



SACRED MUSIC IN A SACRED SPACE: PERFORMANCE AS COMMUNAL EVENT

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INTRODUCTION

The theoretical discussion that arises from a concert-event that took place during the Easter Week of 1999, at the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Archdiocesan Cathedral in New York City, is the focal point of this paper. Throughout my analysis, I will attempt to explore the way in which sacred music can interact with sacred space, when performed in such a setting. My aim is to raise questions concerning the audience's experience of the event, while at the same time contemplating the compositional approach towards the notion of sacred.

The programme, consisting of music by the composer Sir John Tavener (1944-2013), was directed by the American conductor and educator Dino Anagnost (1944-2011). The audience had the chance to observe the Little Orchestra Society of New York, the composer himself and the celebrity actress Mia Farrow, participating as a narrator in Tavener's work *In the Month of Athyr* (1998). Highlights of the night included the New York premiere of *Soyati* (1995) for cello and chorus¹ and *The Repentant Thief* (1990), for clarinet and orchestra. The Orpheon Chorale also performed, a cappella, some of Tavener's most celebrated pieces: *The Song for Athene* (1993), *The Lamb* (1981) and *The Tyger* (1987).²

As the idea of performing sacred music in a performance space with specific requirements can be rather vague and approaching sacred music

1 The Russian-American cellist Borislav Strulev performed the cello solo part.

2 See Allan Kozinn, "MUSIC REVIEW; Spirituality as Composer's Driving Force," *New York Times*, April 6, 1999. Online version access: <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/06/arts/music-review-spirituality-as-a-composer-s-driving-force.html>.

within a strictly musicological spectrum seems precarious, I believe that defining the field of study for this paper is necessary, in order to provoke an original discourse between applied musicology and Christian Orthodox theology. First and foremost, the term *sacred music* can be misleading since the definition of such a term can vary according to the context in which is being used. To clarify, this paper focuses on concert music of the late 20th century, which is influenced by compositional tools borrowed by the Christian Orthodox musical tradition, such as the eight church music tones, Byzantine music and a frequent use of drones (ison). An important distinction that should also be addressed is that of the difference between liturgical and para-liturgical music, as both terms are included when identifying sacred music. The term *liturgical* music covers everything that can be heard during a service, while the term *para-liturgical*, which some may also describe as spiritual music, is used to describe musical compositions which, while heavily influenced by aspects of worship, cannot be used in a service.

BACKGROUND

After shocking the experimental scene with his masterpiece *The Whale* (1960), and being heavily influenced by Igor Stravinsky and Olivier Messiaen in his earlier works, John Tavener's compositional style steadily shifted to a unique musical idiom, the so-called holy minimalism. According to the composer, his intention was to form a sound closer to the spiritual idea of monastic *hesychia*; the need to withdraw into isolation in order to experience God [Matthew (6:6)]. As a result, his compositional voice included a significant amount of silence and an abundance of musical elements from Byzantine and other spiritual traditions, combined with a plethora of other contemporary techniques, shaping in this way a unique artistic product.

Tavener enjoyed a major international career, having his music performed by the most prestigious orchestras, conductors, soloists and organizations. Tavener's output includes a large number of musical pieces using various techniques and orchestral forces, with the choral element always being decisively present. Tavener worked extensively with texts by Greek writers such as Seferis, Cavafy, Kalvos, Sikelianos, as well as numerous Orthodox fathers such as St Simeon the New Theologian, St Andrew of Crete and St Gregory Palamas, to name just a few, producing a vast number of musical pieces that negotiate at their core with some of the most profound ideas in Orthodox theology.

Towards the end of his life however, the composer also studied and incorporated other musical and spiritual traditions such as Sufi, Tibetan and Islamic, into his work. As a result, influenced by perennial philosophers such as René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, he shaped a concrete, holistic spiritual approach, combining sacred texts from different traditions in the same musical work.³ Ultimately, my objective is to inform the musicological community

³ Ivan Moody, "Circular Movement: Spiritual Traditions in the Work of John Tavener," *Temenos* 17 (2014): 206-214.

about Tavener's idea of the correlation between music and Logos, under the prism of the sacred in music and life.

