Icons in Sound: A Comparison of the Music of Sir John Tavener and the Iconography of the Eastern Orthodox Church

Philip P. Graybill

Follow this and additional works at: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors

Part of the Christianity Commons, Liturgy and Worship Commons, and the Music Commons

Recommended Citation
https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors/7

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
Icons in Sound: A Comparison of the Music of Sir John Tavener and the Iconography of the Eastern Orthodox Church

“During this period I felt myself groping towards the idea – the ideal! – that what I wanted to do was to make ikons in sound. Of course, I never knew whether this would ever be possible” (Tavener, Music 61). In his artistic manifesto *The Music of Silence: A Composer’s Testament*, the contemporary British composer Sir John Tavener (b. 1944) sets forth his musical theology. Although he focused on sacred subjects and sought to convey a mystical quality in his music before he joined the Eastern Orthodox Church in 1977, this quality became even more prevalent after his conversion. With a convert’s zeal, Tavener sought to absorb the aesthetic of the Orthodox Church—woven throughout its visual art, music, poetic canons, and architecture—and allowed it to shape his artistic philosophy and compositional process.

John Tavener displayed a prodigious aptitude for music at a young age. Early on, he was trained on the organ by Edward Chapman (*Music* 5-9). After this, he studied at the Royal Academy of Music, with Lennox Berkeley at the Royal College of Music, and with composer David Lumsdaine (9-13). He also interacted with other well known figures in Western music, including Nadia Boulanger and Benjamin Britten (11, 13-14). For a time he held a post as organist and choirmaster at St. John’s Kensington, and his compositions frequently found public performance (11-25). During the first part of his
career, he found himself firmly rooted in the stream of contemporary Western art music and its various circles.

Tavener became somewhat disillusioned, however, with Western music at about the same time that he began exploring the Eastern Orthodox Church (Music 33-38). He met with Metropolitan ANTHONY Bloom for informal catechism and eventually joined the Orthodox Church in 1977 (33-7). The liturgical art of the Eastern Church—its iconography, music, and hymnography—offered Tavener a different paradigm through which to approach art, a paradigm which he soon sought to absorb and practice. For Tavener, the icon stands at the center of the Eastern Orthodox artistic paradigm, and in his work he has striven to create the musical equivalents of icons—icons in sound (61,113-8).

This paper will explore the concept of creating icons in sound by contrasting and comparing icons and the discipline of iconography with Tavener’s music and his creative process. Although there are ways in which Tavener’s music—and music in general—cannot achieve exactly what is achieved in the icon, there are some fundamental characteristics of iconography that Tavener has successfully incorporated into his compositional process. An examination of the points of contrast—the aspects of the icon that cannot be translated into music—will help to clarify the unique place and importance of the icon in the life of the Church, particularly with respect to the doctrine of the Incarnation. And drawing out the points of commonality—how Tavener has successfully applied aspects of iconography to his composing—will help to clarify the meaning of sacred art in general in the Orthodox Tradition.

At this point, it is pertinent to note that Tavener’s recent artistic explorations have
taken him down some roads incongruent with the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox Church. While Tavener still considers himself to be an Orthodox Christian, as Michael White’s article in *The New York Times* explains, he has begun to incorporate textual and musical materials from other religious traditions. In its scope, this paper will only cover the period of Tavener’s career before he moved in these new directions.

In comparing Tavener’s music with Orthodox iconography, it becomes immediately apparent that there are some aspects of the icon that cannot be translated into music because of the simple fact that an icon is comprised of matter and music is comprised of sound waves, a form of energy. The difference in medium—an icon’s materiality and music’s immateriality—carries an implication that solidifies the unique place of the icon in the life of the Orthodox Church, a place that music will never be able to occupy. This is the icon’s testimony to the Incarnation.

In the Incarnation, the immaterial God truly took on a material body. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us…” (John 1.14). God became visible, tangible, and the fallen human nature—doomed to death and hell—was itself united to God and redeemed. According to Orthodox Christianity, this is how the salvation of humankind was accomplished. If Christ did not truly take on a material body, then He did not redeem the body, and the human body cannot be saved. But because Christ took on the totality of humanity—body, soul, and spirit—the entire human person is redeemed, including the material body. As St. Gregory the Theologian wrote, “For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved” (Schaff and Wace 440). Thus for the Orthodox the doctrine of the incarnation is bound up with human salvation.
The incarnation is also inextricably linked with the theology of the icon. Before the Incarnation, God was invisible and could not be depicted. Indeed, any depiction of God was perceived as idolatrous. Through the incarnation, however, God became visible and can therefore be depicted. St. John Damascene explains:

