

Long night's journey into elation

Music

The Veil of the Temple

TEMPLE CHURCH, ECG

FOR John Tavener, music isn't just about music. It's a way of stilling the mind, so as to focus on the emptiness that the mystics tell us is the essence of the Divine. The trouble with trying to evoke emptiness in music is that it can seem, well, empty – particularly in Tavener's recent pieces, which fill long hours with portentous drones, bell-strokes, and Eastern-sounding chant.

So it was with a sinking heart that I arrived at the beautiful and dimly lit Temple Church just before 10pm. We were in for a nearly eight-hour-long portrayal of the soul's journey from darkness to light, in eight cycles of prayers and meditations drawn from the Bible, mystical writings and, towards the end, the Hindu Upanishads. There were other more mundane reasons for worry. Would I make it through without nodding off? What if hunger pangs struck at 3am? (I needn't have worried; bacon butties were on hand at all hours outside the church, and two bars of *Veil of the Temple* chocolate were waiting on every seat. The organisers had thought of everything.)

In the end the experience turned out to be riveting. It's not that Tavener has discovered some new voice – more that

the familiar one was given a cogency I'd never heard before. The new piece is above all a masterpiece of pacing, beginning in a modest way with a handful of singers and instrumentalists, and building to a mighty climax with what seemed like hundreds of performers. Within the larger symmetry traced by the recurring pattern of the eight cycles were myriad small symmetries and recurrences. Expectancy was mingled with pleasurable recognition, as some particularly shapely or tender phrase came round again, slightly varied and augmented. The musical patterns were made more vividly evident by dramatic lighting, and by a performance of heart-stopping passion from the Holst Singers.

Much of the power of the piece lay in the combination of economy – laid end-to-end, the basic musical material would barely fill an hour – and amazing stylistic variety. (Amazing because Tavener is always issuing stern anathemas against the wicked Western fondness for variety, harmony and so on. But it's the sign of a real composer that he disobeys his own rules.) At the end, in a marvellous *coup de théâtre*, the choir led us out into the dawn to a joyful chant from the Hindu scriptures. As I emerged, dazed and elated, I felt that I had just witnessed Tavener's masterpiece.

This review appeared in earlier editions yesterday.

Ivan Hewett