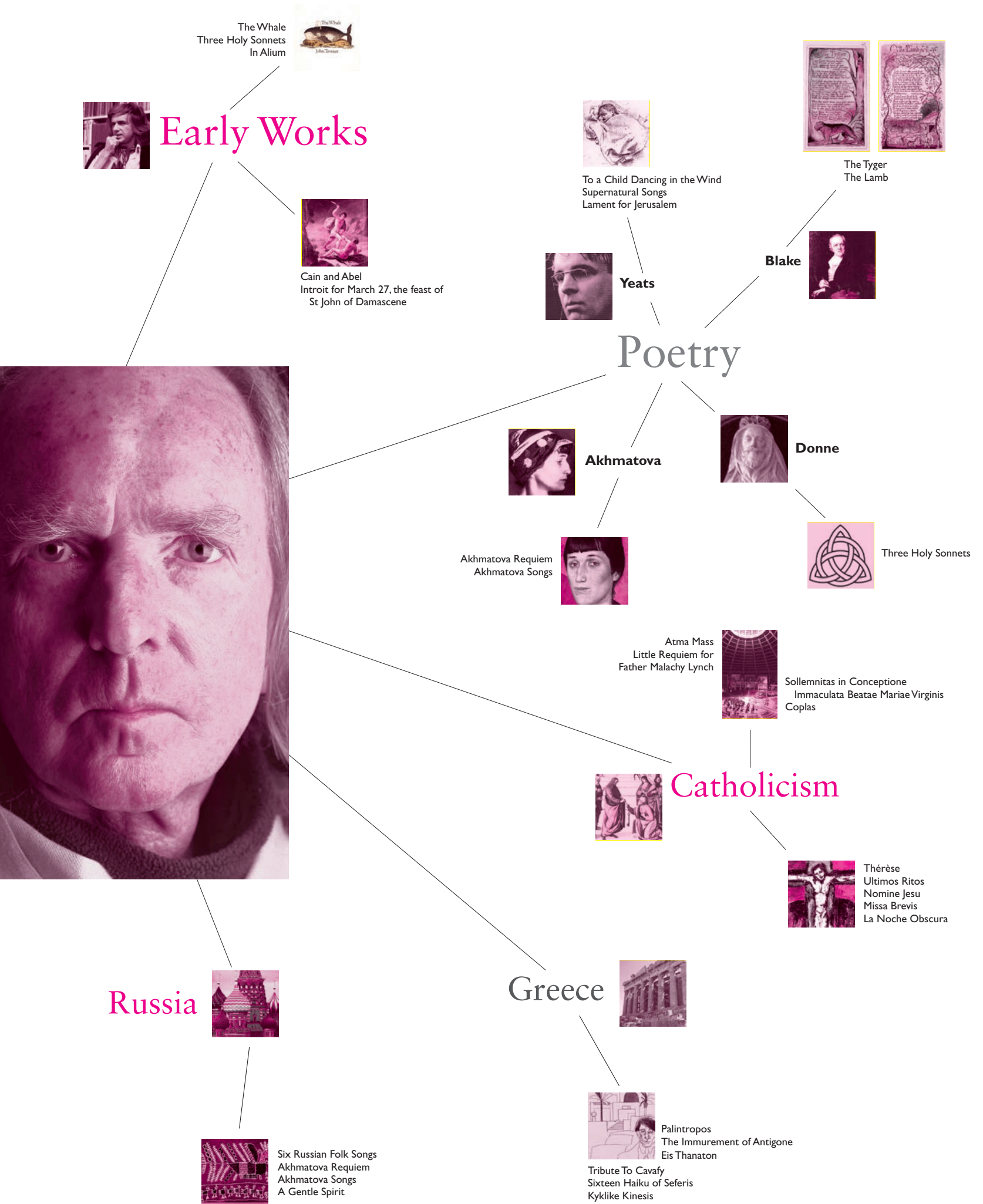


Schuon



Schuon Lieder
 Flood of Beauty
 Requiem
 The Play of Krishna
 Sollemnitas in Conceptione
 Immaculata Beatae Mariae Virginis
 Requiem Fragments



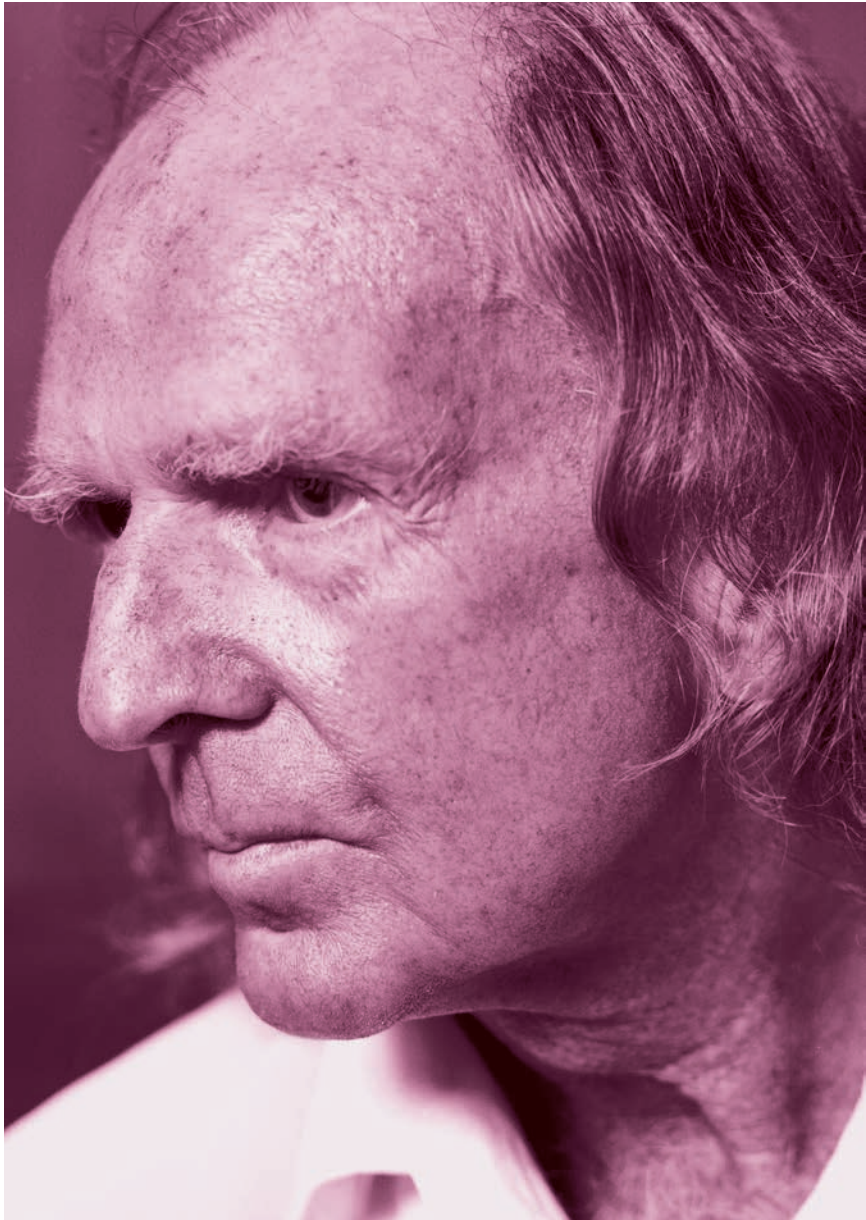




John Tavener with
Mother Thekla at
her monastery



With the soprano
Patricia Rozario at
rehearsals for *Laila (Amu)*



The Works



1962, 15'
Soloists and orchestra
Solo voice: Baritone/2hn.2tbn/timp/str
Language: English

Three Holy Sonnets

A deep consciousness of death has for most of his life informed John Tavener's musical expression. *Three Holy Sonnets* is an early example of a preoccupation that has influenced many of his subsequent works, either through the direct contemplation of a person's death or habitual meditation on its broader spiritual implications. Recalling the first performance of the work, Tavener has described it as 'the first real sound of me,' and the only music of that early period with which he can clearly associate later compositions. The wide spacing of chords, restrained vocal writing and measured silences all contribute to the ethereal gravity that permeates Tavener's broader musical idiom.

The early works of the Jacobean English satirist, lawyer, priest and metaphysical poet John Donne often orbit the preoccupations of his own youth - women, literature and travel - and tend toward the ironic and satirical, moods with which he displayed a formidable dexterity. While John Tavener's early works are not quite so openly hedonistic, pieces such as 1966's *The Whale* demonstrate the ripening of a healthy distrust of the status quo - musically at least - that is reminiscent of Donne's. Tavener's contemplation of mortality, however, was rather more precocious than Donne's, and by the age of 15 he had set the poet's sonnet, *Spit in my face you Jews*, for voice and organ. During later studies under Lennox Berkeley at the Royal Academy of Music, Tavener was encouraged to create a triptych of Donne's sonnets. *Death be not proud* and *I am a little world* were set alongside the earlier work and the whole orchestrated to create *Three Holy Sonnets*, which received its first performance by the London Bach Society under Paul Steinitz.

Spit in my face you Jews urges Christian readers to recall that Christ, having committed no sins of his own, died for theirs. To forget and continue to sin renders them both more guilty of his crucifixion than its perpetrators, and more deserving of such a death than he. Tavener admits that it was a 'very severe' text for someone of 15 to be drawn to, but the appeal of Donne's tenor evidently endured for the young composer, the death of whose maternal grandmother also influenced the inclusion of *Death be not proud* in 1962.

The Whale

1966, 32'

Chorus and orchestra

Solo voices: Mezzo soprano, Bass, Speaker

Chorus: Children's choir. SATB

Orchestration: 2(pic, afl).2(bcl).2(cbn)/4.3.3.1/

timp.8perc(cel)/hp.amp.pf.grand org.Horg/str(no vn)/tape

Languages: English, Latin

The orchestra and conductor remain motionless, the attention upon the speaker. The music gradually assumes control. The speaker should make no attempt to speak above the sound but allow it to dominate him. If at bar 65 the speaker has not finished the material, he should stop and retreat from the audience's vision, or turn off the lighting for his situation.

1 minute
Speaker begins to speak

30 seconds
Full organ pulse chaser

15 seconds
Retransmission

Diagram labels: Horned Organ, drums, grand piano, strings, all orchestral entry, Electronic organ, Retransmission required.

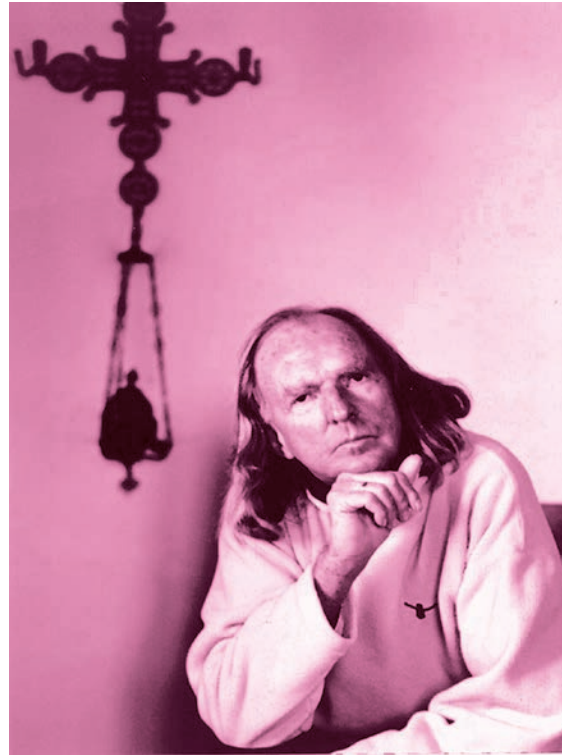
Small text on the right side of the collage: 'Species try a baritone voice, off stage, in a bar, or in a row, through piano, etc. ...' and 'Main vocal of the whale Cetacea. They come in three groups: Cetacea, ...'