When He Who is without a body and without form, Who has neither quantity nor magnitude, Who is incomparable with respect to the superiority of His nature, who exists in Divine form—accepts a bondservant’s appearance and arrays himself in bodily form, then do thou trace Him upon wood, and rest thy hopes in contemplating Him, Who has permitted Himself to be seen. (qtd. in Schmemann 207)

To affirm the icon is to affirm to the fullest that the human person of Jesus Christ is God incarnate and that the human nature of Christ and the divine nature of Christ are truly united in one Person. Christ did not merely borrow a material body or appear to have a body, as the Gnostics claimed. The Church teaches that Christ ascended into heaven corporally, and that He—in His deified flesh—is sitting at the right hand of the Father (Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed). Jesus Christ is still flesh and He will forever be flesh. He did not cease to have a human body after the Ascension, and His humanity—including His body—is forever united in one Person to His divinity. Alexander Schmemann writes, “An image of the Man Christ is also an image of God; as Florovsky has said, everything that is human in Christ is now the living image of God” (207). To depict the man Christ is to depict God.

Thus for the Orthodox, refusing to honor an image—or icon—of Christ is akin to refusing to honor Christ’s body. To refuse to honor His body as merely human is to
separate His humanity from his divinity, which is ultimately a Nestorian denial of the Incarnation (Ware 24-5). And to deny the Incarnation is to deny the salvation of the entire human person. St. John of Damascus summarizes the Orthodox understanding of the connection among the Incarnation and the icon and salvation, “I do not bow down to matter, but to the Creator of matter, Who for my sake took on substance and Who through matter accomplished my salvation, and I shall not cease to honor matter, through which my salvation was accomplished” (qtd. in Schmemann 207).

Beyond the salvation of the human person, the Incarnation carries implications for the redemption of the entire material realm, and the icon testifies to this. Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) explains:

God took a material body, thereby proving that matter can be redeemed:

‘The Word made flesh has deified the flesh,’ said John of Damascus [On Icons, I, 16 (P.G. xciv, 1245A)]. God has ‘deified’ matter, making it ‘spirit-bearing’; and if flesh has become a vehicle of the Spirit, then so—though in a different way—can wood and paint. The Orthodox doctrine of icons is bound up with the Orthodox belief that the whole of God’s creation, material as well as spiritual, is to be redeemed and glorified. (33-34)

Because of this inextricable connection between the icon and the salvation of the world, the Orthodox Church has vehemently defended the icon from various waves of iconoclasm, especially throughout the first millennium. At the Seventh Ecumenical Council in Nicea in 787, the Church spoke definitively in defense of the icons and established their place in the life of the Church, although it was not until 843 that the
icons were permanently restored by the Empress Theodora and the Iconoclast controversy of that time came to an end. The Church commemorates this final restoration of the icons every year on the first Sunday of Lent, known as the “Orthodoxy Sunday” (Ware 31).

To summarize, the icon clearly holds an indispensable place in the life of the Orthodox Church because of its testimony to the Incarnation and the salvation of the entire cosmos. The Seventh Ecumenical Council, the celebration of the restoration of icons on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, and the prevalence of icons in Orthodox temples and homes all evince the unique importance of this sacred art in the life of the Church.

Although Orthodox services are filled with music from beginning to end and canons regarding Church singing do exist (for example, Canon 75 of the Council of Trullo), Church music has not been accorded anything near the attention that has been given to icons. No major controversies have arisen over music, and no major council has been called regarding music. This speaks not so much to the unimportance of music but rather to the central dogmatic importance of the icon. Nonetheless, music, being immaterial, can never fully symbolize what the icon symbolizes. The words of music can of course tell about the incarnation and about the redemption of matter, but the music itself cannot be a symbol of the Incarnation. Tavener himself seems to acknowledge the unique relationship of the icon to the Incarnation. He observes, “The ikon is the meeting of the created and the uncreated. It is above all a witness to the Incarnation” (Music, 114).

As a result of its unique testimony to the Incarnation, another aspect of the icon that distinguishes it from music is its connection with its Prototype (the subject of an
icon, or the person or persons depicted) and its resulting veneration in Orthodox worship. Because Christ has redeemed and deified matter in the Incarnation and because of the understood relationship between a person and his image (Ouspensky and Lossky 32), icons are understood to bear an “ontological connection” with Christ or the Theotokos (the Virgin Mary) or the Saints or Holy Angels which they depict (Florensky 70).

