



## The mind and the heart: Mysticism and music in the experience of contemporary eastern Orthodox Composers

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## The Mind and the Heart: Mysticism and Music in the Experience of Contemporary Eastern Orthodox Composers

Ivan Moody

Is it possible to arrive at a definition of mystical music? Taking the OED definition of the word *mystic* as a basis, the premise behind several works which could be described as mystical by contemporary Orthodox Composers (Pärt, Tavener, Adamis, Moody) is examined. The idea of initiation (the attaining of a hidden body of knowledge, or *gnosis*) emerges as being of great importance, and the geometric, two-dimensional style of ikon painting is referred to as a point of comparison. The role of repetition and the use of symbols (in Stravinsky and Adamis) are discussed. While no objective conclusion as to the nature of mystical music is thought possible, a subjective one, employing the words of Fr Matta el-Maskeen from another context, is suggested.

KEYWORDS Ikon, Initiation, Mysticism, Orthodoxy, Prayer, Repetition

The Oxford English Dictionary gives two definitions of the word *mystic*, as

a. & n. 1. Spiritually allegorical; occult, esoteric; of hidden meaning, mysterious; mysterious and awe-inspiring. 2. n. One who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into the Deity, or who believes in spiritual apprehension of truths beyond the understanding.

The Greek root of the word is *mistikós*, cognate with *mistrion* (*mio* being closed lips or eyes). It is perhaps surprising that there are so many shades of meaning of the word, but then mysticism is one of those concepts likely to arouse only the most vaguely defined of ideas in most people. The word is in fact, as the dictionary proceeds to point out, often used derogatively; one may therefore conclude that the popular perception of mysticism is subject to the same mingling of terms as the original Greek, and that it is to do with mystery, whether or not also inspiring awe. At any rate it is not immediately comprehensible.

Here we begin to touch upon the idea of *gnosis*: a hidden knowledge, a meaning obscure except to initiates. It is not without reason that the word 'mysteries' has been used of Greek religion from Eleusis to present-day Orthodox Christianity, and is a word which may be used to characterize much of Eastern religion in a more general way.

An ikon, for an Orthodox Christian, is a holy presence to be venerated. It is not a religious picture, and it cannot be truly apprehended in terms of art history only: in that sense it is mystical. St John of Damascus, who wrote three treatises **Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images** in response to the iconoclast heresy of the 8thC, wrote that

We use all our senses to produce worthy images of Him, and we sanctify the noblest of the senses, which is that of sight. For just as words edify the ear, so also the image stimulates the eye.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> St John of Damascus: *On the Divine Images*, English translation by David Anderson, Crestwood, New York 1980. For the original Greek text see J.P. Migne: *Patrologia Graeca*, vol 94.

It is obvious from these words that an ikon is not something vaguely or sentimentally 'religious', but, quite the contrary, very definitely incarnate. One of the problems in speaking of religion and the arts at all, but especially of religious mysticism and the arts, is that one is constantly subjected to a confusion between a genuine aspiration towards the sacred and mere romantic sentimentality: the word 'spiritual' is often used misleadingly and quite wrongly in this context. It is for this reason that I quote the words of St John of Damascus, and bearing this incarnate conception of religious mysticism in mind, pose the question: can music also be a vehicle for mysticism in a similarly incarnate way?

As a composer, I can answer in the affirmative, though there are inevitably perils in such an enterprise and one is not always successful. Orthodoxy speaks of the mind entering the heart – this is the condition for real prayer – and this must be, at least partially, what is required for the composition of sacred music.

John Tavener touched on this subject in conversation with Andrew Ford, who asked "I read in a copy of the journal *Temenos* from a couple of years ago an article by you in which you quoted Stravinsky on the late music of Beethoven. He said 'Je ne pense pas, j'écoute.'<sup>2</sup> Is this your own attitude to art?"

