# AQA GCSE AoS4: Peter Maxwell Davies and John Tavener

KS4


## David Kettle

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### Introduction

For AoS4 in its GCSE specification, AQA has gathered together four important and very contrasting British composers from the 20th and 21st centuries: Malcolm Arnold, Benjamin Britten, Peter Maxwell Davies and John Tavener. Students are expected to listen to unfamiliar music by these composers, and to be able to describe musical elements in it, as well as the musical contexts and musical language.

Last month (*Music Teacher*, December 2022), we examined the music of Malcolm Arnold and Benjamin Britten. This month, we'll turn our attention to Peter Maxwell Davies and John Tavener, looking briefly at the composers' lives, before exploring two representative works by each of them in more detail, with suggestions for activities and further listening.

### Peter Maxwell Davies

#### Biography

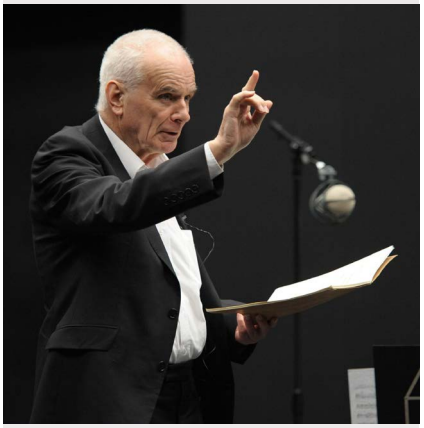
Born on 8 September 1934 in Salford, Peter Maxwell Davies comes from the generation after Benjamin Britten, but was only a few years younger than Malcolm Arnold, though he was a world away from Arnold in terms of his musical style and thinking.

Maxwell Davies reputedly told his parents he was going to be a composer at the age of just four, after having been taken to a performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Gondoliers*. And he meant it: ten years later, as a 14-year-old, he sent in a piece of his own called *Blue Ice* to the radio programme *Children's Hour* in nearby Manchester, and was promptly made the show's 'resident composer' (conductor Charles Groves had apparently advised the programme's producers: 'I'd get him in.')

He studied at the Royal Manchester College of Music, alongside figures who would later become some of the most influential names in post-war British music: fellow composers Harrison Birtwistle and Alexander Goehr, pianist John Ogdon, and trumpeter and later conductor Elgar Howarth. Along with Birtwistle, Maxwell Davies founded a performing group they named the Pierrot Players (after Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*) in 1967, later reforming it as the Fires of London in 1970, an ensemble that remained together until 1987.

After early teaching posts at Cirencester Grammar School and the University of Adelaide, Maxwell Davies moved to Orkney in 1971, where he would live for the rest of his life, initially on Hoy and later on the smaller, remoter island of Sanday. He founded the St Magnus Festival there in 1977, which takes place mainly in the islands' capital, Kirkwall, transforming this remote location into one of contemporary music's hotspots and most influential breeding grounds. Many of his works embedded Orcadian themes, whether in the storylines of theatre pieces *The Martyrdom of St Magnus* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnXMM3aXqoM**) or *The Lighthouse* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFlF7dVyN_I**), or Orcadian folk music in works including his Violin Concerto No. 2 ('Fiddler on the Shore') (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGoOZpiFBcI**) or *An Orkney Wedding, with Sunrise* (discussed in more detail below).

Maxwell Davies was hugely prolific and productive as a composer, across a bewilderingly broad variety of styles and forms, so much so that it might seem hard to know where to start with his music. He gained notoriety in the 1960s for his radical, uncompromisingly modernist works, including *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (discussed in more detail below), or the neo-expressionist 1966 *Revelation and Fall*, another semi-theatrical piece, which involves a soprano dressed in a scarlet nun's habit screaming through a loudhailer (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFQ35dZbstc**).



*Peter Maxwell Davies*

He maintained a strong interest in early music, which he often drew on in his own works, sometimes subverting existing works to his own ends, or even blending them with other forms. His 1968 *Missa super l'Homme armé* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=yO7Ze_ZpfH4**), for example, begins as an arrangement of an anonymous 15th-century mass before fracturing into disconnected, dissonant lines, which are eventually reborn as a foxtrot via the sounds of an old-fashioned record player getting 'stuck' in a groove. (Maxwell Davies had something of an early obsession with foxtrots, perhaps drawn from memories of listening to records of foxtrots and Charlestons from the 1920s and 30s while sheltering under the stairs during Second World War bombing raids. He said that for him, the foxtrot represented 'total and absolute corruption'.)

Maxwell Davies wrote ten symphonies, a series of ten 'Strathclyde' Concertos for musicians of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra between 1986 and 1996, and ten string quartets commissioned by record company Naxos between 2001 and 2007. He was particularly productive in music for children and young people, writing much for local schoolchildren in Orkney, and one of his final works was *The Hogboon* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=TN7vsJQ27Pw**), a children's opera based on an Orcadian folk tale. He was also a pioneer in the use of the internet: he opened his own website, MaxOpus (now sadly defunct), in 1996, using it as a repository for information on his music and activities.

