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The Idea of an ‘Icon in Sound’ in the Works of John Tavener

Idea „dźwiękowej ikony” w twórczości Johna Tavenera

Abstract

The aim of this article is to present an innovative concept of the ‘icon in sound’ created by the English composer John Tavener. The first part of the article presents the intermedial and intertextual features of Tavener’s work, the second shows the genesis of the concept of ‘icon in sound’, to which three factors have contributed: 1) the composer’s interest in religious topics in his pieces, 2) the composer’s conversion to Orthodoxy, 3) collaboration with Mother Tekla, the author of the texts of many Tavener’s works.

The last, third part of the article describes issues related to the formal structure and musical symbolism present in Tavener’s musical icons. The composer refers to painted icons by composing works characterised by static form and the expression of spirituality, mysticism and inner peace. These features result from the juxtaposing of melismatic structures, inspired by Byzantine music, with repetitive technique and dynamics often characterised by a low intensity. One characteristic of Tavener’s sound icons is a ‘luminous’ sound, achieved through the use of high registers of voices and instruments, which are combined with contemplative and lyrical expression. An important feature of John Tavener’s musical icons was the introduction of archaic elements, resulting primarily from the inspiration that the composer drew from the musical culture of the Orthodox Church (eg the use of Byzantine scales in *Mary of Egypt*, the introduction of instruments such as simantron in *Mary of Egypt*).

Keywords: ‘icon in sound’, Orthodoxy, Byzantine music, musical symbolism, intertextuality, intermediality.

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie nowatorskiej koncepcji „dźwiękowej ikony” (*icon in sound*), stworzonej przez angielskiego kompozytora Johna Tavenera, w świetle idei intermedialności i intertekstualności obecnych we współczesnych badaniach humanistycznych. W pierwszej części artykułu przedstawione zostały intermedialne i intertekstualne cechy twórczości Johna Tavenera, w drugiej ukazana została geneza koncepcji „dźwiękowej ikony”, do której przyczyniły się trzy czynniki: 1) zainteresowanie kompozytora tematyką religijną w komponowanych utworach; 2) przejście kompozytora na prawosławie; 3) współpraca z prawosławną zakonnice Matką Teklą, autorką tekstów wielu utworów Tavenera. W ostatniej części artykułu opisane zostały zagadnienia związane ze strukturą formalną oraz symboliką muzyczną obecną w ikonach dźwiękowych Tavenera. Kompozytor nawiązuje do ikon malarskich poprzez komponowanie utworów cechujących się statyką formy oraz ekspresją duchowości i spokoju. Cechy te wynikają z zestawiania inspirowanych muzyką bizantyjską struktur melizmatycznych z techniką repetytywną i dynamiką cechującą się niskim natężeniem siły dźwięku. Charakterystyczny dla dźwiękowych ikon jest „światlisty”, kontemplacyjny i liryczny charakter muzyki, osiągany poprzez użycie wysokich rejestrów głosów wokalnych i instrumentów. W muzycznych ikonach pojawiają się także elementy archaizacyjne, wynikające głównie z inspiracji kompozytora kulturą muzyczną Kościoła prawosławnego (np. wykorzystanie skal używanych w muzyce bizantyjskiej w *Mary of Egypt*, wprowadzenie takich instrumentów, jak simantron w *Mary of Egypt*).

Słowa kluczowe: „dźwiękowa ikona”, prawosławie, muzyka bizantyjska, symbolika muzyczna, intertekstualność, intermedialność.

