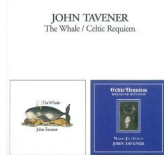


John Tavener - The Whale & Celtic Requiem (2010)

Written by bluesever

Tuesday, 03 December 2013 17:21 -

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The Whale 01. Documentary 02. Melodrama And Pantomime 03. Invocation 04. The Storm
05. The Swallowing 06. The Prayer 07. In The Belly 08. The Vomiting Celtic
Requiem

09. a) Requiem Aeternam 10. b) Dies Irae 11. c) Requiescat In Pace 12. Nomine Jesu 13.
Coplas

Anna Reynolds, mezzo-soprano Raimund Herincx, baritone Alvar Lidell, speaker June
Barton, soprano John Tavener, organ/hammond organ The London Sinfonietta The London
Sinfonietta Chorus David Atherton/John Tavener, conductor

John Tavener, who here makes his gramophone debut, was born in 1944 and composed The Whale when he was 22. It was received with wild enthusiasm at its premiere (by the performers heard here), has won prizes abroad, and been much performed. It was an obvious selection when Apple Records decided to include straight music in their catalogue (they have since recorded Tavener's In alium and Celtic Requiem).

Thirty-five minutes may seem poor measure for two 12-inch sides, but The Whale contains plenty of loud music which needs careful stereo separation and balance; the centre grooves of each side are well un-used here, and the engineering of the recording, by the BBC Transcription Unit with Argo's Michael Bremner producing, is brilliantly clear in perspective and detail. I wondered for example why the solo singers sometimes sounded muffled, then on repetition realized that they have been sent, on these occasions, to the far end of the church so that their voices attract a halo of roof resonance distinct from the closer sound of choir and orchestra, The Whale is mainly a setting of the Jonah story in Vulgate Latin. In these strictly narrative passages the music suggests the Stravinsky of Threni—a good model, imaginatively adopted. But the Cantata is much more than just this, for the narrative awoke Tavener's fantasy, inspiring highly dramatic sections, and some that build up static noise-clusters slowly and with terrifying tension. An outstanding example is the section describing Jonah's sojourn inside the whale, a strictly controlled but apparently very free palimpsest of sound-patterns, characteristic of the

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music's whole structure.

I could draw attention to the compelling deployment of rhythmic drum-patterns; the tingling effects for organ, piano and percussion; the polyphonic chanting ("And Jonah arose"), the solo baritone's shouts into the piano strings—an amazing effect— and several other terraced textures for solo voices against the rest. If you get the score (published by Chester) three or so bits of choral noise will be found omitted from the recorded performance (presumably at the composer's request).

But it's simplest to recommend the music as exceptionally exciting, durably satisfying (I enjoy it more each time), impressively composed; and the recording does the music justice. Anyone under 30 will have to possess the record; and old people like me should find their ears and receptive faculties valuably stretched. Plenty of information, and some nice pictures on the sleeve.—Gramophone, arkivmusic.com

It seems that we have Ringo Starr to thank for the Apple record of John Tavener's *The Whale* which has justly been followed up by another major Tavener piece on disc. *The Celtic Requiem* is so-called partly because it was composed in Ireland, partly because Irish poems (sung in English) are among the texts used. For this is not a straight setting of the Latin Mass for the Dead. Tavener is viewing the phenomenon of death from two angles, adult and childish. While the grown-ups at the back of the stage sing *Requiem*, *Dies irae*, *Requiescant*, and poems by Blathmac and Henry Vaughan, at the front of the stage, surrounded by orchestra, a party of children perform a number of singing games about death—an inexhaustible fascination for children, not necessarily fearful at all: a dead animal, if it isn't bleeding, is no more strange than the limp doll one's sisters play with.

The unconventional dichotomy in *A Celtic Requiem* lies in the allotting of the children's contribution to the foreground while the heartfelt keening and breastbeating of the adults is relegated to the background. "Poor Jenny Jones is dead" and "Mary had a little lamb" are given more prominence, visually and audibly, than what adults would regard as the appropriate, profound music of mourning. This is because the emphasis in this *Requiem* is laid on the unimportance of the act of death, the happiness of those who have left life on earth. Already at the beginning the solo soprano is carolling dream-like fioritura, soaring up to top E flat like an angel. Later she sings, significantly, Vaughan's "They are all gone into the world of light", and

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the children's funeral rites meet those of the adults on common ground in the climactic singing at very slow tempo of "Lead, kindly light" to J. B. Dykes's melody with Tavener's revised harmonies. This gives logic to the children's "There is a happy land"—sung with its parody words—and explains also the mixture of emotions juxtaposed before.

Tavener's Celtic Requiem is a work to watch as well as hear: the children's games are acted out, even to pop-guns for the shooting of Mary's Lamb (who was, of course, Jesus, though children may not remember this), and humming-tops towards the end. The tops are tuned to the chord of E flat major, the chord on which the whole work is based. Tavener intended his Celtic Requiem to be a gigantic uninterrupted decoration of this favourite hymn tune chord. Now and then its presence is reasserted but the music never seems monotonous, perhaps all the more cosmic. When it is over you would be surprised to calculate that it lasts only half an hour, it has expressed so much so fluently and without being too dense.

The performance conveys a miraculous ease—all credit to David Atherton and his massed forces, and to the recording technicians who bring the visual spectacle so vividly before our inward eyes. The first performance knocked me out. The record has completely reproduced that effect. To stop me enthusing to the incredible full, do just listen to this Requiem, especially if you have children or remember your own childhood. AR will have to bring out a new edition of his Requiem book to include this unprecedented setting.

The two vocal pieces on the other side are pleasing, individual and much less heavy. Nomine Jesu involves polyglot speeches, Coplas a gradual merge of Tavener's music into the Crucifixus of Bach's B minor Mass.—Gramophone, arkivmusic.com

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