He was an outspoken activist in political and social issues throughout his life, especially for gay rights (Maxwell Davies was openly homosexual throughout his adult life) and environmental issues, particularly those affecting his adopted home of Orkney. His 1980 *Yellow Cake Review* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZbL4ySg7Ic**), for example, is a satirical cabaret piece for singer and piano about a proposed uranium mine near Stromness, Orkney's second biggest town. (It's also the larger work that contains what's probably Maxwell Davies's most famous and best-loved piece, a short solo piano movement called 'Farewell to Stromness' (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=SuWk_3Dlfio**), originally an imagined lament for Orcadians forced to flee the islands following contamination from the mine. 'Farewell to Stromness' has spawned countless arrangements, and has also been the subject of an episode of the BBC's *Soul Music* series (**www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000760l**), exploring music with strong emotional connections.) Having previously expressed republican sympathies, Maxwell Davies was a controversial choice as Master of the Queen's Music in 2004 (a role he remained in for ten years), though he explained that the Queen herself has converted him into accepting the British monarchy.

Maxwell Davies died in 2016 of leukemia, having first being diagnosed three years earlier. Asked in a 1985 interview what he expected from a listener coming to a concert of his music, he replied: 'First of all, I expect that they're going to be curious, and that they're going to be made to work.'

## Eight Songs for a Mad King

*King George III painted by an unknown artist, around 1763*

*Eight Songs for a Mad King* is one of Maxwell Davies's most notorious works, and it still has the power to shock more than five decades after its premiere on 22 April 1969. The King of the title is George III, and across its eight movements, the piece charts his descent into the apparent insanity that remained part of the monarch's life from 1765 until his death in 1820.

It was inspired when the piece's librettist, writer Randolph Stow, was shown a miniature mechanical organ that once belonged to the King, and which could play eight different tunes (the same device was presented as a gift to Maxwell Davies in 2000). The King was an avid lover of birds, keeping bullfinches in cages so that their songs might entertain him, and Stow imagined the monarch attempting to teach his birds to sing the music played by the mechanical organ.

Accordingly, Maxwell Davies's piece is scored for six instrumentalists: flute, clarinet, violin and cello represent the King's caged birds (and their players often sit within cages in stagings of the piece), plus piano/harpsichord, and a percussionist who represents the King's sentry or keeper, ensuring that he causes no harm to himself or his pets, and leading him offstage at the end.

Most importantly, the solo singing role – for a baritone – requires the singer not only to cover an enormous vocal range, but also to draw on a huge number of unconventional vocal techniques, from falsetto warbling to grunting, shouting, screaming, whispering, even producing vocal multiphonics (singing more than one note as once). It was originally written for the South African actor and singer Roy Hart, who could do all of these things, and who gave the premiere performance.

Maxwell Davies's music seems to be a portrait of the King's increasingly fractured, deranged imagination, mixing together memories, free associations, hallucinations, and quite a lot that it's almost impossible to define. Likewise, it also brings together a wide range of musical references, from Handel's *Messiah* to popular music from the 20th century. It's an intentionally strange, disconcerting, even downright upsetting work, in which you can never quite be sure what's real, and what's part of the King's imagination.

Maxwell Davies's score is no less unconventional, and approaches graphic notation at times. Listen to a recording of *Eight Songs for a Mad King* with score here: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=tStW8vRDB_s**

A basic description of the work's eight movements (with timings taken from the video above) is as follows:

| Movement title | Timing | Description |
|---|---|---|
| 1. The Sentry | 0:00 | ▶ The percussionist (as the King's sentry or keeper) mercilessly beats his drum as the monarch makes his first appearance.<br>▶ The King is apparently about to leave for a country walk, but quickly has a breakdown.<br>▶ The piccolo later represents one of his caged bullfinches. |
| 2. The Country Walk | 5:22 | ▶ The King notes the trees he sees on his walk, but is made nervous by mysterious figures he glimpses. |
| 3. The Lady-In-Waiting | 9:02 | ▶ The King imagines himself speaking to a 'well-bred young woman', represented by the flute.<br>▶ Maxwell Davies's score for this movement is itself in the shape of a bird cage, designed to be played from side to side. |
| 4. To Be Sung on the Water | 13:22 | ▶ The King sails down the Thames, the ensemble's cello playing the role of the river. |
| 5. The Phantom Queen | 16:33 | ▶ The King imagines a substitute for his real wife.<br>▶ The instrumentalists go through a sequence of pastiches of music from the time: a Rondino, Arietta, Allemande, Courante, another Rondino, forming a kind of 18th-century suite of dances, none of which lasts longer than a few bars. |
| 6. The Counterfeit | 20:03 | ▶ The King imagines that the real Queen, Charlotte, has been listening in on his ravings, ranting at the clarinettist.<br>▶ The music breaks into another 18th-century pastiche, of an opera aria with clarinet and cello obbligato lines, but it doesn't last long before fragmenting into chaos. |
| 7. Country Dance | 21:56 | ▶ The King speaks directly to his subjects at a country dance in Windsor.<br>▶ The movement opens with a pastiche of the recitative 'Comfort Ye' from Handel's *Messiah* in an almost pub-piano style (marked 'smoochy' in the score), which later returns as a foxtrot, the King crooning over the top of it.<br>▶ Maxwell Davies's disturbing popular music pastiche leads to the piece's climax: the King snatches the violinist's instrument and destroys it.<br>▶ Night descends, and the King considers the nature of evil. |
| 8. The Review | 26:37 | ▶ The King announces his own death and presents his own eulogy.<br>▶ This movement represents the King at his most self-aware, and we might begin to wonder at the treatment he's received so far.<br>▶ The pieces ends as the percussionist sentry leads the howling King off stage with solemn drum beats. |