1. Intermedial and intertextual features of the work of John Tavener

The aim of this article is to present an innovative concept of the ‘icon in sound’ created by the English composer John Tavener, which refers to the ideas of intermediality and intertextuality present in contemporary research in the humanities. The concept of intermediality is defined by Irina O. Rajewsky broadly as ‘a generic term for all those phenomena that (as indicated by the prefix *inter*) in some way take place *between* media¹, with a narrower definition distinguishing three subcategories: 1. medial transposition, 2. media combination, 3. intermedial refer-

¹ Irina O. Rajewsky. 2005. “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality”. *Intermedialités* 6: 46.

ences². The musical pieces composed by John Tavener that are described as 'icons in sound' belong to the third subcategory, of intermedial references, which Rajewsky defines as follows: 'meaning-constitutional strategies that contribute to the media product's overall signification: the media product uses its own media-specific means, either to refer to a specific, individual work produced in another medium (i.e., what in the German tradition is called *Einzelreferenz*, "individual reference"), or to refer to a specific medial subsystem (such as a certain film genre) or to another medium *qua* system (*Systemreferenz*, "system reference"). The given product thus constitutes itself partly or wholly *in relation* to the work, system, or subsystem to which it refers'³. John Tavener called many of his musical pieces 'icons'. In them, he referred both to the material characteristics of works of art called icons and also to such features associated with them as symbolism and spirituality. Rajewsky also emphasises the close relationship between intermedial references and intertextual references⁴.

In the work of John Tavener, we find numerous features that allow us to define many of his works as intertextual. In this paper, I would like to refer to the concept of intertextuality, defined by Ryszard Nycz as follows:

a category used to determine that dimension of the structure and meaning of a text (a work of art) which indicates the inextricable, inherent dependence of its production, subjective status and reception both on the existence of other texts and archi-texts (stylistic-typical rules, discursive-generic conventions, semiotic-cultural codes) and on the possibility of recognising these inter- and archi-textual references by participants of cultural cognition and the communication process⁵.

There are numerous other texts and archi-texts that appear in John Tavener's works, and they can be classified into five categories. The first of them consists in combining ideas typical of different religions in a single work. The second involves introducing elements of different cultures in a work; this chimes with the

² Rajewsky. 2005. "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality", 51–52.

³ Rajewsky. 2005. "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality", 52–53.

⁴ Rajewsky. 2005. "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality", 54.

⁵ Ryszard Nycz, 2005. Poetyka intertekstualna: tradycje i perspektywy ("Intertextual Poetics: Traditions and Perspectives"). In *Krzysztof Penderecki – muzyka ery intertekstualnej. Studia i interpretacje* ("Krzysztof Penderecki – Music of the Intertextual Era. Studies and Interpretations"). Eds. Mieczysław Tomaszewski, Ewa Siemdaj, 8. Kraków: Akademia Muzyczna.

composer's interest in Eastern philosophy and spirituality. The third category is iconic painting, which inspired the composer to create the concept of an icon in sound. The fourth category includes numerous works in which musical symbolism appears. The fifth and last category is characterised by Tavener's tendency to use musical quotes.

Works by John Tavener in which ideas from different religions appear include *Hymn for the Sovereign*, which features invocations to God from the Christian, Islamic, Judaic, Hindu, Buddhist and American Indian faiths, *Prayer for Jerusalem*, with the repeated invocation to God 'Allah, Adonai, Kyrie', typical respectively of Islam, Judaism and Christianity, and *Requiem*, in which sections from the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass are combined with lines from the Koran and Sufi texts, Hindu words from the *Upanishads* and other sources. But the most typical example is the monumental, seven-hour work *The Veil of the Temple*, regarded by the composer as his supreme achievement⁶. Tavener comments on this work as follows:

Although *The Veil of the Temple* is mainly Christian, it attempts to remove the veils that hide the same basic truth of all authentic religions. It begins for instance in the words of the Sufis, and ends in the Hindu world, with the Upanishad Hymn. The 'Logos', that mysterious substance inside the Godhead, reveals itself in many forms, whether it be Christ, Krishna, or 'the word made book' in the form of the Koran⁷.

To sum up, there are elements of several different religions – Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam (*Two Hadiths*), as well as beliefs of Native American Indians (*Butterfly Dreams*) – present in both the content and in the ideological layer of John Tavener's works. Inspiration drawn from different religions is evident in his works composed after 2003 (e.g. *Atma Mass*).