The Whale, a dramatic cantata, is one of John Tavener's most prominent works and among his earliest, having been composed when he was 21. While already Tavener's interest in biblical subjects was quite mature, he was at this time on the cusp of the conviction that there existed, for him, a mode of expression uncompromised by the conventions of formalism. Though born from the biblical allegory of Jonah and the Whale, Tavener's youthful disillusionment with the classical establishment caused *The Whale* to escalate into a fantastical expression of dissent, incorporating orchestra, chorus, spoken word, megaphones, plainsong, jazz, football rattles, stamping and rakish brass, all woven with Tavener's peculiar, measured reverence.

The work opens with the words, 'The Whale: Marine mammal of the order Cetacea.' As the narrator continues through this deliberately dry Collins Encyclopaedia entry, the orchestra and chorus begin to lap at the edges until the voice is entirely engulfed in sound, and we are plunged into the biblical narrative in Latin. Tavener sought to balance the surrealistic, ritualistic and more radical elements of the work, and these initial scenes are contrasted with Jonah's prayer, answered by the cacophonous salvation of his descent into the belly of the whale. Here Tavener parodies his own music, shaping the first four notes of the work into a jazz break and summoning a wild array of sonic effects in a gesture of defiance at what he describes as the 'intellectual kitchens of Europe,' treating music as a recipe to be followed.

The music becomes softer as Jonah begins to emerge from the whale, sections dropping out until only the choir and soloists are left. When finally Jonah is vomited onto the sand, the surrealistic depiction of the whale and the work's ritualistic, biblical foundation are united as the choir urges Jonah forth with a rhythmic stamping, repeating the appeal, 'In Aridam' - 'On to the dry land.'

The Whale was commissioned by the London Sinfonietta for its inaugural concert and released on The Beatles' Apple Records label the year following its premiere, greatly increasing public awareness both of the piece and of its composer, who was rapidly revealing himself to be very much of his own making. *The Whale* has enjoyed enduring success, and although Tavener does not regard the work as having borne fruit in his subsequent musical development, this conviction cannot but have spurred his ever more decisive shift away from modernist ideals, thus shaping in some small way his later works.



1972, 50'

Chorus and Orchestra/ensemble

Solo voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass

Chorus: 5 SSAATTBB/4(2af1)+6rec.4(2obda)0.0/4.10.4.0/timp.perc/
amp ch org.amp hpd.gorg/str (6.6.4.4.2).tape

Languages: Spanish, 50 others

Dark Night of the Soul is probably more familiar to modern ears as a turn of phrase than as the title of a poem, and certainly more so than the name of its author, the 16th-century Spanish mystic and priest, St John of the Cross. This and others of his works are set throughout *Ultimos Ritos* (Sp. 'last rites'), which consists of five movements composed over three years.

Ultimos Ritos began with *Coplas*, the final movement, its genesis an incident the composer believes cannot be explained by anything so random as chance: switching on the radio while driving, he heard the final cadence of Bach's Crucifixus from the Mass in B Minor, and instantly was resolved to write a work based on these chords. While the entirety of *Ultimos Ritos* hinges on this idea, it does not make itself explicit until the close of the final movement, as the Bach gradually subsumes Tavener's own invention, swallowing it with the words, 'et sepultus est' - 'and was buried.'

Ultimos Ritos is about the crucifixion and burial of the self. St John of the Cross was a Carmelite, one of three to whom Tavener has dedicated works. Traditionally among this order, when a person is called to Christ he or she must 'come and die' to themselves and to the world, in order to achieve true spiritual unity. *Ultimos Ritos* explores this concept through the poetry, much of which angles material from secular love songs metaphorically, to reveal a metaphysical interpretation in which the lover, or soul, seeks the beloved: God; through its staging, which represents the crucifix in its layout of the choirs; and through the music itself, also intended to proportionally reflect the crucifix, and moreover to mirror the ardent willingness of the poet who wrote, 'One day he climbed a tree and spread his arms so wide, his heart an open wound with love.' Tavener has said that at the point of his introduction to Roman Catholicism he had 'begun to think that liturgy as drama and drama as liturgy were the only means of expression.' *Ultimos Ritos* is the apotheosis of this notion.

Tavener has described *Ultimos Ritos* as very dramatic - and very Roman Catholic - in its violent exaltation of the crucifixion. While he respects the work as an early example of consciously metaphysical composition, within a few years of its premiere he had realised that neither the Western Church nor Western music could offer the balance of tradition he sought. Were he to set the crucifixion today, Tavener would write a quite different work.

Ultimos Ritos

Aylesford Priory, the religious house of the Order of Carmelites dating back to the 13th Century, the home of Father Malachy Lynch



Little Requiem for Father Malachy Lynch

1972, 13' Chorus and Orchestra/ensemble
Chorus: SATB
Orchestration: 2fl/tpt/org/str
Language: Latin

Much of John Tavener's composition throughout the 1960s and 70s was motivated by an intense desire to express metaphysical concepts by musical means. He credits the germ of this desire to his meeting at the age of 12 with the singular Father Malachy Lynch, a Carmelite whom he describes as 'one of the most interesting Roman Catholics' he ever met. Lynch indulged his own broad theological interest with frequent visits by Sufi and Methodist friends to the Kent castle in which he lived during the latter part of his life, the walls of which Tavener recalls were littered with notes encouraging his guests to maintain 'the medieval spirit in art.'

Tavener's teenage involvement as organist at a Presbyterian church continued, his focus on Roman Catholicism only sharpening some years later, yet Lynch was in fact an early influence on his much later inclination toward the Orthodox Church. Lynch also confided to the young composer his sense that, 'the Roman Catholic Church is a fading star.' Following his eventual disillusionment with Catholicism, Tavener pondered this as a possible reference to what he felt as the oppressive dogmatism that kept him from embracing this tradition. Musically, however, Catholicism was a strong influence and Tavener still regards the old Latin services of Holy Week as some of the 'most desolate and primordially moving.'

Upon the death of Father Malachy Lynch in 1972, Tavener experienced the first of several instances of works coming to him 'fully born.' During Lynch's open-air funeral at Aylesford Priory, the opening section of the *Little Requiem for Father Malachy Lynch* entered his mind, the following sections unfolding during the drive home to London. Tavener has since had a number of works appear to him in this way, as if it were a parting gift from the deceased.



Thérèse

1973, 110'

Opera

Solo voices: 4 Sopranos.2 Tenors.Bass/Chorus: SATB

Orchestration: 4(4pic,af1)+6rec.0.4(2bcl,4Eflat).0/6.6.6.0/

10perc.2timp/hp.2pf(Horg).cel/str

Language: English

Marie-Françoise-Thérèse Martin was born in Alençon at the beginning of 1873, to a jeweller and a lacemaker, both devout Catholics. She was an intense personality and struggled throughout her childhood with emotional fragility until at the age of 10, she experienced a kind of attitudinal epiphany that she felt had been worked by God and allowed her to turn away from herself to embrace Him. At the age of 15 she joined her elder sisters as a Carmelite postulant in Lisieux, where she lived and composed numerous prayers, plays and autobiographical notes until her death from tuberculosis aged 24.

The events of Thérèse's life were not of themselves extraordinary, but one of these collections of notes was published posthumously as *Story of a Soul*. Though heavily edited prior to publication and disparaged by some as displaying an unformed or naïve spiritual approach, Thérèse's example of what came to be referred to as her Little Way - the constant demonstration and generation of

spiritual love by every tiny action - was taken up with extraordinary enthusiasm by many, and the cult of Thérèse quickly grew. In 1914 Pope Pius X signed the decree for the opening of her canonisation, which finally occurred 11 years later.

What drew Tavener to the subject was not what some interpret as Thérèse's somewhat cloying humility, but the crisis of faith prompted, in the year before her death, by her realisation of the reality of faithlessness for a growing number of people. Thérèse became dismayed and alarmed at the conviction of these *incrédules*, yet curiosity began to engender doubt whilst both tempting her away from her faith and strengthening, desperately, her will to believe. In addition, a love of the poetry of 16th-century Carmelite St John of the Cross is held in common by Tavener and Thérèse, who viewed Christ as a bridegroom and thus felt for Him a love shaded by something as close to eroticism as a truly devout nun could approach.

It was the musician Clive Wearing who suggested that the composer consider the Song of Songs, a book of the Hebrew Bible in which a man and a woman exchange allusions to the progress of their love through courtship to consummation. Although not explicitly religious, the verses are often interpreted allegorically as a representation of the devout's relationship with God. This obvious parallel with Thérèse's style of devotion catalysed in Tavener an outpouring of music, beginning at the end with the ecstatic love duet, the couple here embodied by Thérèse and Christ. Conversely, the work opens at the onset of Thérèse's illness and confrontation with the void left by her formerly unyielding faith. Tavener binds these extremes by leading Thérèse's soul on a journey: through prayer for a murderer, through the First World War and the end of the world, before her prostration in the dust and ecstatic union with Christ, who in the guise of her father and alongside the chaotic figure of Rimbaud has been her guide throughout.

Though works written in the short period between *Thérèse* and his conversion to Orthodoxy were reactions against Roman Catholicism, this was the last wholly Catholic work Tavener would write, and he claims that doing so extricated him from the 'spiritual angst' of this tradition. He felt that musically, the proud, worldly perspective of Roman Catholicism bound him to equally human, contrived and therefore fallible musical systems, of which he wished to rid his expression.

Fyodor Dostoevsky,
the Russian writer whose
text inspired Tavener to
compose *A Gentle Spirit*



A Gentle Spirit

1977, 45' Opera

Solo voices: Soprano. Tenor/Orchestration:
1(pic).0.1(bcl).0/1.1.1.0/perc.timp/str5tet /tp
Language: English

The year of Tavener's conversion to Russian Orthodoxy was 1977, and though newly received into a world of tradition with which he felt significantly more at ease, he also felt so disillusioned by the Western civilisation and culture he still inhabited that he found himself somewhat strung between ideologies, with no sure way forward.

He had yet to even begin to assimilate or fully comprehend the enormity of the traditional systems offered by Orthodoxy, which he craved; or to be exposed to the many other musical traditions that would influence his later work. For a composer disinclined to pursue a musical idea unless it can be developed within an hour, the 'slow and laborious' progress he made during this time was indicative of this sense of suspension.

The proto-existentialist writer Fyodor Dostoevsky has been claimed by the composer as one of the only three novelists he can read, the others being the Greek author Alexandros Papadiamantis, and Dostoevsky's fellow Russian, Leo Tolstoy. During this phase of stasis Tavener's friend, the Irish playwright and actor Gerard McLarnon, recommended to him the Dostoevsky short story 'A Gentle Creature', sometimes also rendered as 'The Meek One'. McLarnon had written the libretto for *Thérèse* and Tavener says that by this time he had become accustomed to his collaborator's 'rather violent dramatic sense,' well suited to the sombre story woven by Dostoevsky following the publication in 1876 of a news report on the suicide of a seamstress. In Dostoevsky's own tale, a pawnbroker first takes pity on and then marries a young woman who repeatedly visits his shop in order to raise money to advertise her

services as a governess. Their marriage begins harmoniously enough but soon the girl chafes at the man's preoccupation with accumulating wealth and they become emotionally estranged. When she falls ill he takes great care over her recuperation and vows to change, rushing out on her recovery to organise passports for a voyage away. When he returns home, the crowd gathered outside his house tells him that she had jumped from the window, clutching an icon. The story was intended as a criticism of what the author called *kosnost*, the spiritual stagnation engendered by material motivations.

Tavener and McLarnon stripped away much of Dostoevsky's 'somewhat rambling' original, creating a condensed and ritualistic work whose suffocating atmosphere is immediately suggested by a rather askew minor third. Dividing the music are seven 'remembrances' of the couple's life together, culminating in his belated realisation of the root of her frustration with him.

