

Sacred Site and Sound Festival

Tintern Abbey and St Michael's Church, Gwent NP16 6SE

18th – 19th July 2014

A sense sublime: two sacred sites in the Wye Valley

"I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused" (Wordsworth)

The Sacred Site and Sound Festival, unique in Wales, celebrates the ancient Abbey of Tintern, and its older sister church of St Michael, in two performances of sacred music and poetry.

Tintern Abbey, which for three centuries resonated to the sacred chants of Cistercian monks before being transformed into an awesome ruin by Henry VIII, has been reborn in modern times as a place of secular pilgrimage. And where once the praises of God rang out in its walls, people now come from all over the world, whatever their beliefs and background, inspired perhaps by the paintings of J.M.W. Turner or the poetry of William Wordsworth, to contemplate its sublime beauty.

In trying to recapture those feelings, and relate them to our current longing for some kind of uplifting vision of hope, we have created a programme of music and light in these ancient walls. The music of Sir John Tavener, leading British composer who died last December, is at the heart of the Abbey programme which is performed by orchestra, choir and soloist of international repute in honour of his gift to music and of his life-long quest for spiritual meaning. The emphasis in the programme on the Virgin Mary echoes the original dedication of the Abbey to Mary. The Saturday evening performance will end with Tavener's haunting creation, *Towards Silence*, which, with the final fading light, moves us into the darkness and peace of the Abbey as night closes in.

Near the Abbey, but much older, and still a living centre of the Tintern community, is the parish church of St Michael. Its history goes back well over a thousand years when an early Celtic Christian community established a place of worship here which, with many interruptions and changes, has bequeathed to us a tiny gem of a building, a quiet resting place beside the River Wye. There on Friday evening we hear the work of mainly local composers, players and poets who will celebrate the spiritual traditions of this ancient Welsh site.

This dual celebration will be accompanied by a special exhibition in the Abbey of work by Mike Abbott based on his study of ancient monuments in Brittany. Concurrently there is a weekend conference on the subject of Sacred Sites and Sounds organised by the Scientific and Medical Network, a society of educational professionals which seeks to bridge the gap between science and spirituality in non-creedal ways. And a few days earlier there is a public debate by the local philosophical society on the modern relevance of the idea of the sacred.

As an important complement to the Festival, Chepstow Museum is holding a major exhibition of paintings associated with Tintern Abbey entitled *Sites of Inspiration*, open from Saturday May 24th to Sunday September 28th 2014. The exhibition includes famous watercolours and sketches by JMW Turner, Samuel Palmer, Thomas Gainsborough, John Sell Cotman, John Piper, Eric Ravilious, David Jones and many others, with original manuscripts from the hands of William and Dorothy Wordsworth.

Tintern Abbey

Saturday July 19th at 7.30 pm

Refreshments in Monks' Refectory before, during interval, and after performance

Welsh Chamber Orchestra *directed by Anthony Hose,*

Cantemus Chamber Choir *directed by Huw Williams*

Kathryn Price *cello*

Concert Programme

Eric Whitacre: *Hope, Faith, Life, Love*

Cantemus Chamber Choir directed by Huw Williams

Whitacre condenses E E Cummings' poem by taking only the first four words of the poem (given in the title) and the last four (dream, joy, truth, soul) for his text. These eight abstractions are set in varying textures and in shifting eight-part harmonies that Whitacre thinks of as 'meditations'. Towards the end of the piece, after a swelling setting of the word 'soul', there is a dramatic pause, followed by a repetition of the word in a hushed conclusion.

John Tavener: *The Lamb*

Cantemus Chamber Choir directed by Huw Williams

Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life, and bid thee feed
By the stream and o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing, woolly, bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice?

Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Little Lamb, I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb, I'll tell thee:
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb.
He is meek, and he is mild;
He became a little child.
I, a child, and thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.
Little Lamb, God bless thee!
Little Lamb, God bless thee!
(William Blake)

Anyone who is misled by the form, syntax and lineation of Blake's poem into thinking it is as simple as it looks might be surprised by Tavener's setting. Certainly Tavener respects the simplicity of the end-stopping of all but one of the lines, and the melodic material is restricted; he also captures, in certain harmonies, something of a child's vocal insecurity. But the measured pace of the work, reinforced by the homophonic texture, seems to show the rootedness of the child's conviction, and even, perhaps, a touch of melancholy.

Arvo Pärt: *Summa for String Orchestra*

Welsh Chamber Orchestra directed by Anthony Hose

Summa first appeared as a rather austere four-part setting of the Credo, but twelve years later Pärt re-presented the piece for string orchestra as heard here. The work is not at all challenging tonally and it is made out of a (slightly spiky) theme that one hears repeated with slight variations throughout. Nevertheless, it is oddly difficult to follow exactly what is happening with the reappearance of the theme in different parts, and what at first seems like forward movement turns out to be a mesmerising stasis.

Henryk Górecki: *Totus Tuus*

Cantemus Chamber Choir directed by Huw Williams

Totus tuus sum Maria,
Mater nostri Redemptoris.
Virgo Dei, virgo pia
Mater mundi Salvatoris.
Totus tuus sum, Maria!

[I am wholly yours, Mary,
Mother of our Redeemer.
Virgin Mother of God, holy virgin,
Mother of the Saviour of the world.
I am wholly yours, Mary!]

The text of *Totus Tuus* is clearly of central importance to Górecki, who sets it homophonically so that it can be heard clearly. The role of the music is to shape each phrase, paying loving attention to the expressive powers of harmony and dynamics. Górecki does, however, allow himself to repeat lines and parts of lines. Line four in particular is set in such a way as to exploit an ambiguity and to withhold the significant word 'Salvatoris' for special effect. The whole text is sung twice, each time framed by a musical shaping of the name 'Maria'

Arvo Pärt: *Fratres for Strings and Percussion*

Welsh Chamber Orchestra directed by Anthony Hose

Fratres – 'Brothers' or 'Brethren' – was conceived in 1977, but has been reconceived many times for varying forces since then. This one dates from 1991 and is dedicated to the memory of fellow Estonian composer Eduard Tubin. The work is essentially a set of subtle variations (following principles devised by the composer) over a low drone, each rather measured variation being marked off by a short percussion motif on claves and bass drum (or tom-tom). The whole piece has the quality of a solemn procession, rising and then falling in dynamics.

John Tavener: *Hymne to the Mother of God*

Cantemus Chamber Choir directed by Huw Williams

In You, O Woman full of Grace, the angelic choirs and the human race, all creation rejoices.
O sanctified Temple, mystical Paradise, and glory of Virgins.
In you, O Woman full of Grace, all creation rejoices. All praise be to you.
(from the Liturgy of St Basil)

This hymn is one of a pair that Tavener wrote in 1985 in memory of his mother who died that year. Two choirs sing in canon (the second enters on 'O') in a measured rhythm, producing a thick, glowing texture in the first and third sections. The central section (where the second choir enters on the syllable 'Tem') by contrast seems rather awed.

Benjamin Britten: *Hymne to the Virgin Mary*

Cantemus Chamber Choir directed by Huw Williams

Of one that is so fair and bright
Velut maris stella, [as the star of the sea]
Brighter than the day is light,
Parens et puella: [mother and maiden]
I cry to thee, thou see to me,
Lady, pray thy Son for me
Tam pia, [so tender]
That I may come to thee.

Maria!

