

TAVENER'S MUSICAL PILGRIMAGE HAD RUN FOR SEVEN HOURS, YET FROM FIRST TO LAST IT WAS MESMERISING



ONCE in a while even the most heartless hack must cast aside professional scepticism and gush like a groupie. Perhaps it's the heat, or perhaps it's the fact that I have gone 26 hours on a bacon buttie and two bars of chocolate, but I feel one of those simpering, whimpering raves coming on. So if you think this display of drooling might put you off your cornflakes I suggest that you quickly skip along to something cooler and more objective, like the fashion pages.

The cause of my elation, and of my 26 sleepless hours? Well, it's 7am and I have just got back from the premiere of Sir John Tavener's latest composition, *The Veil of the Temple*. To call this musical extravaganza an epic is a little like calling the Sahara sandy. When that wonderful Anglo-Indian soprano Patricia Rozario, veiled from head to foot like some ghostly apparition, floated her first sublime notes through the darkness of the Temple Church — that mysterious 13th-century marvel tucked between Fleet Street and the Embankment — the hour

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was a few minutes past ten in the evening. By the time that 150 singers, a brass band, organ, gong, Tibetan horn, temple bells and goodness knows what other exotica had thundered their ecstatic way through the great Hindu *Upanishad Hymn*, and led us all out of the church into the dawn, the clock had advanced to 5am.

In other words, Tavener's incredible musical pilgrimage — 850 pages of full score incorporating chants, prayers and psalms from all the world's major religions, and then some — had run for seven hours. That far exceeds Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, the previous record-holder for the longest vocal work in history — a mere tiddler at five hours and 15 minutes. Yet from first to last the piece was mesmerising. And I say that as someone who had previously regarded Tavener's "mystic minimalism" as 10 per cent inspiration and 90 per cent obfuscation.

What he does here is to present the same basic cycle of liturgical events no fewer than eight times. But with each cycle the texts become more intricate, the modes more elaborate, the harmonies richer, the choral forces bigger, and — if you see things the way Tavener does — the journey to the centre of the Cosmos ever closer to reaching its goal. Finally, the "veil of the temple" itself, the final division between earthly and heavenly things, is torn away. All religions and human distinctions are dissolved; all creation becomes as one with its creator.

I think I may have simplified a bit — sleep deprivation and heavy-duty theology don't really mix — but you get the idea. And you probably think, as I initially did when I read the libretto, that it all sounds like the sort of metaphysical guff that goes down very well in Himalayan monasteries and on evangelical TV channels in Utah, but which would sink like a lead balloon if presented in the heart of cynical old London.

That, however, is to overlook the tremendous spiritual force of religious music when crafted by a master — and this is definitely Tavener's masterpiece. As the hours tick by, and the Greek incense wafts more thickly, and more and more candles are lit, and the recurring chants are cloaked in ever more complex ornaments, the piece develops a primordial force that I found at first enrapturing, then almost terrifying in its fervour. Indeed, I can imagine no more ferocious evocation of the Last Trump than the astonishing eight whams on the tam-tam, accompanied by blasts of Tibetan horn and organ, with which Tavener heralds the climactic eighth cycle.

But even if you don't buy into Tavener's eclectic religious tastes — which do seem to grow more exotic by the year — this amazing event was heartwarming for quite different reasons. It made one proud to be English, not least because it is hard to think of another country in which the mixture of high-quality choral forces required by this gigantic score could be mustered. Not only did it employ the superb professional men and boy choristers of the Temple Church itself (the boys, sent to bed at 11pm, returned just before dawn), but also a hundred or so top-class amateurs from the Holst Singers. I don't think I shall hear singing this year more thrilling than the sound of that lot, spread the full length of the church, blazing out the climaxes that crash like waves towards the end of Tavener's score.

What's more, at 4am their combined lungs sounded, if anything, even more magnificent than they did at midnight. And that's remarkable, when you take into account the demands that Tavener makes. It was as if all fatigue had been swept away by the sheer excitement of this bizarre yet unforgettable occasion.

And that brings us to the second reason for English pride, which is summed up in a single word — eccentricity. People think that eccentricity is a character flaw. It isn't. It's an inspiring virtue, perhaps the greatest of all English virtues. And this event was the very epitome of it. It was eccentric of Tavener to write a seven-hour choral piece in the first place. It was wonderfully and generously eccentric of the usually hard-nosed lawyers of the Inner and Middle Temple to raise nearly half a million quid to get it commissioned, rehearsed and performed. It was eccentric of Stephen Layton, the Temple's indefatigable director of music, to devote practically all his waking hours for a year (and, on Friday, quite a few of his sleeping ones as well) to the preparation and direction of this single epic.

And, not least, it was eccentric of us, the public, to forfeit a night's sleep to experience the thing, as hundreds did (and hundreds more will, when it is repeated on Friday). Indeed, the whole atmosphere — from the incongruous burger bar set up in the hallowed Inner Temple court, to the sight of eminent barristers snatching kips propped against ancient tombs — had the delightfully dotty feel of a true English picnic. At the end we were asked not to clap. So, after seven hours, some wag murmured "encore!", and the rest of us giggled at the blissful madness of it all as we drifted out to catch the first Tube.

