

“The Sound of the Beloved” Sir John Tavener (1944 – 2013)

By Ian Skelly



[Photographed at Oxford, September 2013, by Ian Skelly]

Throughout his life Sir John Tavener held firmly to a central truth best explained by one of his favourite Sufi observations, that music is none other than the sound of the Beloved. Thus, for him, music has the capacity to bring forth knowledge of God. He died at the age of 69 having sought to express such knowledge in an outpouring of music that spanned a period in the 20th Century when contemporary music, so dominated by notions of Modernism, had little truck with such a directly explicit, spiritual purpose.

He never wanted to be anything other than a composer. His earliest memories were of improvising at the piano at the age of 3 and being applauded by his grandfather for his raucous interpretations of lightning, thunder and rain. He studied music at Highgate School in North London and then at the Royal Academy of Music where he was introduced to many Modernist composers and, encouraged by his principal teacher,

he worked hard to understand them. In fact, one might be forgiven for thinking that his first notable success in 1968 was a result of such studies. *The Whale* is certainly not a piece that could be considered “contemplative” or an example of what one critic would later call his “religious minimalism.” On the contrary, it is a particularly wacky cantata, composed to launch the new *avant garde* group, the London Sinfonietta. It met with critical acclaim but when it attracted the attention of John Lennon who had the Beatles’ Apple label publish the recording, Tavener effectively became the “poster boy” of the happening, contemporary music scene of the 1960s. And yet, *The Whale* was an early reaction against those prevailing attitudes in contemporary music. It was, he said, written by “an angry young man” who felt deeply frustrated by a world that no longer saw the Cosmos in metaphysical terms. He was particularly disparaging of the so-called Manchester and Darmstadt Schools, the music of which he considered “too po-faced.” He hated its serialism and abstraction, but the real problem was that, no matter how hard he tried, he simply could not “interiorize” the music. For him, Modernist music failed to possess any spiritual possibility and, therefore, did not bring forth knowledge of the Divine.

Thus, he followed his own path which led him in 1977 to begin tapping into a huge source of inspiration from the Christian Orthodox tradition. In the Orthodox liturgy he found the traditional understanding of music he had been searching for although, initially, the adoption was not smooth. The very first piece he produced after being received into the Church, a commission from the Russian Orthodox Church itself, was not received at all well by those who had asked for it. They told him bluntly that he had not understood the tradition at all, that he had simply produced “his” music rather than that of the tradition. This reaction brought him up short. He stopped writing music altogether and made a proper study of what they meant. He spent time with icon painters and Church fathers, with drummers and mystics. His reading ranged far and wide and he began a long association with the Abbess of the Greek Orthodox Monastery of the Assumption in North Yorkshire, Mother Theckla, whom he would consult every day by telephone, often at night or even in the early hours of the morning as he worked. Mother Theckla was, as he put it, “not of a conventional piety.” She spoke her mind directly and rarely held back with her criticism as she guided him,

word by word and sometimes with elaborate diagrams, through the meaning and symbolism of the texts she recommended he should set.

Perhaps his most successful piece from this period was the fruit of a suggestion by Mother Thekla although, in this case, there were no words. In 1987 he had received a request from his friend, the cellist, Stephen Isserlis, with whom he collaborated many times, and the result was a 45 minute soliloquy for cello and strings, *The Protecting Veil*. It was given its world premiere by the BBC at their Proms season in 1989 at the Royal Albert Hall in London and it was received with rapturous applause. For several weeks after its release the subsequent recording became the best-selling classical music disc and it went on to win numerous awards. Based upon the Orthodox Feast of the Protecting Veil, it was, he said, an attempt to portray the feminine in a culture dominated by the masculine. The music is soft, gentle and tender with the cello line soaring like a great bird gliding over a lush, undulating landscape conjured by the strings.

There are too many pieces to mention individually, but, for me, there are two more that deserve attention. The first became, literally, world famous: his *Song for Athene*, which was sung at the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997. It was chosen to end the service, sung by the choir as her coffin was carried to the West Door of Westminster Abbey. All of London had come to a standstill and the minute's silence that followed was made all the more resonant by the extraordinary crescendo with which the piece ends. It had been written for a private occasion, the death of a young family friend, but its global exposure brought John's music to a much wider audience and was, perhaps, a perfect case of "blind testing" of the principle he held so dear. That said, he was insistent in his last months that *Song for Athene* should not be included in any major retrospective concerts planned for his 70th birthday. He was immensely proud of it, but it was, he said, a memorial, not a concert work.

For me, one other piece is worth mentioning, simply because, in its compact form, it seems to be a perfect representation of what John was striving to create with so much of his music. It is a tiny piece from 1999, an exquisite setting for four voices of The Lord's Prayer. This rarely heard miniature has the most absorbing effect, especially on CD if the track is set to endless repeat. Then it assumes the quality of an ethereal round.

