

32. Tavener

The Lamb

(For Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

John Tavener was born in 1944. He is best known for sacred choral music, much of it rooted in the liturgy of the Orthodox Church.

- 'The Lamb' was composed in 1982. Tavener says on his website: 'I wrote [it]...while being driven by my mother from South Devon to London. It came to me fully grown so to speak, so all I had to do was to write it down. It was inspired by [William] Blake and by my three-year-old nephew, Simon.'
- 'The Lamb' sets a poem from *Songs of Innocence* by William Blake (1757–1827).
- It can be termed an 'anthem' – a work with English text for the choir to sing in a church service. The poem is addressed to a lamb, with a play on words in verse 2 – the Lamb of God who 'became a little child' is Jesus Christ.
- The song is often performed at Christmas (note the phrase 'became a little child'), having been widely heard in the broadcast Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College, Cambridge in 1982.
- It is one of Tavener's best-known works.

Performing forces and their handling

'The Lamb' is for four-part choir (sopranos, altos, tenors and basses in the score, although the highest part can be sung by trebles). It is Unaccompanied.

The ranges of the upper parts are narrow:

- soprano: E flat-B (just an augmented 5th, fairly low in the range) and only a perfect 4th at the beginning and end of each verse
- alto: D-B (major 6th); although often sounding below the soprano, its overall range is virtually the same
- tenor: E flat-D (major 7th).

The bass moves mostly within the major 9th A-B. Low Es at the end of each verse provide special depth and weight.

Some passages are far from easy to sing, because of 'difficult' melodic and harmonic intervals and unusual tonality.

Texture

Verse 1 of 'The Lamb':

	Voice(s)	Bar(s) *
Monophonic	Soprano	1
Two-part	Soprano, Alto	2
Monophonic	Soprano	3-4
Two-part	Soprano, Alto	5-6
Four-part	Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass	7-10

*Bar numbers need not be cited in Unit 3 examinations, but are convenient for reference in study notes such as these.

In four-part writing the texture is homophonic – one part (soprano) has the main melodic interest, the others providing harmonic support – but it can also be termed 'homorhythmic' or 'chordal' because all parts are so similar rhythmically.

The two-part writing is also homorhythmic. (The term 'chordal' is best avoided here, because there are harmonic intervals only and no chords as such). The two-part writing shares the melodic interest between the parts. It is therefore possible to think of the parts as related contrapuntally. Although in contrapuntal music the parts are usually differentiated in rhythm, the first species of counterpoint (see the section on 'Further reading') does in fact feature note-against-note movement.

Verse 2 employs Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass throughout to provide fuller textures than in verse 1.

	Voice	Bar	Corresponding texture in verse 1
Octave writing	Soprano, Alto in one octave, Tenor, Bass an octave below*	11	Monophonic
Two parts <i>each doubled at the octave</i>	Soprano, Tenor have one part, Alto, Bass the other	12	'Ordinary' two-part writing
Octave writing		13-14	Monophonic
Two parts <i>each doubled at the octave</i>		15-16	'Ordinary' two-part writing
Four parts		17-20	Same texture

*This is not, strictly speaking, unison writing – where all voices sing the same line at the same pitch. Nevertheless, the term ‘unison’ is widely used in choral music to describe octave writing, and is acceptable when referring to the opening of verse 2 of ‘The Lamb’.

Structure

Blake’s poem has two stanzas. Tavener uses the same musical material for both, despite textural changes, so overall his piece is strophic.

The musical structure of each stanza differs slightly from the poetic structure.

Poetic structure

There are five couplets (pairs of lines) in each stanza:

- couplet 1 has two similar six-syllable lines
- couplet 5 has the same line twice
- couplets 2, 3 and 4 are rhyming couplets with seven-syllable lines

The structure of each stanza might be labelled:

- A = couplet 1 (= first two bars)
- B = couplets 2, 3 and 4 (following six bars)
- A^v = couplet 5 (^v = varied) (last two bars).

Musical structure

Musically there is an A B A^v structure as well, but the second A section begins at couplet 4 (where the opening soprano melody is repeated), not at couplet 5.

Each line of the poem corresponds to one bar in the anthology score (although Tavener thinks more in couplets, because odd-numbered bars end with a broken bar line, while only even-numbered bars have ordinary bar lines).

Tonality

1. **Verse 1, opening:** G major – although in fact it is tonally ambiguous, for the same notes are harmonised in E minor at the end of each verse.

- **Verse 2, opening:** The octave writing is heard as G major again.

2. **Second bar (both verses):** Bitonal (two keys at once):

- the melody (same as previous bar) is in G major, with the alto (its inversion) in E flat major
- all inversion is exact – for example, a rising major 3rd when inverted becomes a falling major 3rd, whereas a major 3rd might be inverted as a minor 3rd in ‘ordinary’ tonal music when all notes come from a single major or minor scale.