Tavener replied: "I think there's a line in Dante which says 'You who have sound intellects, seek out that gnosis and apply it to your arts' – I'm paraphrasing, of course – It's a very Orthodox concept, the idea of the mind going into the heart, so that you pray no longer with the mind – Orthodox monks incline their heads towards their hearts when they pray. That interests me. The heart on its own doesn't interest me; the mind on its own doesn't interest me. It's something the ancients understood and which I think we've lost – Plato certainly understood it. . . . Art's become so disconnected with divine realities, whereas in Plato's day – or in any great civilization – it was the norm that it was connected with divine realities."<sup>3</sup>

It is certainly possible to point to works in Tavener's output in which the chief component is prayer, and very much a prayer of the mind in the heart. The most outstanding example is **Prayer for the World**, a remarkable thirty minute meditation using as its text the Jesus Prayer.<sup>4</sup> The work was not well received at its première in 1981 and has not been widely taken up since. Nevertheless, its austerity, its uncompromising concentration on the text make it a truly remarkable work of sacred art. It is a genuinely mystical work, in that it requires a certain level of initiation, remaining otherwise an impenetrable mystery, and this is of course precisely why it failed as a concert piece.

Much shorter and less harmonically acerbic, and therefore far more successful as a concert work, is **Ikon of the Trinity**, dating from 1990. This is also a setting of a much-used Orthodox prayer, the *Trisagion* – "Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy upon us." It is similarly concentrated upon the text, each of its three sections corresponding to one Person of the Trinity, and could therefore similarly be described as genuinely mystical music. Between these two works chronologically comes **Ikon of Light** (1984), setting the highly abstruse, but at the same time extraordinarily direct, **Mystic Prayer to the Holy Spirit** by the 10thC St

<sup>2</sup> I don't think, I listen.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Ford: *Composer to Composer*, London 1993.

<sup>4</sup> The Jesus Prayer is a central part of Orthodox spirituality. The text is "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner". See Mother Maria: *The Jesus Prayer*, Normanby, 1972.

S.1  
Господи, Иисусе Христе, Сыне Божий, По - ми - - - - - луй ны  
'gosradí yí'suse xris'te sine 'bozhíy ra - 'mí - - - - - luy ní

S.2

S.3

S.4

A.1  
Господи, Иисусе Христе, Сыне Божий, По - ми - - - - - луй ны  
'gosradí yí'suse xris'te sine 'bozhíy ra - 'mí - - - - - luy ní

A.2

A.3

A.4

T.1  
Господи, Иисусе Христе, Сыне Божий, По - ми - - - - - луй ны  
'gosradí yí'suse xris'te sine 'bozhíy ra - 'mí - - - - - luy ní

T.2

T.3

T.4

B.1  
Господи, Иисусе Христе, Сыне Божий, По - ми - - - - - луй ны  
'gosradí yí'suse xris'te sine 'bozhíy ra - 'mí - - - - - luy ní

B.2

B.3

B.4

Ex. 1  
John Tavener: Prayer for the World

S.1  
 Господи, Иисусе Христе, Сыне Божии, По - - ми - - - - - луй ны  
 'gospadi i'isuse xris'te sine 'bozhii ra - - 'mi - - - - - luy ni

S.2

S.3

A.2

A.3

T.3

T.4

B.2  
 Господи, Иисусе Христе, Сыне Божии, По - - ми - - - - - луй ны  
 'gospadi i'isuse xris'te sine 'bozhii ra - - 'mi - - - - - luy ni

S.1  
 Господи, Иисусе Христе, Сыне Божии, По - ми - - - - - луй ны  
 'gospadi i'isuse xris'te sine 'bozhii ra - 'mi - - - - - luy ni

S.2

S.3

S.4

A.2

A.3

T.3

T.4

B.3  
 Господи, Иисусе Христе, Сыне Божии, По - ми - - - - - луй ны  
 'gospadi i'isuse xris'te sine 'bozhii ra - 'mi - - - - - luy ni

Ex. 1 (Continued)

Symeon the New Theologian, and having outer movements setting the Trisagion and, in shining pillars of sound, the Greek words *Phos* (light), *Dhoxa* (glory), and *Epiphania* (shining forth). Again very successful as a concert work (and it has now been commercially recorded twice), one may likewise attribute this to its accessible harmonic language. The essential difference, I think, between these two later works and **Prayer for the World**, is that they are much more firmly grounded in chant, specifically Byzantine chant, **Ikon of the Trinity** even more so than **Ikon of Light**. This gives them a genuinely melodic character and a harmonic clarity which was not apparent in **Prayer for the World**, which is far more dissonant in its harmonic language, in spite of its astonishing austerity.