This helps to explain why Orthodox Christians venerate icons. They pray before them and kiss them; they bow, prostrate, and kneel before them, engaging their entire bodies in paying honor to Christ and His Mother and His Saints. Dabovich explains:

We venerate them and kiss them: not that any divinity or virtue is in them, nor do we pray to them, believing that the wood, the canvas, or the paint can help us, but the honor which we show them is referred to the originals which they represent, so that by the images which we kiss, and before which we uncover our heads or kneel, we adore Christ, and venerate His saints, whose likeness they represent. (12)

As a note, Orthodox theology distinguishes between veneration—which refers to the honor accorded to icons, relics of Saints, the Holy Cross, the Gospel book, or other holy items—and worship, which is accorded to God alone (John of Damascus 23).

Just as music may tell about the Incarnation of Christ but may never symbolize it, so too can music tell about Christ and His Holy Mother and the Saints and angels but never symbolize them in the way that an icon can. Music’s immateriality precludes this. The material image provides the connection between the venerator and the Prototype (Ouspensky and Lossky 32). Thus it does not make sense to speak of venerating a piece of music. And music does not engage the body in prayer the way that an icon does. (The
Orthodox Church does not have a tradition of liturgical dance; however, one may rightly argue that chanting or singing in Church does indeed engage the body in prayer.) An icon is an object for veneration, whereas music disappears into thin air. Tavener himself recognizes this difference between icons and music: “During this period I felt myself groping towards the idea – the ideal! – that what I wanted to do was to make ikons in sound. Of course, I never knew whether this would ever be possible. After all, an ikon is a sacred object – it’s something that causes an Orthodox to bow his head and then kiss it in veneration” (Music 61). And he also says, “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” (113).

Tavener, however, does not seem so concerned with creating an object for veneration as he is with creating music that inspires the same awe and contrition of heart that an icon inspires. And although one cannot “prostrate in front of a piece of music,” music may inspire a worshiper to prostrate before God. Along those lines, Tavener remarks, “…[A]n icon dissects us, and I think truly sacred music should do the same” (Music 113), and he states that he aims at “…that ethos of compunction, of humility…” (118).

Pertinent to this discussion of veneration is Tavener’s work Mary of Egypt, a stylized opera, which Tavener refers to as a “moving icon” (Music 168). It presents the story of St. Mary of Egypt on a stage (166-9). Since in an opera the actors and actresses represent the characters they portray, there would be more material that would potentially overlap with iconography. However, such a discussion would sit more in the realm of drama than music, and the theological questions surrounding liturgical opera (for
example, “What is the nature of the relationship between an actor and the Prototype he portrays?”) are beyond the scope of this paper.

That music cannot capture and convey the implications of the Incarnation should be a testament to the singular place of the icon in Orthodox worship and theology. The icon ontologically attests to the Incarnation. There are indeed icons of the Incarnation—Mary in the cave with the Christ Child in the manger and the whole surrounding scene. But its very existence, every icon reveals the Incarnation. It mystically depicts the Prototype not naturally, but rather in a state of deification, reminding the faithful that fallen humanity—soul, spirit, and body—can indeed be raised to theosis (or deification) because of the Incarnation: “He [the Word of God], indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God” (Athanasius 54.3). And aside from the contemplation of the deified Prototype depicted on the icon, the physical matter of the icon is itself imbued with divine grace, becoming in a sense a sacrament—a material object communicating the grace of God—a further testament to the Incarnation and the sacramental life made possible by the Incarnation.

In spite of music’s inability to attest to the Incarnation in the way that an icon does, a deeper look at the practice of iconography and Tavener’s own compositional process reveals some profound connections between the two disciplines. Three main similarities will be examined here. In both iconography and Tavener’s compositional process, the artist exercises an ascetic spiritual discipline, he adheres to traditionally accepted forms and materials, and he ultimately aims to reveal, in his respective medium, the Kingdom of Heaven.