ANALYSIS

In the Month of Athyr, *Svyati* and *The Repentant Thief* share a unique kind of soloistic attribute, in a rather interactive sense. In fact, they all have a common instinctive antiphonal quality, which is connected to their structural core, and most importantly to the way they unfold and fulfil their own narrative objective. More specifically: Cavafy, a Greek poet, in this rather unusual piece – *Εν τῷ Μηνί Αθύρ* - attempts to recreate an ancient ruined Egyptian sepulchre from the early-Christian period.⁴ He focuses on the profile of the departed and the ways that his loved ones might have grieved his death. The poet underlines the protagonist's youth, and the sense of tragedy in his death as an ironic analogy to the beauty and tenderness of that youth. On the other hand, Tavener's *In the Month of Athyr*, follows a simple antiphonal structure.⁵ The two parties interact by using a different text, alternating between Greek and English, with the choir insisting on the phrase "Αἰωνία ἡ Μνήμη," while the narrator recites Cavafy's fragmentary masterwork, exclusively during the choir's pauses. After a couple of recitations, we hear the original Byzantine *αιωνία ἡ μνήμη* in the third mode, executed by the tenors and basses.

Apart from the Byzantine material, the rest of the musical resources and procedures are widely relatable to his works *Nipson* (1998) and *The Hidden Face* (1996), composed also towards the end of the century, where the harmonic language is unarguably tonal without however being always clearly defined as either major or minor. This quality flirts with the Christian Orthodox idea of *χαρμολύπη* (joyful sorrow), which was greatly attractive to the composer, according to his writings.

It seems that Tavener approaches the text's *general* atmosphere rather than Cavafy's text in detail. He chooses to add material to the work rather than trying to elaborate its meaning using musical material of any kind. Instead, as a compromise, he inserts a good deal of silence, closer to the notion of monastic *hesychia* and, as a result, the complete experience of the work includes a specific kind of narrative space, in which the actor is allowed to perform the essence of the work. Although Cavafy's text only implies a sense of religiousness in a rather secular context, Tavener's musical commentary give a more sacred identity to the work, complicating matters regarding the work's narrative and aesthetic function.

The Repentant Thief, written in 1990, is truly what Tavener could call an icon in sound, trying to encapsulate the persona of the thief who has been

4 See Philip Sherrard, *Cavafy, C.P. Collected Poems*, Revised Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). See also Cavafy, C. P., and Rae Dalven, "In the Month of Athyr." *Poetry* 98, No. 1 (1961): 34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20588311>. See also CAVAFY, C. P., and George Economou, "In the Month of Athyr." *The American Poetry Review* 26, No. 3 (1997): 39-49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27782436>.

5 See Gregory Jusdanis, *The Poetics of Cavafy: Textuality, Eroticism, History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014)

crucified next to Jesus Christ. The composer applies a rondo-like form to the complete material of the total of eleven movements, which can be divided into three smaller motivic groups. The main group (A) traces a serene textural profile, where the strings move in their higher register in fragile fashion, as the clarinet fills the narrative gap, adding a sense of steady movement. As opposed to A, group B is constructed from dance-like material, consisting of just a couple of dances. Here, it seems that Tavener uses the clarinet in a rustic way, closer to the sound of the Greek traditional instrument, where the clarinet is always the orchestral protagonist. In the last group, the composer creates a massive representation of a narrative fall. The orchestral forces insist on steep descending motives which create an unstable, fragmentary atmosphere that leads to the recycling of the A and B sections.

Many of Tavener's works are defined by their repetitive quality, which could be linked to the repetitiveness in the Byzantine style, such as the canon, where this characteristic becomes crucial to the music's function in the sequence of *Orthros*. As we see in *Ikona of Light* (1984), Tavener's proclamation of repentance and probably one of his most theologically precise works, the element of descending, of a slow fall, described always by musical procedures, is extremely present. It is obvious that the composer transmits the idea that repentance in Orthodox theology includes a strong sense of humility, which he successfully depicts with a persistent musical descent.