3. **Third bar:** Tavener juxtaposes a G major segment (G B A F sharp) and an E flat major segment (E flat F natural A flat).

4. **Fourth bar:** Tavener reverses the order of the segments (and the content of each).

5. **Fifth bar:** More bitonality: again G major and E flat major.

6. **Sixth bar:** The retrograde of the previous bar.

7. **Last four bars:** E minor Aeolian – i.e. E minor with every D a natural (not sharp).

While the piece begins in one key and ends in another, G major and E minor are so closely related that everything works smoothly.

No key signature is used – it would be unhelpful in the middle bars of each verse.

Harmony

In two-part writing:

- harmonic intervals do not imply chords in the manner of eighteenth-century two-part writing
- they result from working a melodic pattern against its inversion – with one or two unexpected effects, notably the sounding together of A flat and F sharp (diminished 3rd) in the cadence of bar 2, with crossing of parts. When F natural in one part is followed by F sharp in the other and A natural and A flat are similarly exchanged, there is a double false relation.

In the four-part bars harmony is more conventional:

- it is built on triads and seventh chords – I, I⁷, IIb with double suspension, IIb, V⁷, V (both with unraised leading note), I
- discords are prepared (double suspension G and B on the third quaver of each bar, and A on the fifth quaver) and resolved (the soprano A on ‘ten-(der)’ eventually resolves to G).

However less ‘conventionally’:

- there is some modal harmony, with the perfect cadences having D naturals rather than D sharps in chord V (a flattened – or unraised – leading note)
- soprano and tenor have consecutive perfect 5ths (D and A moving to B and F sharp)
- the tenor’s second note (D) is an unprepared 7th.

Melody

Bars 1-2 are the basis for everything that follows up to bar 6 and everything in the soprano part thereafter.

Tavener’s acquaintance with serialism is clear from his systematic use of inversion and retrograding. Also, in the middle section of each verse, he works with a seven-note set which, like the note row in a twelve-note serial piece, avoids any pitch repetition.

The following table provides some more detail.

	Bar
Two three-pitch segments: G B A and (fortuitously?) its 'free' melodic inversion A F# G (rather than A F natural G)	1
Same again, together with exact inversion. This inversion features three pitches not in the opening soprano melody – Eb F natural Ab	2
All seven pitches from bars 1-2 are combined to make a new melody – G B A F# Eb F natural Ab. In serial terms = P (prime order)	3
The reverse or retrograde of bar 3 = R (retrograde)	4
P in soprano, together with its exact inversion (= I) in alto	5
R and RI. R(retrograde) in soprano, R(retrograde) I(inversion) – the inversion of the retrograde – in alto	6
Melody from bars 1 and 2 (harmonised ordinarily, without recourse to serialism)	7-10

- Bar 1 has stepwise (conjunct) movement, leaps of a major and minor 3rd (nothing bigger), and repeated notes.
- The following bars maintain this style.
- It is only in the last four bars of each verse that the basses have a few perfect 4ths and 5ths – these are associated with simple chord progressions (IV-I and V-I)

Word setting is mostly syllabic, although some pairs of quavers are slurred, with a single syllable each. (The word 'melismatic' is not normally used where a single syllable has just two notes.)

Rhythm and metre

There is no time signature. Bar lines (broken and full) reflect the poetic structure. The composer wants the music to be as 'flexible' as possible and 'always guided by the words' (see the opening performance direction).

- There is much fairly slow movement in even quavers (contributing to the smooth and gentle effect).
- One or two longer notes emphasise the ending of each line/bar.
- The seven-syllable lines (from couplets 2, 3 and 4) all have six quavers and a crotchet, and a feeling of duple or quadruple metre that fits the iambic metre of the poetry.
- Three of the six-syllable lines have six quavers, a dotted crotchet and a crotchet. The dotted crotchet (a momentary deviation from duple or quadruple metre lends particular emphasis to the penultimate syllable ('made' in verse 1).
- The last bar of each verse has all note values doubled (i.e. rhythmic augmentation of the penultimate bar).

- In verse 2, the last four bars are slower than in verse 1, so that together with the closing augmentation (which is accompanied by a 'rit.') the ending is very slow and tranquil.

Further reading:

- Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, (Oxford, 2001), see 'Tavener, Sir John (Kenneth)'.
- For general background, visit <http://www.johntavener.com/>
- For notes on counterpoint, see Tom Pankhurst, 'A Brief Guide to Series Counterpoint', <http://www.schenkerguide.com/species1.html>

Recording:

Among CDs of Tavener's music is 'John Tavener: Song for Athene, Svyati and other choral works' (Naxos, 8.555256). This has a different performance of 'The Lamb' from that in the Anthology recordings – interesting to hear for a change.