Sunday 17th November: Sermon on John Tavener by Robin Griffith-Jones

We shall not listen to his like again. John Tavener, 1944 - 2013.

The Royal Academy of Music, 23 October 1961: the admission interviews for students of piano. The report on one candidate:

Organ and Composition: Produced some remarkably interesting compositions. Lovely harmonic sense. Very good, lyrical clusters.
Extras: Wonderful ear.
General Impression: Really wants to be a composer.

So John Tavener entered the Academy. He ‘really wanted to be a composer’: he did indeed. And for the next fifty years his music would enthral, enrapture and uplift audiences all over the world. On Tuesday, weakened by years of illness but apparently growing slowly stronger, he collapsed and died.

In all that follows, we should remember John’s courage through decades of illness, and the devotion of those who loved and supported him. He would quote a Buddhist proverb: ‘Life is a creeping tragedy, that is why we must be cheerful.’

It was as well that he pursued so relentlessly his own first love. John Rutter, his contemporary at Highgate School and his lifelong friend, told me recently that in his 20s John Tavener suffered a mild stroke. No lasting harm was done, except that one hand could no longer play the piano to concert-standard. His career as a pianist, had he chosen it, would have ended almost before it started.

John first came to prominence with The Whale in 1968, inspired by Jonah’s three days in the whale’s belly. It was always going to be strange. It started with the recitation of the whale’s entry in Chambers’ Encyclopedia. It included five minutes of ‘aleatory music’: players and singers were invited to ‘choose any low note’ or ‘choose any high note’ and to play or sing at will. The instruments included a football rattle, two amplified metronomes and an amplified sheet of glass; a grand organ, a Hammond organ and an amplified grand piano. The choir was to neigh, grunt, snort and yawn; six performers were given loud-hailers. The designated conductor resigned.

And the first performance? It was a triumph; The Whale was recorded on the Beatles’ Apple label. John was one of the bright young people of London.

But he has become famous in the decades since for his deepening love of the Orthodox Church and of its music. He was received into the Church in 1977. His first preference was for Byzantine music rather than Russian, which had been (as he saw it) corrupted in the romanticising, westernising nineteenth century. John’s own

musical voice became utterly distinctive: slow, repetitive, musically often minimalist, always lovely to hear.

He came back to fame at the Proms premiere of *The Protecting Veil* in 1989, and when *Song for Athene* was performed at Princess Diana’s funeral in 1997:

O thou who reignest over life and death, in the courts of thy Saints grant rest unto her whom thou hast removed from temporal things. Alleluia.
Weeping at the grave creates the song: Alleluia.
Come, says the Lord, enjoy rewards and crowns I have prepared for you.

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John always had his detractors, of course. From the earliest days of his debt to Orthodoxy, he was denigrated by part of London’s Orthodox community – most loudly, it seems, by English converts who resented his contamination of Eastern with Western music. Even Father Michael Fortounatto, a long-standing friend and advisor and supporter of John’s music, was unsettled by John’s fusion of the Orthodox tradition with his own inspiration.²

The West’s musical establishment was always wary of John’s music, if not dismissive. Musicians found his musical material thin, and often unsophisticated; they found his cross-over into pop music and its idioms light-weight, unserious. His public persona added to their distrust. He was a most striking figure: six feet six inches tall, immaculately dressed in a white suit and white silk scarf, his long hair flowing. Combined with this striking self-presentation was a profound and much proclaimed spirituality. The combination was electric, and undoubtedly added to his music’s appeal. There is an irony here: John valued the ancient tradition of Orthodox music and its anonymity, the work of musicians whose names will never be known; but about John himself there was nothing anonymous at all.

Perhaps as well there has been something approaching resentment of John’s palpable success. He had always enjoyed large cars, from his early childhood; and he was able with increasing flamboyance to indulge his passion.

I first met John in 2000, when he was recording in the Church. We thought we might want to commission some music from him. He came to tea in the Master’s House. The party was frankly a disaster. John himself was nervous and shy. We of the Temple were all too deferential. Stephen Layton, then our Director of Music, had admired Tavener ever since he, Stephen, had premiered several of his most famous works as a chorister in Winchester; Stephen was uncharacteristically tongue-tied. To be hospitable, I had bought some chocolate brownies from Pret a Manger; but in my nervousness I failed to provide any plates. In the uneasy silence, John took a brownie; it crumbled into a hundred pieces and cascaded down his perfect white suit. Disaster. Well, that was clearly the end of that commission.