All this world was forlorn
Eva peccatrice, [Eve having sinned]
Till Our Lord was y-born
De te genetrice. [of you, his mother]
With Eve it went away
Darkest night, and comes the day
Salutis [of salvation]
The well springeth out of thee.
Virtutis. [of virtue]

Lady, flow'r of ev'rything,
Rosa sine spina, [rose without a thorn]
Thou bare Jesu, Heaven's King,
Gratia divina. [by divine grace]
Of all thou bear'st the prize,
Lady, queen of paradise
Electa. [chosen]
Maid mild, mother es Effecta.
Effecta. [you are fulfilled]
(anon. c. 1300)

Britten found this macaronic (mixing languages together) carol when he was only sixteen and set it for two choirs, one singing the English and the other the melodic echo in the Latin phrases. Much of the texture is homophonic, so the musical stress is on the beautiful harmonies, particularly at the ends of the first two verses. The third verse introduces a kind of urgency in which the texture thickens before achieving the peaceful conclusion.

Arvo Pärt: *Cantus in memoriam Benjamin Britten*

Welsh Chamber Orchestra directed by Anthony Hose

The work is for a single tubular bell and string orchestra and is in the form of a canon in which the same or similar material is played by the different parts at differing speeds. It begins with scored silence followed by three strikes on the bell (which continues to toll at calculated intervals almost throughout the whole piece). Shortly after the initial strikes, the main theme, based on a descending minor scale, appears. Lower and lower strings are gradually introduced playing the same theme at increasingly slower speeds. The effect is a cascade of grief, which is intensified by the dynamics and by the way the focus is increasingly on the lower strings. At the end of the piece, the bell sounds again, followed by scored silence.

Thirty minute interval. Refreshments in the monks' refectory

John Tavener: *The Protecting Veil*

Welsh Chamber Orchestra directed by Anthony Hose with cello soloist Kathryn Price.

Although *The Protecting Veil* is written for soloist and orchestra, it is not a concerto, having none of the dialogue and forward movement characteristic of the post-classical genre. In this work, the string orchestra is a kind of extension of the cello's expressive and lyrical line, and in place of progress, we have stasis, or at least a procession of eight static meditations played without a break. Tavener conceived of it as one of his 'ikons in sound'. The idea of such a work is not to offer programme music, but to capture the significance of what it musically depicts. For Tavener, the cello 'represents the Mother of God' and the continuous singing of the solo instrument throughout the piece presumably shows her continuous presence in the world. The opening and closing movements, each named 'The Protecting Veil', are inspired, as is the work as a whole, by the Orthodox Feast of the Protecting Veil, which commemorates the story of the Virgin Mary defending 10th Century Christians against the Saracen army. The middle six movements represent scenes from Mary's life: 'The Nativity of the Mother of God', 'The Annunciation', 'The Incarnation', 'The Lament of the Mother of God at the Cross', 'The Resurrection' and 'The Dormition'.

John Tavener: *Towards Silence*

Surround-sound installation for four (recorded) string quartets and (recorded) Tibetan singing bowl, with moving images by digital artist John Clive, and with lighting and sound design by Martin and Robin Redfern.

This remarkable work was composed in 2007 at a time when Tavener's spiritual questings had taken him beyond Christianity, and his musical language had correspondingly expanded. In this work, the inspiration and overall conception are derived from the Hindu Vedas. The composition is in four parts, played without a break, though punctuated by chanted words 'Soham' and 'Om'. The progressively lengthening movements are meditations on four states of being – waking, dreaming, deep sleep and 'that which is beyond'. The *first movement* is very busy with musical ideas jostling one another and the bowl sounding (for symbolic reasons) every nineteen bars. But as the overall title and the titles of the movements suggest, the surface complexity is gradually quelled. The *second movement*, for example, is dominated by quiet, steady pizzicato and long drawn-out notes. Wandering melodies emerge with suggestions of a raga, and the bowl begins to sound as if it is leading somewhere. Towards the end of the *third movement*, a sweet fragment of melody, reminiscent of Messiaen, appears, and with the chanted 'Om' the fourth and strangest section begins. The pace is reduced in the *fourth movement* to that of quiet and peaceful breathing, and the suggestion of journeying in the earlier movements becomes the expression of a state, with the bowl thrumming behind the strings, thickening the texture. If there is melancholy here, it is dispelled finally by the auditory equivalent of a vision. Then the strings fall silent and only the gently reverberating bowl is left.