In the works composed by John Tavener from about 1999, an intercultural tendency is manifest in the use of musical instruments typical of different cultures. In *Hymn of Dawn*, for example, wishing to symbolically show the transcendent unity of all religions, the composer used such exotic instruments as Tibetan temple bowls, the pow-wow drum (an instrument used by American Indians), a very large tam-tam, the bandir drum (an ancient drum used by the Sufis) and an Indian hand drum, in addition to solo voices, harp, flute and strings. Another example is the ora-

⁶ Siobhán Dowling Long, John. F.A. Sawyer. 2015. *The Bible in Music. A Dictionary of Songs, Works, and More*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 251.

⁷ J. Tavener, 'Programme Note. John Tavener *The Veil of the Temple (All night vigil)* (2002)', <http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/1567/14207> [Accessed: 24 November 2019].

torio *Fall and Resurrection* for solo voices, choir and orchestra, which includes – besides instruments from the European orchestra – 2 kavals, a ram's horn trumpet, 2 Tibetan temple bowls, 5 tom-toms and a very large tam-tam.

In the works composed by Tavener after 1999, the connection with the cultures of the Near and Far East is particularly distinct. In works composed after his conversion to Orthodoxy, in 1977, the composer drew inspiration from Byzantine, Greek and Russian culture. In *Lamentations and Praises*, for instance, he used such instruments as a Byzantine monastery bell and a Simantron (a Byzantine wooden instrument). For his vocal works, Tavener frequently chose texts by poets of different epochs from Greece and the Middle East, including Cavafy, Angelos Sikelianos, Saint Ephraim the Syrian and Rumi. He also set poetry from the Abbasid dynasty and a text by the Byzantine poet-nun Cassian (in *The Myrrh-Bearer*), although he also used texts by the English poet William Blake and the Irish poet W. B. Yeats. His dance score *Laila (Amu)* is based on the Arab legend of Layla and Majnun.

Musical symbolism is of great importance in the work of John Tavener. In many of his works, instruments and voices (solo or in groups or choirs) are treated symbolically, representing, for example, the figures of saints or angels. Sometimes even the distribution of the performers on stage has a symbolic meaning. Examples of compositions in which musical symbols appear include *The Apocalypse*, *The Protecting Veil*, *The Beautiful Names*, *The Bridegroom*, *It is finished*, *The Myrrh-Bearer* (in which a viola symbolises Mary Magdalene and the choir is 'us' or 'the sins of the world') and *Song of the Cosmos*. In some of his works, Tavener used musical quotations (from Bach, Händel, Mozart, Chopin and Szymanowski) – a technique that links his music to the trend of postmodernism.

2. The genesis of the concept of 'icons in sound'

The concept of an 'icon in sound' is one of the most important archi-texts in John Tavener's music. The analogy of a musical work to an artwork is not a new phenomenon in music; such comparisons occur in music of the twentieth century, for example in the works of Claude Debussy⁸. Another example is the much later concept of unism in music, created by contemporary composer Zygmunt Krauze, referring to the unistic paintings of the Polish avantgarde artist Władysław

⁸ Józef Michał Chomiński and Krystyna Wilkowska-Chomińska have described the musical 'image' (Pol. 'obraz') – a musical genre that appears in the work of Claude Debussy. Józef Chomiński, Krystyna Wilkowska-Chomińska. 1987. *Formy muzyczne* ("Musical Forms"). Vol. 2: *Wielkie formy instrumentalne* ("Large Instrumental Forms"). Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 807–813.

Strzemiński, produced during the 1920s. In the case of a musical icon, however, it is inappropriate to refer only to the correspondence between two genres of art – an icon and a musical work – because the word ‘icon’ does not mean only an artwork *sensu stricto*. The icon is understood by Orthodox Christians not as a work of art, but as the image, or symbolic representation, of Jesus Christ or the saints, and so it is perceived as a sacred object, crafted in accordance with rules established by a centuries-old Christian tradition, an object which must be blessed by a priest to be truly called an icon, and which is treated by believers with great respect and should not be admired for its artistic qualities.