Arvo Pärt, also Orthodox, has until recently concentrated very largely upon setting Latin texts from the Roman Catholic liturgy. This has proved interesting indeed in that he has brought an Orthodox perspective to bear on them. The results have been extraordinary, though not immune to failure. One of the most interesting, and certainly now the most famous of his works, is the **Passio Domini nostri secundum Iohannem** of 1982. This is a mystical composition of the highest order, but it is curious that at first sight its means are so different from those that Tavener uses. Pärt's treatment of the text is deliberately 'cold', that is to say, his word setting is like that of the most syllabic kind of Gregorian chant, and therefore on the surface 'inexpressive'.

Such austerity leads to a different form of listening and, as one must suppose was the composer's intention, to the contemplation of higher things. In this one may find a parallel with the deliberately flat, geometrical style of ikon painting, but it differs greatly from Tavener (even though the latter has called many of his pieces "ikons") in that the melodic luxuriance deriving principally from Greek chant is entirely absent. This luxuriance in Tavener's work at its best is, however, stylized; there is no feeling of word-painting in the melismata of **Ikon of the Trinity**, for example. Pärt, stripping away even this and coming near to a composer like Heinrich Schütz, betrays a very northern European sensibility.<sup>5</sup> There is nothing mediterranean, let alone from further east, in Pärt's music: we cannot imagine him writing a work with the title **Uncreated Eros**, for example, as Tavener has.

Leaving aside these differences of temperament, **Passio**, by treating its subject in this 'black and white' fashion, reveals its secrets only to those who are prepared to enter fully into its spirit; once again, it is a mystery, and therefore mystical. Much the same could be said of the far less ambitious **De profundis** (1989) or the **Stabat Mater** (1985). In both these works the text is set with absolutely no word painting, but with a stylized ritual solemnity: the tragedy is felt, but as with the **Passio** it is over a long time-span, an arch, as though one were waiting for a hammer to strike a gong.

Time is suspended, and that is another important element of mysticism. In an ikon there is no perspective, that is to say, it is not situated in reality. Similarly mystical music must suspend real time in order to create its own 'two-dimensional' level into whose metaphorical simplification the initiate may enter in order to understand the multi-dimensional mystery thus presented.

<sup>5</sup> See Wilfrid Mellers's remarkable essay *Arvo Pärt, God and Gospel* in *Contemporary Music and Religion*, *Contemporary Music Review*, Volume 12, Part 2.

28 18,10

VI.

Evg.

Si - mon er - go Petrus habens gla - di - um e - du - xit e - - um: et percussit Pon - ti - fi - cis ser - vum: Si - mon er - go Petrus habens gla - di - um e - du - xit e - - um: et percussit Pon - ti - fi - cis ser - vum:

Ex. 2  
Avro Pärt: Passio

29

30 18, 11

The musical score consists of four staves. The first two staves are for VI (Violin I) and Ob. (Oboe), both in treble clef. The last two staves are for Vc. (Violoncello) and Fg. (Fagotto), both in bass clef. The score is divided into two systems. The first system begins with a bracket labeled 'EVG.' under the first two staves. The lyrics are: 'et abscidit auriculam eius dexteram. Dixit ergo Jesus Petro:'. The second system continues with the lyrics: 'Erat autem nomen servo Malchus. Dixit ergo Jesus Petro:'. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Ex. 2 (Continued)



*f*

cru - ci - fi - xo con - do - le - re, do - nec e - go vi - xe - ro.  
 cru - ci - fi - xo con - do - le - re, do - nec e - go vi - xe - ro.  
 cru - ci - fi - xo con - do - le - re, do - nec e - go vi - xe - ro.  
 cru - ci - fi - xo con - do - le - re, do - nec e - go vi - xe - ro.  
 cru - ci - fi - xo con - do - le - re, do - nec e - go vi - xe - ro.

