

Nina Large looks at the logistics of staging John Tavener's all-night vigil and outlines its significance for the Temple Church

Night shift

Tucked away from the incessant pace of Fleet Street, some of London's finest lawyers work in the private haven of Inner and Middle Temple, a maze of cobbled alleyways leading from one magnificent building to another: around the Inns of Court. At the heart of the enclave lies the 800-year-old Temple Church, one of London's most beautiful and all the more so for its secrecy. But this June word will be out when the building hosts one of the most ambitious choral projects ever staged: an all-night vigil lasting from dusk until dawn, composed by Sir John Tavener.

The first I heard of this monumental idea was 18 months ago when Stephen Layton, organist and director of music at the Temple, casually mentioned that a new work was being written for the Temple Church, to be performed by the Holst Singers and the men and boys of the Temple Church Choir and entitled *The Veil of the Temple*. Moreover, it was to be the longest choral work ever written, sung by 150 people throughout the night as one continuous candle-lit vigil, complete with Tibetan horns, bells and incense imported from a Greek monastery on Mount Athos.

The reaction was one of awed bemusement. But it did not take long before Tavener ring tones could be heard on some of the choristers' mobile phones (a sure sign of allegiance) and Layton held everyone's attention by peppering otherwise unrelated rehearsals with hot-off-the-press pianistic snippets of the great work to come.

Music of this length and proportion requires some serious organisation. Layton duly commis-

sioned a complex Microsoft Access database into which he has entered every detail of the work, the number of bars in each section, corresponding number of parts, time at which each part will be sung, position in the church and so on. It has been a serious labour of love and taken hundreds of hours to produce, but each singer now has a personal schedule 'so that they can all move from a to b and still go to the loo.' Resting and eating times are also scheduled, to the relief of the participants, and call times are given to the minute.

In February this year everyone involved was introduced to the fearsome database first-hand when they gathered for a workshop with Layton and Tavener himself, which certainly gave them a real sense of what lay ahead. 'One objective of this day was to get the singers really to believe it was worth doing and get their enthusiasm. It also gave both John Tavener and me the chance to work on it first hand,' Layton says.

Taking part as a member of the choir, official photographer for the event and author of this feature gave me a good appreciation of the *Veil's* multiple dynamics. The work is very much conceived for the space of the Temple and its unique acoustics, and the workshop allowed some useful discoveries. Layton has taken Tavener's original positions as starting points to spread the sound right around the building – voices in the 13th-century round church blend with those from the triforium high up above, small choirs dotted about the chancel, chanting as singers move down the aisle and so on. Such free rein is testament to the tremendous trust between the two men.

'In a way it is a closer collaboration than I have had in the past,' admits Tavener. 'Stephen is very musical and has a remarkable grasp of the work.' Piles of letters dating back to February 2002 show how thoughts and ideas have developed between them, including discussion over which passages might best become one of the 12 or so anthems to be extracted from the *Veil* for separate publication (something implicit in the commission).

Unusually for Tavener the texts cover many religious perspectives, starting with the most recent revelation of God in the world of Islam and ending with the most ancient, Hinduism, while Christian-

ity, in particular Christ's ascension, provides the main thrust.

The work has eight cycles, which grow ever more layered and complex as they progress through the night. The eighth includes the *Upanishad Hymn*, Tavener's answer to Parry's Jerusalem – a massive, chorale-like outburst with Hindu chanting, timpani, brass and the full gamut of singers. From start to finish basic musical cells are not so much developed as expanded in a manner not dissimilar to Indian Ragas, and the composer points out the severe mathematical construction which underpins it all since with a work this

A matter of trust:
Sir John Tavener (left)
and Stephen Layton