The tradition of iconography lays a serious ascetic demand on its practitioners;
painting an icon is not something one enters into lightly. In his book *Iconostasis*, Pavel Florensky describes the asceticism expected of the iconographer:

An iconpainter’s life is therefore not simple. Because they are raised in the ecclesiastical hierarchy above ordinary laypeople, they must therefore practice a greater humility, purity and piety, a profounder practice of fasting and prayer, and a more constant and deeper contact with their spiritual father…. But, in actual reality, iconpainters always put themselves under disciplines stricter than any given to them, becoming genuine ascetics in the exact sense of the word. (90)

Florensky also quotes the 100-Chapters Council, giving canonical evidence that the Church expects a life of purity and strict asceticism from her iconographers:

Let it be known, then, that the iconpainter shall be meek, humble, and reverent, neither filled with vain talk, nor empty laugh, nor quarrelsome, not envious, not a drinker of spirits, not a thief nor a murderer; and above all things, that he shall sustain in great mindfulness a pure chastity of soul and body, and that if he cannot sustain a pure chastity of body, he shall marry a wife by the lawful sacrament of matrimony; and that always and everywhere the iconpainters shall attend constantly to their spiritual fathers, telling them everything always and living always according to their teachings about fasting and prayer and all the ascetic disciplines, doing so with neither embarrassment nor willfulness, and with always the true wisdom of humility…. (92)

One unfamiliar with Eastern Orthodox spirituality may wonder at these strict rules
for the liturgical artist. But the Orthodox Christian’s life is woven throughout with asceticism; the Orthodox Church expects fasting, personal prayer, confession, and a level of obedience from all its members, including the laity. So it is no surprise that the Church expects even more from those with ecclesial vocations. Again highlighting the necessity of a serious spiritual life for iconographers, Florensky writes, “…the successful accomplishment of iconpainting technique depends entirely upon the iconpainter’s devotion to prayer” (97), and, “In the most precise sense of the word, only the saints can be iconpainters…” (88).

These demands placed upon the iconographer begin to reveal the Orthodox theology of liturgical art. The Church believes that the personal faith and piety of the iconographer does indeed matter since iconography is a spiritual as well as technical process. Indeed, the iconographer must have artistic ability, but without a spiritual life, the iconographer’s work will miss the mark. Florensky explains it well:

…[I]f eternity must be witnessed in and through the icon, can this occur through the work of someone who is himself alienated from true spirituality? This is precisely the point at which the Church, in considering not merely the work but the whole life of an iconpainter, will come to view disregard of spiritual rule as devastating to the very integrity of the iconpainting cult. Hence, the ascetic demands placed upon iconpainters in the matter of their personal lives…. (91-92)

Thus, through asceticism and prayer the iconographer must become a worthy vessel through which the Holy Spirit can work.

Tavener, it would seem, also understands the necessity of asceticism and prayer to
the process of creating sacred art. He does not explicitly describe his own ascetic practice or prayer rule (and modesty and the confidence of his spiritual counsel would prevent him from doing so). But in an article he wrote for *Contemporary Music Review*, in which he compares iconography with his own work, he describes iconography as “...a strict discipline, requiring fasting and constant communion,” and he writes about “...the ascetic pain of labouring [sic] to find the best way [he] can to depict the subject…” (“Sacred” 50). In *The Music of Silence*... he says, “I cannot separate composing, the act of working, from prayer” (62). And he also describes his composing as a “work of repentance,” a phrase which conjures associations with asceticism (“Sacred” 52).

Furthermore, in his book Tavener speaks of the necessity of having a spiritual father—or in his case, a spiritual mother. He found his spiritual mother in Mother Thekla, the Abbess of the Orthodox Monastery of the Dormition in Whitby (*Music* 55-6).

In line with the Church’s teaching on iconography, Tavener also expresses the assumption that the spiritual life of the artist, including his faith, is essential to sacred art. He writes, “For an artist to work in a sacred tradition he must first believe in the divine realities which inform that particular tradition. This is a *sine qua non*: not, of course, a guarantee for great art, but a *sine qua non*” (“Sacred” 49). He also echoes Florovsky’s comment about saintliness: “In a certain sense you have to be something of a saint to be able to paint an icon and write chant” (*Music* 115). It is apparent that Tavener has understood and assimilated in his own work the unbreakable connection between iconography and genuine faith expressed through ascetic practice.

A second area in which Tavener has mirrored iconography is in his adherence to traditionally accepted forms and materials. Unlike modern art, in which anything and
everything is free game for subject matter, form, or medium, the discipline of iconography is limited to a vocabulary of traditionally accepted forms and media. As humility is the foundation of Orthodox spirituality, the art of the icon is born out of the iconographer’s humble submission to the artistic tradition of the Church.