21

*f*

Ex. 3  
Avro Part: Stabat Mater

Musical score for Ex. 3 (Continued). The score is written on a grand staff with three staves. The first staff is the vocal line, and the second and third staves are the piano accompaniment. The score is divided into two systems by a dashed line. The first system contains the first two staves of music, with the vocal line starting on the first staff and the piano accompaniment on the second and third staves. The second system contains the next two staves of music, with the vocal line starting on the first staff and the piano accompaniment on the second and third staves. The score is marked with a forte (*f*) dynamic at the beginning and a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic at the end. The lyrics are: Ju-xia cru-cem te-cum sta-re, et me-ti-bi so-ci-a-re in planctu de-si-de-ro. et me-ti-bi so-ci-a-re.

*f*

Ju-xia cru-cem te-cum sta-re, et me-ti-bi so-ci-a-re in planctu de-si-de-ro.

et me-ti-bi so-ci-a-re

*f*

*mf*

22

Ex. 3 (Continued)

In my own **Passion and Resurrection** (1992), I was faced with the problem, as Pärt had been in his *Passion*, of reconciling narrative with stasis. The difficulty was not whether the *Passion* should be seen largely in dramatic terms, something I wished to avoid, but precisely how to bring its ritual aspects to the fore. In the western tradition the first of these methods has usually been preferred, and is of course exemplified at its height in the *Passions* of Bach, but in the Orthodox Church there has never been such a tradition of dramatic presentation. During Holy Week, as the *Passion* unfolds, the intensity of the services is brought about by other means; that is to say, the use of the ritual structure of the services themselves, with their constant references backwards to the Old Testament and forwards to the Resurrection, so that one never loses sight of the whole.

It was for that reason that I used the title **Passion and Resurrection**. Orthodoxy looks forward to Easter Sunday throughout Holy Week: "We worship Thy *Passion*, O Christ. Show us also Thy glorious Resurrection." The text comes, with the exception of a short phrase from a hymn by St Ephrem of Syria, entirely from the Holy Week services. In compiling it, I drew chiefly upon the *Twelve Gospels* service of Great and Holy Thursday (which is in fact *Matins* of Great and Holy Friday sung the previous evening by anticipation), but also the *Bridegroom* services from earlier in the week, *Vespers* of Great and Holy Friday, and the service of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. I employed three languages, English, Greek, and Slavonic. The symbolism of the use of these three is important, as well as the fact that they represent for me the three elements (liturgical, musical, and linguistic) upon which I feel most able to draw in the tradition of Orthodoxy in England. Though the text follows the liturgical order I have already mentioned, the work is divided into further sections which I have called *ikons*. This is once again related to the idea that the *Passion* can be presented 'non-dramatically', or, better expressed, a series of stylized ritual scenes in the manner of an *ikonostasis* (*ikon* screen) in a church – though I react rather strongly against the idea that music can actually *be* an *ikon*.

The Gospel narratives themselves are sung by a solo tenor, using the tone to be heard in any Russian church (the Gospel is always sung in the Orthodox Church so that the priest may not, through the inflections of reading, interpose his own personality between the Word of God and the congregation), except that Christ's words are given to a solo bass. In this way I have tried to attain a 'black and white' presentation of the Gospel, as Pärt did through other means. Commentary is left to the liturgical insertions sung by the choir, using both Russian and Byzantine chant as well as my own music written in the spirit of chant. So there is here too a mystery, since so much is kept back through the deliberate avoidance of drama (and the recurrence of the *Alleluia* throughout serves to emphasize this): in this way I have tried to present a narrative, as it were, mystically.