Tavener describes *A Gentle Spirit* as the most angst-ridden work he had yet written, though in a manner less 'German' and more Orthodox than previously. He reflects that while he likes both *A Gentle Spirit* and *The Immurement of Antigone*, written the following year, they were still mired in a system from which he drew little satisfaction.

Kyklike Kinesis

Kyklike kinesis is a Greek term referring to the 'circular movement' of the soul on its journey back to God, as described by proto-orthodox theologians in their theory of *theosis*: deification or unity with God. It is the concept of this journey, interpreted through several different spiritual traditions, that has informed so much of Tavener's work of the past four decades, and he recalls that *Kyklike Kinesis*, written in the same year as his conversion to Russian Orthodoxy, is the first composition that reflected this new awareness of tradition. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the tradition of prayer in seclusion known as the *hesychia* ('stillness, rest') aims at *ekstasis*, or the ecstatic union, the whole being a process of *kyklike kinesis*.

The *hesychia* is derived from Christ's exhortation in the Gospel of Matthew to 'go into your closet to pray,' interpreted as the need to withdraw into isolation in order to experience God, much in the way that Eastern meditative practices are intended to induce a state of detachment from the material world.

Tavener asserts that humanity's aspiration, however unconscious, to perceive and assimilate with the Infinite - that which is beyond manifested existence - is what motivates all religious belief. Indeed, there are a number of parallels to be found between not only Western and Eastern Christian ideas of *theosis*, but between all prayer traditions, meditative practices and spiritually motivated lifestyles, such as asceticism, whose practitioners' aim is to be freed from corporeal constraints and united with the infinite, whether this be called God or *Brahman*; whether it be identified as a single entity or an ultimate reality. Tavener has sought through his own work to explore, realise and in some way distil this process of spiritual elevation, and many works, including *Towards Silence*, *Lament for Jerusalem* and *Requiem* consider the schism between man's worldly existence and his innate urge to be unified with his spiritual origins. The poetry of St John of the Cross, so beloved of Tavener and set by him in works such as *Ultimos Ritos*, also speaks of this transcendent union, but as a marriage of the soul with God rather than as deification of the soul itself. Despite Tavener's dawning sense of tradition as a spiritual truth at this time, he does not regard *Kyklike Kinesis* as having comprehended the scale of Orthodox teachings and feels that his formative diet of serialism and systems remained prevalent in his writing for some years following his conversion.

1977, 45'

Chorus and orchestra

Solo voice: Soprano/Soloist: cello/Chorus: SATB

Orchestration: 0.1.0.1(cbn)/1.1.1.0/timp.perc/pf /str(1.1.1.1.1)

Languages: Greek, Hebrew



1978, 24'

Soloist and orchestra

Solo Instrument: piano

Orchestration: 2hn.2tpt/timp.perc./hp.cel/str



Palintropos

Patmos is a small Greek island in the Aegean Sea, close to the Turkish mainland. A writer, John of Patmos, identifies in the introduction to the Book of Revelation a cave on the island, in which a vision was revealed to him by Christ. This author has been otherwise named as John the Apostle, and the location of the miracle as the Cave of the Apocalypse, now a destination for Christian pilgrims. It is on Patmos that John Tavener spent some time following his conversion to Orthodoxy, and where he wrote *Palintropos* in response to the landscape, and in contemplation of the tradition into which he was so recently initiated.

In the Orthodox Church it is held that the Incarnation - God's descent to Earth in the human form of Jesus Christ - joined both man and nature with God, lending the former two a redemptive divinity. This is in opposition to the Roman Catholic concept of original sin, which assumes an inherited debt of sin for all humanity and nature itself, tracing back to the Fall of Man. Prior to his Orthodox conversion, Tavener had felt a considerable discomfort with such perspectives within Catholicism; his conversion and subsequent stay on Patmos allowed him to reflect on a new perspective and to respond to his surroundings without this stigma.

Tavener recalls that while on Patmos he would sit for hours outside a monastery, conversing with a monk and observing the changing colours on the surface of the sea. He began to develop a 'sound-world of pitches, intervals and instrumentation' with the concept of 'palintropos' in mind: a 'turning-back structure' essential to the piece, as four almost continuous contrasting sections are divided by pulsating brassy, tam-tam and widely spaced strings. The resonances created by the piano's sustain pedal are connected with those colours Tavener watched play over the water, and while the piano decorates and occasionally anticipates the rest of the ensemble, it never dominates.

'Palintropos', its prefix common to the more familiar 'palindrome', can also be translated roughly to a concept of 'reflexive harmony', of repetition, continuity and consequence in which a superabundance of any one force will inevitably produce and be tempered by its opposite, thereby redressing the balance. Tavener relates *Palintropos* most readily to the landscape of Patmos and says that this work is the closest he has written to a tone poem, but also that his withdrawal to the island was perhaps a way of tempering the effects of a lifestyle and beliefs with which he had not felt wholly at ease, and of coming, through contemplation, to a deeper understanding of what he felt were his true spiritual - and musical - needs.



Akhmatova Requiem

1980, 50'

Soloists and large ensemble

Solo voice: Soprano, Bass (Baritone)/3hn.3tpt.3btbn/
2timp.5perc/cel/str

Language: Russian

Akhmatova Requiem was written during 1979, two years after Tavener's conversion to Russian Orthodoxy, and is the first work in which Tavener employed the Orthodox tone systems - eight groups of melodic formulae which form the basis of Orthodox chant and song, and which are rotated weekly throughout the year. Rather than adapting the tone systems to non-liturgical purposes, in *Akhmatova Requiem* Tavener isolates them to direct quotes from Russian Orthodox services, which punctuate his setting of the entirety of *Requiem*, a major work by revered Russian poet Anna Akhmatova (above). *Requiem* is a cycle of 15 poems and one prose paragraph that describe the experiences of Akhmatova and the millions who suffered throughout the Great Purge, Joseph Stalin's regime of repression and persecution during 1936-8. Such persecution had been rife throughout the preceding decades and Akhmatova was notable among the Russian artistic elite for having chosen to stay in her homeland rather than fleeing with other members of her social circle. Though her censure in 1925 made publishing virtually impossible and writing a threat to her life, she did not waste her fierce conviction, continuing to testify in her work to the inhumanity being enacted around her. Though *Requiem* is not a liturgical text, Tavener was strongly affected by its simplicity of expression, interpreting the poem as essentially a meditation on death, and 'deeply Russian,' qualities shared by the tradition with which the composer was at that time familiarising himself through his experiences of Orthodox practice. Akhmatova's stark treatment of anguish, death and maternal grief also touched on Tavener's enduring and profound preoccupations with both mortality and the Mother of God, prompting him to follow her theme to a conclusion settled between the two artists' sensibilities, through the splicing of the original text with prayer from the Russian Orthodox funeral, Resurrection and Good Friday services. Stylistically, *Akhmatova Requiem* meets its inspiration in its spartan scoring, assembled by Tavener to convey and amplify the cold, bleak austerity of the poet's words. The composer describes it as 'monumental in character,' the soprano part being almost continuously active and pausing only to admit the bass soloist as he intones prayers for the

dead. The structure is severe, formal and somewhat ritualistic, with brass, string and percussion driving the vocalists forth on a dark and insidious tide of widely spaced chords reminiscent of Tavener's early setting of Donne poems, *Three Holy Sonnets*.

Tavener asserts that *Akhmatova Requiem* was not intended as a political statement but rather exemplifies what for him is the inevitability of his treating a non-sacred subject in a sacred manner. At the time, the work represented an early step toward Tavener's comprehension and mastery of tradition in his music and he felt that he had captured for the first time his 'voice'. Though he now looks upon the non-liturgical elements of the piece as being mired in a contrived idiom, it is clearly if distantly related to the singular style he was to develop, having purged the influence of the Modernism to which he had been unhappily exposed during his latter education.



1988, 43'

Soloist and orchestra

Solo instrument: Cello

Orchestration: str (min 8.8.6.6.3.)

The Protecting Veil

The title of this work is taken from one of the many possible English renderings of *Pokrov* (Church Slavonic) or *Sképē* (Greek), a feast celebrated each 1 October in the Orthodox Church. The numerous translations result from the words meaning simultaneously 'protection' and 'veil' or 'mantle', as the feast commemorates the protective apparition of Mary, Mother of God, to Andrew, a Holy Fool, and his disciple Epiphanius in the Church of St Mary of Blachernae in the early 10th century, in what was then Constantinople.

The Protecting Veil was written by Tavener with not only this episode but with the entire life and force of Mary in mind, and he has stated that it was intended as a counterpart to the painted icons so central to Orthodox worship. The techniques and approach employed in creating these icons have remained largely unchanged throughout the church's history, exemplifying its emphasis on the constancy of tradition in veneration. Tavener sought to create 'a highly stylised, lyrical icon in sound' as a celebration of Mary, or *Theotokos*, the name given her by the Greek Orthodox church that means literally 'God-bearer'. Tavener represents her appearance to Andrew and Epiphanius, but also the most significant events of her life as honoured by other Orthodox feast days.

Andrew of Constantinople came to the Byzantine capital as the slave of a bodyguard to Emperor Leo VI. He later devoted himself to Christ by becoming a Holy Fool - a Christian who, through ostensibly insane, foolish or outrageous behaviour, attempts to renounce the material in favour of the spiritual; encourage others to remember Christ and do the same; and distance society in order to fully appreciate God. During an invasion of the city by Saracens, Andrew, his disciple Epiphanius and a small group kept a prayer vigil at the Church of St Mary of Blachernae, not far from the city gates. Several of her relics, including her robe, were kept here, and as the group prayed for deliverance, Mary appeared to them. Surrounded by angels and saints, she entered the church through its high domed ceiling and descended into a prayer of protection to Jesus Christ, tears streaming down her face for the suffering Christians. She then covered the assembled faithful with her protective mantle, and departed. The Saracens were driven back from the city gate and the crisis averted.

This miracle is illustrated by the first and last of the eight continuous sections of *The Protecting Veil*, in which the cello represents Mary and her 'song' or unending prayer for Christians. The further, enclosed six represent the Nativity of the Mother of God - her birth; the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she would be the mother of God's son and earthly incarnation Jesus Christ; the Incarnation or birth of Jesus; the Lament of the Mother of God at the Cross, on his crucifixion; the Resurrection; and the Dormition, the 'sleep' or death of the Mother of God. Tavener has made use of the eight Byzantine tone systems associated with these feasts.

The composer has said that, while there is a definite subject matter to the work, it is equally possible to listen to it as 'pure' music, and he feels that the popularity of the work is inseparable from its celebration of the feminine. Tavener has reiterated many times the profound importance in his life of the feminine and of the women who embody it, many of whom have acted as catalysing forces. Tavener's surrounding experiences and beliefs have often been associated with the term 'the Eternal Feminine', intimating as it does the forces of creation, nurture and sustenance. Though the concept is not the exclusive preserve of women, in a world long dominated by patriarchy, the aggressive egoism once essential to the survival and advancement of a species or race has outstripped necessity at the expense of the more altruistic, feminine tendencies responsible for the wellbeing of the whole. In Tavener's view, this emphasis on progress and innovation has contributed to the gradual divergence of Western society from the anchoring effects of tradition and recognition of human unity.



1991, 100'

Opera

Solo voices: Soprano, Alto, Bass

Chorus: SATB. Children's choir

Orchestration: 4fl/3tpt.2tbn/3perc.timp/hp/str (2.0.1.2.1)

Language: English

Mary of Egypt

The story of St Mary of Egypt had 'long haunted' John Tavener, the ostensibly straightforward morals of its two protagonists, Mary - or Maria Aegyptica - and St Zosimas (or Zossima) of Palestine, concealing a greater complexity that has prompted the composer to describe its essential theme as that of 'non-judgement.'

Mary, a prostitute in Alexandria from the age of 12, offered her body not for money but to sate an insatiable lust, resorting for a living to the profits of begging and spinning flax. After 17 years she travelled to Jerusalem with a group of pilgrims, hoping to find more custom on the journey but, once arrived, was instead stricken with remorse upon being denied entry to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre by an unseen force.

