

A detailed charcoal or pencil drawing of a man's face, likely John Tavener, is the background of the entire image. The man has long, dark hair and is looking slightly downwards and to the right. His hands are clasped in front of his chest. The drawing is very expressive, with fine lines and shading that give it a sense of depth and texture.

THE ESSENTIAL
John Tavener
ON NAXOS



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JOHN TAVENER**

“John Tavener is a master of sonic masonry, constructing vast cathedrals of both solemnity and exultation within the head and heart. Religious proclivity is not a prerequisite to uncovering the ecstasies in these scores, and the magnetism of each infuses even the most vexed of minds with hope and tranquility.”

- Doyle Armbrust (Time Out Chicago)

JOHN TAVENER 1/28/1944 - 11/12/2013

Throughout his career, Sir John Tavener has been a unique and influential figure on the contemporary music scene. From his days as an audacious young composer at the forefront of the avant-garde movement in the late sixties and seventies, through to his present-day rejection of many of the standard aesthetic principles on which the western classical music tradition is based, he seems to have caused controversy whichever direction he has moved in.

John Kenneth Tavener was born in London in 1944, and educated at the Royal Academy of Music with Lennox Berkeley as his tutor in composition. He was still at college when he won the prestigious Prince Rainier of Monaco Prize in 1965 with his cantata, *Cain and Abel*. He has been closely linked with religious music, and his catalogue of works includes three Requiems. More recently has moved towards sacred orchestral works, of which his score for cello and orchestra, *The Protecting Veil*, has entered the world of 20th century 'pop' classics.

He has been influenced by Stravinsky, but has developed a very personal style, that embraces his own concept of melodic minimalism. Within the field of sacred music Tavener has developed a style whereby he uses what appears to be a traditional theme, which on closer examination is seen to have been his own. He has been criticized for his lack of a distinct purpose in the progress of his career, while envied by those who see him as one of the most commercially successful composers of his time. That success was greatly furthered when his sacred work, *Song for Athene*, was sung at the funeral ceremony of Princess Diana.

On the surface, he can seem like a figure of contradiction: on one hand, he moves in the austere world of royalty and religious institutions; on the other, he can be seen communing in a glamorous world of

film and pop stars. His critics have jumped on these apparent paradoxes to denounce Tavener as a carefully and cleverly manufactured PR product, but this is a superficial judgement. All his paths are taken with the utmost integrity and conviction, and unified by one consistent, obsessive goal: a desire to find what is true in the deepest sense of the word. Different people and different traditions refer to this truth by different names, but whether you call it salvation, the soul, nirvana, cosmic consciousness or simply the 'essence' of life, Tavener's one and only aim is to bring himself, and his audiences, closer to an ultimate truth through his music.

Tavener has moved from an "Orthodox" towards a Universalist view in which all religions are seen as equally valid. Throughout his career there have been many influences, not only from different religious traditions but from secular sources as well. The unifying factor between them all is not any one particular tradition, it is the desire to express truth and beauty through his music.

Tavener's view is that we live in an over-intellectualized society in which the strong emphasis placed on issues that feed the ego, such as academic success, money and achievement—all the things on which our society is based—has distanced us from who or what we really are, from the 'essence' of life. Few would disagree that the increasing importance placed on image in western countries tends towards a shallower, dumbed-down society. Tavener would apply this viewpoint on a wider scale. For him, the downward spiral started with the Renaissance. In musical terms, he can acknowledge the genius of masters like Beethoven and Wagner, though he finds the sophistication and 'clever' techniques of the music lacking in this essence.



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This view may seem outrageous to many music-lovers, but it is a view which strikes a strong chord with his own philosophy and it is this belief that leads him to write music which has had an extremely significant impact on the industry. With this in mind, if one looks at Tavener's career to date as a whole, it can be seen as a process of unlearning.

From his early, complex works, he has gradually pared down his music, removing the intellectual systems

and techniques, to get as near as he can to a state where only the 'essence' remains. This has not always made him popular with the critics, but it is his firm and absolute conviction that this is the right direction for him. Once, when accused of his music having no substance, he retorted 'but I'm not interested in substance, it's the essence of the music that counts!' Given the popularity of his music, and his long-standing success, it is difficult to deny that he has a point.



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