**Listening and discussion activities: *Eight Songs for a Mad King***

Once you've had a chance to listen to *Eight Songs for a Mad King* with your students, quiz them with these specific listening questions:

1. Which instrument does the King duet with in the third movement? (Flute)
2. Which instrument does the King duet with in the fourth movement? (Cello)
3. Which instrument does the King duet with in the sixth movement? (Clarinet)
4. Name as many unusual vocal effects that the singer uses as you can. What demands do you think these make on the singer? How might performing a work such as this differ from performing music that calls for more 'conventional' singing?
5. What's the strange sound you can hear behind the vocalist at 19:01, and how is it produced? (Strumming/scraping the lowest strings of the piano)
6. Compare the beginning of the seventh movement (**https://youtu.be/tStW8vRDB_s?t=1316**) with Handel's original recitative 'Comfort Ye' from *Messiah* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-HYrHuf9s4**). What changes does Maxwell Davies make in his version? What is his intention in making those changes, do you think?
7. What techniques does Maxwell Davies use to portray madness in the piece? How do you feel about his portrayal? Is it funny, unsettling, difficult to watch/listen to? Do you have any concerns about how the piece portrays mental illness? Is it the kind of piece a composer might write in 2022, do you think?

**Listening/watching activity: music theatre**

*Eight Songs for a Mad King* has been described as a 'monodrama', and it's also been staged by opera companies as a 'chamber opera'. But it's perhaps more accurately described as music theatre.

Music theatre is a kind of musical performance genre that emerged during the 20th century, most clearly in the 1960s and 1970s. It's a form that has parallels with opera and musical theatre, but that blends music and theatre in a new and unusual way – sometimes using a clear narrative in the same way as an opera, but often involving some kind of direct link between the musical and theatrical aspects of the piece. In music theatre works, the music itself often becomes the theatre, or at least plays a crucial role in it (rather than simply providing a 'background' to singing), and there may not even be any singing or speaking in the work anyway.

Works from the first decades of the 20th century such as Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vM4B1fNTQ8**) or Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRl5bGIsYgI**) could be considered as early examples of music theatre. But more recent examples that explicitly demonstrate the form include these pieces:

- **Maurizio Kagel: *Match*** (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYW8SWzEOwE**). Kagel's humorous 1964 piece apparently recreates a tennis or table tennis match, with two cellists battling it out as competitors and a percussionist playing the role of the umpire – all conveyed through just the music itself.
- **Luciano Berio: *Sequenza V*** (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnfApTtzJmk**). Italian composer Berio wrote 14 works to which he gave the title 'Sequenza', each exploring the virtuoso possibilities of individual solo instruments. No. 5 (1966) is for solo trombone, to which Berio assigns the character of early 20th-century clown Grock – this performance by trombonist Christian Lindberg has him in full clown costume. The score includes some requests for miming and even speaking through the instrument.
- **Luciano Berio: *Recital I for Cathy*** (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1AodEZj3Qs**). Berio explored theatricality in many different ways across his output. He wrote this piece in 1972 for his former wife, mezzo-soprano Cathy Berberian. It's almost like a musical soliloquy for its singing soloist, who enters to give a recital only to find her accompanist hasn't turned up, and then goes on to survey her repertoire (with excerpts from many different pieces, by Berio and other composers) before descending increasingly into madness, in the end praying for liberation.

## An Orkney Wedding, with Sunrise

*An Orkney Wedding, with Sunrise* is one of Maxwell Davies's lighter, more immediately approachable pieces. It depicts the wild and increasingly drunken celebrations at an Orcadian wedding celebration, and was inspired by the composer's own experiences at a friend's nuptials on the islands.

