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9. 'Dumped modernism'? The interplay of musical construction and spiritual affect in John Tavener and his *To a Child Dancing in the Wind*¹

Introduction: Tavener and Modernism

In public discourse around John Tavener's music since the 1990s, a sense of dialectic is discernable between modernist compositional techniques and perceived spiritual qualities. As Brian Keeble commented while interviewing Tavener in 1999, 'your earlier music obviously had a good deal to do with modernism [...] but you've come to hate modernism and all it stands for' (Tavener 1999: 91). And his publisher's biographical material refers to the 'Modernist fervour' with which Tavener was surrounded during the formative years of his musical education, regarding which he nevertheless 'felt an instinctive and increasing mistrust' (Seymour 2013: 5). According to this narrative, the key event of his compositional career was conversion to Russian Orthodoxy in 1977, which led to a withdrawal from the contemporary music scene and a period of silent contemplation, followed by the flowering of a radically simple new compositional ethos, linked nevertheless to enduring musico-religious traditions (but owing nothing to Tavener's compositional training or previous works). In one biographer's phrase, 'Once he dumped modernism, his music came to inhabit a world made up largely of traditional models' (Haydon 1995: 164). The emblematic approach in the earlier music is of angst-ridden struggle in the Romantic/modernist mould (the post-enlightenment view of musical expression), with complicated compositional manipulations of dissonant atonal material incorporating all twelve notes of the chromatic scale. Conversely, the approach in the post-conversion piece is of music coming fully-formed in a state of serene receptiveness: beautifully diatonic or traditionally modal; an almost pre-lapsarian² view of compositional process and results linked with notions of 'divine inspiration'.

¹ A version of this paper was delivered at the second Study Day of the Tavener Centre for Music and Spirituality hosted by the University of Winchester on 10 November 2017. Some of the material delivered then, and in this expanded text, is derived from Inglis (1999).

² The state of a perfect relationship with God before the Fall of humanity.

This narrative was widely promulgated by Sir John himself around the time of Keeble's book and has achieved almost axiomatic status. But did he completely dump modernism? And was his pre-conversion music entirely concerned with self-expressive innovation? I propose a more nuanced interpretation of Tavener's career, emphasising continuity over rupture.³ Tavener's comments, like those of any other composer, shouldn't necessarily be taken at face value. Especially in the 1990s (a period of increasing fame following the successful premiere of *The Protecting Veil* at the 1989 BBC Proms), they were often made for polemical purposes, or to deflect perceived or actual criticism.⁴ And in any case, his condemnation of modernism and modernity was neither comprehensive nor unqualified – or his comments on religion uncritical. Nor are the differences in compositional approach in different career-stages so clear-cut, or entirely unrelated to the music of his contemporaries; we can find both continuities and contradictions across Tavener's career.

In examining my premise, I will explore how techniques associated with musical modernism form structural foundations in pieces which exhibit in different ways the contemplative idiom (sometimes labelled spiritual minimalism or new simplicity) for which the composer became renowned. The main focus of this chapter will be a musicological close reading of a key work from Tavener's mid-career, *To a Child Dancing in the Wind* (1983) supported by briefer analytical and interpretative comments on other pieces, primarily *The Lamb* (1982) and secondarily *Fall and Resurrection* (1997). My aim is to facilitate a holistic understanding of Tavener's achievement as a composer: acknowledging his music's potential for impacting spiritually on listeners, but seeing in it an exemplar of postmodern intellectual craftsmanship.

Continuities and Contexts; *The Lamb* and *Fall and Resurrection*

Amongst musical features which can be identified across Tavener's style periods, one of the most obvious is the juxtaposition of blocks of material, paced with a strong sense of ritual. Michael Tumelty writes of the work which elevated Tavener to public prominence in 1968, *The Whale*:

³ In part I follow Moody (2014) - who emphasises the gradualness of Tavener's stylistic transformation - in this regard., See also Begbie (2000: 132-3)

⁴ Some actual criticism is found in (for instance) Fisk (1994). Fisk's critique will be discussed later in this chapter.

Rather than creating a progressive dramatic unity, Tavener boldly juxtaposes large, static blocks of material, with separate events punctuated by pauses or long silences (Tumelty 1988: 2).