With respect to the iconographer’s adherence to traditionally accepted artistic forms, another quote from the 100-Chapters Council conveys the general Orthodox attitude:

…and that they shall with great diligence make the image of Our Lord Jesus Christ, of His Most Pure Mother, of all the holy apostles and prophets, of all the holy hierarchs and martyrs, and of all the righteous women and holy fathers, each and every according to the “image and likeness” of the most divine essence, looking always to the images of the ancient iconpainters and always drawing from that good treasure-house of their most excellent example. (qtd. in Florensky 92)

Tavener himself highlights this aspect of the icon when speaking about the prototypical icons in the Church, after which subsequent icons were patterned:

…and according to tradition, we have a prototype in the ikon in so far as St Luke pained the Mother of God. And the prototype for the head of Christ, Orthodox tradition believes, is that when Christ was unable to visit the King of Edessa He miraculously imprinted an image of His face on to a cloth. He sent to King Abgar this ikon ‘made without hands’, and it’s from these prototypes that the first ikons were derived. (book 115)

(With regard to iconography, the word *prototype* may refer either to the subject of the
It is important to note, though, that the iconographer does not seek to slavishly and automatically copy the pattern set before him. Ideally, the iconographer spiritually “sees” through the original icon and, in a living, dynamic way, beholds the person he is depicting. Florensky describes this well:

If someone copying a prototypical icon is unable to experience in himself that which he depicts, if while following the original he fails to make contact with the reality of it, then (being honest) he will try as precisely as possible to reproduce in his copy the prototype’s outward features; but it almost always happens that, in such a case, he will not comprehend the icon as an opening and so, lost in copying the fine lines and brush strokes, he will interpret unclearly the icon’s essence. But if, on the other hand, through the prototype he is opened up into the spiritual reality depicted on it and thereby comes to see it clearly (if secondarily), he will—because he possesses the living reality of his own aliveness—manifest his own viewpoint and thus swerve from a strict calligraphic adherence to the original. (74)

But even when the iconographer is able to “experience in himself that which he depicts,” the resulting icon will still reside within the lineage of the prototype after which it was patterned. The living experience will be expressed within it, but the “new” icon will be
completely recognizable as a daughter of the original (74-5).

Iconographers adhere not only to accepted forms and patterns, but they also limit themselves to traditional materials and processes. Icons may be carved or formed in mosaic, but most commonly they are painted. Iconographers most often use egg tempera, a practice which can be traced back to antiquity. Ouspensky writes, “…[T]he methods of this technique, elaborated by many centuries of practice, form a traditional system and are used by contemporary icon-painters almost without change” (53). The tradition prescribes the types of wood, ground, and finishes in considerable detail, and the process of preparing and assembling them has been handed down through the centuries (Ouspensky and Lossky 53-5, also Florensky 131-44).

This limitation to tradition forms and materials goes hand in hand with the ascetic practice of the iconographer. Just as in fasting, wherein the believer limits the foods he may eat, the iconographer limits the colors and materials he may use. The materials themselves are subdued; iconographers have generally resisted using oil paints since, “…owing to their sensual character, oil paints are unfit to express the asceticism, spiritual richness and joy belonging to an icon” (Ouspensky and Lossky 55). Tavener notes, “It [the icon] possesses simplicity, magnificence, transfigured beauty, and austerity. Austerity because the manner of painting has remained unchanged…” and, “An ikon does not express emotion (it is geometric and its colour palette is severely limited) and yet to the believer it inspires awe, wonder, and the reverence of kissing” (“Sacred” 50).

Indeed, the limitation of materials serves at least two purposes: it helps to subdue the temptation an iconographer faces to try to innovate or express something personal or sensational, and it results in a less sensual, more spiritual work of liturgical art that does
not distract the viewer from prayer. The icon does not draw attention to itself (61); in its humble form and colors, it metaphysically points beyond itself to the person it depicts. This quality of the icon to point beyond itself is possible exactly because of the traditional artistic limitations placed on the iconographer and the use of austere or non-emotive forms and materials.

Tavener has also sought to submit his own work to the traditional musical forms of the Church. He recognizes that Orthodox music, like icons, must adhere to and be born within the stream of tradition that came before it. He has written that a sacred artist “…must know the traditions of the art he works in” (“Sacred” 49) and must have a “…fully assimilated knowledge of the tones” (50). (The word tones here refers to the eight main modes, melodies, or chordal progressions that are used in Orthodox liturgical music.) In speaking about his piece Agraphon, he says, “Why I feel very happy about it, and why I love it so much, is because the music, although put together by me, is entirely, absolutely entirely, formed by traditional means” (Music 76). He also writes in favor of tradition and against innovation, “I often wonder why the sacred music of any age should sound very differently. The answer is that it should not. …[N]o innovatory art can possess magnificence or magisterial primordial beauty…” (“Sacred” 50).