In *Svyati*, Tavener stretches the borders of the concerto-like structure. Instead of using an instrumental ensemble to accompany the solo cello line, the composer explores ways in which a mixed choir can function in this way. At the beginning of the piece the choir interacts with the soloist's part in an antiphonal style, engaging the cello line to move towards a dramatic climax, where both parts blend together, leading to a sudden general pause. The soloist, which according to Tavener represents the Priest or an Icon of Christ, drives the music to a recapitulatory state, in which the cello wanders in both higher and middle registers, provoking the choir to comment on its material. However, as the cello line continues to evolve between the choir's interventions, the choral part seems slowly to taper off, until the end of the work, where the non-ending drone on the note E from the beginning of the work finally stops. The choir finally cadences on G major, using the E drone as a vi chord. The cello interrupts and the choir repeats the relieving cadence twice, allowing the sound essentially to disappear as a natural fade-out effect.

The interaction between the parties is certainly the most interesting quality of this piece, as the communicative nature of the work requires a specific performative strategy based on the evolution of the interaction between cello and choir. It seems that especially after the first tutti climax, the cello takes a taming role, somewhat like the piano part in the second movement of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto. With the element of struggle being more than present, the solo line seems to attempt to tame, and in this case console, the choir, which represents all humankind, in the fashion of an ancient Greek chorus (χορός), with notable success.

In one of the composer's most celebrated pieces, *Song for Athene*.⁶ an unusual juxtaposition of parts of the funeral service, adapted by Mother Thekla, and a couple of lines from *Hamlet*, the composer strives to combine two diametrically opposed texts into one holistic sound world, using exquisite harmonies and, in parallel, keeping a chant-like texture throughout the entire work. The word "alleluia" is sung between each line of text, sounding above the steady drone – the ison, representing the idea of eternity. In parallel, Tavener's settings of the texts *The Lamb* and its sister poem *The Tyger*, both by the poet, engraver and painter, William Blake, survived in time so far also as the composer's most successful works, defined by masterful use of resources and a structural clarity of sublime quality. Both pieces share more or less the same compositional tools, forming a literary and musical unity. Even though it was completed almost six years later, *The Tyger*, written for Phillip Sherrard's 65th birthday, even recalls some of *The Lamb*'s material. Without using a conventional climactic strategy, the composer truly underlines the text by musical means, always through a completely tonal prism, without excluding certain modal influences from the total harmonic texture, such as a heavy use of functional tritones, always referring to Eastern chant traditions.

RECEPTION AND QUESTIONS OF FUNCTION AND TEXTURE

Anagnost (1943-2011) claimed the directorship of the Archdiocesan Choir in 1976, succeeding Nicholas Iliopoulos. During Anagnost's multi-year term, the choir presented oratorios and special programmes.⁷ Additionally, Anagnost conducted the choir in liturgical services and on other occasions, and also composed new works for the Church, building an impressive legacy around his figure. He also conducted an unbelievable number of concerts with the Little Orchestra Society, and established a series of popular concert schemes for targeted audiences, such as the *Happy Concerts for young people* and *Sound Discoveries*. Maestro Anagnost was dedicated to the education of the American audience and was a huge supporter of new music. He became the music director of The Little Orchestra Society of New York in 1979 and he had also been conducting the Metropolitan Chorale in NYC since 1968.⁸

We have no other specific indications or any form of correspondence between Anagnost and Tavener; however, it is safe to assume that it was mostly Anagnost's initiative that brought the British composer to New York City. Anagnost's statement for the event reads as follows:

6 Things could become even more complicated assuming that the piece was written after the ancient Greek goddess Athena. To clarify, the work was composed and dedicated to the death of a young person named Athena, a family friend of the composer. John Tavener and Malcolm Crowthers, "All at Sea? On the Eve of the Barbican Festival Devoted to His Music, John Tavener Talks to Malcolm Crowthers about the Sea, Bells, Religion and Life in Greece," *The Musical Times* 135, no. 1811 (1994): 9-14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1002825>.

7 Frank Desby, "The Growth of the Liturgical Music in the Iakovian Era," in *Greek Music in America*, ed. Tina Bucuvalas, (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2019), 53-70.