These comments could readily apply to many of Tavener's later large-scale pieces, even though the musical ingredients of the juxtaposed blocks may be different.

Moving from structure to texture and timbre, one of the most characteristic aspects of Tavener's soundworld - not least in *To a Child Dancing in the Wind* – is extended vocal range. This may include low bass parts in choral music (Tavener takes basses down as low as C₂), but more commonly features the high, implicitly pure, soprano voice. This is as much an aspect of *In Alium* (1968) as it is of *The Veil of the Temple* (2003). Identified by Stephen Banfield as the 'resource most central to later twentieth century vocal expression' (Banfield 1995: 490-1), it links Tavener to his contemporaries more closely than is sometimes apparent.

Sacred texts and themes are as prevalent in pre-1977 works as in later ones, often tinged with Catholicism and filtered through St John of the Cross. Tavener's journey, after all, was less from secularism to religion and more from Western Protestantism and Catholicism to Eastern Orthodoxy (and beyond). And yet Tavener's Orthodox-inspired music has been embraced more by Anglican choirs and professional Western classical performers than by Eastern churches or traditional musicians.

Tavener's compositional process, too, always seems to have been a mixture of inspiration and craft:

Very often there are long periods of nothing at all, but once started I don't stop. Something will happen ... and music will come to me almost full-grown: that's happened a lot during the last three years, but also before that up to a point. (Griffiths 1985: 110)

The crucial terms in the above quote are Tavener's revelation that this process was not entirely new, and his qualifier that music came to him 'almost' full-grown. Much can be found within that one word 'almost', as his scores themselves attest. For instance: *The Lamb* is one of Tavener's best-known pieces, which since its premiere at Christmastide 1982 has

become a favourite with choirs and choral societies, and more besides (in the early 2000s it could be heard frequently on UK TV advertising a brand of mobile phone).

In Tavener's own account of its genesis, it 'came to me spontaneously and complete. I read Blake's poem [...] and as soon as I read it, the music was there. Within a quarter of an hour, the piece was finished' (Tavener 1999: 48). The musical setting is broadly a verse-refrain repeated twice (once for each stanza of the poem). Tavener also refers (in the above-cited conversation) to a chord, consisting of the notes A-C-G-B, identified as the 'joy/sorrow' chord and symbolising for him those emotions.⁵ Prominent in the refrain section, it emphasises, in particular, the iterations of the word 'Lamb' (implicitly the Lamb of God), as highlighted below:

[Refrain 1]

Gave thee *such* a tender voice,

Making *all* the vales rejoice?

Little *Lamb*, who made thee?

Dost thou *know*, who made thee? //

[Refrain 2]

I, a *child*, and thou a lamb,

We are *called* by his name

Little *Lamb*, God bless thee!

Little *Lamb*, God bless thee!

Tavener's 'joy/sorrow' chord could be understood as a four-note diatonic cluster (G-A-B-C), although its context, spacing and (hence) aural character suggests an A minor eleventh chord (iv¹¹ in the context of the refrain's E minor tonality) with missing fifth. This is a type of chord progression (e-e⁷-a⁹-D⁷/A-b⁷-e) one might find in late-Romantic harmony influenced by modal folk music, such as that of Vaughan Williams or Peter Warlock, and its use could be understood as (re-)connecting the music with an earlier twentieth-century English sacred

⁵ This sonority has great significance in Tavener's output. A comparison can be made with the 'bright sadness' which Bouteneff (2015) identifies in Arvo Pärt's music - see especially part III.

choral tradition.⁶ It is also reminiscent of chord progressions found in popular music, perhaps explaining the popularity this piece has gained. The way Tavener initially harmonises the, originally unadorned, melody (in itself as short and simple as a nursery rhyme) is very different however, as is an aspect of the rhythmic language. Each interval of the diatonic soprano melody is exactly inverted (mirrored) in the harmonising alto voice, creating unexpected and unconventional progressions (see Figure 9.1).

{INSERT EXAMPLE 1}

Figure 9.1: *The Lamb*, bars 1-2.