Recognising her impurity as the cause of her denial and a boundless love as the cause of her impurity, she prayed for forgiveness to an icon of the Virgin Mary, promising to give up the world and become an ascetic. Attempting once again to enter, she passed freely into the church, where she venerated the relic of the True Cross before returning outside to give thanks to the icon. Here she heard a voice telling her that if she should cross the river Jordan, she would find true peace.

At the monastery of St John the Baptist on the banks of the river, she received absolution and Holy Communion, waking the next morning to cross into the desert, where she lived as a

penitent and hermit until her death.

Mary's encounter with the monk Zosimas came a year from the end of her life, when Zosimas was resident in a monastery near the banks of the Jordan. He was an exceptionally pious man but arrogant in his expectation that his piety would bring him peace. Venturing into the desert to fast and pray during Lent, he crossed the path of the

now-naked Mary - her white hair trailing and her skin by this time blackened by dirt and exposure - and barely recognised her as human. After recounting to him the story of her life, she asked that he bring her

Holy Communion on the banks of the river on Holy Thursday of the following year. This he did, and she told him to again meet her in the same place at Lent. When Zosimas had travelled the 20 days from his

monastery to the meeting place, he found Mary's body there.

An inscription in the sand by her head told that she had died the night

they had last met, her body having been miraculously preserved so that he could, as the message implored, 'bury humble Mary.' A lion, rendered tame in the presence of the holy man, assisted Zosimas in doing so. *Mary of Egypt* is loosely based on an ancient Byzantine

hymn addressed to the Mother of God, 'Awed by thy Beauty', a reference to Zosimas' renewed love of God when glimpsing His beauty through Mary. Both Tavener and Mother Thekla, his frequent collaborator and librettist, were determined that their *Mary of Egypt* should express itself by the plainest means possible, free from operatic convention and with something of the asceticism portrayed. Tavener allowed the work to soak up the influences of Japanese Noh theatre and Indian classical dance, resulting in a highly simplified, stylised treatment of sexuality and other themes that might otherwise tend toward sensation, and tight use of musical material. Through successive versions of the libretto the pair came to call it a 'moving icon' rather than an opera.

Portrait of Anna Akhmatova
(1889-1966), the Poetess,
1914, by Nathan Altman

Akhmatova Songs

1993, 20'

Solo voice and small ensemble

Solo voice: Soprano

Orchestration: string quartet, alt. version solo cello

Language: Russian



John Tavener has twice set the works of the Russian-Soviet Modernist poet Anna Akhmatova, first in 1980 with the entirety of her *Requiem*, then again as fragments of poetry gathered from the span of her career and assembled into *Akhmatova Songs*, 'a sort of cycle.'

Akhmatova was one of the very few artists who remained not only in Russia during the Stalinist purges, but true to her convictions against the regime. These were frequently expressed, in varying degrees of explicitness as the political climate allowed, throughout her lifetime. Akhmatova's attachment to her country extended to a deep respect for her compatriot writers: the Romantics Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov, and her contemporary and close friend Boris Pasternak, who himself was imperturbable in his refusal to yield to Stalinist pressure to condemn his colleagues. A direct appeal to the leader by Pasternak during the Great Purge resulted in his name being personally removed from the execution list by Stalin, who warned his subordinates: 'Do not touch this cloud dweller' - or so Pasternak claimed.

Her brief odes to these artists are flanked in *Akhmatova Songs* by poems acknowledging the Florentine writer and thinker Dante Alighieri, in whose work and persecution by Florentine authorities Akhmatova and her contemporaries developed an acute interest, drawing parallels with the Florence of Dante's time and the St Petersburg of their own, and further, with their treatment by the Soviet state. *Dante*, written at the onset of the Great Purge and in the same year as *Boris Pasternak*, here opens Tavener's work, superficially describing the poet's integrity in preferring exile over the terms of return offered him by the government, while allegorically commenting on the conditions imposed by Stalin on the likes of Akhmatova. *Death*, which here closes the sequence, again mentions the author of *The Divine Comedy* as

Akhmatova relates an exchange with the Muse:
'I say to her: "Did you dictate to Dante The script of Hell?"
She answers: "I."'

In implying that her muse is identical to that which delivered to Dante his description of the Inferno, Akhmatova likens Soviet Russia, and her task of recording it, to the Italian poet's rendering of Hell. Tavener also notes that *Death* is indeed Akhmatova's yearning anticipation of her own inevitable demise.

In the central Couplet of *Akhmatova Songs*, the poet voices, in the stark, precise language to which Tavener is so drawn, her indifference to praise, and it is this simple precision, born of the classical tradition, that Tavener has sought to reflect in his settings for soprano and cello. It is not until *Death*, at the close of the work, that the musical material is layered to create a more complex climax.

Soprano Patricia Rozario, for whom the *Songs* were written, in part inspired the use of an Indian *raga*, or melodic mode, as the basis for one of the *Songs*. Beyond such choices, Tavener feels that works of this period marked a departure from human emotion as a creative force in his work. Instead he references the Platonic - and Christian - idea that music already exists, as created by a higher agency, and that it remains to be found by an artist once the effects of ego have dissipated.

Saint Kassia by 20th century Russian painter Elena Kisterova



1993, 40'

Chorus and orchestra

Solo instrument: viola/Chorus: SATB

Orchestration: perc

Languages: English, Greek

The Myrrh-Bearer

The eponymous myrrh-bearer of this work is the subject of a troparion, or short hymn, written by the Byzantine Saint Kassia (also Cassiane), in the mid-9th century. Kassia was born into a wealthy Constantinople family and is reputed to have grown into an exceptionally intelligent and beautiful woman. Some chroniclers claim that, when at the age of 17 the Emperor Theophilus was required to choose a wife, Kassia was his favoured participant in the customary bride show. Seeking to measure her character, he goaded her: 'Through a woman came the baser things,' an openly provocative reference to Eve's transgression and ensuing human suffering and sin. Kassia rose instantly to the challenge, countering: 'And through a woman came the better things,' a redemptive reminder of the delivery of Christ's earthly manifestation through a mortal woman. His pride wounded, Theophilus chose another bride and Kassia went on to found an abbey, writing poetry, music and hymns.

In most accounts, their mutual romantic feelings endured despite divergent paths, and at the end of his life Theophilus attempted to visit Kassia at the abbey. Witnessing his approach, she left the hymn she was writing on her desk, hid and watched as he wept for the love they had

relinquished. Aware of her presence, he respected her wish to remain unseen and instead read through her work, adding one line before leaving. Traditionally, it is held that Kassia abandoned her hymn at the line, 'I will kiss thy immaculate feet/ and dry them with the locks of my hair,' to which Theophilus added: 'Those very feet whose sound Eve heard at dusk in Paradise/ and hid herself in fear,' before granting her return to solitude. This, her most famous composition, became known as the Hymn of Kassiani and is sung on Holy Wednesday in Orthodox services.

Yet other accounts have Kassia continuing a relationship with the Emperor as his mistress, and it is this version in combination with the penitent theme of the troparion from which Tavener drew inspiration. The poet underwent prayers of deep repentance, and the myrrh-bearer to whom she likens herself refers, in Eastern Orthodoxy, to the female followers of Christ - among them Mary Magdalene - who presided over his burial and, returning after the Sabbath to the tomb to anoint his body with myrrh, discovered that he had risen. The solo viola is intended to reflect the text, simultaneously representing the spiritual elevation of both Kassia and Mary Magdalene: '*Sensing Thy divinity, O Lord, a woman of many sins/ takes it upon herself to become a myrrh-bearer.*'

The music follows its subject from profound penitence to the clear and infinite expanses of an enlightenment that has moved beyond intellectual capacity, as the viola is driven from its very lowest note by an increasing ecstasy, punctuated by the prosaic anarchy of the chorus and bass drums' worldly concerns.

Finally the viola - Mary Magdalene - falls at the feet of Christ, recognising his divinity and the irrelevance of human constructs, even as the chorus delivers its emphatic final ignorance of God, countering, 'We have no king but Caesar - Caesar - Caesar!'



At The Temple Church, London in 2003, the venue for the premiere performance of *The Veil of the Temple*

2002, 7 hrs

Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Solo voice: Soprano

Chorus: SATB, Boys' choir

Orchestration: duduk/3hn.2tpt.tbn+btbn/Tibetan horn/

timp.3 temple bowls(high,medium,low).tam.tbells/

org.indian harmonium

Languages: English, Greek, Hebrew,

Church Slavonic, Sanskrit,Aramaic

The Veil of the Temple

Tavener considers *The Veil of the Temple* to be his greatest compositional achievement, and indeed it is the culmination of a lifetime of not only musical, but philosophical and spiritual enquiry.

The seven-hour vigil, comprising eight cycles 'like a gigantic prayer wheel,' is neither liturgical nor concert music, and is to be performed overnight in a sacred space, though without emphasis on one theology over another.

Written at the beginning of the new millennium, *The Veil of the Temple* is an expression of Tavener's profound realisation that at the basis of all religions there exists no division, for they are inspired by the same ultimate truth. The various interpretations of this truth are the result of man's need to relate it to the world around him, but as his environment necessarily differs from culture to culture, and as human nature tends toward the worldly, the differences between these interpretations have come to loom much larger than their common inspiration. The veil of

the title refers to these obstructions, and in the eighth cycle they are pulled away to reveal the universal nature of faith.

Tavener approaches the exposure of this concept through the eight cycles, each of which is longer than the last, its pitch higher, and the volume and scale of the performance increased until the close of the seventh cycle announces the rending of the veil, revealing to the listener the ecstasy of the universal divine. The solo soprano, representing *Ātman* - the Hindu 'self', identical with the ultimate truth - and Mary Magdalene, travels through all eight cycles to the final realisation that the soul's destination is identical with its origin, and that it is to here that it has striven to return throughout its earthly manifestation.

Though the work draws significantly on Christian liturgy and is heavily influenced by Orthodox vigil services and Byzantine music, it embraces with equal passion Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Judaic and Native American dogmas and music. The structure of the cycles bears similarities to Eastern Orthodox tone systems - sets of melodies attached to specific liturgical practices - and at the centre of each are verses from St John's Gospel. These relate, over the first seven cycles, Christ's final dialogue with his disciples, in which he alludes to the Crucifixion, Resurrection, Pentecost and the Ascension. A cacophonous chorus of tam tam, temple bowls, Tibetan horn, bells, simantron and organ herald the close of the seventh cycle and the revelation of the eighth, in which the veil, or illusion of religious separation, becomes light and reveals the reality of spiritual unity. To quote Frithjof Schuon, an exponent of Universalism and the greatest influence on Tavener's philosophy at the time, 'The veil had become light - and indeed there is no longer any veil.' By removing literalistic religious divisions and revealing their single source, the work seeks to restore some sense of the sacred to an increasingly secular society.

A shortened, concert version of *The Veil of the Temple* exists where the full work may not be performed, and at almost 3 hours, conveys as much as possible of the essence and rising intensity of the all-night vigil. Elements of the full work are also available for independent performance.