It's also one of the few pieces of classical orchestral music to incorporate bagpipes. The piper is requested to appear near the end of the piece, entering from the back of the concert hall already playing, and making their way to the stage through the audience. Maxwell Davies explained that the pipes were intended to represent the rising of the sun over the mainland in Caithness, as seen from Orkney.

The piece was commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and premiered on 10 May 1985, conducted by famous film music composer John Williams. It employs many references to Scottish traditional music, though the tunes are all Maxwell Davies's own, rather than quotations from existing music.

*An Orkney Wedding, with Sunrise* is also a piece that conveys a particular storyline in music, and hence serves as a modern example of programme music (see *Music Teacher*, July 2019). Maxwell Davies gives his own description of what's happening in the piece in his programme note:

**At the outset, we hear the guests arriving, out of extremely bad weather, at the hall. This is followed by the processional, where the guests are solemnly received by the bride and bridegroom, and presented with their first glass of whisky. The band tunes up, and we get on with the dancing proper. This becomes ever wilder, as all concerned feel the results of the whisky, until the lead fiddle can hardly hold the band together any more. We leave the hall into the cold night, with echoes of the processional music in our ears, and as we walk home across the island, the sun rises, over Caithness, to a glorious dawn. The sun is represented by the Highland bagpipes, in full traditional splendour.**

We'll use this description as the basis for a breakdown of the piece, based on the recording with score that you can listen to here: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=IumuQqY6uJs**

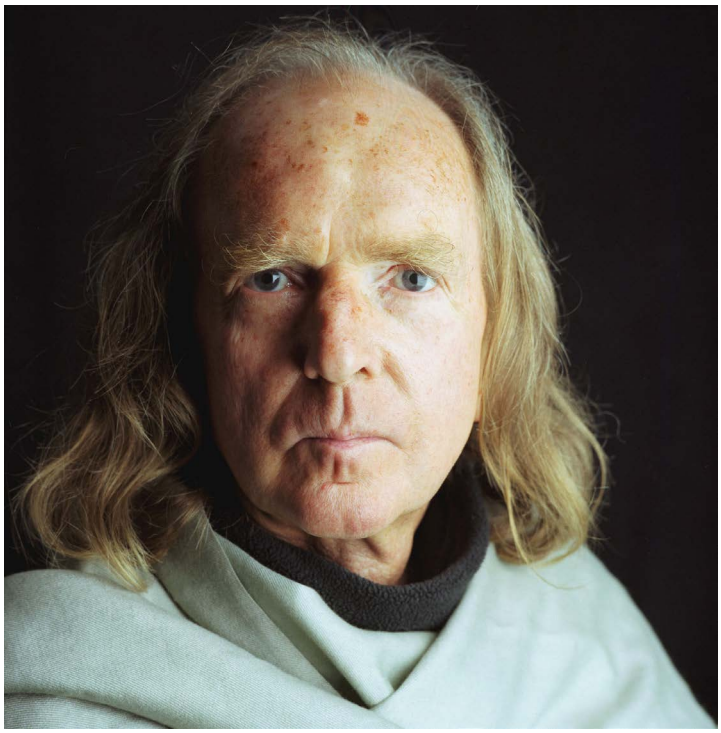
| Bar numbers | Time | Description |
|---|---|---|
| 1-14 | 0:00 | ▶ Rushing strings, roaring brass, rolling drums and even a swanee whisle add to the general noise of the wind and rain, as guests arrive for the wedding celebrations. |
| 15-60 | 0:25 | ▶ Quite an elegant, formal-sounding tune greets guests as they enter the venue and are received by the bride and groom, first heard on an oboe solo, and later on clarinet, flute, oboes in octaves, then flute again.<br>▶ This is a heavily decorated strathspey, full of distinctive 'Scotch snap' short-long rhythms. |
| 61-94 | 1:49 | ▶ The orchestra's brass section enters raucously, complete with sliding trombones, as the first dram of whisky is passed round.<br>▶ The dancing begins in earnest, though still with a sense of formality (and sobriety), with a faster, more rhythmic reel in the strings. |
| 95-104 | 2:37 | ▶ The band tunes up before the dances begin in earnest, led (as in orchestral concerts) by an A from the oboe.<br>▶ Violins and lower strings slide around as if trying to find their notes, leading to a big orchestral build-up in anticipation of the dances to come. |
| 105-295 | 3:05 | ▶ The piece's longest section is a series of increasingly wild and inebriated dances based on Scottish traditional music, as the wedding party continues into the night.<br>▶ The violins begin with a varied, faster version of their earlier reel tune.<br>▶ A new strathspey tune for a duet of oboe and trumpet is accompanied by surging strings and rolling timpani (bar 145, 3:50), taken over by a pair of clarinets playing in octaves, then flutes, then oboe and trumpet again. The constant drone notes in the lower strings in this section prefigure the bagpipe drone we'll hear later in the piece.<br>▶ The noisy atmosphere suddenly clears for a new tune (a jig) in compound time from the flute (bar 172, 4:41), later taken up by the bassoon and oboe, with clip-clopping accompaniment from woodblocks.<br>▶ The rather well-behaved jig tune is interrupted by a loud snare drum and a summons to attention from trumpets and horns, leading to the next dance: another stomping reel from the strings (bar 207, 5:33), which you might feel you want to clap along to (and some orchestras do the same at this point). There's distinctive 'oom-pah' accompaniment from the bass drum and cymbals, and harmonies supplied by the lower strings. A horn and trumpet take over the melody, adding a few 'wrong' notes (flattened leading notes), before it returns to the violins (bar 213, 6:13). Things start well, but soon get a bit out of control as the percussion go out of step with their rhythm, and some over-enthusiastic contributions from horns, trumpets and trombones push the dance to a raucous climax.<br>▶ The texture suddenly clears for what's obviously meant to be a touching, poignant strathspey from the band's solo fiddler (bar 239, 6:27), though the musician is clearly too drunk to play anything very accurately, with over-ambitious runs, slides and wonky rhythms. The fiddler even gets interrupted by some equally inebriated brass players, and pauses to try and remember where they were in the tune. Things degenerate even further when the flute, bassoon, drums and cymbals get involved.<br>▶ Just as things seem to be falling apart entirely, the band reassembles for one last stomping reel (bar 270, 8:42), with the violins playing the tune in A minor against accompaniment in A major. Listen out for whooping horns egging the players on, and the return of the solo fiddler – now slightly more sober. The music winds down as the players lose their energy, however, despite a distant memory of the earlier tune from a clarinet. |
| 296-310 | 10:02 | ▶ The oboe returns with its opening melody, now quietly and somewhat sadly, to bid farewell to the wedding guests as they step out into the early morning.<br>▶ The wind and rain have now died down, heard only in the string trills and tremolos.<br>▶ There are fragments of the night's earlier dance tunes still ringing in the guests' ears, heard on flute and horns. |
| 311-376 | 11:03 | ▶ The departing guests see the sun rising over Caithness on the mainland. It begins as a glimmer of light on the horizon from a glockenspiel tremolo, high strings and flutes, the harmony gradually working its way down to the lower orchestral instruments.<br>▶ The harmony then does the reverse, ascending from the lower orchestral instruments to the higher ones.<br>▶ The entrance of the bagpipes brings the piece to a celebratory, joyful conclusion, playing a modified version of the oboe's earlier processional melody. |