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Music by John Tavener

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This is a technical procedure found in many subsequent pieces – it is as much a trademark of Tavener’s ‘spiritual minimalist’ style as Arvo Pärt’s tintinnabuli. And the melody is developed through retrograde (reversal) as well as inversion, creating surprisingly challenging tuning issues for amateur choirs when harmonised analogously. Figure 9.2 illustrates this, considering the initial melody (with pitch repetitions eliminated) as the prime (P) form of a quasi-serial 4-note row subject to inversion (I), retrograde (R) and retrograde inversion (RI):

{INSERT EXAMPLE 2}

Figure 9.2: *The Lamb*, bars 3-6.

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⁶ See also Moody, who finds the ‘palpable lushness’ of Tavener’s later Requiem (2008) places him ‘in a very English tradition’ including such mystically-inclined composers as Holst and Foulds (2014: 215).

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Inversion and retrograde are techniques found in early polyphonic music, especially Baroque fugues and medieval or Renaissance masses and motets. But their more immediate context for Tavener is likely to have been their revival in the serial techniques of Webern and Stravinsky which formed part of his musical formation (his interest in Webern will be revisited shortly).⁷ Rhythmically, there is at times a somewhat irregular combination of three- and two-beat patterns (for instance at 'made thee' in Figure 9.1). This could be related to Gregorian chant (and hence Tavener's Catholic phase) but may, again, be related more immediately to Messiaen 'added values' – Messiaen being very much part of the modernist musical firmament of Tavener's youth, and sharing with him concepts of musical structure and drama as well as, of course, spirituality. Likewise, rhythmic augmentation (as found at the end of each refrain section) may be related as much to Messiaen's technique as to early music. The fact that Tavener almost 'smuggles' such techniques into a piece which has found favour not only with choral societies but also so many listeners – thereby extending their musical as well as their spiritual experience – is testament to Tavener's discernment in fashioning such memorable musical imagery. Tavener was not always keen to articulate the technical procedures behind his music's apparent artlessness. Tavener also admired his teacher David Lumsdaine's sense of the 'magic and mystery' of music.⁸ Yet magic, to its practitioners, is less about miraculous conjuration than about discipline and process. Later in life Tavener confessed that pieces like *The Lamb* which came fully born didn't necessarily seem to him more inspired than those he 'agonised' over and took him 'forever', like *The Veil of the Temple* (understandably given the latter's extended duration of 7 hours)(Palmer 2015: 436).

What Tavener found lacking in modernist music was, in his perception, its abstraction; its lack of a symbolic vocabulary. This in itself is a debatable point, as the use of modernist sounds in horror and science fiction films to connotative, and sometimes

⁷ Begbie draws attention (in a theological context) to Tavener's debts to the techniques of Stravinsky and Messiaen (see below) (2000: 130-1 and 139-40).

⁸ 'I don't know whether he's religious or not, but he has a very deep feeling for the magic and mystery of music, which communicated itself to me.' (Griffiths 1985: 109).

denotative, ends attests;⁹ consider also Messiaen's strongly symbolic intentions for his modernist sonorities and techniques. Tavener certainly found modernist tools retained their usefulness when deployed to his own musico-eschatological ends. My second example is from *Fall and Resurrection*, Tavener's grand fantasy of creation and redemption with which he greeted the year 2000.¹⁰ At this point Tavener was at the height of his fame and popularity, following the use of his *Song for Athene* at the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997 – an icon of spiritual celebrity. To quote his account of the representation of chaos near the beginning:

I decided to [...] take from a Byzantine chant [...] a matrix of notes, and to give it forty permutations, all being played on different instruments, with about twenty-seven different tempi [...] the construction of it was a huge mathematical undertaking for me. It took me a month to compose each page [...]. If you heard this music out of context, you might think that you were listening to a piece of the 'new complexity', except there is an underlying sound which never goes away. (Tavener 1999: 177-8)

With regard to the latter, a comparison can be drawn with Arvo Pärt's collage-composition *Credo* (1968), where chaotic sounds become grounded by deep pedal-points. But a hint of pride is surely detectable in Tavener's account, which foregrounds technique and labour over passive inspiration – 'a huge mathematical undertaking'; 'a month to compose each page'.