Lament for Jerusalem

2002, 50'

Chorus and orchestra

Solo voice: Soprano, Countertenor

Chorus: SATB

Orchestration: 2(afl).1.0.0/4.3.3.0/

tbells.3temple bowls/hp/str

Languages: English, Greek

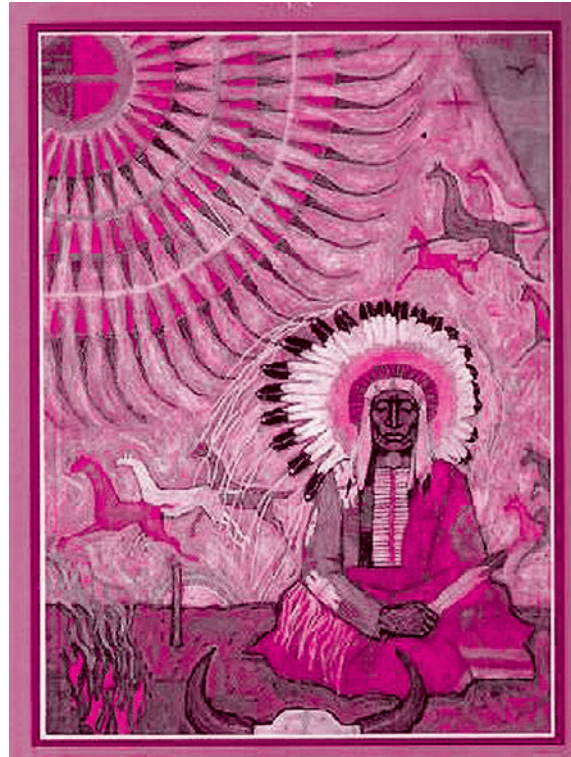
Jerusalem, to the modern and secular mind, is the scene both of significant episodes in the foundation of three major religions, and the conflicts now dividing them. For Tavener, the spiritual fertility of the place itself demonstrates man's innate longing for meaning; our contemporary perceptions have leached Jerusalem of its symbolic power to bestow that meaning, and we are left adrift. *Lament for Jerusalem* is therefore not a comment on the present woes of an ancient city, but a love song to a spiritual cradle, a lost paradise from which we have fallen and are unable to find the way back due to the temporary loss of what Tavener terms 'beatific vision'.

In philosophy, phenomena are those things perceptible to the senses, while noumena belong to ultimate reality, a plane beyond human perception. It is the desire to experience noumena that religion strives to sate, but as *Lament for Jerusalem* contends, this desire can only begin to be realised through the unifying energy of love; the traditional forms of belief are still phenomena, cloaking the universal nature of their own tenets. The work combines texts from the Christian, Judaic and Islamic faiths, forming a cohesive whole from the basic forces behind seemingly disparate beliefs. The simple seven-stanza structure is intended to reflect the purity of a love song, and the collective presence in each stanza of elements of each faith generates a fourth, universal dimension representing the Divine, or noumenon.

Texts include Christ's lament over Jerusalem (Matthew 23), in which the scribes and the Pharisees are admonished for their moral and spiritual paucity, before the announcement of woes upon them, sung in Greek by the chorus; the Judaic Psalm 137, 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,' divided between the choir and the solo soprano; and the Islamic prologue of Sufi saint and poet Rumi's *Masnavi*, a poetic collection of anecdotes and stories designed to guide Sufis in achieving union with God, which was described by the poet himself as 'the roots of the roots of the roots of [the Islamic] religion.' This is sung throughout by the solo countertenor.

While voices convey the *Logos*, or Word of God, of each tradition, the more abstract concepts behind elements of *Lament for Jerusalem* are expressed instrumentally, with love represented by the flutes, oboe and strings; regal dignity by the brasses; and ritual by the harp, Tibetan temple bowls and tubular bells. Tavener urges performers to invest in *Lament for Jerusalem* great intensity, but with a purity of intent and bearing that allows the music to transcend human experience and reflect the mystical and sublime nature of the texts.

A painting by Swiss
philosopher and poet
Frithjof Schuon



Schuon Lieder

2003, 60'

Solo voice and up to 6 players

Solo voice: Soprano

Orchestration: str quartet, pno, 4 temple bowls

Language: German

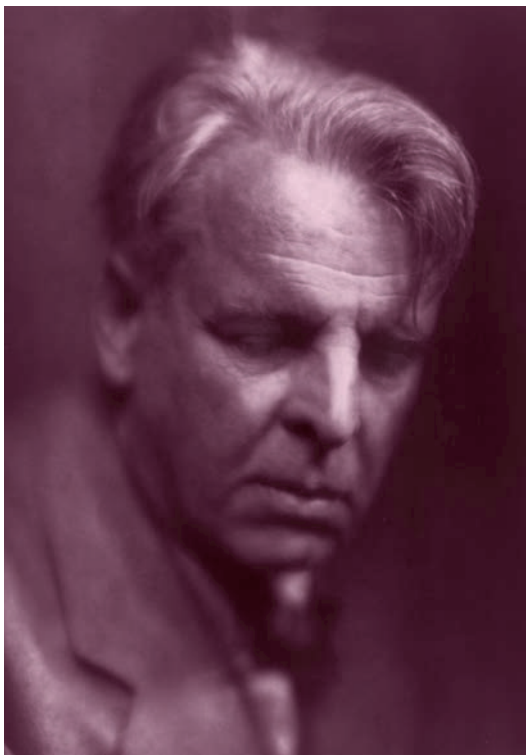
Lieder are an originally German song form in which poetry, often with romantic or pastoral themes, is set for a single singer with piano or orchestral accompaniment. The text of lieder usually influences the character of the music more than in other vocal genres, and here it has also influenced its texture, with *Schuon Lieder* being scored for string quartet, piano and four Tibetan temple bowls in addition to soprano voice.

The use of the bowls is a reflection of the metaphysical nature of the text: 19 poems by the Swiss philosopher and poet Frithjof Schuon, chosen from among more than 3,500 written in his lifetime. The vast majority of these were composed in his final years, and in German.

Schuon was one of the foremost proponents of Traditionalism, a school of thought also termed Perennialism which focuses on the fundamental metaphysical concepts common to all religious traditions, and which encourages their internalisation in order to detach from material concerns.

Tavener was introduced to the work of Schuon and his fellow Traditionalists Ananda Coomaraswamy and René Guénon in the late 1990s, and felt an immediate connection with ideas he had at an embryonic level nurtured for many years. Though his initial contact with Schuon's writing was through his dialectic essays, Tavener was equally impressed by Schuon's gift for poetry, in which he admires the writer's child-like attitude to God and the very prevalent feminine dimension – an emphasis common to both men. Schuon, a Sufi, believed that the profound was best approached with simplicity.

Tavener's settings are likewise spontaneous responses to Schuon's poetry, each based on a series of 25 notes that Tavener describes as 'musical mirrors of Divine Love.' The songs are separated by one or more canons for string quartet based on material from the preceding songs. Tavener regards *Song XII* as the focal point of the work, setting as it does a poem Schuon wrote when the unhappy conclusion of a love affair encouraged him further toward God.



William Butler Yeats
photographed by
Pirie Mac Donald

Supernatural Songs

2003, 30'

Soloists and orchestra

Solo voice: Mezzo soprano (=baritone)

Orchestration: pow-wow drum.

Hindu temple gong/str(8.8.4.4.3)

Language: English

William Butler Yeats, cited by Tavener as having been called 'the most learned of poets,' his entire life immersed himself in the spiritual and the occult. At just 27 he wrote that, 'If I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word... The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write.' This preoccupation with mysticism would continue to infuse his later writing, one significant component of which was an interest in Hinduism which, once established as a new dimension in his work, both resonated with and repelled readers, the latter group including critics who dismissed such works as lacking intellectual credibility.

While Tavener does not draw explicit parallels between Yeats and himself, it is this common thirst for the supernatural that renders Yeats, for him, 'the supreme artist of the 20th century', and the one with whom he feels the greatest accord. In their ceaseless spiritual explorations, both have found inspiration and enriched perceptive and expressive capacities; and, in their latter Universalist approaches, a means of circumventing the distortions imposed by popular intellectualism.

Yeats' late poems are steeped in the Upanishads, a collection of over 200 philosophical texts considered to be the basis of modern Hinduism. In Tavener's work, this influence is reflected in the orchestral timbres employed to colour Yeats' texts, which comprise three excerpts from his *Supernatural Songs*, interspersed with excerpts from a further three poems. These are bookended by the entirety of *Do Not Love Too Long*, and a single line from Yeats' play, *Where There Is Nothing*. The whole begins with a line in Latin from St Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions*, commonly rendered in English as, 'Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient and ever new! Late have I loved you!'. This is possibly a reference to Tavener's interest in Universalism having followed a number of earlier and more specific spiritual affinities.

Tavener has chosen the pow-wow drum's primal character to represent mysticism, while the Hindu temple gong embodies the influence of the Upanishads on Yeats' poetry. Both of these instruments also have significance in the context of Tavener's own deep respect for both Native American and Hindu metaphysical thought. From St Augustine's exclamation on Divine Love we are drawn by the synthesis of text and music through human love, Greek myth, Hindu ecstasy, and death, resulting in a description of Tavener's view of the 'vast horizon of human experience' encompassed by Yeats' own artistic vision.

Tavener's intention in *Supernatural Songs* was to express the qualities of ecstasy and what the poet termed 'tragic gaiety' realised in Yeats' Universalist approach. For the composer, this work represents, in miniature, the shift in metaphysical thinking that came over him whilst composing the latter part of *The Veil of the Temple* some months earlier.

The Beautiful Names

2004, 70'
Chorus and orchestra/ensemble
Orchestration: 0000/0.4.2+btbn.0/timp.2perc
(Pow-wow Drum, 4 Tibetan Temple Bowls, 4 Gongs, Very Large Tam-tam)/pf+org/str(8.7.6.5.4)
Language: Arabic

1. Al-Rahman	The Merciful	71. Al-Muqaddim	The Witness
2. Al-Rahim	The Compassionate	72. Al-Hadi	The Truth, The Fleet
3. Al-Malik	The King	73. Al-Qadir	The Trustee, The Dependable
4. Al-Qadir	The Power, The Omnipotent	74. Al-Razak	The Strong
5. Al-Qabul	The Answerer	75. Al-Jabbar	The Firm, The Resolute
6. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	76. Al-Mutakabbir	The Protecting Friend, Patron and Helper
7. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	77. Al-Muhsib	The All-Providing
8. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner, The Reckoner	78. Al-Muhsib	The Accessor, The Nearer of All
9. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner, The Reckoner	79. Al-Muhsib	The Provider, Originator, and Initiator of a
10. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner, The Reckoner	80. Al-Muhsib	The Releaser Who Brings Back All
11. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	81. Al-Muhsib	The Gift of Life
12. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	82. Al-Muhsib	The Bringer of Death, The Destroyer
13. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	83. Al-Muhsib	The Ever-Living
14. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	84. Al-Muhsib	The Self-Sustaining Sustainer of All
15. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	85. Al-Muhsib	The Sustainer, The Provider, The Unfailing
16. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	86. Al-Muhsib	The Ruler, The Sovereign
17. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	87. Al-Muhsib	The One, The All-Sufficient, The Indefinite
18. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	88. Al-Muhsib	The Self-Sufficient, The Irresistible
19. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	89. Al-Muhsib	The All-Abble
20. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	90. Al-Muhsib	The All-Determiner, The Dominant
21. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	91. Al-Muhsib	The Expediter, He Who Brings Forward
22. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	92. Al-Muhsib	The Delayer, He Who Pushes Far Away
23. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	93. Al-Muhsib	The First
24. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	94. Al-Muhsib	The Last
25. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	95. Al-Muhsib	The Most Honored, The All-Victorious
26. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	96. Al-Muhsib	The Hidden, The All-Encompassing
27. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	97. Al-Muhsib	The Patron
28. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	98. Al-Muhsib	The Self-Exalted
29. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner	99. Al-Muhsib	The Most Kind and Righteous
30. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner		
31. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner		
32. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner		
33. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner		
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68. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner		
69. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner		
70. Al-Muhsib	The Reckoner		

The Beautiful Names was written during a period in which Tavener was avidly exploring the Universalist approach to theology, which recognises all representations of the divine as in fact referring to the same source. Universalism encourages positive discussion of the similarities between faiths, rather than focussing on conflicting interpretations. Consequently, *The Beautiful Names* contains elements of Islam and Hinduism, as well as Native American and Tibetan instrumentation, and cannot but have been informed by Tavener's own long spiritual evolution.

The 99 names of the title have been drawn from the Quran, the holy book of Islam, for in the Sufi tradition there are 99 ways of referring to God, or *Allah*, each corresponding to one of His divine manifestations to humanity. They are divided into names of majesty and names of mercy, and can be viewed as universal if one subscribes to the idea that they refer to all manifestations of the divine in the world, rather than to an exclusively Islamic deity.