**Listening activity: musical sunrises**

Maxwell Davies's *An Orkney Wedding, with Sunrise* ends with a spectacular musical depiction of the dawn and the sun rising, complete with bagpipes. Sunrises have been a constant source of inspiration for classical composers. Listen to these other examples of musical sunrises, and discuss with your students how the composers have depicted them, what similarities there are between them, and what are their differences in approach:

- Ravel: 'Sunrise' from *Daphnis and Chloë*: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=_MoboaBa6QM**
- Ysaÿe: 'Sunrise' from Solo Violin Sonata No. 5: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BBh4Cyg7d4**
- Sibelius: *Night Ride and Sunrise*: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQyfFMwrLeE**
- Richard Strauss: 'Night' and 'Sunrise' from *Ein Alpensinfonie*: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=kb1nnzobfac**
- Nielsen: *Helios Overture*: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHLFCuNwSW8**
- Haydn: 'In splendour bright is rising now the sun' from *The Creation*: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBxA51LzeQk**

## John Tavener



*John Tavener*

### Biography

John Tavener was born in 1944 in Wembley, London. His parents ran a successful building firm (later taken over by John's younger brother Roger), but also held a strong interest in music (his father was the organist in a local church) as well as strong Christian beliefs.

Tavener remembered wanting to become a composer after seeing Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* at Glyndebourne and shortly afterwards Stravinsky's far more angular *Canticum sacrum*, both at the age of 12. He improvised and composed at the piano from an early age, and went on to be a music scholar at Highgate School and to study at London's Royal Academy of Music, where he turned decisively from piano studies to composition.

He made a name for himself with his student compositions, but the work that really put him on the British musical map was *The Whale*, premiered in 1968 (discussed in more detail below). His equally freewheeling, surreal, cacophonous *In alium* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=TM3yR2UbbaQ**) was encored in its entirety following its premiere at the BBC Proms the same year, after the audience demanded to hear it again.

The Catholic Church was an early influence on some of Tavener's music, but in 1977 he converted to the Eastern Orthodox Church, which would profoundly impact on much of his later music, in works including a setting of the Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkVcseq8zds**), the Orthodox Church's principal liturgical text. The Russian Orthodox Abbess Mother Thekla, based at the Monastery of the Assumption near Whitby, became Tavener's principal spiritual advisor for many years, and also supplied texts for several of his works.

