

Press release

“My brush with death gives poignancy to première of ravishing Tavener composition”

Professor Paul Robertson, leader of Medici String Quartet

Towards Silence, by Sir John Tavener
UK première 6 July, Winchester Cathedral

Prof Paul Robertson, who led the renowned Medici Quartet for 34 years and now heads the Music Mind Spirit Trust, will lead the UK première performance of Sir John Tavener's most recent work on 6 July at Winchester Cathedral as part of the Art and Mind Festival.

Towards Silence, written for four string quartets and a large Tibetan bowl, explores the nature of consciousness and the process of dying. Tavener had long wanted to write the work and persuaded Robertson to perform it. However, shortly after the manuscript was completed both men became critically ill and close to death themselves. Tavener, who has Marfan Syndrome, an inherited condition that attacks the body's connective tissue, had a series of major heart attacks while Robertson suffered a near fatal aortic dissection.

“Just before Christmas 2007,” recalls Robertson, “we received the devastating news that John had been taken grievously ill at a concert in Switzerland. Shortly after this I was also struck down with a serious medical emergency and, like John, found myself desperately fighting for life in an intensive care unit. For many months, although unconnected, we seem to have followed similarly grim paths, balancing tenuously between life and death.”

However, by August 2008 Robertson had recovered sufficiently to resuscitate the project, which had now taken on a profound significance for himself and for Tavener, who is also recuperating at home with his family.

The members of the Medici Quartet immediately agreed to reform and identified young professional string quartets with whom to perform and to act as musical mentors. They selected three outstanding British ensembles for the UK performances – the Court Lane, Finzi and Harpham Quartets – and rehearsals began.

Robertson is overwhelmed by the piece. “I believe Tavener has composed a masterpiece here. It's the most ravishing piece of music I've ever been on the inside of. It's like a living ecstasy, it's something quite extraordinary – that's how we all feel.”

The music is based on mystical Hindu concepts. “I was inspired by reading [French philosopher] Rene Gueron's book *Man and his becoming according to the Vedanta*,” says Tavener. “He describes the four states: the waking state, the dream state, the condition of deep sleep, and that which is beyond. I decided very rashly early on to base the music on these four states – I couldn't help myself doing so – and try to represent them. These are metaphysical inner states but they also can be described as stages of dying.”

Tavener's vision is for all four quartets to be positioned high up in the cathedral dome,

invisible to the audience, and arranged in the shape of a cross, bringing the Christian, Buddhist and Hindu religions together.

Tavener first came to public attention in 1968 when his avant-garde oratorio *The Whale* was premiered at the inaugural concert of the London Sinfonietta. As the years progressed his music became increasingly spiritual in conception. In 1977 he joined the Orthodox Church, which was a major inspiration on his work for the following two decades. From the late 1990s his religious interests diversified and his music embraced many different traditions: Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the spirituality of the American Indians.

Towards Silence has been jointly commissioned by the Music Mind Spirit Trust in the UK and the Rubin Museum in New York, where it receives its world première on 23 April. The work will also be performed on 9 July at St Mary's, Petworth, as part of Petworth Festival.

<http://www.towardssilence.org.uk/>

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Notes for editors

Sir John Tavener – biog

John Tavener first came to public attention in 1968 with the premiere of his oratorio *The Whale* at the inaugural concert of the London Sinfonietta. The Beatles subsequently recorded this on their Apple label.

Although Tavener's avant-garde style of the seventies contrasts with the contemplative beauty of his works for which he is best known, the seeds of the language he would later adopt were in evidence from an early stage. Some of his first published compositions, notably *Thérèse* (1973) commissioned by the Royal Opera House and *A Gentle Spirit* (1977) after the short story by Dostoyevsky, showed that spirituality and mysticism were to be his primary sources of inspiration.

His conversion to the Orthodox Church in 1977 resulted from his growing conviction that Eastern traditions retained a primordial essence that the west had lost. Works such as *The Lamb* (1982), and the large-scale choral work *Resurrection* (1989) date from this period. It was in 1989 that Tavener once again came firmly into the limelight, when the Proms premiere of *The Protecting Veil* introduced his music to a new audience. The opera *Mary of Egypt*, premiered at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1992. The same year, a major documentary, 'Glimpses of Paradise' was broadcast on BBC2. His 50th birthday year was marked in 1994 by the BBC's *Ikons Festival*, as well as another major Proms commission - *The Apocalypse*. In 1997, the performance of *Song for Athene* at the close of Princess Diana's funeral showed that the profound effect of his music reached far beyond just the concert-going public.

The premiere of *A New Beginning* played out the final minutes of 1999 in London's Millennium Dome; on 4 January 2000, *Fall and Resurrection* was premiered at St Paul's Cathedral, broadcast on both television and radio; he received a Knighthood in the Millennium Honours List, and later the same year, London's South Bank Centre presented a major festival of his music. The number of commissions from overseas increased, notably with *Lamentations and Praises* (2000) for the San Francisco-based Chanticleer (whose recording of the work secured for Tavener the Grammy award for Best Classical Contemporary Composition in 2003) and *Ikon of Eros* (2001) for the Minnesota Orchestra.

In the first years of the new millennium, Tavener was led to look for inspiration from alternative sources by his interest in the universalist philosophy of the late Swiss metaphysician Fritjof

Schuon, which embraces all great religious traditions. This change in direction is manifest in works written since 2001, such as the epic all-night vigil *The Veil of the Temple* (2002) which includes Sufi poetry as well as Christian, Islamic and Hindu texts; *The Beautiful Names* (2006) sets the 99 names for Allah from the Qu'ran; the *Requiem* (2007) also sets words from the Qu'ran and the Upanishads alongside those of the Roman Catholic requiem mass; and the Hindu inspired *Lalishri* (2006) for solo violin and strings, written for Nicola Benedetti.

Medici Quartet – bio

Drawing on more than 35 years of world class musical performance The Medici Ensemble is a leading international group, having appeared to critical acclaim in more than thirty countries across five continents. □□As well as regular radio broadcasts, they have a wide ranging and eclectic discography of more than 40 records which includes a highly regarded Beethoven Quartets Cycle, the seldom heard Saint-Saëns Quartets and Wajahat Khan's Sarod Quintet Raag Dush.

In 1996 Channel 4 Television broadcast a three-part series entitled *Music & the Mind*, performed by The Medici Quartet and presented by their leader Paul Robertson; these programmes combined music and science to explore the power of music in human life, cognitive and emotional development and health. □□Renowned for their dramatic programmes for string quartet and actors which revealed the intimate relationship between the composer's work and his life & times through the imaginative conjunction of music and readings were initiated by Paul Robertson, 'The Kingdom of the Spirit': Beethoven through his Letters by John Caird and Michael Kennedy's programme about Sir Edward Elgar at Brinkwells entitled 'Wood Magic' have been performed many hundreds of times. Alan Bennett with composer George Fenton also created and recorded a memorable performance piece 'Hymn' with them for their 30th anniversary.

Although the Medici Quartet gave its final performance at the Harrogate International Festival in 2007 the same core members have since reformed, as the Medici Ensemble, in order to explore a wider repertoire and share its unique history with young professionals and Executive Leaders. □

Court Lane Quartet

<http://www.courtlanemusic.com/index2.html>

Finzi Quartet

<http://www.finziquartet.com/>

Harpham Quartet

<http://www.harphamquartet.com/>

Winchester Art and Mind Festival

<http://www.artandmind.org/pages/ArchiveEntrances.htm>

Petworth Festival

<http://www.petworthfestival.org.uk/>

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