Tavener says that the music arrived to him after deep daily contemplation of the meaning and sound of each name, echoing the Sufi meditative practice of *dhikr*. His realisation of the piece was spontaneous and fully formed, 'never random or chaotic, but seemed to have the logic of cosmic music.' Tavener decided to structure the work around the Hindu concept of the seven-fold constitution of man, according to which humans comprise four 'lower' and three 'higher' components. The lower four are of our earthly existence, and perish with our bodies: they are the physical form, energy, emotions and intellect. The three higher parts are pure intelligence, pure love and pure will, and they are eternal and inseparable from the divine.

This produced a sequence of nine 'zones' of eleven names each. The first eight of these are preceded and separated by cries of 'Allah' as well as canons for either strings, three trombones, or four trumpets with piano and timpani. The final set of eleven names acts as a coda, and is therefore not prefaced. The Native American pow-wow drum represents the drum of the Hindu deity Shiva, being struck every 99 beats until the coda, while the Tibetan temple bowls, gongs and tam-tam represent the Divine Breath. The two choirs reflect this in a mass exhalation that depicts the Sigh of Sadness and Compassion of the Primordial Being, while a string quartet, set at a distance, represents Divine Mercy. Tavener explains that 'the music abounds in mirrors, thus emphasising the presence of the Divine in His creatures.'

Sollemnitas In Conceptione Immaculata Beatae Mariae Virginis

2006, 100'

Chorus and orchestra

Solo voice: Soprano

Solo instruments: String quartet, bandir drum

Chorus: SATB double choir, T.2Bar.4B soli

Orchestration: 4tpt.3tbn.btbn/timp.

2perc (pow-wow drum, Tibetan temple bowls, hand bells)/
org/str (6.6.4.4.2)

Languages: Latin, Sanskrit, Greek, Arabic,
Aramaic, German, Italian, Native American

Tavener joyfully describes *Conceptione* as 'a commission sent from Heaven.' The messenger was the German organist Christoph Maria Moosmann, whose specific mission for Tavener was no less than a Universalist setting of the Mass for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a request that left very little room for objection. As Tavener himself has enthused, it is to his passions for the Orthodox Church, the Hindu doctrine of Advaita Vedanta, the Eternal Feminine, and a profound reverence for the Virgin Mary that his life and work have bent, and thus the music 'seemed to explode onto the page.'

The Immaculate Conception is a Roman Catholic dogma according to which the Virgin Mary, though born of natural processes, was herself conceived 'without stain' - in Latin *macula*, thus *im-maculata*. Though often confused with the virgin birth of Jesus, in which Mary miraculously conceived her firstborn son whilst still a virgin, the Immaculate Conception places emphasis on Mary's own exemption from original sin and thus her fitness to bear the infant Christ. However, *Conceptione* seeks to express the radiance of the Eternal Feminine represented by the Virgin Mary, more than her specific embodiment of it. As a force, the Eternal Feminine - the feminine manifestation of God's benevolence - both descends from Heaven to aid, as mother, and attracts to Heaven, as virgin, thus symbolising both the continuity of human life, and its literal and spiritual nourishment. Though here spoken of with reference to Christianity, as with many of Tavener's principal spiritual inclinations this concept is common to several traditions.

In *Conceptione*, Tavener connects this dual significance with the Hindu goddesses invoked during a celebration of the 'Mother of the Universe'. His use of Latin, Sanskrit, Arabic, Aramaic, Greek, German, Italian and Native American languages expands the scope of worship to encompass multiple approaches, common to all of which is a reverence for the Eternal Feminine in some form.

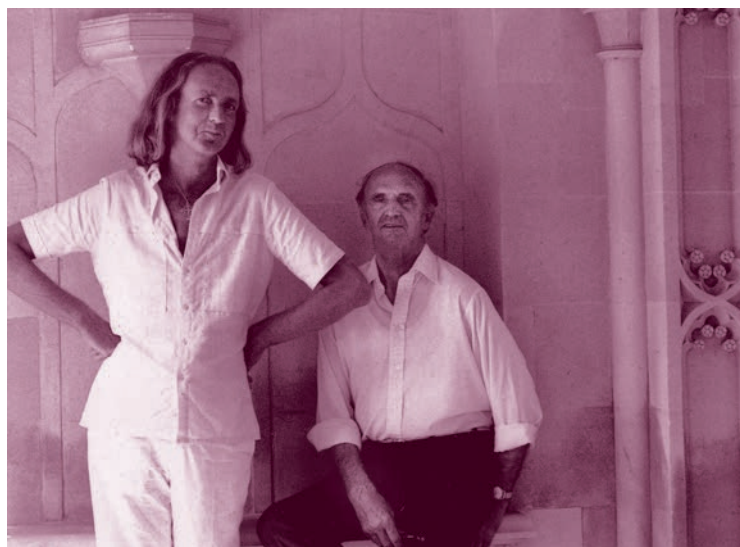
Tavener describes the work as having a 'mosaic-like' structure, a representation of metaphysical concepts composed of harmonies and melodic ideas. The Magnificat is punctuated by six quotes from Tavener's 1988 work, *The Protecting Veil*, underlining the significance of the Immaculate Conception by reminding the listener that it was from the Virgin that Christ inherited his entire human nature.

Tavener strongly believes that at a time when religious doctrines are apparently losing relevance, there is an even greater need for each to shed its exclusivity and accept a universal perspective; such a setting of the Mass is thus highly timely.



The Immaculate Conception
Joan de Joanes

John Tavener
with his father



Requiem

The core of this *Requiem* is expressed by the statement that, 'Our glory lies where we cease to exist,' one of the 225 Truths of Sri Ramana Maharshi, a Hindu spiritual master active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Though the work comprehends Hinduism, Catholicism, Islam and Sufism, *Requiem* draws most significantly on Hinduism's Universalist approach to spirituality.

Tavener himself feels that the existence of religious doctrine hinges on man's inability to extinguish the 'false self' and to allow the true self (identical with God and the universe) to be attained. He explains this conviction by his belief that despite superficial conflicts, every religion strives to the same end, and is ultimately the doctrine of the self - of self-realisation through reunification with a single spiritual origin.

This view was shared by Ramakrishna, another 19th-century Hindu mystic who was believed by some to be an incarnation of this ultimate spiritual reality. He readily explored other religious traditions, most prominently Islam and Christianity, but arrived at the conclusion that all lead to the same Supreme Being, or concept of a manifest energy.

Ramakrishna principally worshipped the goddess Kali and claimed to have seen her manifest as the Supreme Being, and in the fourth movement of *Requiem*, the judgment of Christ depicted in the *Dies Irae* intersects with the ferocious Kali's Dance, based on an Indian rhythmic pattern called Mohara, which 'dances' throughout. This meeting of traditions not only represents the intersection of the temporal and the eternal, but is the climactic point of a highly structured piece of seven movements, reflecting the cruciform performance space for which it is intended.

The solo cello symbolises the Primordial Light said to journey with a soul from death to the state of unity, and thus the soloist takes up position in the centre of the formation. Choir and brass are in the east end, with strings, solo treble and solo tenor opposite in the west end. The north and south house the Tibetan temple bowls, gongs and tam-tam, two sets of timpani and a pow-wow drum. The audience is seated in the midst of these clusters. The cello guides us through the first and second movements on its journey to Paradise, representing the fading false self before its total annihilation played out in Kali's Dance and juxtaposed with the Judgment of Christ. The following two movements fall into serenity followed by the ecstasy of the second movement, before settings of Sanskrit, Hebrew, Greek and Arabic texts all communicate in pulsating rhythm the statement, 'I am that - I am God.'

A particularly famous saying of Ramakrishna would seem to encapsulate the purpose not only of *Requiem* but of Tavener himself, in music and in life, that 'He is born in vain, who having attained the human birth, so difficult to get, does not attempt to realise God in this very life.' From a spiritual viewpoint secular society, by favouring worldly enlightenment through human innovation, is only drifting further from the fulfilment it seeks

2007, 35'

Chorus and orchestra/ensemble

Solo voices: Soprano.Tenor

Solo instrument: cello

Orchestration: 4tpt.4tbn/timp.pow-wow drum.Tibetan temple bowls.2gongs.tamtam /org/str

Languages: English, Latin



René Guénon, author of *Man and his Becoming according to the Vedantā*, the inspiration for *Towards Silence*

2007, 30'

Large ensemble

Orchestration: four string quartets/ large Tibetan temple bowl

Towards Silence

In Hindu philosophy, *Brahman* refers to absolute reality - the transcendent self of which each manifested being shares a part, known as *Ātman*, the higher self. Unlike the Western conception of the self, however, *Ātman* is a continuation of *Brahman* and not a particularisation of it; it is not specific to that being, but is its true essence as well as that of the universe.

As *Ātman* is identical with *Brahman*, so each being is ultimately identical, and while it cannot be sensed or quantified, the nature of *Ātman* can be known by individuals through a process of enlightenment. The word *Ātman* is a cognate not only of the root word *et-men*, but of the Old English, Greek and German words meaning 'to breathe'.

The Upanishads, a body of texts concerned primarily with *Brahman*, are a commentary on the Vedas, a larger collection constituting the oldest Sanskrit literature and Hindu philosophical writings. The Upanishads are considered a distillation of the Vedas and form the basis of Vedantic thought. René Guénon, a French metaphysical author and intellectual, wrote in 1925 an exposition of Hindu metaphysical and philosophical thought, entitled *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedantā*.

The work - as with the majority of Guénon's writings - aimed to bring to Western minds the universal character of Eastern doctrines and expose the manner in which, throughout its history, Eastern metaphysical thought has maintained an uninterrupted line originating at what he felt was an original transmission to humanity from the source of wisdom. Guénon was convinced that the West's failure to maintain such a lineage, and the construction in its place of metaphysical doctrines modelled closely on human experience rather than a neutral, overarching universal essence, was at the root of the moral and spiritual degeneration of the modern Western world. This trajectory led toward the rise of individualism and the ever-expanding divide between man and an understanding of his own infinite nature.

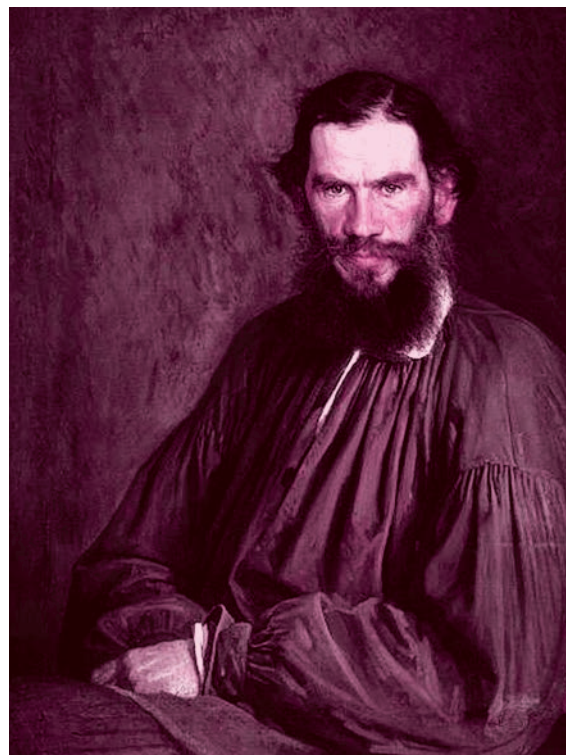
Guénon's Universalist approach and his conviction that the steady degeneration of modern Western society was due to the lack of a continuous tradition resonated deeply with Tavener. *Towards Silence*, while it may be interpreted superficially as a meditation on states of death, was inspired by *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedantā* and rather reflects the four States of Atma as described by Guénon. These are Vaishvanara, the waking state whose world is that of gross manifestation and worldly objects, and which has 19 mouths;

Tajjasa, the dream state inhabiting the world of subtle manifestation and of inward objects, and which also has 19 mouths; Prajna, the Condition of Deep Sleep, in which the sleeper does not dream and feels no desire, only beatitude; and Tunya, a state of total beatitude without duality, free of any mode of existence.