A more recent work of mine, **Hymn to the Light** (1984), uses a similar ritually repeating structure to emphasize the idea of "holy light", though the text is this time liturgical (*Svete tikhii*, from the Orthodox service of *Vespers*); as in the prayerful repetition of the Jesus Prayer, re-iteration is fundamental to music aspiring to the expression of a mystery. This is of course also the idea underlying Tavener's one-word movements from **Ikon of Light**, *Dhoxa* and *Phos*, which also exist as independent works. The Roman Catholic composer Górecki did something similar in his choral work **Amen**, written as long ago as 1975. For me the best example of ecstatic repetition (with subtle changes, as in Pärt's *tintinnabuli* method) remains

Handwritten musical score for "Passion and Resurrection" by Ivan Moody. The score includes vocal parts (Soprano, Tenor, Bass, and Solos) and piano accompaniment. It features Greek lyrics and their English transliterations. The bottom of the page includes the Greek and English titles: ΧΡΗCΤΟC ΒΟΘΡΕΥC! and ARIETOR ANETH!

*S. Solo*  
# Χριστός ἀ-νέ-στη ἐκ νε-κρῶν, Ὁ-υά-τω ἄ-να-τω-ν πα-τί-σας, καὶ τοῖς ἐν τοῖς  
# khristos a- ne- sti ek ne- | kron, tha-na- to tha- | na- ton pa- |

*T. Solo*  
# ἁ-νι-μα-σι, ζω-ῆν ἐν χη-ρι-σά-με-νοῖς.  
# ani- ma- si, zo- | ien kha-ri- sa- | me- nos.

*B. Solo*  
# ἁ-νι-μα-σι, ζω-ῆν ἐν χη-ρι-σά-με-νοῖς.  
# ani- ma- si, zo- | ien kha-ri- sa- | me- nos.

*S.*  
# ἁ-νι-μα-σι, ζω-ῆν ἐν χη-ρι-σά-με-νοῖς.  
# ani- ma- si, zo- | ien kha-ri- sa- | me- nos.

*A.*  
# ἁ-νι-μα-σι, ζω-ῆν ἐν χη-ρι-σά-με-νοῖς.  
# ani- ma- si, zo- | ien kha-ri- sa- | me- nos.

*T.*  
# ἁ-νι-μα-σι, ζω-ῆν ἐν χη-ρι-σά-με-νοῖς.  
# ani- ma- si, zo- | ien kha-ri- sa- | me- nos.

*B.*  
# ἁ-νι-μα-σι, ζω-ῆν ἐν χη-ρι-σά-με-νοῖς.  
# ani- ma- si, zo- | ien kha-ri- sa- | me- nos.

ΧΡΗCΤΟC ΒΟΘΡΕΥC!      ARIETOR ANETH!

Ex. 4  
Ivan Moody: Passion and Resurrection

The musical score is written on ten staves. The top three staves are vocal lines with lyrics: "me- vos." and "me- vos." followed by "In the beginning was the Word, and the". The bottom seven staves are piano accompaniment. The first two staves of the piano part have lyrics: "Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things", "were made through Him, and without Him was made nothing that was made. In Him", and "was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkness; and". The final staff of the piano part has the lyric: "the darkness compre- hendeth it not." and includes a dynamic marking of *f*. There are various musical notations including slurs, accents, and dynamic markings like *p* and *f*. A box containing "KKK" is written above the first vocal staff, and another box containing "LLL" is written above the final piano staff.

Ex. 4 (Continued)

Handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Great and Holy Tuesday". The score is written on ten staves. The top four staves are for voices: Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), Tenor (T.), and Bass (B.). The lyrics "li-lu-i-a" are written under the vocal lines. The bottom six staves are for instruments: Bell, Violin 1/2 (VI 1/2), Viola (Vla), Violoncello (Vcl), and Contrabass (Cb). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamics. At the bottom of the page, there is a handwritten note: "Clava ledé, Daxe! Great and Holy Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> April, 1992". Below this, there are two more lines of handwritten text: "(Vare de Cenizas 2/11/91)" and "Lisson 21/4/92".