Beata Elwich⁹ describing an iconographer’s model of life, distinguishes the immaterial and material sequences of icon creation. She divides the immaterial sequence into three categories: mystical journey, imagination and gazing intently. Analysing the category of ‘gazing intently’ she distinguishes three phases of experiencing the icon: expressive seeing, recognition of the sacred and participation in the sacred. She also emphasises the importance of the liturgy in experiencing an icon. Writing about the material sequence of creating an icon, she distinguishes the preparatory and actual phases. In the actual phase, ‘Through the gesture of writing-painting, the original raw material forges the whole – a picture emanating freshness, purity, lightness, accuracy, subtlety, transparency, imperturbability and LIGHT’¹⁰. The author also emphasises that in the training of eighteenth-century candidates for icon painters, their preparation was preceded by prayer.

In reference to Ryszard Nycz’s¹¹ three types of inferential indicators in relation to a literary work and referring them to a musical work, the ‘icon in sound’ concept should be classified as the third of those types, defined as ‘attribution’, and therefore ‘the belonging of a given text or its fragment to specific contexts, such as other works or discursive fields or historically and functionally diverse styles, genres and conventions that occur in the realm of expression’¹². However, John Tavener referred in his works described as ‘icons in sound’ not only to the generic features of icons as works of art, but above all to the iconic symbols and to the essence of these works considered as sacred objects, the content of which is contemplated by the faithful – the followers of the Orthodox Church. Here is what the composer said about the icon: ‘To me, it is the most transcendent form of art that exists in

⁹ Beata Elwich. 2006. *Ikona. Duchowość i filozofia* (‘The Icon: Spirituality and Philosophy’). Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM.

¹⁰ Elwich. 2006. *Ikona. Duchowość i filozofia*, 114.

¹¹ Ryszard Nycz. 1990. “Intertekstualność i jej zakresy: teksty, gatunki, światy” (‘Intertextuality and its Domains: Texts, Types and Worlds’). *Pamiętnik Literacki* 81/2: 99.

¹² Nycz. 1990. “Intertekstualność i jej zakresy: teksty, gatunki, światy”, 99.

the West – that is, if you can call it art in the conventional sense. Whether you can write music that is truly like an ikon, whether you can prostrate in front of a piece of music, I simply do not know. I suppose the closest you get to it is in the chant that goes with the ikonography of the Church'¹³.

G rard Genette in the article *Romances sans paroles* proposed a typology of intertextual musical references, dividing them into three types: compositions 'with words' ('avec paroles'), compositions '  propos of words' ('  propos de paroles') and compositions 'with words without words' ('avec paroles sans paroles')¹⁴. We may observe that instrumental works by John Tavener which are described as musical 'icons' (e.g. *The Protecting Veil*) belong to the third category – compositions 'with words without words', which Genette defines as cultural suggestion, evoking certain associations and general cultural references.

The genesis of the musical concept of the icon is determined by several factors. The composer first saw an icon at an art exhibition at the age of nineteen, and it attracted his attention as a painting that was definitely different from the other works exhibited. 'All the other paintings round it seemed to fade into nothing in comparison'¹⁵, he wrote in his autobiographical *Music of Silence*, published many years later. The composer often mentioned his interest in icon painting, and in one interview he also stressed his interest in Coptic icons: 'I actually adore the Coptic icons because they have a childlike mentality. I don't mean a sentimental childlike. I mean a childlike simplicity'¹⁶.

Another important factor was the composer's religiosity. Tavener's mother was brought up as a Christian Scientist, but she broke with that confession, and the composer's father was in the Congregational Church. During childhood, although Tavener was not brought up in the spirit of strict religiosity, he became acquainted with religious music¹⁷. As a teenager, he turned to the Roman Catholic faith and partici-

¹³ John Tavener (edited by B. Keeble,). 1999. *The Music of Silence: A Composer's Testament*. London: Faber & Faber, 113.