In *Towards Silence*, Tavener has sought to represent the four States of Atma with four string quartets, each playing unseen in high galleries. Throughout the first three States, a Tibetan temple bowl sounds every 19 beats to symbolise the 19 mouths, and in the last pulses to evoke the eternal nature of *Ātman*. Five revolving musical ideas begin in the first State and at this point reflect its complex and manifest qualities; the second state is exactly twice the length of the first and its reduced complexity accords with the nature of the 'Dream State'; in the third state of 'Deep Sleep' a resonant halo of sound continues thrice the length of the first State; and the longest, subtlest statement of the five ideas is found in the representation of the final State, opening at last onto silence.

The composer views this work as something of a 'musical experiment', to be approached as 'liquid metaphysics' rather than concert music. It should be performed in a resonant building, with the Tibetan temple bowl placed in the highest possible position. The string quartets should play from raised galleries equidistant from one another, and sounding above the audience.

Leo Tolstoy painted by
Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoi



2012, 25'

Soloist and orchestra

Solo voice: Bass baritone

Solo instrument: cello

Orchestration: 0.0.0.0/0.0.1+btbn.0
/timp.perc / pf / str

The Death of Ivan Ilyich

Following the completion of Tavener's 2007 piece *Towards Silence*, a meditation on the four states of being - and therefore also of death - as defined in Hinduism, the composer became very seriously ill.

Nicholas Kenyon described the work as sounding closest to the experience of near death as any music he knows, and though of course the extremity of Tavener's imminent ill health could not have been foreseen during its composition, his subsequent recovery and composition of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* somewhat bookended a period marked by deep contemplation of mortality.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich is based on the novella of the same name by high-born Russian writer Leo Tolstoy. It was one of the first major works composed by Tavener following his recovery, which he insists was greatly aided by reading Tolstoy and Shakespeare, and listening to late Beethoven and Mozart. While it was to Mozart's Mass in C Minor that Tavener literally regained consciousness, it was Tolstoy who lifted the creative pall that had descended during his illness. Though Tavener had read *Ivan Ilyich* as a teenager, the intervening decades of precarious health and his recent reflection on the fluid nature of mortality during the writing of *Towards Silence* had heightened Tavener's receptiveness to the ambivalent plight of the story's protagonist.

Over his lifetime Tolstoy became consumed by the ideals of pacifism, asceticism, anarchism and a form of Christian ethics that drew much practical direction from the Sermon on the Mount. By the time of *Ivan Ilyich*, he was firmly attached to the renunciation of the material and social benefits that were his birthright, and his relationship with his wife had deteriorated significantly as a result of the acceleration of his beliefs.

Ivan Ilyich details the decline and death of the eponymous high court judge, whose own life has been dominated by material and social ambition at the expense of his family relationships. While hanging curtains in a new and prestigious apartment, he injures his side and though the nature of his injury remains unknown to a parade of costly doctors, it gradually becomes apparent that he is dying. Terrified by the relentless and mysterious advance of death, Ivan Ilyich rails against his fate, while his wife and family, having decided to evade the subject in favour of attempting to calm him, leave him to contemplate how such a cruel and bewildering end could be inflicted upon one so worthy. Only his peasant servant Gerasim shows him compassion, and during this time it is only Gerasim whom Ivan can abide. However, in the final hour of his life and after three days spent screaming in rage and terror, he is struck by the clear recognition of his own selfishness in the throes of death as well as in life, and pities his family for his treatment of them. He goes willingly to his death in the hope that it might liberate them, whispering to himself that, 'Death has gone'. In Tavener's adaptation, a monodrama for bass baritone, solo cello, two trombones and strings, this moment is marked by a musical apotheosis.

There are parallels with the character of Ivan Ilyich in the lives of both Tolstoy and Tavener: Tolstoy, in the unhappy marital relationship caused by the pursuit of his ideals, however at odds they may have been with those of his protagonist; and Tavener, in his experience of severe pain and illness, sometimes without definite cause or cure, and his consequent meditations on the nature of death. The psychologist Mark Freeman wrote that, among much else, Tolstoy's story is 'about the consequences of living without meaning, that is, without a true and abiding connection to one's life'. The desire to live with meaning has motivated all of John Tavener's lifelong spiritual exploration, and it has often been his struggles with serious illness that have spurred him to greater connection with his own life.



In progress
Pantomime opera
(*Love Duet* premiered 2013)
Narrator, soloists, chorus and orchestra

The Play of Krishna

As a child of 12 attending the Glyndebourne Festival, John Tavener was struck by the brilliance of Mozart - in particular, by *The Magic Flute*, with its exquisite and playful musical depictions of archetypal characters. An even younger Tavener had a fondness for staging impromptu solo concerts for his grandfather, in which he would recreate elemental sounds such as thunder and crashing waves, and it is possible to see in both of these early fascinations the infant form of Tavener's later and more explicit emphasis on writing music as a means by which to express something much bigger, more constant and enduring than the self. Tavener, as with Mozart and his archetypes, seeks to communicate universal truths that transcend our narrower individual experiences and thus are recognisable to all.

While *The Magic Flute* has never fallen from favour with Tavener, it has taken him several decades of navigation through compositional fashions and his own metaphysical evolution to arrive back to a position in which it is a direct influence. *Krishna* marks a return for Tavener, following his extreme ill health, to music that is universal in scope and ecstatic in mood. Its composition and characterisations draw much from the character of Mozart's *Singspiel*, presenting as it does episodes from the life of Krishna in what Tavener has described as a 'mystical pantomime' employing mime, dance, song and acting. One of the many incarnations of Vishnu, the Supreme Being as worshipped in the Vaishnavist form of Hinduism, Krishna is most often depicted either as an infant or small child; or as a noble young man renowned as a hero or lover. He embodies *Līla*, the playful, blissful side of Vishnu and in whatever guise, there is about him a prevailing air of mischief mingled with enlightened composure, a kind of ideal spiritual guide.

Each of the fourteen vignettes from Krishna's life as illustrated in Sanskrit in *Krishna* operates equally on a literal and an esoteric level, so that the action represents not only what the audience sees and hears, but what this implies metaphysically. To illuminate this dual significance for the audience, Tavener has created the role of the 'Celestial Narrator', effectively a master of ceremonies who describes the onstage action to the audience very simply in English, moving among them and teasing out their responses by being himself alternately beguiling and frightening, benevolent and malevolent. The Celestial Narrator is played by a mercurial and charismatic baritone throughout, while the character of Krishna progresses from a treble to a baritone as he ages.

The play opens with the weeping earth deity Bhūmi, who has assumed the form of a cow in order to beg the Supreme Being to aid the overburdened earth. She stands before the Ocean of Milk, one of the seven oceans of various liquids described in Hindu cosmology and the domain of Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi. Krishna is then incarnated by a kind of meditative transmission to a woman's womb; we see his ecstatic birth and attempted murder by the demoness Putana; his mother's discovery of the heavens and universe inside his mouth;

his first meeting with Radha, an earthly incarnation of Lakshmi and one of the 108 *Gopi*, or cow-herd girls; his trickery of the *Gopi* to reveal themselves to him; the dance of the *Gopi* in which he appears to each of them; and his departure from them. We then arrive at the love duet, the half-way point of the play and its climactic scene: the Supreme Being makes loves to Radha, adoring her in his earthly incarnation as Krishna. Tavener describes the music for their choreographed union as 'the most ecstatic I have ever written.' Each time Krishna sings, the sacred mantra '*Om namō narāyanāya*' is chanted, connecting the incarnation to his cosmic counterpart.

The subsequent scenes guide us through Krishna's defeat of evil; his abduction of Rukhmini as his principal wife; the meeting of Radha and Rukhmini and the elision of their souls and bodies through love of Krishna; and his withdrawal from the world and return to paradise. The Epilogue presents a scene suggestive of our current age, which is by many Hindus believed to be the *Kali Yuga*, characterised by imbalance and aggression and the last in a cycle of four phases of decreasing enlightenment. There are echoes of Bhūmi's weeping, as Krishna sings from paradise that when evil prevails and truth declines, he will return to the world.

Glossary



Akhmatova

Anna Akhmatova (Anna Andreyevna Gorenko, 1889-1966) was a Russian-Soviet modernist poet whose stark yet emotive descriptions of the turmoil in her native country brought her both admiration and persecution. She was notable among the artistic elite of Russia for having refused to flee at the onset of the Stalinist terror, her poetry serving as a testament to the dehumanising suffering of herself and her compatriots. Her outspoken stance was eventually curbed by the imprisonment of her son, but she neither abandoned her country nor allied herself with her persecutors. Tavener found her bleak clarity both highly moving and an expressive match for his musical aesthetic, and set her works in both *Akhmatova Requiem* (1980) and *Akhmatova Songs* (1993).



Ananda Coomaraswamy

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1887-1947) was a Ceylon-born philosopher and art historian significant in the introduction of Indian art and culture to the West. In conjunction with his study of symbolism in art, he promoted ideas of Traditionalism and transcendent unity, and along with René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon is considered one of the three founders of Perennialism – the Traditionalist school of philosophical thought.

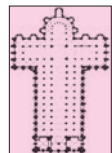
Advaita Vedanta

See 'Upanishads'



Carmelite Order

John Tavener has dedicated three of his works to Carmelites, members of a Catholic order believed to have been founded on Mount Carmel in the 12th century. Particular emphasis is placed on contemplative prayer and Marian devotion – special worship of the Virgin Mary. Tavener was exposed at a formative stage to the poetry of the 16th-century Carmelite St John of the Cross, whose expression of the passionate, almost erotic potential of Christian devotion had a great impact on the young composer. Another who similarly admired his work was Marie-Françoise-Thérèse Martin, later to become the Carmelite St Thérèse of Lisieux and share patronage of France with Joan of Arc. Tavener has set the works of St John of the Cross in *Ultimos Ritos* (1972), and dramatised St Thérèse of Lisieux's final year in *Thérèse* (1973-6).



Cruciform

A cruciform shape is one mirroring the structure of a cross, specifically a crucifix. Tavener has specified that certain works be performed in cruciform spaces (such as churches and cathedrals), usually when the subject matter pertains to Christian worship. Often the performers and even the audience are arranged to conform to this shape, thus enhancing the total reflection of the subject matter, and exploiting the acoustic potential of the space.



Desert Spirituality

The practice of retreating into the desert to live as a hermit or in a community of religious ascetics grew out of the Old Testament commandment by God for his people to wander the desert for 40 years. This seclusion in harsh conditions is seen either as a test of one's faith, or an opportunity to distance oneself from worldly distractions and approach as near as possible to the Divine. Desert spirituality has had an especially profound influence on Eastern Christianity, and consequently on several of Tavener's works following his conversion to Russian Orthodoxy in 1977.



Eternal Feminine

The Eternal Feminine is a concept of the feminine manifestation of divine energy. Where male energy is aggressive, egoistic and competitive, the Eternal Feminine encompasses creation, nurture, sustenance and compassion – the altruistic traits of the mother – as well as the attraction and fertility of the virgin. This concept has always had profound significance for Tavener, who claims that his spiritual understanding has been deepened by every woman he has ever known, and that a greater emphasis on the feminine is needed to redress the current imbalance of masculine energy dominating modern culture. However, it is important to note that the concept of the Eternal Feminine stems from a general set of tendencies displayed by females, rather than being the exclusive preserve of women.

Gerard McLarnon

Gerard McLarnon (1915-1997) was an Irish playwright and actor, and a friend of Tavener's who collaborated with him as a librettist during the 1970s.



Godhead

The Godhead is the ultimate truth, reality and source of divine energy. Regardless of the differing guises imposed on the Godhead by various religious traditions, this is a neutral term referring to this transcendent life-force. Universalist thought teaches that it is at the root of every theology, while individual religions characterise it more specifically.