Tavener was later reported to have been exploring the beliefs of other religions, at least with the aim of widening his own musical language. This new approach is embodied best in the composer's gargantuan, seven-hour-long *The Veil of the Temple* (**www.youtube.com/playlist?list=OLAK5uy_lM8YAXH4nfZhKdZCYwUPh27ZjVIQHsPIA**) for four choirs and several orchestras, intended for overnight performance, and which draws on texts from a number of religions. Tavener later explained: 'By writing *The Veil of the Temple*, I understood that no single religion could be exclusive. The veil has become light – there is no longer any veil. This tearing away of the Veil shows that all religions are in the transcendent way inwardly united beneath their outward form.'

Earlier, Tavener's *The Protecting Veil* for cello and string orchestra (discussed in more detail below) became hugely popular following its premiere at the 1989 BBC Proms and subsequent CD release. His 1993 *Song for Athene* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezuIDtL6ydg**) was sung at the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997, and Tavener had already developed a close and lasting friendship with Prince Charles, now King Charles III, dedicating his 2000 *Fall and Resurrection* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=DpSAlI3KQP8**) to him.

An entirely different side to Tavener was his abiding passion for classic cars, of which he owned several during his life, including a Rolls Royce, a Jaguar and a Bentley. He wrote about his love of vintage vehicles: 'Ever since I was aged three until I became very ill over three years ago I have had what some consider a paradoxical interest in cars. When I was a child my father used to bring home pamphlets of cars he thought of buying. He used to lay them out on the floor and I as a toddler used to stamp on them ritually chanting: "Big car, little car, big car, little car."'

Following the unfettered, experimental creativity of early works such as *The Whale*, Tavener developed a distinctive and highly indivdual musical style that often dispenses with traditional ideas of form and structure, in music that simply begins and ends, and relies heavily on repetition and ritual. Much of his later music is suffused with a sense of mystery and spirituality, unfolding slowly with simplicity and directness, and often with a sense of the infinite gradually expanding before the listener. Tavener said in a 1999 interview: 'We seem to have lost our contact with the primordial, the idea of call it divine revelation as opposed to something that's learnt by the human intellect, something that, if you lay yourself completely open and you just open your heart completely, something will actually come into it.'

Tavener suffered from serious health problems throughout his life, including a stroke in his 30s, heart surgery and the removal of a tumour in his 40s, two further successive heart attacks, and another stroke in 1980. He died in 2013.

## The Whale

Tavener wrote his 'dramatic cantata' *The Whale* in 1966, when he was 21. The piece received its high-profile premiere performance on 24 January 1968, at the inaugural concert given by the London Sinfonietta, which also happened to mark the opening of London's Queen Elizabeth Hall. There's something of a legend concerning the work's premiere recording, too. Tavener's younger brother Roger, who by 1968 had taken over the family building business, happened to be doing some work at the home of Ringo Starr, and managed to persuade the Beatles to release *The Whale* on their Apple Records label, which they did to great success in 1970.

*The Whale* is based on the Biblical story of Jonah and the whale, and Tavener made a special (though unsuccessful) trip to Cornwall while writing the piece in the hope of spotting a real whale. He later admitted, however, that the work's genesis bore certain parallels with the story it was telling: 'The "fantasy" grew and perhaps at times nearly "swallowed" the Biblical text: so the swallowing of Jonah became almost "literal" in the Biblical sense.' It's an exuberant, fantastical piece that brings together large performing forces – orchestra, chorus, narrator, two vocal soloists, organ and tape – and musical styles that range from plainsong to jazz, football rattles, and angular avant-garde music.

*The Whale* is very different in style from the music Tavener would write across the majority of his career. The composer himself admitted: '*The Whale* seems musically a long way from me now, but it was something that I had to write and if its youthful exuberance seems excessive, I still stand by it.' Nonetheless, it's a piece very much of its time – the late 1960s – and contains a wealth of material that might inspire students in their own compositions, or at least challenge what they might consider 'music'.

Listen to a recording of the piece in this playlist: **https://youtube.com/playlist?list=OLAK5uy_mbhFcpNZ-BiYqibbJq_6d30oXedhFF9co**. The score of the piece is available to view online here: **https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/the_whale_8538**

So rich and eclectic is the music of *The Whale* that we won't go through the whole work in detail. It's worth, however, drawing attention to a couple of sections for more consideration.