² Haydon, 179.
On the contrary. John’s eyes lit up; he giggled; ‘Well,’ he said, ‘it is a long time since I have done that.’ And he leant back and regaled us with story after story from his childhood. Cars: yes, he had always liked cars. Did we know, he asked, how musical cars are? (I hope our choristers and their parents realise, I am not recommending that you try this at home, however keen you are to become a young composer.) If you stand on a car bonnet and jump, the flex and buck of the metal makes a most satisfying deep and double poing; better still, if you pull your younger brother up on to the car too, and have him bounce on the roof at the same time. A syncopated bouncing: good notes, beautiful rhythm, not great for the car.

What a contrast, with that mannered exterior and distant look we all know from the publicity photos. John himself, in a lovely interview given to the Guardian this year, recalled how the journalists had come to his home armed not just with their cameras but with icons and candles and all the props they needed, and he had gone along with their staging of the photographs. He wryly admitted that it had been a mistake, which he had come to regret.

John could be combative, about Western music. Mahler, he said, was just ‘vulgar’: everything in Mahler’s music was about himself. In 1993 John gave a lecture at the V & A, ‘Towards the Sacred in Music.’ Stravinsky’s Canticum Sacrum passed muster, as part of the sacred tradition; but Mozart’s Coronation Mass was an ‘operatic sweet of sin’. The Papageno-Papagena duet won limited approval, but was ranked far below the example he played of Byzantine chants, Indian sacred music and Sufi flute-playing. When we ourselves commissioned The Veil of the Temple, John’s vast musical vigil premiered here in 2003, John corresponded at length with Stephen Layton. John wrote:

I think The Veil of the Temple differs from such masterpieces as the Bach Passions, Messiaen’s Transfiguration, Stravinsky’s Symphony of Psalms or Threni in so far as it is a sacred ritual, a sacred ceremony. These other undisputed masterpieces are still only “sacred” concerts. When I have attended Orthodox vigils, Sufi ceremonies, or even “listened” to the Sun Dance of the Red Indians, I have been struck by the “monotony” which somehow safeguards “spiritual poverty”*. The sacred “concerts” are still “concerts”, and not sacred art as such. The ultimate object of sacred art is not to evoke feelings. It is surely a symbol, and as such it employs simple and primordial means. One of the most tenacious of “modernist” prejudices is one that opposes the impersonal, the objective and indeed repetition because it might stifle the “individual” creative genius!!

One could say that individual creative genius is opposed (in one sense) to the sacred, because one of the fundamental conditions of “true happiness”** is to know that EVERYTHING one does has an eternal meaning – but who at the present time can envisage a civilization in which all its aspects are developed “in the likeness of heaven”?! And this is where “spiritual poverty” comes in. African drumming, Red

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3 Haydon, 273.
Indian drumming, Byzantine Chant, Gregorian chant, the Ikon, Hindu art, Hindu scripture, Buddhist art, Tibetan chanting etc. – all are childlike, and all are primordial *** - and all contain spiritual poverty.

This is the aspiration behind The Veil of the Temple! And only God knows whether I come anywhere near this aspiration!!! ****

Thank you all at Temple Church for giving me the possibility to do this, or at least attempt it!!!!

It was only in John’s last years that he turned again to the Western canon: to Beethoven’s late quartets, that ‘arose out of the transcendence of such huge personal suffering’; to Schumann and Chopin, and ‘those amazing symphonies of Bruckner’; to Stockhausen whom he now recognises as searching, as John himself always did, for truth. 5

What are we to make of John’s music? We do well to acknowledge what he himself was trying to do, and to see in the first instance if he succeeded; rather than ask whether and why he did badly what he was not trying to do at all.

An analogy might help. I offer it cautiously.