René Guénon

René Guénon (1886-1951) was a French intellectual and Traditionalist with a particular interest in the universality of Eastern religious doctrines. Also known as Shaykh Abd al-Wahid Yahya following his 1911 initiation into Sufism, he sought to use these doctrines as a means of enlightening western spiritual tradition as to the similarities between all religious thought. Tavener has been significantly influenced by his writings, in particular *La Crise du Monde Moderne*, which expressed his conviction that much of the unhappiness encroaching upon modern culture is inextricably linked to the degeneration of spiritual traditions and fulfilment.



Hinduism

The dominant religion of India, Hinduism comprehends ideas of spiritual strata through which a soul or self (*Atman*) might journey by means of devotional rigour to reach unity with the Infinite, or *Brahman*. The self in this case does not refer to the ego, but rather to the true essence of each being, which is both itself and everything –

separate from yet identical to *Brahman*. These concepts are central to Tavener's latter exploration of Universalism, as Hinduism comes closer than many other spiritual traditions to acknowledging and accommodating the idea of the transcendent unity of all religions.



Icons

Icons (or *ikons*) are visual representations of Biblical episodes; of the lives of saints; and of historical events in church history.

In the Orthodox Church, these are most often two-dimensional, and highly stylised. The veneration and use of iconography is a fundamental part of Eastern Orthodox worship, though this came under heavy and prolonged attack during the Iconoclast Controversy of the 8th and 9th centuries, when literal interpretation of the Ten Commandments catalysed significant instability within Christian belief systems. The Sunday of Orthodoxy marks not only the first day of Lent but the revival of Orthodox veneration of icons. Because the purpose of icons is to induce contemplation of the their subject matter, icon painters adhere to largely unchanged techniques and styles in order not to confound their own human interests with the aim of connecting the viewer to God; any deviations from these traditional approaches are seen as human contrivances obstructive to true worship, and the painting ceases to be an icon.

The Infinite

This is a concept central to Universalist thought, as it acknowledges that all religious traditions stem from a single source – a supreme being, an ultimate reality. The motivation of all religious devotion is to journey back to and be united with the Infinite, but Universalism argues that without acknowledging that its goal and thus the source of its belief is the same, no single religion can offer its followers this ultimate satisfaction. Instead, the intricacies of each separate belief system cloud the larger truth and keep believers mired in a cycle of false righteousness, their devotion misdirected. Hinduism in particular acknowledges the Infinite and its ultimate aim remains reunion with this supreme energy, though the achievement of this is less reliant on worldly matters than in some other traditions.



Kali Yuga

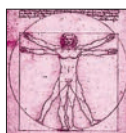
In Hindu scripture, the world is described as existing in a perpetual cycle of yugas, or season-like stages through which the universe travels from creation to destruction over one full day and night (believed to approximate variously 4.1 to 8.2 billion years) in the life of *Brahman*, the Supreme Being. There are four *yugas*: Satya, Treta, Dvapara and Kali, of which Earth is currently experiencing the final, most destructive: the 'age of vice' or of the demon Kali, in which man strays ever further from *Brahman*. Morality in Hinduism is called *dharma*, and often represented by a bull. During the first *yuga*, the bull has all four of its legs; as the cycle continues, the bull loses a leg with each new *yuga* until, during *Kali Yuga*, it stands on only one leg. The *Kali Yuga* unleashes gross imbalances in power and privilege; a steady drain on the spiritual constitution of both the leaders and the led; environmental disharmony through the mass cultivation of wheat and barley; and a steady acceleration and acceptance of behaviour considered by most spiritual traditions to be

amoral and socially destructive. According to one interpretation, *Kali Yuga* began on 23 January 3102BC – when it is held that Krishna departed the Earth for his home – and is to last 432,000 years. This places our time firmly within *Kali Yuga*, however some scholars believe that we are still experiencing *Dvapara Yuga*, or that the cycle has completed and that we are in the early stages of the re-creative *Satya Yuga*.



Mary Magdalene

She was a disciple of Jesus, having been cleansed by him of 'seven demons', interpreted sometimes as illnesses. However, as the number corresponds to the Deadly Sins, it has also been suggested (and subsequently refuted) that Mary was sinful, perhaps a prostitute. Whatever her previous circumstances, she became a close friend of Jesus, remaining with him at the cross after his other, male disciples had abandoned him, and supposedly being the first witness to his Resurrection.



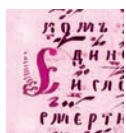
Metaphysics

Metaphysical thought is that which explores the nature of the physical world, what it means, and the implications of this for what might be beyond it. One popular way of demonstrating the metaphysical approach is to ask, 'What is there?' and 'What is it like?', admitting philosophical questions relating to existence, identity, the cosmos, religion, spirituality, space, time and matter.



Mother Thekla

Marina Scharf (1918-2011) was born in the Caucasus and grew up in London. Her career as an English teacher was truncated when she met an Orthodox nun on a retreat, and felt called to a life of religious devotion. As Mother Thekla, she was the Abbess, founder and, finally, last remaining nun of the Orthodox Monastery of the Assumption at Whitby, North Yorkshire. She and John Tavener met in 1986, and he describes the person who became a friend, a spiritual muse and a frequent collaborator as 'the most remarkable woman I have ever met in my life.' Highly intelligent, tempestuous and passionate about Orthodoxy, Thekla guided Tavener through his first attempts at merging his own original composition with the deep tradition of the Orthodox church. Mother Thekla translated and wrote many texts for Tavener's works, and together they created, among many other works, *Akathist of Thanksgiving* (1987); *Mary of Egypt* (1991); *The Apocalypse* (1993); *Song for Athene* (1993); and *Fall and Resurrection* (1997).



Orthodox tone system

Every Eastern Orthodox country has, over thousands of years, developed its own tone system – eight sets of sung melodies or hymns used in liturgical music and attached to specific services. Unlike in Western Christian services, the hymns are not interspersed throughout the service and sung by the congregation; they are instead intoned by a choir, but the congregation will be familiar with all the hymns and the services at which they should be performed. Music cannot be considered sacred in the Orthodox Church unless it adheres to the relevant tone system, and then the chosen tone must correlate to the subject matter, which must be liturgical.



Rumi

Rumi (Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Balkhī) was a 13th-century Persian Sufi poet, mystic and theologian. At the core of his teaching was *tawhid*, a concept of union, or rather reunion, with 'the beloved' – the primal root of spirituality – from which man has been separated, and to which he must restore his being. This is a concept very similar to that of transcendent unity. His principal work was the *Masnavi*, a six-volume poem which remains fundamental to Sufi and Persian literature. John Tavener's 2002 work *Lament for Jerusalem* makes particular use of the *Masnavi*, though during the latter part of his career, the composer has been more generally influenced by Rumi.



Frithjof Schuon

Though never an academic, the Swiss philosopher, metaphysician and author Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) was a Traditionalist acknowledged as an authority on comparative religion, his principle emphasis being the transcendent unity of all religions, a concept that proposes that all religious belief and practice is inspired by the same supreme universal governing force, however it may be called. Schuon's writings had an enormous effect on Tavener's spiritual direction during the 1990s, and although he remains an Orthodox Christian and later came to feel that Schuon had taken some elements of his philosophy too far, Tavener also became irrevocably convinced of the fundamental congruence of all belief systems.



States of Atma

The Sanskrit word, *Ātman*, originates from the root word *et-men*, a cognate of the Old English, Greek and German words meaning 'to breathe'. In Hindu philosophy, *Ātman* is the true self, entirely distinct from the ego and in fact being identical to *Brahman*, variously described as the Supreme Being, the ultimate reality, or the transcendent self. *Brahman* is the universal force, and its earthly manifestation is the *Ātman* of each individual. In Hinduism, salvation can only be achieved through the realisation that one's true self transcends the phenomenal (material) world and is identical with this transcendent self, which exists on the *noumenal* plane, that of ideas, senses and spiritual experience. Since the development of his interest in Universalism, Tavener has been strongly drawn to the concept of *Ātman*, and *Towards Silence* (2007) follows the four states of *Atma*, which are *Vaishvanara*, the waking state; *Tajjasa*, the dream state; *Prajna*, the condition of deep sleep; and *Tunya*, that which is beyond. The work may be superficially interpreted as a meditation on death, but refers rather to states of spiritual detachment from the physical world.

St John of the Cross
See 'Carmelite Order'



Sufism

Sufism is a facet of Islam, centred on the very internal, spiritual aspects of its teachings. Sufism has been described as being the precise, almost scientific, practice of healing and detaching one's mind and heart from all but its love of God (*Allah*): 'Sufism' as a term originally referred simply to the internalisation of the tenets of Islam, but gained followers until it developed an identity quite distinct from mainstream Islam. Principal characteristics of Sufi worship include asceticism – a lifestyle devoid of all but the most necessary of material and social interaction – and *dhikr*, a form of prayer involving the repetition of the names of God, intended to focus one's entire being on His worship. Tavener's 2004 work, *The Beautiful Names*, is a representation of this practice.

Traditionalism

Traditionalists emphasise a non-material approach to life and worship that internalises the fundamentals of religious belief, allowing the adherent to detach themselves from the concerns of human existence and focus on the ultimate truths common to all spiritual doctrines. Traditionalism places most importance on the preservation, through practice, of the essence of one or all belief systems, rather than the perpetuation of its varied interpretations across them. By raising intellectual arguments as to the detail and validity of different belief systems, these manifestations are felt to cloud the fundamental meaning of this spiritual essence, rather than illuminating it.



Transcendent unity

The Transcendent Unity of Religions is a 1984 work by Swiss philosopher Frithjof Schuon, in which is articulated the concept that at the centre of every religious tradition is the same esoteric core that both spawned and transcends the individual, literal interpretations that divide belief systems. This idea of an 'eternal religion' supposedly passed from Plato down through centuries to Ananda Coomaraswamy and René Guénon, both significant influences on Schuon and consequently on Tavener.



Upanishads

The Upanishads is a collection of over 200 philosophical texts considered to be the basis of modern Hinduism. They are concerned primarily with *Brahman* – the Hindu concept of ultimate reality – and are a commentary on the Vedas, a larger collection constituting the oldest Sanskrit literature and Hindu philosophical writings. The Upanishads are considered a distillation of the Vedas and form the basis of Vedantic thought, the word 'Vedanta' having originally been synonymous with the Upanishads.



Virgin Mary

The Virgin Mary was the mother of Jesus Christ – the vessel into which God placed his earthly form to be mortally born. Thus, she is also the Mother of God. Mary was chosen by God to carry Jesus because, though conceived naturally she had herself been born 'without stain', or *immaculata*; it is Mary's own conception which is known as the Immaculate Conception, while her bearing of Jesus Christ is known as the Virgin Birth.

Index by ensemble type

Chorus and orchestra/ensemble



The Whale 1966, 32'
Little Requiem for Father Malachy Lynch 1972, 13'
Ultimos Ritos 1972, 50'
Kyklike Kinesis 1977, 45'
The Myrrh-Bearer 1993, 40'
The Veil of the Temple 2002, 7 hrs
Lament for Jerusalem 2002, 50'
The Beautiful Names 2004, 70'
Sollemnitas in Conceptione Immaculata Beatae Mariae Virginis 2006, 100'
Requiem 2007, 35'

Large ensemble

Towards Silence 2007, 30'

Opera

Thérèse 1973, 100'
A Gentle Spirit 1973, 110'
Mary of Egypt 1991, 100'
The Play of Krishna in progress ('Love Duet' premiered 2013)

Soloist and orchestra

Three Holy Sonnets 1962, 15'
Palintropos 1978, 24'
Akhmatova Requiem 1980, 50'
Supernatural Songs 2003, 30'
The Death of Ivan Ilyich 2012, 25'

Solo voice and small ensemble

Akhmatova Songs 1993, 20'
Schuon Lieder 2003, 60'

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