Neither the techniques nor the sounds of modernist music are inherently incompatible with a spiritual sensibility – consider (as Tavener did) the later works of Stravinsky, and the cantatas of Webern; or the intense asceticism of Galina Ustvolskaya's symphonies, many of which have religious titles, texts or religio-symbolic intentions. Again, late in life Tavener confirmed:

⁹ See for instance Donnelly (2005),

¹⁰ While completed in 1997, *Fall and Resurrection* was premiered on 4 January 2000 at a packed concert at London's St Paul's Cathedral, also broadcast live on BBA Radio 3 and videorecorded for subsequent TV broadcast and DVD release.

Because symmetry is terribly important to me I agonise over numbers and getting the formal structure of my music as mathematical as I can. I like to be able to explain every bar that I write. This is just to satisfy me, really – it's a private thing. (Palmer 2015: 436)

In this, one of the last long-form interviews Tavener gave, he is open and honest about the modernist concerns continuing to underpin his compositions (formal structure, mathematics, technical accountability). Which brings us to my third and principal example, *To a Child Dancing in the Wind*, where every bar can indeed be explained: as my analysis will show, the whole construction of the work can be explained with recourse to symmetrical and logical or numerical principles.

To a Child Dancing in the Wind

Written to a commission from the Little Missenden Festival, this 40-minute song cycle is scored for soprano, flute, viola and harp. While it could be viewed as a transitional work, and in certain ways it is, in my reading the composition has a central importance within Tavener's oeuvre. This arises from its internal structure, combination of specific musical elements, and position of equilibrium within the composer's musical journey, as he himself seems to have acknowledged: 'Somebody commented at that time – that was when the simplicity came' (Dudgeon 2003: 113).

Unusually for its place in Tavener's career, the words (by W. B. Yeats) are neither religious, nor do they relate to Russian or Greek culture – a trinity of preoccupations in the works immediately following Tavener's conversion in 1977. Yet there is evidence that Tavener considered sacred and literary texts coterminous. The choice of Yeats' poems seems in part linked to the poet's interest in magic and mysticism, and the ceremony and ritual of the Order of the Golden Dawn. Tavener considered Yeats 'the supreme artist of the 20th century', and explained his attraction to the poetry thus:

In recent years, I have written little music that is not sacred or liturgical. The Yeats Poems [...] are exceptions, partly I think because [Yeats] had a profound sense of the loss of the sacred and Primordial tradition in art. Also the music [...] has a quasi-liturgical atmosphere. (Tavener 1987)

Nine separate poems are arranged in a sequence by the composer (see column 2 in figure 9.6 below). They do not in themselves form a linked cycle or narrative, though many share a thematic preoccupation with regret for lost innocence and childhood. A more mystical strain, typical of the 'Celtic twilight' period,¹¹ is exemplified in the famous 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven'. This, set at the beginning of the cycle, forms with the terminal 'Countess Cathleen in Paradise' a kind of frame for the central poems of lost innocence.

The structure of the work bears comparison with another Yeats cycle, Peter Warlock's early modernist classic *The Curlew* (1922) and Tavener admitted he felt close to Warlock's 'singular vision'.¹² The texts provide Tavener's structural skeleton, along with a unifying device consisting of a melodic sequence played on the harp, which opens the piece and returns in varied forms between each poem, except those whose settings are paired: 'To a Child Dancing in the Wind'/'Two Years Later'; and 'Sweet Dancer'/'The Stolen Child'.

The first of the two main musical foundations of the piece is heard at the outset in a monophonic harp solo (Figure 9.3):

{INSERT EXAMPLE 3}

Figure 9.3: *To a Child Dancing in the Wind*, opening harp passage.

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Its construction is derived from a symmetrical word-square originating in Classical antiquity:

SATOR

AREPO

TENET

OPERA

ROTAS

¹¹ Yeats' 1893 collection of stories and poems drawing on Irish folklore and Celtic mythology.

¹² 'Although I greatly admire Britten and Elgar, in some ways I feel closer to Warlock, who had a very singular vision. The intensity of that vision moves me, although I'm not a miniaturist composer like he was' (Palmer 2015: 439).