But similar to the iconographer, Tavener also recognizes that composing within the tradition does not mean slavish imitation. He uses an incident involving icons as an example:

Certainly people do go on painting ikons by copying earlier examples. I remember the Patriarch of Alexandria came over to England and one of the first things he did was to be shown an exhibition of recently painted
ikons. I happened to be with him when he was looking at them, and he said, ‘Yes, these are very good reproductions of Byzantine icons. But where’s the spirit?’ And that’s the danger. (Music 117)

And he also says,

As a composer I would argue with an absolutist traditionalist who would no doubt say that I had abandoned the Apostolic tradition. I would simply have to say, ‘The Spirit listeth where it will’. That does not mean I believe in or would advocate a general ‘free for all’; it rather means a mysterious continuation: not development, but a recreation. (Music 117)

Also, as the iconographer limits himself to specific materials and a restrained visual vocabulary, Tavener has also limited his musical materials. In comparing iconography and composing, he writes that the composer “…must also limit the tonal and colour palette…” (“Sacred” 50). In the way that an icon does not draw attention to itself, but points beyond itself, Tavener explains how sacred music must point beyond itself by using limited materials:

…[F]rom a Christian point of view the Word must be heard. Music is the extension of the Word, not a frilly decoration of the Word. It is at the service of the Word, as in all great traditions. There must be no harmony, no counterpoint, just a single melodic line with an ison, or the tonic note of the melody, representing eternity…. (Music 47)

And in a statement that describes his artistic asceticism, Tavener writes, “…each new piece is an act of repentance, stripping away inessentials, ever more naked, ever more simple…” (“Sacred” 50). Tavener has clearly shown his assimilation of the iconographic
ethos in his adherence to traditional forms and materials and his dedication to a simple, non-emotive style.

The first two similarities between iconography and Tavener’s music discussed here—the spiritual discipline and the adherence to traditional forms and materials—reflect the negative or austere aspect of Orthodox asceticism, the stripping away of all that is non-essential. The third similarity reflects the positive goal of asceticism at which both iconography and Tavener’s music aim—the revelation the Kingdom of Heaven in their respective work.

Orthodox tradition understands the icon as a visual revelation of a heavenly reality. Florensky defines an icon as “…a transfixing, an annunciation that proclaims in color the spiritual world” (78). He describes a special category of icons as “[r]evealed icons, ones wherein the iconpainter records his own spiritual experience arising from either direct vision or from mystical dream” (75). Icons may also be based on accounts from Scripture or Church Tradition or even from an iconographer’s direct experience with a saintly person while he or she was still alive on earth (75). And as mentioned above, prototypical icons are often reproduced by other iconographers (74). But even when an iconographer personally has no “direct vision or…mystical dream” on which to base his work—that is to say, if he is working from a prototypical icon or an account from Scripture, for example—he still seeks to “…experience in himself that which he depicts…” (74). Thus Florensky writes that “…the basis of every icon is spiritual experience” (75), whether that experience comes through a clear, direct vision or a less direct “inner seeing.”

To be clear, what is meant here by “direct vision or mystical dream” is not a
subjective, sentimental imagining, but an actual encounter with another Person, albeit mystically. Orthodox tradition is replete with accounts of icons that resulted from visitations of the Virgin Mary, a Saint, a Holy Angel, or even Christ Himself. Sometimes the iconographer himself is the witness, and other times he paints an icon as described by another witness (Florensky 88-9). One such account is documented by Priestmonk Christodoulos in his book Elder Paisios of the Holy Mountain:

When the Elder was still residing at the cell of the Holy Cross, one night, as he was saying the Jesus prayer, suddenly the roof of his cell was removed and in its place he clearly saw the Lord. His face was so bright that he could not look straight at Him and wondered how it was possible for some people to once spit on it.

After this incident, the Elder gave instructions to the nuns of the Convent of St. John the Theologian, who were paining icons, to paint the Lord just the way he had seen Him that night. During the whole time they were painting the icon, he was by their side guiding them.