8 Margalit Fox, Dino Anagnost, "Who Led Little Orchestra Society, Dies at 67," *New York Times*, April 3, 2011. Online version access: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/arts/music/dino-anagnost-67-dies-led-little-orchestra-society.html>. See also Brian Wise, "Dino Anagnost, Little Orchestra Society Conductor Has Died," March 31, 2011. <https://www.wqxr.org/story/121352-dino-anagnost-little-orchestra-society-conductor-dies/>.

I am delighted to be part of this unique event and to be able to honor such an important contemporary composer. I have long admired John Tavener's exquisite work and because of its religious inspiration, it is especially meaningful to perform it at the Greek Orthodox Cathedral. Throughout Europe audiences have had the opportunity to hear Tavener's music and it's time that American audiences are given a chance to appreciate his gifts.⁹

Anagnost's comment regarding the performance of these works at the Greek Orthodox Cathedral raises a number of questions concerning the functionality of this event in a church environment. Indeed, apart from the given historical importance of this concert, I believe that this event was innovative mainly on account of its functional accuracy regarding its narrative, context and meaning.

Tavener often asked for large resonant spaces for the performance of his works, as opposed to conventional concert halls, and he was really fond of placing musicians in surprising formations; in his early work *Últimos Ritos* (1972), the performers are seated in a specific way that forms the shape of the cross, while the musical material is a reference to Bach's Mass in B minor. In other words, Tavener really cared for his music's function in performance and he dared to attempt things that could suit his aesthetic intuition.¹⁰

We simply cannot infer that all these different works, written in different periods of his life, using different texts, were supposed to be performed at this time, in this space. However, we need to address the fact that six works of para-liturgical music, by a Christian Orthodox composer, were performed in a Christian Orthodox cathedral, and at this point there are many questions to be asked. How did this music function at this time? What would it mean for the music itself and its function, if a member of the audience was inspired to pray during the performance? And in such a case, would this mean that the music had reached its aesthetic goal?

Tavener makes it clear that art should be charged with a theological reality found within its core. He specifically stated that while "art cannot express a theological truth, a theological truth can surely be found inside the art".¹¹ In parallel, he adds that the role of any sacred art is to bring the audience closer to praying. To be more specific, he adds:

The whole purpose of sacred music must be to lead us to the threshold of prayer or to the threshold of a true encounter with the living God. For the sacred is prior — ontologically prior — to art and is totally unaffected by anything art can do, or cannot do, although of course if it does possess a sacred quality, it can certainly help us to renew our awareness of the sacred.¹²

9 https://www.goarch.org/news/releases/1999/-/asset_publisher/7NCuYdJYMvgG/content/orthodox-composer-john-tavner-s-music-featured-at-holy-trinity-cathedral-on-april-3

10 Paul Griffiths, "Tavener and Ultimos Ritos," *The Musical Times* 115, no. 1576 (1974): 468-71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/957951>.

11 John Tavener, "Composing Sacred Music," *Temenos* 9 (1998): 32-37.

12 In fact, Tavener, in his interview with Gregory Pysh for the *Choral Journal* adds: "I would say to work is to pray". Tavener, John. "Composing Sacred Music." p. 33. See also Gregory M. Pysh, and John Tavener, "Icon in Sound: An Interview with Sir John Tavener," *The Choral Journal* 54, no. 10 (2014): 18-23, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43051951>.

Again, it would be interesting to explore the aesthetic boundaries of an art form which brings an audience closer to the threshold of praying rather than praying itself, which would be a truly demanding task. However, Tavener's statement reveals the great detail in which he approaches the concept of sacred art and art within the notion of sacred.

Most importantly, the composer also comments that para-liturgical art is the most effective way to communicate a theological reality with an audience. In his words: "Dostoevsky shows us a theological truth inside a novel like *The Brothers Karamazov*, but he does not attempt to write a novel about St John, for instance, chatting with the Virgin Mary! That would be a perversion and an amputation."¹³ On the occasion under discussion, all works together compose a musical representation of different views on death; in Tavener's words a musical icon of death, using material from Cavafy to Blake, and from Blake to Shakespeare and the Christian Orthodox funeral service. More specifically, in this event as a whole, we see how the composer realizes the idea of death, based on a different views on death ultimately creating, to be more accurate, a musical "iconscape" of death; a general atmosphere takes on this matter, rather than a specific, discrete artistic product based solely on his own beliefs or emotions.

