

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 12th-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.

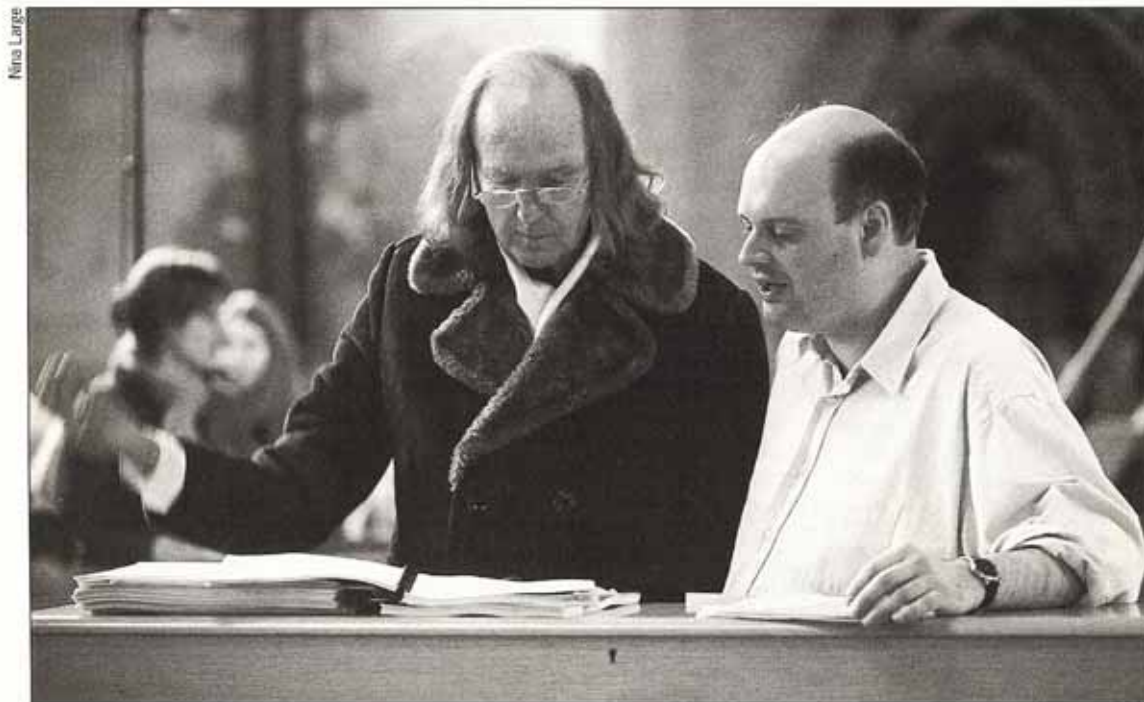
'In a way it is a closer collaboration than I have had in the past,' admits Tavener. 'Stephen is very musical and has a remarkable grasp of the work.' Piles of letters dating back to February 2002 show how thoughts and ideas have developed between them, including discussion over which passages might 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



size he insists, 'it can't just be an outpouring'.

The *Veil* is subtitled *A Journey to the Centre*: just as the darkness outside will turn to the first light of dawn, so Tavener hopes the listeners' journey will take them towards the 'realisation of self' in the final cycle – represented symbolically by soprano Patricia Rozario (a Mary Magdalen type figure) physically unveiling herself. 'I consider the very end to be going beyond being to the infinite,' says Tavener. 'The audience don't have to experience that change cerebrally but inside themselves somehow. That's why I feel quite strongly that they keep in touch with the sounds happening through the night.'

Mystical rhetoric aside, Tavener is not immune to some of the practicalities of such an event. Greek vigils allow a measure of moving about and Tavener is keen for his London audience to follow suit. 'If I can lead that sort of thing, I will. They can't just be sitting there or they'll get thrombosis,' he says. The second all-night performance on 4 July will also be relayed out to giant screens in the Temple Gardens where it is hoped that 2,000 people will gather to experience the event *al fresco*. A food village will be set up to satisfy the midnight munchies, as will lines of Portaloos, and a team of St John's Ambulance officers will be on hand in case of any problems. To the relief of those at the Temple a separate production crew has been brought in to sort out the logistics of all of this including rigging up microphones for a BBC Radio 3 broadcast of the concert version on 1 July, and managing all manner of lighting effects and staging. 'You could say it is a kind of religious music theatre,' Layton remarks.