Father Paisios said that the face of the Lord and the Virgin Mary had the color of ripe wheat. (152-3)

But an icon’s revelation of the Kingdom of Heaven goes far beyond a mere visual depiction of what the Prototype looks like. If that were all it conveyed, it would simply be a pious picture. The essence of the icon, however, is the revelation of the Kingdom of Heaven in a dynamic, experiential way to its beholder. Florensky generally describes the spiritual experience of encountering an icon:

There is not the slightest question in such experiences that what is coming
through the icon is merely the viewer’s subjective invention, so indisputably objective is its impact upon the viewer, an impact equally physical and spiritual. Like light pouring forth light, the icon stands revealed. And no matter where the icon is physically located in the space we encounter it, we can only describe our experience of seeing it as a beholding that ascends. Our seeing rises above everything around us, for we recognize that we are, in this act of seeing, existing in the icon’s space in eternity. In such acts of seeing, the fires of our lusts and the emptiness of our earthly hungers simply and wholly cease; and we recognize the vision as something that, in essence, exceeds the empirical world, as something acting upon us from its own dominion. (72)

Thus the venerator actually encounters the Prototype through the icon and experiences something of the reality of the Kingdom of Heaven within his own spirit. The icon becomes a source of grace—a sacrament—to the faithful. Innocent Neal writes: Interacting with Christ through praying in front of, contemplating and venerating icons of Him is one way that we participate in the divine energies of our Lord. And through veneration of icons of the Theotokos, the angels and the saints, we interact with the grace of the deified prototypes. This grace, or energy, is in turn ‘communicated’ to us. (41)

Throughout history, innumerable healings and other miracles have been attributed to icons. Today, there are a number of icons around the world considered to be “wonder-working” because of the large number of miracles and healings associated with them, including the spontaneous streaming of myrrh (see Markides17-8, 73-4). These
sensational miracles, as well as the interior “beholding that ascends” described by Florensky, testify that the Kingdom of Heaven is revealed in and through icons.

Tavener also expresses his aim to allow something of the Kingdom of Heaven to be revealed in and through his music. In his interview with his friend Brian Keeble, Tavener says, “…I totally believe that the only way to write music is for the music to be revealed” (Music 122). He elaborates, “…[T]hings present and things to come are made clear in musical terms. Not discursively, obviously, but by their being made manifest—a theophany, a revelation of man and God. Whether I succeed, it is not for me to judge” (137).

Tavener himself describes how a number of his works spontaneously came to him, apparently from some source outside himself. He describes how one piece of music was given to him at the time when a good friend of his passed away:

Philip Sherrard was, as I understood from his daughter, very ill – I didn’t know that he was actually dying. I don’t think even she knew at the time. He’d been taken to a hospital in London and I was flying back from Greece, hopefully to see him, when an extraordinary thing happened. We had been airborne for about half an hour when suddenly there came over me a feeling of intense joy, an ecstasy almost, that I had never known before. My last relations with Philip had been less than cordial – in connection with personal matters – yet I loved him very much. In fact, next to my father, maybe he was one of the men I loved most. I wasn’t particularly thinking about him, though I was hoping that I might see him in London. Suddenly at two o’clock, which was twelve o’clock English
time, this extraordinary feeling, almost of ecstatic forgiveness, came over me. As I later learned, Philip had died at exactly this time. I started singing and I felt as if I was drunk without wine. A melody came to me, which became the beginning of *Wake Up and Die*. The melody was the opening chant-like passage which was played on the cello. I composed the whole piece when I got back to England. I relate this story simply because it is an example of music being given to me in a way that I’d never experienced. The death of people has very often produced music in me, but not in quite this extraordinary way. I can only refer to it as a kind of mystical experience. (*Music* 81)

He also describes the origin of *Mystagogia* in mystical terms:

When I arrived in Greece I began to write, but I simply cannot say where the music came from. I should point out that we are talking about a piece that will last well over an hour, if not more, for three instrumental groups. The experience of writing it has been utterly extraordinary. I remember going to bed at night and wondering whether I’d be able to continue in the morning. It wasn’t anything to do with having the faith to go on with it. And yet I knew I would be able to continue.

I went for a walk one evening, during one of those wonderful winter sunsets that you get in Greece, and I suddenly had, I suppose, what they call an out-of-body experience. I suddenly thought, I’m not a person, I’m just a piece of music. I could only see myself as music. It remains a total mystery to me. I’m looking forward to 2001 to see, or rather ‘hear’, what
I think of it. (Music 85)

Tavener describes more generally how he allows the music to come to him:

In a series of recent eschatological works I feel that finally I have begun to find ‘The Voice’. I know now that it is not a matter of finding what to say, but of how to be silent and how to hear the Spirit speaking in this silence. The Spirit alone is true; all else does not exist and Truth does not submit to any of our man-made or legalistic preparations. ‘He comes to His own’ – and in that moment the answer is born, the notes, the rhythm, the melody and the harmony are heard. All come into being – with no mechanical procedures, no systems, everything seems newly born and fresh, both in structure and in grace. (Music 90)

Among other works that he describes as coming to him or being given to him are The Lamb (48), The Last Sleep of the Virgin (70), Song for Athene (74), …Depart in Peace… (84), and Eternity’s Sunrise (84).