Those of us who enjoy the National Gallery find there room after room of masterpieces. The Western figurative tradition spent 500 years mastering the depiction of the human figure and of earthly space, light and form. (The tradition has since spent the last 150 years freeing itself from the apparent straitjacket imposed by this aspiration.) In narrative paintings we look for the subject, the characters and the depiction of the drama; in portraits for sensitivity towards the sitter, delicacy of expression, the sitter’s individuality. And all within the painting’s place in a progressive tradition, eager for change, brilliant with the great stars of the canon, from Giotto to Picasso and beyond, who have done what no artist has done before. The artist’s aspiration was for centuries to offer a stylized window onto the world, through which we see figures such as we are going about their own business or in their portraits confronting us: as king confronting his subjects, a father his family, one mortal those fellow mortals who shall come after. And to be honest, we do not spend very long in front of any one of these paintings. We look, we get it, and we move on.

And if by contrast we ever look at Orthodox icons? There is generally no action there. There is no longing for naturalism. There is no view offered into a fictive recreation of our world or its scenes. There is no evolving tradition, pregnant with technical discoveries or stylistic advances. No. We gaze in an icon at a figure of heaven who gazes from heaven at us. Icons are most frequently and rightly encountered in

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4 The Veil of the Temple, Programme (London: Temple Church, 2003), 14. The notes: *I think Arvo Part certainly approaches “spiritual poverty” in a way that the others do not. Which is why modern man does not really “understand” him. **The true paradisal state and the state I want people to emerge from The Veil! ***And all have severity of Style as well as severity of form. ****It does have severity of form in its most geometric construction.

devotion, where we ourselves come nearest to a glimpse of heaven where these figures belong; and not least in a liturgical devotion that has changed no more than heaven has in 1,700 years; why then should the sight we have of heaven change?

This, then, is how we appropriately look at such an icon: in prayer, with a steady gaze, with our hearts and minds on the figure represented and on the heaven that he or she inhabits. We are engaged too: for the figures watch us and our world from theirs.

John, if I might draw the analogy, is right: we are not there to feel feelings, to indulge and relish our sensibilities. We are there to be shown a truth vaster than any truth we can comprehend, a truth by which we are comprehended. This is a revelation, and it takes time: stillness, repetition, the rhythm of weeks, seasons and years, the renewed encounter with a truth at once utterly strange and nearer to us than are our own conscious, hectic, agitated selves.

Such an icon, so seen offers revelation, to which we may respond with feelings, yes; but first and foremost we are being offered a place on the threshold of eternity.

John, I suggest, wrote icons. (Those photo-journalists, unbeknown to themselves, were not so wrong after all.) And such musical icons are as alien to Western audiences as painted icons are to those of us who love the National Gallery.

Grandest of all John’s works was The Veil of the Temple. It is not just a single icon; it is the iconic progression of the human soul and of God’s whole cosmos through the whole week of life to new birth on the day of resurrection.

*The Veil of the Temple* is an attempt to restore the sacred imagination. It takes place at night, as we wait for the withdrawal of night and the coming of dawn; and, by its gradual cosmic Rising, it attempts to bring about a transformation from the Old Temple to the new.

The Veil is a “Vigil”, not quite a liturgical ceremony. Through its eight cycles, gradually rising an octave in pitch, it attempts to reveal the mystery of the death and burial of Christ through His rising. In creating man, God entrusted him with the task of completing the Temple, and himself becoming the Temple of God.

I offer *The Veil of the Temple* as a poor man’s mite to the Temple Church, and perhaps ultimately to the Western Church as a whole. It may be only through the world of the divine imagination that any kind of unity can come about. But it is uncharted territory, and I can know nothing about its future, save that I have tried to reinstate the sacred, the natural in the divine world, which is the source and consummation of all sacred art.\(^6\)

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For John, his life and his work,

\(^6\) *The Veil of the Temple*, 8, 6.
for his immense courage through years of illness,
for Maryanna and the children,
for Mary and for all who loved John and supported him,
we, this country, the Western Church and all those who search for the sacred and in
John’s music have heard its echo give heartfelt thanks to God.

O thou who reignest over life and death, in the courts of thy Saints
grant rest unto him whom thou hast removed from temporal things.
Alleluia.
Weeping at the grave creates the song: Alleluia.
Come, says the Lord, enjoy rewards and crowns I have prepared for
you