The sheer length of the *Veil* is likely to be its hardest selling point but Layton is adamant that with the right approach it will be a great experience. 'You don't go to an all-night vigil as a music critic,' warns Layton. 'You go as somebody who wants to be in tune with the spirit and with yourself. That means you should judge such a thing as the *Veil* as a spiritual event in a church and not a piece of concert music in the concert hall – I think once you make that distinction with a lot of Tavener's music it really comes into its own.'

Such an event and the possibility of internationally released CDs will undoubtedly raise the profile of the Temple Church, something which its organisers aim to take full advantage of. Although music has had a colourful history at the Temple and the choir has been featured on BBC TV (for the sound track to *Gormenghast*) and radio it has been decades since it really enjoyed really widespread recognition as it did in 1927 when the forward-thinking Temple organist Sir George Thalben-Ball captured the attention of HMV which recorded Mendelssohn's *O for the wings of a dove* with Ernest Lough as treble soloist. It became one of the first great hits, and is still in the playlist now having sold over five million copies. 'Without harking back endlessly,' says the Reverend Robin Griffith-Jones, Master of the Temple, 'it is viable to say that we are looking for the Ernest Lough moment for the new century.'

By courting public attention and interest both Layton and Griffith-Jones hope that an endowment might eventually be set up to ensure that music at the Temple, specifically the choir, continues to thrive. It is currently funded by the incredible generosity of the Inns themselves, which on top of looking after their church provide salaries for Layton, his assistant James Vivian and a singing teacher as well paying for the 12 Temple men, and two thirds of the school fees required to attend the City of London School for the 18 young choristers. Ideally the



Nina Lange

endowment would ensure 100% scholarships for years to come, thereby allowing any talented boy to enjoy such an education without being held back by financial disadvantage.

Layton himself was never destined for a public school education but it was this system of scholarship that sent him first to The Pilgrims' School, as chorister in Winchester Cathedral Choir and then on to Eton. He is passionate about preserving the choral tradition and sees these choirs at the very heart of British music making:

'We are providing something for young children here which is extremely precious. An important function for these choirs is to sing the great music that has been written by composers in this country, Purcell, Byrd, Tompkins and indeed Tavener. If those choirs with their young boys don't continue to perform it where will the men come from who are going to sing the music in years to come?' He provides an analogy between a Holbein painting and piece of music by Byrd, both from the same period: the Holbein is put in the National Gallery and preserved for the nation forever, but the Byrd needs more than just an air conditioned room – it needs people to perform it. 'So we've got to look after the performance of this art, otherwise we could find that in 50 years' time, if such choirs were on the wane, we wouldn't be able to sing it. It would die and that would be a tragedy.'

While Layton is much in demand across Europe as a conductor he explains that the Temple is central to his work. 'The work that one does with little children is like getting your knees dirty. It's not as glamorous as conducting the *John Passion* at ENO but I owe it to the institutions that gave me the chance to at least spend some time in my life doing this kind of work,' he says. 'And I believe that without doing it we are compromising the future of British music – it's as dramatic as that.'

The 12 anthems taken from the *Veil* will be a huge contribution to the British choral repertoire and will turn the Temple into the major commissioner of church choral music in the last 100 years. It is incontestable proof that now, at any rate, the choral tradition is alive and kicking.

The *Veil of the Temple* by Sir John Tavener will be performed 10pm-5.30am on the nights of 7 June and 4 July in the Temple Church, London, with a shortened concert version at 7pm on 1 July. The performances are part of the City of London Festival. Box office 020 7638 8891

www.theveilofthetemple.com

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