- 'The Storm' (**https://youtu.be/JcmMYprx9zk**). This unusually quiet, subdued musical depiction of a storm might provoke some discussion with students. What instruments and techniques can they hear going on here? How does Tavener go about conveying the idea of a storm? Is there anything surprising about his depiction? Is this how students imagine a musical storm might sound? Why might Tavener have chosen to depict it in this way?
- 'In the Belly' (**https://youtu.be/jJ_XRLF9M3E**) is, in many ways, *The Whale*'s most over-the-top, even surreal section. It opens with clicking metronomes, chattering, shouting and general vocal noise from the choir, and taped effects including pop music and fire alarms. Next comes a thick, noisy texture generated by a dense collection of repeating musical cells (or mobiles) across the orchestra. Most surprisingly, however, its next passage is simply a huge cluster (see below) across the whole chorus and orchestra, notated to last for five whole minutes, with instructions that instruments and voices should choose any low or high note, breathe or bow as needed, and change to an adjacent note as required.

**Listening activity: clusters**

The long, dense cluster in *The Whale*'s 'In the Belly' section is one of the most extravagant in any piece of classical music. You might think that clusters barely qualify as harmony, and that they're better classed as simply a musical sound (or maybe noise). Strictly speaking, a cluster is formed from three or more adjacent notes played or sung together – though there can be many more than three. They often involve unusual playing techniques, for example a piano being played with the fists, palms of the hands, or even whole forearms. Some composers (for example Lou Harrison – see below) even devised simple tools to enable clusters to be played rhythmically and in quick succession. (Students with eagle eyes or ears might already have spotted clusters in Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King* – listen to the piano at this point: **https://youtu.be/tStW8vRDB_s?t=1426**. Clusters are also a crucial musical ingredient in Tavener's *The Protecting Veil*, which we'll discuss below.)

Clusters generate a remarkable sonic effect, usually a highly dissonant one but one that's also very expressive and/or atmospheric. In his entertaining video discussion of clusters, however, 'classical nerd' Thomas Little (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSLEvPu8Q5k**) suggests there are four kinds:

- Chromatic: using piano black and white notes
- Diatonic: using piano white notes only
- Pentatonic: using piano black notes only
- Aggregate: using a particular combination of black and white notes, but not all of them

Here are some examples of clusters in action:

- **Henry Cowell: *The Tides of Manaunaun*** (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=-a7ndvvdJTo**). US composer Henry Cowell was a pioneering musical experimentalist (another piano work *The Banshee*, for example, involves nothing but strumming, scraping and plucking the instrument's strings: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=WaIByDlFINk**). *The Tides of Manaunaun* is an Irish-inspired piece from 1917 about the god of motion in Irish mythology. It uses a traditional, Irish-inspired melody in the right hand and forearm clusters played by the left arm.
- **Blind Tom Wiggins: *The Battle of Manassas*** (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6vLl-55szE**). Several decades before Cowell's experiments came the remarkable figure of Blind Tom Wiggins, born a slave in Georgia, blind and autistic, who went on to become a musical superstar of his time, and one of America's best-known pianists and composers in the 19th century. This solo piano piece depicts a Civil War battle of 1861 with many unusual effects, including clusters representing the roars of canons and muskets.
- **Krzysztof Penderecki: *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*** (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=HilGthRhwP8**). Polish composer Penderecki's most famous piece is a lament for those killed and maimed by the US atomic attack on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. It's written for string orchestra, but barely uses a single instance of conventional playing throughout its entire length. Clusters are among the many unusual extended effects that Penderecki calls for in this harrowing music.
- **Lou Harrison: Organ Concerto** (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJAzzHiQhH4**). If clusters represented intense anguish and trauma in Penderecki's *Threnody*, they seems to offer energy, exuberance and joy in the Concerto for Organ and Percussion Orchestra by US composer Lou Harrison. His partner, instrument maker William Colvig, constructed specially padded slabs that the organist uses to play fast-moving clusters.
- **György Ligeti: *Volumina*** (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7bdwarV6SQ**). Another organ work, this time by Hungarian/Austrian composer Ligeti, and using nothing but clusters, conveyed in what's essentially a graphic score.
- **Jonny Greenwood: *Water*** (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lrt8s7SxUBI**). Far more recently, Radiohead guitarist and composer Jonny Greenwood used a cluster as the enigmatic final musical sound in his 2014 *Water* for flutes, piano, chamber organ, string orchestra and tanpuras.
- **Japanese gagaku** (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OA8HFUNfIk**). Finally, an example of clusters from a traditional music. The elegant, ritualised Japanese court music known as gagaku uses a combination of instruments that might sound very alien to Western ears more used to symphony orchestras or rock bands. Among them, the sho mouth organ (see 2:27) produces nothing but clusters (diatonic clusters in Thomas Little's terminology), serving as a harmonic backdrop to slow-moving melodies from the hichiriki oboe and ryuteki flute.