¹⁴ G rard Genette. 1987. "Romances sans paroles". *Revue des Sciences Humaines* 205: 113–120, cited after A. Hejmej *Music in Literature. Perspectives of Interdisciplinary Comparative Literature*, translated by L. Davidson, Polish Studies – Transdisciplinary Perspectives, vol. 8, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition, 2014, 23–24.

¹⁵ Tavener (edited by B. Keeble,). 1999. *The Music of Silence: A Composer's Testament*, 113.

¹⁶ 'Sell Cleverness, Buy Wonder: The Music of Sir John Tavener', an interview with John Tavener conducted by Laura Sheahen, <https://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/christianity/orthodox/2002/02/sell-cleverness-buy-wonder-the-music-of-sir-john-tavener.aspx> [Accessed: 24 November 2019].

¹⁷ Piers Dudgeon (2003. *Lifting the Veil: The Biography of Sir John Tavener*. London: Portrait, 31) mentions Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, which he heard as an eight-year-old boy at the Royal Albert Hall, and Stravinsky's *Canticum Sacrum*, performed in a concert at St Mark's in Venice, which he attended with his father in 1956.

pated in seminars led by Father Malachy Lynch, head of England's Carmelite Order, at Allington Castle. That became a meeting place for monks, artists and representatives of various confessions, to which Sufis were also invited. Later, however, John Tavener decided to convert to Orthodoxy. This decision was preceded by year-long conversations with the Metropolitan Anthony of Zouroz, head of the Russian Orthodox Church in the West. In 1977, it was Metropolitan Anthony who received John Tavener into the Orthodox Church. From 1981 onwards, the composer wrote works in which he referred extensively to the Orthodox tradition. Ivan Moody points to the pioneering importance of one of these works, *Orthodox Vigil Service*, for the development of the musical Orthodox tradition in English-speaking countries¹⁸.

The composer's interest in religious topics, which was present in his works composed in the 1960s and early 1970s, before his transition to Orthodoxy, probably also contributed to the genesis of the 'icon in sound' concept. At that time, such well-known religious works were created as the cantata *The Whale*, *Ultimos Ritos*, to the words of Saint John of the Cross, and *Celtic Requiem*, distinguished by its innovative textual layer. The composer defined some of his later works in such terms as 'prayer' (*The Hidden Face*) and 'meditation' (*Mandelion* – 'meditation upon the changing and distorting images of Christ'). The word 'prayer' also appeared in the titles of his works, e.g. *Prayer for the World*, *Prayer to the Holy Trinity*. An important factor was also his friendship and collaboration with the Russian Orthodox Abbess Mother Thekla, who wrote the texts to many of Tavener's works and the libretto to the opera *Mary of Egypt*. In his introduction to the book *Ikons*, the composer wrote about his 'unique collaboration with an Orthodox abbess'¹⁹, and in his book *Music of Silence*, published a few years later, he admitted that 'I found a spiritual mother, in Mother Thekla'²⁰.

3. The construction and meaning of icons in sound

One of the first works of John Tavener in which the theme of the icon appears is the opera *A Gentle Spirit* (1977). The libretto, based on Dostoevsky, tells (in retrospect) the story of a young woman who committed suicide by jumping out of the window of her house holding an icon. The composer referred to the painted icon

¹⁸ Ivan Moody. 2001. Tavener, Sir John (Kenneth). In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Second Edition. Ed. Stanley Sadie. London: Macmillan.

¹⁹ J. Tavener and Mother Thekla, with I. Moody, *Ikons: Meditations in Words and Music*, London: Fount. An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 1994, p. VII.