While these five five-letter words have some semantic content as a Latin text,¹³ their deeper meaning is symbolic and talismanic. The square has been described as ‘an early Christian device based on the Lord’s Prayer’, which ‘forms the words “Our Father” (pater noster) in Latin, together with the ciphers of Alpha and Omega, the “Beginning and the Ending”’ (Knight 1991: 151-2). Tavener himself called it a ‘Byzantine Palindrome’ owing to his understanding of its presence on Byzantine gravestones (Haydon 1995: 164). It has great significance in forming a ‘stock-in-trade’ of Tavener’s compositional process, found (as Haydon relates) underlying many of his pieces - although this appears to be the first one. In Haydon’s account, Tavener found the device in Hans Moldenhauer’s chronicle of the life and works of Anton Webern, who ‘sought analogies between the “magic square” and the dodecaphonic system’ of manipulating 12-note rows (Haydon 1995: 164).

Webern was certainly not averse to equating pitch manipulation with mystical enquiry. Although a related pattern, the palindrome isn’t strictly speaking a magic square.¹⁴ Yet as a source for compositional manipulation the impetus is similar. As a letter square, Tavener’s palindrome perhaps has more in common with the mystical manipulations of the Jewish cabbalah (a favoured source, incidentally, for composers identified with ‘new complexity’¹⁵ for whom, judging from his account of the ‘representation of chaos’ from *Fall and Resurrection*, he had some fascination, of not admiration).

Tavener devises the melodic line of Figure 9.3 firstly by assigning a note to each letter to create a pitch-set square – there being only eight different letters, he conveniently aligns the letter-set with the notes of a major scale based on E^b, as shown in Figure 9.4.

A simple left-right/bottom-top reading constructs the harp’s 25-note sequence. The linear reading also preserves the palindrome’s elegant symmetry, especially in Tavener’s diatonic rendering. Owing to the special properties of the square, the linear sequence is palindromic around the thirteenth term, and a reverse or vertical reading will give the same sequence as a horizontal one. Tavener makes no obvious use of diagonal readings, perhaps because of the limited range of intervals that results.

¹³ A paraphrase might be: ‘Farmer Arepo keeps good hold of his wheels [plough]’

¹⁴ A number square, familiar from esoteric philosophy and linked with one of the Ptolemaic planets, where each row and column adds up to the same number.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Silverman 1996: 36-37.

Figure 9.4: Conversion of Byzantine Palindrome letter square to pitch-classes

S	A	T	O	R
A	R	E	P	O
T	E	N	E	T
O	P	E	R	A
R	O	T	A	S

E ^b	G	D	C	B ^b
G	B ^b	A ^b	F	C
D	A ^b	E ^b	A ^b	D
C	F	A ^b	B ^b	G
B ^b	C	D	G	E ^b

The second musical foundation is, perhaps surprisingly (as Tavener was said to have dumped modernism by this point), a twelve-note row: E^b-G-D-C-B^b-A^b-F-D^b-G^b-E-A-B. This is most prominently heard in the vocal line, as in the opening song (Figure 9.5):

{INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 4}

Figure 9.5: *To a Child Dancing in the Wind*, vocal line pp 3-5.

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This series shares its first five notes with the palindrome sequence, and the first seven with the E^b major scale; one can readily imagine its construction arising from a desire to provide variety in a work of this duration. (Playing through the first line of the square at the piano perhaps led Tavener to a variation, initially sticking to the same diatonic tonality then taking a logical leap into chromaticism, enabling the last few notes of the chromatic scale to be utilised.) The row's first half is used as a 6-note 'incipit' or hexachord from which subsidiary diatonic or modal elements are derived. Figure 9.6 summarises the structure of the whole

cycle, indicating the musical basis of each song and instrumental section. As the table shows, the palindrome sequence, row and derivations such as the incipit account for almost every part. One further element is found in songs 2 and 9, which Haydon identifies as a Byzantine/Russian chant (this will be revisited later).