The voices begin in unison, then divide into a sequence of different harmonies that jangle suddenly into discord before resolving and finally ending with the Amen sung again in unison. The symbolism is typically explicit—from unity we come; to unity we return.

As was well known, ill health dogged much of John's life. As far back as 1980 he suffered a stroke. He was at the wheel of his beloved Rolls Royce at the time as he drove home from a visit to Benjamin Britten's home, leaving his left side permanently weak. Then, in 1991, he was operated on for a serious heart condition known as Marfan's syndrome, the cause of his tallness and his necessary slow, giraffe-like movement, but he ploughed on despite the increasing amounts of pain this caused, often repeating the advice given to him by a favourite Presbyterian Minister he had known during his 14 years as organist at a church in Kensington. "Life is a creeping tragedy and that is why we must be cheerful."

By 2000, with a major festival of his music at the South Bank Centre in London and big commissions rolling in, he found his spiritual interest widening. From the Orthodox tradition he assumed a more universalist's standpoint. He was guided by his biographer, the poet and co-founder of the Temenos Academy, Brian Keeble, who introduced him to the writings of the universalist philosopher, Fritjhof Schuon. Readers of *Sacred Web* will be familiar with his essay, "Towards the 'Musica Perennis'", which he wrote as a tribute to Schuon¹. Large-scale works dominated his output at this time, not least his 7 hour all-night vigil, *The Veil of the Temple*, but now, as with his *Lament for Jerusalem* and *Hymn of Dawn*, the texts were combinations from different traditions. They blended Christian, Islamic, Sufi, Hindu and Jewish words and this led to a special commission from HRH The Prince of Wales, a setting of the 99 names of Allah, *The Beautiful Names*. At the express wish of the Prince it was given its premiere, not in a Mosque but, somewhat controversially, at Westminster Catholic Cathedral in Central London. The Prince attended the performance, it was broadcast live by the BBC and it proved to be a most extraordinary occasion as each of the 99 names of Allah, sung in Arabic, resounded in the acoustic of such an important

¹ Sacred Web, Volume 13, July 2004, pp. 23-32. Speaking of his inner vocation "as a composer of sacred music, to find the primordial voice of God, the Original Music", he stated: "I had to write music that was both void and plenitude—annihilation and bliss... As a composer of the Sacred, I will continue to search for the 'sound of God', but this must necessarily lead to silence or to metaphysical zero." [Editor's Note]

Roman Catholic Cathedral. There could not have been a better statement of inter-faith dialogue at such a poignant time in Western history, but it was also testament to John's deepened understanding of spirituality. As he explained in one interview, "all primary music was either addressed to the Creator or to the process of healing, which are properties and functions that have been lost in the Western world."

His health suffered a catastrophic blow in 2008 when he was struck down by a massive heart attack. He was put on a life-support machine in Zurich and his wife, Maryanna, was summoned to switch it off. Fortunately she arrived armed with a CD of Mozart, which she played to her husband as he lay in a deep coma. He was considered "brain dead" and yet the moment the music began his hand began conducting it in the air.

It was a slow recovery and after extensive heart surgery, much to his surprise, he woke to find he had lost all of his faith and his ability to think of music. In time, both made a gradual return but in a different form. Musically, he found he could listen to works he had once struggled with, notably the late string quartets by Beethoven. He found he could understand them from the inside out which, evidently, was much the same experience with faith. As he put it in his last broadcast interview, God was inside him by the end, not something that lay outside as it had done before, and he came to understand the real truth in Vaughan's observation that "God is Divine Darkness which lives within."

It was a great privilege for the Temenos Academy to commission one of his last compositions, a piece called *Mahavakyas* for soprano and cello, comprising of the most important lines from the Upanishads in a setting that fused his music with that of a cello suite by JS Bach. It was given its premiere in Oxford just two months before his death and he dedicated it to the founder of Temenos, for so long a friend and an inspiration, the late poet, Kathleen Raine. I interviewed John on stage at the premiere and in a private conversation we had beforehand as he rested in his room, with his young son, Orlando, happily playing a noisy and fast-moving video game on the bed beside him, he spoke in his typically straightforward way about faith and of the Divine. Rarely have I met anybody who could speak so easily and so convincingly of such things in any given company. I remember the conversation turned to atheism and he told me how impossible he found it, even for those who claim to be atheists. "If you think about consciousness—what it is and what it connects us to—how

can it be possible? It is physically impossible to escape the transcendent.” It was a typically forthright and doubtless statement of his profound understanding of the human condition.

He died peacefully on Tuesday 12th November 2013 at his beautiful farmhouse in the Dorset village of Child Okeford, leaving the world an enormous legacy of music that will undoubtedly stand the test of time, simply because so much of it is timeless and anchored to right thinking. He was fond of quoting Plato, in particular the idea that Beauty is the splendour of the True. It was his belief that if music has the ability to bring forth great beauty, then it is always worth the writing. That he persevered to do so, despite his many years in pain, is something in our disconnected world that, perhaps, we should all be thankful for.