²⁰ Tavener (edited by B. Keeble,). 1999. *The Music of Silence: A Composer's Testament*, 56.

in the form and symbolic layer of his works composed in the late 70s (*Akhmatova Requiem*) and in the 80s and 90s. The idea of 'icons in sound' often appears in the titles of works (e.g. *Ikon of Light*) and their subtitles (*Mary of Egypt* – 'an icon in music and dance'). Moreover, in the commentaries to his works, the composer also pointed to the relationship of a given work to the concept of a musical icon. Various terms used by the composer, including 'a lyrical icon in sound' (*The Protecting Veil*), 'an icon of glory and repentance' (*Nipson*) and 'an ikon of sorrow' (*Eis Thanaton*), show the richness of the symbolism and expression of these works.

The idea of an icon in sound occurs in numerous compositions by Tavener for different forces: instrumental pieces (*The Protecting Veil*), choral songs (*Elizabeth Full of Grace*), a large-scale vocal-instrumental work (*We Shall See Him As He Is*) and a stage work (the opera *Mary of Egypt*). The musical form of some works is forged from a series of icons. They include *The Protecting Veil*, in one movement, in which several internal sections are distinguished, to which the composer attributes the character of icons, symbolically depicting the Mother of God and feasts associated with her. Tavener explains the symbolic meaning of the individual episodes of this work in the following way:

the second is related to her birth, the third section to the Annunciation, the fourth to the Incarnation, the fifth (which is totally unaccompanied) to her lament at the foot of the cross, the sixth to the Resurrection, the seventh to her Dormition, and the first and last sections to her cosmic beauty and power over a shattered world²¹.

Another example is the oratorio *We Shall See Him As He Is* for solo voices, choir and orchestra, constructed from a series of eleven icons. The composer explains the form of this work thus:

The music and text are constructed as a series of ikons with a refrain – We shall see Him as He is – using Byzantine tones as an ikon painter uses brush and paint. Each ikon depicts a different event in the life of Christ, as seen through the eyes of His beloved apostle, John. The climax of the ikon sequence comes at ikon X: 'Behold thy mother! Behold Thy Son!' This represents the establishment of the Christian Church, and here material from other ikons is juxtaposed with a constant assertion – We shall see Him as He is²².

²¹ John Tavener. 1988. Programme Note. John Tavener, *The Protecting Veil*. (24 November 2019). <http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/1567/8549>.

²² John Tavener. 1992. Programme Note. John Tavener, *We Shall See Him As He Is*. (24 November 2019). <http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/1567/8537>.

An important feature of John Tavener's musical icons was the introduction of archaic elements, resulting primarily from the inspiration that the composer drew from the musical culture of the Orthodox Church. He used Byzantine scales and Byzantine melodies, examples including a Byzantine melody arranged in the form of a palindrome in *Nipson* for viol consort and eight Byzantine tones in *The Protecting Veil*. His works often include microtones – 'breaks of the voice' that are characteristic of Eastern chant. In the opera *Mary of Egypt*, he used a simantron – a percussion instrument used in Byzantine religious music since at least the sixth century. The title of *The Protecting Veil* alludes to the Feast of the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God, important for the followers of the Orthodox Church. In the monumental cantata *Akathist of Thanksgiving*, Tavener used a musical form comprising eleven sections, each including a Kontakion and an Ikos, which resembles the form of the akathist, a hymn of thanksgiving or supplication used on special occasions in the Orthodox liturgy. Tavener described this piece as 'a musical ikon to the glory of God, in celebration of the millennium of the Russian Orthodox Church'²³. It should also be mentioned that in Tavener's works referring to the ideas of Orthodox icons, the figures of saints worshipped in the Orthodox Church are often portrayed, as in *Icon of St. Seraphim*, *Mary of Egypt* and *Elizabeth Full of Grace*, a vocal-instrumental work which refers in a symbolical way to the life and martyrdom of Grand Duchess St Elizabeth, New Martyr of Russia.

