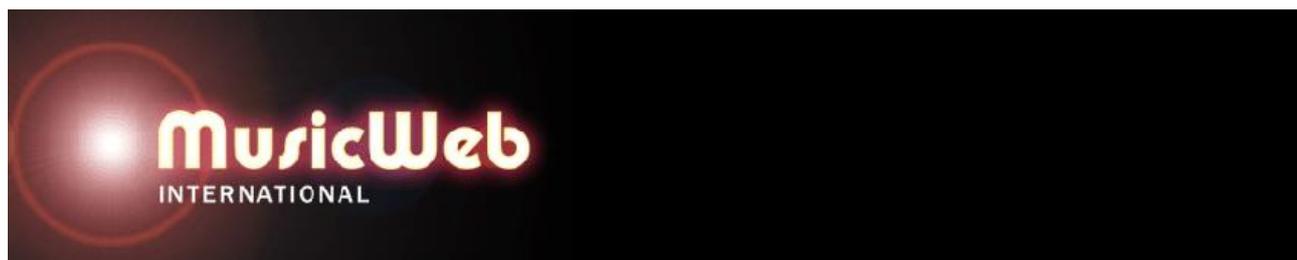




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Sir John TAVENER (1944-2013)

No longer mourn for me

Preces and Responses arr. eight cellos (2013) [12:19]

The death of Ivan Ilyich (2013) [27:05]

Mahámátar (2013) [15:48]

Popule meus (2010) [12:19]

No longer mourn for me arr. eight cellos (2013) [4:26]

Steven Isserlis (cello)

Matthew Rose (baritone)

Abi Sampa (sufi singer)

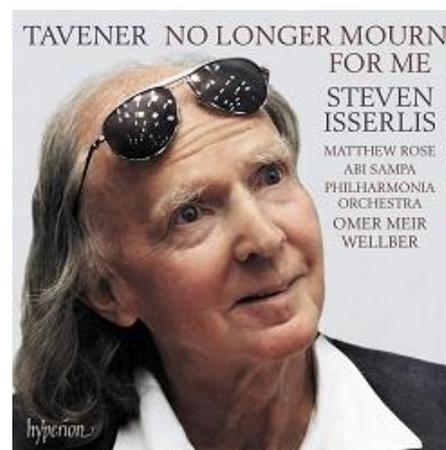
Trinity Boys Choir

Philharmonia Orchestra/Omer Meir Wellber

rec. 8 September 2017 (*Preces and Responses, No longer mourn for me*) and 17 & 18

December 2019, All Hallows, Gospel Oak, London.

HYPERION CDA68246 [71:59]



This release comes with substantial booklet notes by Steven Isserlis, for whom this recording “could hardly have been a more personal project.” Isserlis’ personal connection with Sir John Tavener was a close one, and he talks about the composer’s insecurities about the music he composed after a long silence enforced by his heart attack in 2007. “As I hope this recording demonstrates, he needn’t have worried - his last works are among the most powerfully beautiful he ever composed.”

Preces and Responses, originally for choir but heard here in a sublime arrangement for eight cellos made by Steven Isserlis, is almost certainly Tavener’s last completed work. The prayerful intent and origins of the music can be heard in a solo cello that takes the part of a priest’s intonations, to which the responses are both beautiful and at times startlingly impassioned. This is a piece that stays with you for its potent and at times spine-tingling atmosphere, and the absolute commitment given to it by the players in this recording. It is entirely accessible, one of the returning melodic gestures reminding one of Mozart’s *Ave Verum Corpus* but of course going off in an entirely different direction.

The death of Ivan Ilyich was written for the Manchester International Festival in 2013, and is “a monodrama for bass-baritone, solo cello, two trombones, percussion and strings... It was one of the first major works that I composed [after a long illness], as though Tolstoy himself was waking me from a long creative sleep.” Leaving aside the moving associations Steven Isserlis describes in his notes, this is a piece with “undisguisedly autobiographical” overtones, the pain of the protagonist unmistakably illustrated by gnarly, screaming strings and stabbing notes from the trombones. These moments are contrasted with Tavener’s signature chorale-like moments of tenderness. There are hints of late Shostakovich in some of the grim sparseness of the vocal settings and surrounding sections, and the sense of fateful foreboding is palpable throughout. Matthew Rose rises to meet the remarkable demands made by the vocal part superbly, from high lyrical lines to extreme lows and dramatic and forcefully rhythmic accents. While this is a work that makes for an uncomfortable listen it is one that also delivers powerful catharsis, right down to its bone-chilling final minutes.

Mahámátar was described by the composer as a mantra, in which “the cello states and re-states a two-part chant over which the singer improvises a hymn of praise”. It was originally composed for a film about pilgrims, and “an invocation to the Great Mother Mahámátar in Sanskrit, and to the Theotóke (God-bearer) in Greek.” Abi Sampa has become a major force in music, coming to prominence with an appearance in TV hit *The Voice UK* in 2013. Both the cello and the singer have a melodic function here, but there is a symbiotic communication here that makes the piece work superbly, helped by the luminous sound of the chorus and orchestra. Sampa makes this music her own through her improvisation in eloquent traditional style. *Popule meus* just pre-dates Tavener’s illness and is “a meditation on on the Judaic and Christian text, ‘O my people, what have I done to you?’, but is also a Universalist contemplation of the wholesale rejection of God by modern man.”

Violent timpani “represent man in his vain and pointless rejection”, while the tenderly lyrical cello is “the All-Compassionate One”. As is immediately apparent, this is a work of extreme contrasts between a kind of religious ecstasy and earthly turmoil, and while the premise lacks a degree of subtlety the actual music delivers its effect with unarguable directness. It certainly delivers with the intensity of this performance and the dramatically involving effect of the recording, in which the timpani are grippingly spaced to come at you from everywhere.

This programme ends with *No longer mourn for me*, a piece taken from Tavener’s set of *Three Shakespeare Sonnets*, and another work arranged for eight cellos from a vocal original. Its message is clear, and the music has a valedictory quality appropriate to the nature of this recording. Steven Isserlis ends his booklet notes with a “hope that this recording as a whole will serve not just as a fitting memorial to John, but also as a catharsis for all of us whose lives were touched by this extraordinary man.” Well, I would say ‘job done’ to all concerned, especially to the performers for creating such an extraordinary and moving account of every work here, but also to the recording engineers for capturing everything with clarity and empathy to make this a very impressive and memorable release indeed.

<http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2020/Dec/Tavener-mourn-CDA68246.htm>

Dominy Clements