



Richard Morrison...

why musicians should dare to surprise us

A lot pops into your noddle when you sit in the dark for seven hours. Perhaps that explains why, halfway through John Tavener's *The Veil of the Temple*, I found myself pondering the numbing predictability of musical life in modern Britain.

That train of thought, I hasten to say, is no reflection on Tavener's epic. *Au contraire*. It was because Mystic John had concocted something extraordinary even by his eccentric standards – seven hours of continuous choral music, meshing Christian, Hindu and Muslim texts into a kind of sacred *Midsummer Night's Dream* which played from dusk till dawn in a London church – that I started to feel these pangs of dissatisfaction with the everyday musical world.

Tavener's own, rather narrow thesis is that music – indeed, all art – is meaningless without religious purpose. He would like us to return to an imagined golden age when all compositions were sacred. I don't subscribe to that. The truth is that he who pays the piper has always called the tune, and for composers in the totalitarian medieval world the Church was the only show in town. But I do agree with Tavener about one thing; that the modern music world has swung too far the other way. Too often music is treated merely as a product to be sold in safe little packages.

Of course there are pragmatic reasons for that. Musicians have to eat. To allow them to earn their daily crust we set them to work in factories called concert halls or recording studios which churn out performances according to schedules usually fixed by accountants. The function allotted to us, the music-loving public, is to buy their products and consume them passively – just as our function as, say, the banana-loving public is to visit supermarkets and consume the fruit that will keep Caribbean farmers in business. That's how consumerism, and capitalism, works.

The big question, though, is how far we allow music, greatest and most mysterious of

all art forms, to become just another cog in the consumerist merry-go-round that is laughingly called Western civilisation, c2003. I fear we have gone too far already. Think back 120 years or so. If you wanted music then, you made it yourself. The piano in the parlour, the choir in church, the choral society in the town hall, the brass band at t'pit head, the amateur orchestras in the shires – these were the rocks on which musical life was built. Through them, millions made music, with the emphasis on making, not listening.

Today? Of course some people still make music for themselves. But it is a tiny percentage of the population. For the vast majority, music is something you buy or

That was why I enjoyed the Tavener marathon so much. It was a kind of blissful madness. It acknowledged no unbridgeable gulf between amateurs and professionals (the 120 superb singers were a democratic mixture of both), or received notions about when concerts start and finish. You knew that you would never experience anything like it again. And out of the 2,000-odd musical events I have attended in the past ten years I don't think such a claim could be made for more than half a dozen others.

Of course, Tavener's detractors – I believe he has a few – detect hypocrisy. How, they ask, can someone who loftily claims to disdain vile commercialism happily licence

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switch on. That's a terrible indictment of our education system. Why aren't more people equipped with the tools, or infused with the desire, to make music in their adult lives?

But to blame the school curriculum for the narrowness of musical life is too simplistic. Professional musicians – whether classical or pop – are also at fault. They are supposed to be creative visionaries. That is the mystique they cultivate. Yet when was the last time you were startled by a concert format? When did you last encounter any professional music-making that came as a delightful surprise? Professional musicians, it seems to me, so rarely attempt to ambush us with their talent. Concert and opera seasons turn into so many tins of baked beans.

the use of his own sacred music in TV ads for mobile phones? But I find even that incongruity stimulating. I wish more serious contemporary composers wrote music memorable enough to be used in commercials.

It seems odd, I agree, to hail as revolutionary a composer whose harmonies would have sounded antique to Palestrina. Yet *The Veil of the Temple* is, in its way, as daringly iconoclastic as *The Rite of Spring*. It reminds us that music, musicians and music-houses should know no conventions, accept no boundaries, follow no routines. From the synthetic pap of *Top of the Pops* to the stodgy 'everything important happens in tails at 7.30pm' ethos of the orchestras, that is a lesson that must quickly be learnt. ■