The most original feature of 'icons in sound' is the idea of musical representation, referring to painted icons in which numerous symbols are introduced, connected with figures shown on icons: Jesus Christ, the Mother of God or a saint, such as the dark blue colour of the mantle on the icon of Christ Pantocrator, which symbolises Christ's humanity. In Tavener's works, a particular musical instrument or instrumental or vocal ensemble often symbolises a character who is the subject of the work or to which the work refers in a prayerful manner. For example, in *The Protecting Veil*, the cello part symbolises the singing of the Mother of God, while in *The Myrrh-Bearer*, a solo viola symbolises Mary Magdalene. In *Mystagogia* and *Ekstasis*, the orchestra is divided into three groups, each of them symbolising one of the Three Divine Persons. One of the most interesting examples of musical symbolism is *Resurrection*, featuring the number seven, a symbol of fullness and perfection in the Christian tradition (Matt 18: 21). In this work, both the forces and the form have symbolic meaning. The composer describes the symbolism of this work as follows:

²³ John Tavener. 1987. Programme Note. John Tavener, *Akathist of Thanksgiving*. (24 November 2019). <http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/1567/8521>.

Musically, I have divided the instruments and voices into seven groups. *Resurrection* also falls into seven sections, representing the seven days of Holy Week culminating with Pascha. The seven groups are spatially separated. I have used primary colours rather like an ikon. Group I (SATB and String Quartet) is the liturgical group. Group II are the 'dramatis personae' (New Testament). Group III (trumpets and tam-tam) are Christ and Mother of God. Group IV is the organ. Group V are percussion. Group VI Old Testament (male voices, trombones, timpani). Group VII Recorders. And above all this is a group of voices (pre-recorded in a huge building from a great height) representing 'Paradise'. All these strands are interconnected, and everyone comes together in the seventh and final section, 'Pascha'²⁴.

Tavener refers to painted icons by composing works characterised by static form and the expression of spirituality, mysticism and inner peace. These features result from the juxtaposing of melismatic structures, inspired by Byzantine music, with repetitive technique and dynamics often characterised by a low intensity. Richard Taruskin characterises Tavener's 'sounding icons' as follows:

Above all, there must be no sense of structural dualism or opposition (hence no 'functional harmony'). Instead there should be a sense of 'habitation', a listening environment evoked by sounds, particularly drones, that do not change over the course of the work, as in performances of Byzantine chant, which is always accompanied by a steady bass drone on the final of the mode known as the *ison*²⁵.

One characteristic of Tavener's sound icons is a 'luminous' sound, achieved through the use of high registers of voices and instruments, which are combined with contemplative and lyrical expression. For example, in the song *Lament of the Mother of God*, the composer repeats the melody sung by the soprano from successively higher notes of the scale, achieving an extraordinary type of expression, full of seriousness and sadness. This 'luminosity' of the sound reflects the gold used when painting icons, symbolising the Divine Presence.

Another feature of musical icons is the repetition of words, as in *Ikon of Eros* and the opera *Mary of Egypt*, which imparts a static character to sections of a work. In *Mary of Egypt*, such a procedure was used, for example, in the 'Blessed Duet', which is the central point of the work. The word 'Bless', which is constantly re-

²⁴ J. Tavener. 1989. Programme Note. John Tavener, *Resurrection*. (24 November 2019). <http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/1567/8534>.

²⁵ Richard Taruskin. 2010. *Music in the Late Twentieth Century* (The Oxford History of Western Music). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 408.

peated in the melismatic vocal parts of Maria and Zossima, constitutes almost the whole text of this duet.

Thanks to the innovative form of the ‘icon in music and dance’, *Mary of Egypt*, composed in 1992, is one of the most original operas created at the end of the twentieth century. The reference to painted icons is evidenced by many features of the opera, including the focus on the two characters Maria and Zossima, treated as two figures in an icon, the introduction of the voice of the Mother of God (offstage) and the figures of angels, personified by the soprano choir or boys’ choir, and the static, non-evolutionary and ‘luminous’ nature of the music. The opera is characterised by the simplicity of the musical means, with chamber forces, the minimalist technique of repeating singular sounds, sound sequences and consonances, the use of long sounds and repeated words in the libretto. The work refers to the tradition of Byzantine music through the extensive use of melismata, which appear in mediaeval Byzantine liturgy, and the introduction of a texture typical of Byzantine music: cantillation accompanied by a constant bourdon note. The musical material of the opera refers loosely to the ancient Byzantine hymn ‘Awed by thy Beauty’, sung to the Mother of God.