Returning to the first song, the text is reproduced below:

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
 Enwrought with golden and silver light,
 The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
 Of night and light and the half light,
 I would spread the cloths under your feet:
 But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
 I have spread my dreams under your feet;
 Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

W.B. Yeats

Figure 9.6: Summary Analysis of *To A Child Dancing in the Wind*

Song/section	Description/poem	Musical materials
A	Introduction	Palindrome
B (Song 1)	'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven'	12-note row; drone & ostinato accompaniment
C	Interlude	Inversion of palindrome
D (Song 2)	'The Old Mean Admiring Themselves in the Water'	12-note row + chant
E	Interlude	Palindrome
F (Song 3)	'To a Child Dancing in the Wind'	Palindrome
G (Song 4)	'Two Years Later'	Incipit + modal/diatonic elements + recap of F
H	Interlude	Inversion of palindrome
I (Song 5)	'The Fiddler of Dooney'	Incipit (prime & inversion) transposed to D, drone 5 th
J	Interlude	Inversion of palindrome
K	Interlude	Fragments of 12-note row
L (Song 6)	'A Deep-Sworn Vow'	Modal (Phrygian) scales + recap of K

M	Interlude	Inversion of palindrome
N (Song 7)	'Sweet Dancer'	12-note row + interpolations from F (in minor mode)
O (Song 8)	'The Stolen Child'	Palindrome + inversion in canon over pedal-point
P	Interlude	Palindrome
Q	'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven'	Recapitulation of B
R (Song 9)	'The Countess Cathleen'	Chant

The voice embarks on a journey through the row's twelve notes, systematically reversing them, then inverting, then reversing the inversion in classic serial fashion as seen in the annotations in Figure 9.5. (Exact inversion, as we saw in *The Lamb*, is one of Tavener's most characteristic devices, and it may perhaps derive from serial thinking.) Meanwhile the viola offers the most elemental of all accompaniments: a drone. This sustains E flat, the basic pitch-centre of the song and of the whole cycle.¹⁶ The harp offers an implacable ostinato (Figure 9.7), repeating consistently – almost stubbornly - the row's initial major third, which along with the viola's pedal-point has the effect of anchoring the tonality to E^b within the context of the fully chromatic vocal line.

{INSERT EXAMPLE 5}

Figure 9.7: *To a Child Dancing in the Wind*, harp ostinato in Song 1.

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The alto flute, joining the accompaniment for the second half, has its own repeated phrase: four notes of a descending E^b major scale. At one point, in the sixth line of the poem: 'But I, being poor, have only my dreams', this pattern is interrupted by the flute's imitation of the

¹⁶ The exceptions are the last song, whose focal pitch is B (or C if the transposition option is taken up); and the fifth song 'The Fiddler of Dooney' which slips down a semitone to D, no doubt to facilitate the drone of the viola's open A and D double-stopped strings.

voice (at this point pursuing a partial inversion of the row), drawing special attention to this line (Figure 9.8).

{INSERT EXAMPLE 6}

Figure 9.8: *To a Child Dancing in the Wind*, voice and alto flute lines p. 6.

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Rhythmically, the song's vocal part is based on a repeating pattern of four expanding durations; successively 1, 2, 3 and 4 crotchet beats long (i.e. crotchet, minim, dotted minim, semibreve). This pattern is also freely reversed, forming a parallel rhythmic process to the manipulations of the pitch series. The use of such '*personnages rythmiques*' independently of pitch is reminiscent of Messiaen's works of the 1930s and early 1940s.¹⁷ It also has an interesting effect on the prosody. By way of comparison, Tavener's immediately-preceding piece, *The Lamb*, preserves the metrical structure of Blake's poem (even where sense would justify a more flexible approach, such as in the third and fourth lines). This links it to the English choral and folk traditions, especially their elision in the carol repertoire. But in 'Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths', while the deployment of melismas does highlight important words and accented syllables (*hea-vens*; *gol-den*; light; dark), the applied rhythmic process leads to unimportant and unaccented syllables being given unexpected prominence through longer durations and placement at the beginnings of 'bars'. This separates the setting from the 'sensitivity' tradition of English song identified by Stephen Banfield (1985) with the early twentieth century, but projected into the postwar era particularly through Britten and Tippett, even to an extent influencing popular song. The effect is somewhat reminiscent of text-setting in early English music (sacred and secular), but has a more direct connection with – and may have been influenced by – Stravinsky's settings of English texts from the 1950s and 60s, such as *In Memoriam Dylan Thomas* and *Elegy for J. F. K.*

¹⁷ For an explanation of Messiaen's concept of *personnages rythmiques*, see Healey (2004).