As may be expected, no parallels exist—as far as is known—between the overt miracles associated with some icons (that is, the spontaneous streaming of myrrh or physical healings) and John Tavener’s music. And it should be noted that traditionally in the Church, healings and miracles tend to be brought about either through the prayers of a holy person or through some intermediary physical object, not generally through music. However, Tavener does mention that his music has at times brought tears to him and the audience. He says, “When I listen to some of my recent pieces like Resurrection, The Apocalypse, Akathist of Thanksgiving, or any of the recent shorter pieces like Agraphon or Eternity’s Sunrise, Eonia, The Lamb or Song for Athene and things like As One Who
Has Slept, my reaction to such pieces very often brings ‘the gift of tears’” (Music 122-3). And in describing Agraphon, Tavener says, “I was moved to tears at the rehearsals – and I was not alone in this. There were intelligent Greek friends in the audience, who found themselves unable to speak after the performance” (76).

Tears are a frequent topic in books on Orthodox spirituality, being a sign of pure prayer, heartfelt repentance, joy at the love of God, or heartfelt sympathy with someone who is suffering. And in certain circumstances, tears are understood to be a gift of God’s grace. Discerning the ultimate cause of one’s tears, however, is not always easy. Tears, as understood in Orthodox spirituality, are not linked with sentimentality nor limited to an emotional experience, but are rather understood as a spiritual gift of Divine grace. Furthermore, in the spiritual literature, they are not linked with aesthetic experience but rather with deep personal repentance (see Brianchaninov 235-6, 238-242 and Sophrony 324, 448-451). In the final analysis, though, Tavener’s perspective on his own work is modest. About his lofty ideal of composing music that acts as a theophany, he humbly remarked, “Whether I succeed, it is not for me to judge” (Music 137).

This examination of John Tavener’s attempt to write “icons in sound” brings into focus some important points regarding Orthodox liturgical art. First, identifying the areas of contrast—the aspects of the icon that cannot be translated into music—helps to clarify the unique meaning of the icon and its central place in the Church. Its materiality testifies to the Incarnation, and it stands as an indispensable symbol of the completeness of salvation—that the body as well as the soul is saved in Christ, who is God become flesh. Christ took on matter; therefore, the body is redeemed. God became a man; therefore, the invisible God can be depicted (Schmemann 207).
Second, by finding the points of commonality—how Tavener has successfully applied aspects of iconography to his composing—the purpose of sacred art in general in the Orthodox Church becomes clearer. The liturgical artist strips away his own will through ascetic discipline—fasting, repentance, and confession. He humbles his own “artistic voice” in obedience to the canonical tradition of the Church, deliberately limiting the forms and materials that have been used by the faithful for ages. And out of the ascetic struggle, the final hope is that the Kingdom of Heaven is shown forth, whether in color or in sound. The same could potentially be said of the poetic canons of the Church, its architecture, or even the clergy’s vestments.

Liturgical art in the Orthodox Church mirrors the life of each faithful believer. The Christian struggles in asceticism—prayer, fasting, almsgiving, mental watchfulness. He strives to keep Christ’s commandments and walk the narrow way of the Holy Fathers and Mothers of the past. And he clings to the hope that the Kingdom of Heaven might ultimately be revealed in his own person.

The icon, it may be said, is art wherein the artist has crucified his ego and allowed Christ to show forth. It is the challenge of any sacred artist, regardless of whether he is a visual artist, musician, poet, or architect, to work in humility. This is the challenge that faces the Christian—to work in humility, in anonymity, denying his own impulses and thoughts and desires and ego so that the impulses, thoughts, desires, and person of Jesus Christ might be born within him. For the iconographer, this means not only a spiritual life of asceticism but also a humble rejection of his own fallen artistic impulses and mental images so that the divine images may be brought forth through him.

Correspondingly, the composer of sacred music must practice asceticism in his life and in
his art, humbly rejecting his own artistic impulses and the melodies contrived from his own mind so that the melodies of heaven may be heard and transcribed. To the degree that an iconographer does this, to the degree that Tavener does this, he will allow Christ to show through his work and become present to those who partake of his work.
Works Cited


Faber, 1999.