According to the Greek theologian and philosopher Christos Yannaras:

At baptism the whole of a man's life becomes an ecclesial event, a fact of communion and relationship. Thus when a man takes his food in accordance with the Church canons on fasting and feasting, this is not a means to individual survival but becomes a way of partaking in a common experience of the use of good things.¹⁴

We see many similarities between the way that Yannaras defines this idea of the ecclesial event and the way Tavener treats Cavafy's or Shakespeare's texts. I believe that the composer's approach rests on his need to shift the work's main reference; from a private to a public standpoint, placing the work's focus on the receptor, as in Byzantine iconography. As in the work of the Greek iconographer George Kordis, a secular theme can have a sacred quality. Not because of the work's original theme, but only because of the artist's ability or need to add in the work's context a public-sharing quality: a quality of communion and relationship. The artist thrives to achieve that, by applying a number tools in his or her work, which add a religious element, in order to realize the vision through the artist's craft. These tools are in accordance with Church tradition in a wider sense. In Tavener's approach to Cavafy for example, he chooses to insert a religious layer into the given text, changing completely its original texture. As a result, by attaching this kind of identity to a given text, Tavener makes the work public and available to the community of the Church. The audience has the chance to partake of this shared experience of this musical iconscape, which is part of the composer's or the community's own experience of the sacred or, in Yannaras' words, his own ecclesial events.

¹³ John Tavener, "Composing Sacred Music", 32-37.

¹⁴ Χρήστος Γιανναράς, *Η Ελευθερία του Ηθους* (Αθήνα: ΙΚΑΡΟΣ, 2011), 19.

To summarize, after a brief analysis of the way that the works performed approach the notion of the sacred in their para-liturgical context, I examined how they could potentially function in this specific setting. The above works share a unique antiphonal quality and they are paired through their mutual association with the idea of death. This paper suggests that these musical pieces can be understood as the composer's understanding of the idea of death through a theological prism, as according to the composer himself, art should carry a theological truth. However, the revelation of this very truth happens in an unclear way, as the composer does not comment on the presentational, performative aspect of the music itself at all, thereby meaning that the reader of Tavener's written texts is only left to believe that music owns a transformative power that can move the receiver-audience member closer to the threshold of prayer, rather to prayer itself. An interesting aspect that arises in this context is also the fact that this event's music programme was exclusively made up of strictly para-liturgical works, for which the composer praises their potential theological gravity as a genre.

Ultimately, I attempted to create an analogy between Yannaras's suggestions of a shared experience within the Church community with a shared experience of a concert-event consisting of sacred music performed in a sacred space. On a practical note, the usage of compositional tools and elements borrowed from the Christian Orthodox musical tradition does not only add an extra textural layer to a finished product. Most importantly, on account of the aforementioned, the work moves away from the boundaries of a conventional work of art and becomes a shared experience within the community of the Church, in its para-liturgical or even secular context, especially since the performance of such works takes place in a sacred space. Fundamentally, what defines a work as a shared experience or even as an ecclesial event, is not its original context but the trope (τρόπος) according to which its material has been organized within the work itself; we can see a secular theme presented in the most sacred (sic) way, in, for example, the *Song of Songs*.

Therefore, concerning the concert in the Holy Trinity Cathedral, although it would be safe to imply that this kind of event is not just a usual concert, at the same time, it is rather difficult to specify its aesthetic function. Yannaras's suggestion is distinctively theological and using it in a musicological context seems irrational at first. On the other hand, traditional music theory's tools seem insufficient in order to approach such works in depth; these works call for an interdisciplinary method of analysis and understanding because of their multi-textural identity. In any case, a theoretical assumption like this can be either readily defended or deconstructed, again on account of the amount of freedom it took for it to grow. However, because of the rarity with which these kinds of events take place and such issues arise, I believe that my musicological responsibility is to raise questions more frequently regarding their functionality and meaning.

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