The penultimate two lines ‘But I, being poor’ and ‘I have spread my dreams under your feet’ constitute an exception, where evenly-paced notes are succeeded by long ones at the ends of the phrases. Likewise, this draws particular attention to the text in this section, marking the change of perspective from the narrator’s conditional state (‘*Had I the heavens’ embroidered cloths*’) to their abrupt return to an earthly reality in which ‘being poor, [I] have only my dreams’.

The techniques used in this first song – drone, repeated and imitated motifs – are typical of the cycle as a whole, and indeed Tavener’s subsequent compositions. In the third, titular song, a texture of greater density is realised through equally simple means. While the voice follows the palindrome sequence in even notes, flute and viola alternate to create a single *klangfarbenmelodie* imitative line four times as slowly (4:1 mensuration canon). Meanwhile the harp plays an accompaniment which uses the first eight notes of the palindrome as a pitch-class set generating both vertical and horizontal sonorities: a three-chord cycle and descending counter-motif, recalling the flute part in the first song (see Figure 9.9).

{INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 7}

Figure 9.9: *To a Child Dancing in the Wind*, beginning of Song 3 (p. 16).

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Mensuration canon – also a feature of the mature music of Arvo Pärt – is used again to create a more complex texture, in the seventh song ‘Sweet Dancer’. Both the twelve-note row and the Byzantine palindrome are used (Figure 9:10):

{INSERT EXAMPLE 8}

Figure 9:10: *To a Child Dancing in the Wind*, p. 42 (beginning of Song 7).

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The slowest textural layer consists of the harp glissandi in each bar, whose starting notes trace each note of the palindrome sequence. Next is the voice, tracing with two notes per bar the row in its original prime (P) form followed by its retrograde version. The viola picks up the pace, fitting in the same row forms at twice the rate. Finally, the flute manages four flurries of the row in as many bars – prime, retrograde, inversion and retrograde-inversion. The process is interrupted at the end of each verse by a recapitulation in minor mode of the opening of the third song, setting the words ‘Dance there upon the shore’. This is occasioned by the verbal reference ‘Ah, dancer, ah, sweet dancer!’

The final song forms a coda to the cycle and is unrelated to the rest of the work (other than, arguably, song 2, ‘The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water’). Haydon asserts that ‘the setting of the last poem ... sounds like an Irish lament, but the musical material is from medieval Russia’ (Haydon 1995: 163). A model of economy, it uses only 4 notes to create an understated, unaccompanied, chant-like rendering of this four-stanza poem in a series of melodic cells (Figure 9.11) shows the pitch paradigm on which they are based). Yet it achieves an almost mantra-like quality through keening meditative repetitions.

{INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 9}

Figure 9.11: *To a Child Dancing in the Wind*, melodic paradigm of Song 9.

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A kind of ‘pre-echo’ of this material can be discerned in the second song, where it appears twice as a melismatic interpolation within the otherwise twelve-note and diatonic (palindromic) context, at the mention of water in the text (Figure 9.12).

{INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 10}

Figure 9.12: *To a Child Dancing in the Wind*, vocal line p. 13 ('By the waters').

Words by William Yeats

Music by John Tavener

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Discussion, Interpretation and Conclusion

As my above analysis has revealed, rather than entirely 'dumping' modernism Tavener used its constructive devices, and even some of its means (a twelve-note row), in a work where the genesis of his idiom of contemplative simplicity is visibly enacted. At the same time, the continuing influence of modernist composers such as Stravinsky and Messiaen is demonstrably apparent. That said, the constructive devices are certainly a means to an end. As observed by Michael Tumelty, Tavener's 'note rows, canonic and palindromic devices ... are subliminal to his sound world and completely unobtrusive to the unsearching ear' (Tumelty 1988: 4), even as they were at some level important to him. Composers and musicologists like myself, and students of those disciplines, might be fascinated by the ingenious economy with which Tavener deploys and manipulates his materials. Other listeners are likely to be more affected by the potential for spiritual/aesthetic nourishment engendered by this music's spaciousness, incantatory gestures and meditative poise: 'the spirituality of [the texts'] treatment is ... the next thing to holiness', and 'the music-room becomes a temple of stillness' (*Gramophone* 1995). Tavener was inspired by the 'frailty, tenderness, and spiritual transparency of Yeats' poetry' (Tavener 1987), and this is reflected in the sparse yet expressive fragility of the soundworld, occasioned in part by the scoring. The liturgical atmosphere Tavener sought to create is achieved through extended duration and ritual elements. The harp's linking passages, like tolling bells, contribute to this, as does the repetition of the first song before the end, the formalised prosody and musical syntax, the use of drone-based accompaniments, and the occasional chant references. Notably, as one would expect, the notional reference points are Eastern Orthodox rather than Western. Going beyond the sound, in the last song the singer is instructed to turn her back to the