Ex. 4 (End)

the end of the final movement of Stravinsky's **Symphony of Psalms**: this has remained an ideal for me since I first heard the piece as a student, though the mystical quality of this music is hard-won indeed.

Mention of ecstatic repetition – a decidedly eastern concept – leads me to another kind of music which is often talked of when the names of Tavener, Pärt or Górecki are invoked; that which it was once fashionable to call Minimalism. The point may seem obvious, but it is worth emphasizing that repetition with the aim of inducing an almost trance-like state and thereby exaggerating the impact of a harmonic or melodic shift, is far from being mystical music. It could never be, for one thing, without a religious intention, and, secondly, and partly as a result of this, there is in any case no mystery 'encoded' within that would bring it within the range of mysticism. Repetitive and incantatory music with a religious mystical function does indeed exist, but it is within eastern religious traditions (India, Morocco, Japan, for example), not in western Minimalism, at least as a general rule.

Repetition and a sense of hypnotic incantation certainly have a place in the music of both Tavener and Pärt, though they are far from being the technical 'core' of their work; this, I would argue, -- is akin to the state of prayer, though of course in order actually to be completely effective in this way the music needs to be prayed and not merely sung. It is an element which very clearly derives from the liturgical rhythm of the Orthodox Church.

In the same interview with Andrew Ford Tavener said of earlier pieces such as **Ultimos Ritos**, "I tend to think of those pieces as mystical works, and I now react a bit against mysticism, because it's like sniffing around a restaurant without actually going in."

Ford's subsequent question as to whether the 'aroma from the restaurant' could not 'induce pangs of hunger' provoked Tavener's assent, but it is certainly the case that his more recent works have an "incarnate" element (**Mary of Egypt** is a good example, in its simple, graphic telling of the tale) in a way that the large scale works of the 1970s do not.

One way of reconciling mysticism with more 'concrete' musical factors, is through symbolism, as the work of the Greek Orthodox composer Michael Adamis shows (in his case it is a symbolism related specifically to the Byzantine tradition).<sup>6</sup> There is nothing ethereal at all about his **Byzantine Passion** (1967), with its earthy, harsh soundworld rooted directly in Greek liturgical chant, but it is most certainly mystical music, again with a strongly liturgical background. The mystery is preserved unless one is prepared to become an initiate.

Stravinsky also understood symbolism (one might point to the geometry underlying **Canticum Sacrum** or the pyramid of fugues in the **Symphony of Psalms**), and that kind of structural symbolism is certainly to be found in Tavener's **Ultimos Ritos** (in spite of the composer's reaction against it), **The Protecting Veil**, and the very recent **Apocalypse**, as well as in Pärt's **Passio**.

Symbols are a way of mediating between the composer's interior world and the public to which his music will be exposed, and they are a way of imposing some

<sup>6</sup> See Michael Adamis: *Within and Beyond Symbolism in Contemporary Music and Religion*, *Contemporary Music Review*, Volume 12, Part 2.

order upon something (mysticism) which it is extraordinarily difficult to come to terms with in music (because it is so imprecise), and correspondingly difficult to present. Nevertheless, I have tried to put forward some of the connections which, as an Orthodox Christian, I see between my understanding of mysticism and my understanding of music .

In an article entitled **Christ, the Beloved**, the Coptic Orthodox monk, Father Matta el-Meskeen, says

We have agreed, O writer, with what you have written, but how do we begin and where is the way? It is a beat of the heart which lovers recognize immediately as a sign that the Beloved has entered. That is the beginning of the way that leads where God wills.<sup>7</sup>

May not that 'beat of the heart', given that it leads to the 'spiritual apprehension of truths beyond the understanding', therefore also be a way to recognize mystical music?

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<sup>7</sup> Sourozh, #57, August 1994.