The ‘timeless’ nature of the music, deliberately expressed by the composer in this work, evokes associations with iconic painting. It is also emphasised by the expression markings in the score, such as ‘With unearthly stillness’ (p. 1), ‘Radiant, bright’ (p. 63), ‘Pure and delicate’ (p. 66), ‘with infinite humility and tenderness’ (p. 68) and ‘In a radiance of suffering, but objective’ (p. 83)²⁶. In the book *The Music of Silence*, Tavener mentions the inspiration of the art of non-European cultures in this work and its ‘non-operatic’ character: ‘I didn’t want anything operatic, anything of the conventions for expressing all-too-human passions and feelings. I didn’t know many Noh plays but I had seen some and I had watched very stylized Indian dancing, and this is the way I wanted Mary to look. [...] We decided to call it a moving ikon rather than an opera’²⁷. Ivan Moody also emphasises that the relationship between *Mary of Egypt* and conventional opera is very slight, and he compares this work with the church parables of Benjamin Britten, on one hand, and with mediaeval liturgical drama, on the other²⁸.

To sum up, in the ‘icons in sound’ created by John Tavener, the intertextual element manifests itself above all in the musical symbolism used widely by the

²⁶ J. Tavener, *Mary of Egypt. An Ikon in Music and Dance*, Vocal Score, London: Chester Music, 1992.

²⁷ J. Tavener (edited by B. Keeble,). 1999. *The Music of Silence: A Composer’s Testament*, 66–67.

²⁸ Moody. 2001. Tavener, Sir John (Kenneth).

composer and also in the spiritual nature of the music. In the musicological literature, Tavener's music, like that of Henryk Górecki, Giya Kancheli and Arvo Pärt, is associated with the trend of spiritual minimalism²⁹, also termed 'holy'³⁰ and 'mystical' minimalism³¹, which is typical of minimalistic tendencies in European music. The work of representatives of this trend is characterised by the use of repetition technique and the spiritual, religious character of the music, as well as references to folk music. Grace Kingsbury Muzzo, in her book *In Search of the Divine*, in which she compares Pärt's *Te Deum* with Tavener's *Ikon of Light*, writes about the religiousness of both composers and the primary role of sacred music in their work. She points out that: 'Both composers openly and consistently claim that their own religious experience is central and pivotal to their lives as composers. Their composition emerges from an attitude of prayer, meditation and devotion to God'³².

Yet John Tavener's individual style of music extends far beyond repetitive musical formulas. Its originality stems from his combining of highly melismatic melodies with minimalist forms, simple musical means and sophisticated symbolism. The uniqueness and distinction of his style results from the fusion of ancient and new, Eastern and Western, elaborate and simple elements. We may say that Tavener's concept of the icon in sound, characteristic of the postmodern era, was undoubtedly one of the most original experiments in music of the late twentieth century.

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²⁹ K. Robert Schwarz. 1996. *Minimalists*. London: Phaidon, 216–217.

³⁰ Richard Taruskin (2010. *Music in the Late Twentieth Century*, 526) writes of the success of the 'Holy Minimalists' Pärt, Górecki and Tavener in the 80s.

³¹ John Rockwell applies the epithets 'holy' and 'mystical minimalist' to such composers as Tavener, Pärt and Górecki in his article: "In East Europe, minimalism meets mysticism". The New York Times, 4 July 1993: 24, cited after: Grace K. Muzzo. 2010. *In Search of the Divine: Arvo Pärt's 'Te Deum' and John Tavener's 'Ikon of Light'*. Saarbrücken: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 34.

³² Muzzo. 2010. *In Search of the Divine: Arvo Pärt's 'Te Deum' and John Tavener's 'Ikon of Light'*, 113.

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