audience and walk slowly out of sight while singing, evoking a priest's procession out of church.

As a listening experience, the soprano's voice is naturally a focal point, and vocal timbre is integral to the music's aural affect. In the recording reviewed above (Tavener 1994) by Tavener's long-time vocal interpreter Patricia Rosario, her effortless rendition combines human warmth with a purity which could be interpreted in religious terms as angelic. The reviewer for *Gramophone* (1995) picks up on this theme:

In Patricia Rozario the composer finds ... a heaven-sent singer of his music. Her gentleness and purity of tone have nothing shallow or merely pretty about them. [...] blissfully free in the higher regions and then wonderfully ample and at ease when the tessitura is suddenly lowered.

A metaphorical interpretation along spiritual lines would discern a heavenly connotation in the use of the highest register, deployed strikingly towards the end of song 1, whose text actually references 'the heavens', although the highest note B₅ sets the word 'dreams' (arguably a related concept). The ethereal sound of the harp harmonics (see again Figure 9.3), which is a consistent colour in the sound palette, could also be heard as connoting an otherworldly, implicitly heavenly, realm.

Finally: a (re)turn to Josiah Fisk's (1994) critical comments on the music of Tavener, as well as Górecki and Pärt. In summary, he criticises the music of the 'new simplicity' for its lack of inner life and ambiguity (that is, a sense of dialogue with listeners and potential for varied understandings) compared with other classical music. (In fact, he implies throughout that such music is not truly 'classical', though a definition of this polysemous term is not offered, nor is an alternative categorisation explicitly stated.) His critique is presented musicologically, and again without it being stated it becomes apparent that his understanding of music's 'inner life' is centred on a quasi-Schenkerian dichotomy between foreground and underlying (tonal) structures. That said, he provisionally allows the validity of the radical critique of received conventions wrought by musical Modernists, (including Schoenberg and Stravinsky) on the grounds that 'they toiled as hard as their predecessors had, and at many of the same labors [...]. The radicalism of the Modernists was more extreme on the surface ... than in the deeper realms' (Fisk 1994: 395).

Fisk grudgingly concedes that 'Tavener has the most proficient ear and appears to have absorbed the most musical training; his works have a degree of sophistication that the other two ... have tried to make a virtue of lacking' (1994: 403).

My preceding analytical investigations of *The Lamb* and, in particular, *To a Child Dancing in the Wind* surely refute accusations of the music having no inner life. Even something as ubiquitous and apparently artless as the former displays, when examined, ingenious artfulness in its construction. And the latter contains within the musical syntax itself a dialogue between Tavener's modernist musical background and his developing interest in re-interpreting the power and directness of the scales and modes of Western and other classical music traditions to spiritual ends. As for interpretative dialogue and nuanced understandings, the varied interpretations of *To a Child Dancing in the Wind* as spiritual and/or liturgical and/or poetic – and even the varied usage contexts of *The Lamb* – surely reveal inherent ambiguity.

Further: whatever the merits or otherwise of the term 'spiritual minimalism', if we concur that *To a Child Dancing in the Wind* derives maximum potential out of minimal means, its use of a 12-note row reconciles two major strands of post-WWII Western compositional thought; post-serial, and minimalism. At the same time, the derivation of this row from the more prevalent palindrome sequence, and the overriding importance in the piece of the interval of a major third links it to Western classical music's traditional concern with organic development. Such a combination of perennial sonic objects with sophisticated compositional techniques, allowing a variety of emotional responses (including spiritual), is a postmodern artistic achievement of considerable note.

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