## The Protecting Veil

*Icon of the Mother of God Hodegitria, late 15th century, Museum of the Russian Icon, Moscow*

After the wild experimentation of *The Whale*, *The Protecting Veil* is far more representative of Tavener's later music, and is arguably the composer's best-known work. He wrote it in 1988 following a request from cellist Steven Isserlis for a ten-minute work for cello and strings, which later expanded into a 45-minute 'concerto'. Tavener later remembered: 'I think if someone had simply asked me for a conventional cello concerto I would have said no, but the way Steven put it to me – how he loved the Orthodox Church, how he'd been to services and wondered if I could write something that had some connection to Orthodox music – I listened with bated breath to what he was saying.'

*The Protecting Veil* was premiered at the BBC Proms in 1989, to great acclaim, and was phenomenally successful when released on CD in 1992, even being shortlisted for that year's Mercury Music Prize.

It's deeply inspired by Tavener's Orthodox faith, in particular the Orthodox Feast of the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God, observed on 1 October, which commemorates a vision of the Virgin Mary at the Church in Vlacherni (Constantinople) in the early tenth century, during a time when Greek Christians were under threat from Saracen invasion. Surrounded by a host of saints, Mary spread her veil as a protective shelter to cover the Christian believers, inspiring the Greeks to drive away the Saracen army.

The solo cello line in *The Protecting Veil*, Tavener explained, symbolises the voice of the Mother of God: 'I have tried to capture some of the almost cosmic power of the Mother of God. She is represented by the cello and never stops singing; the accompanying string music is an extension of her unending song.'

Despite its deeply religious and spiritual themes, however, the composer acknowledged that belief on the part of the listener wasn't necessary to engage with the music. 'It is perfectly possible to listen to *The Protecting Veil* as "pure" music but I think that it may be helpful if I recount what was in my mind during the composition. It is an attempt to make a lyrical ikon in sound, rather than in wood, and using the music of the cellist to paint rather than a brush. The music is highly stylised, geometrically formed and meditative in character.' Indeed, Tavener later remembered a reaction to the work from the conductor who directed its premiere at the Proms, Oliver Knussen: 'Early on he'd said of the score: "There aren't any notes in it."' It's perhaps more accurate to say that this is slow-moving, contemplative music that makes extensive use of repetition, and indeed relies on a limited number of types of musical material, reworked and recombined in different ways.

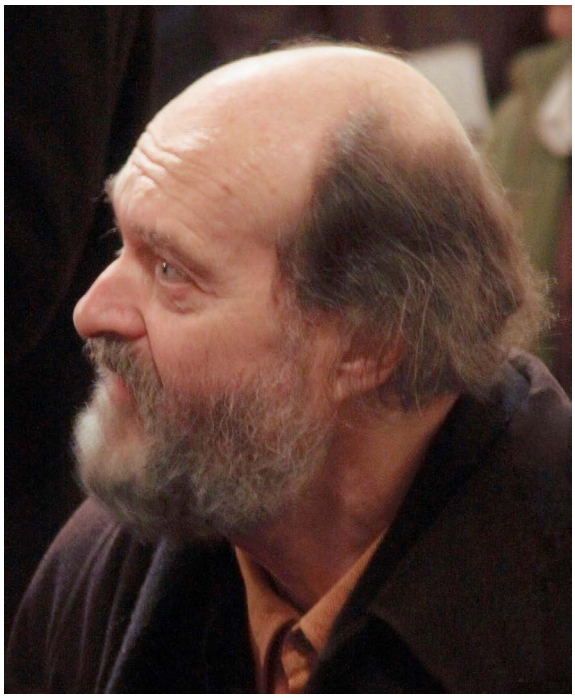
The original recording of *The Protecting Veil* – by cellist Steven Isserlis and the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Gennady Rozhdestvensky – is available to listen to with a live score here: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJkZ5okKYEA** (and the timings below are taken from this video). Alternatively, the score on its own can be viewed here: **https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/protecting_veil_8549**.

The piece falls into eight sections that run together without a break. Here's a breakdown:

| Section title | Timing | Bar numbers | Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. The Protecting Veil | 0:11 | 1-63 | ▶ The piece begins with an introductory section that almost seems to have no sense of pulse or rhythm. The cello plays a slow-moving melody right at the top of its range (just its third note, for example, lasts for nine slow bars of 4/2, or almost a full minute).<br>▶ The string orchestra gradually joins the soloist from the basses upwards, building what's essentially an F major chord with an added 6th.<br>▶ There are two contrasting sections in the middle. In the first, the solo cello joins the upper strings in stepwise patterns, often in 3rds. In the second, the cello has arpeggio-like patterns that descend to the bottom of its range and rise back up again.<br>▶ Later in the movement, Tavener introduces faster-moving cluster harmonies in the higher strings, marked in the score 'like bells': this is an element that will return again and again throughout the piece.<br>▶ From bar 62, Tavener introduces a closing section that he'll repeat at the end of each of *The Protecting Veil*'s eight sections, beginning with a dissonance from a high F in the solo cello against a low E in the orchestral cellos and basses, before a final passage in E major. |
| 2. The Nativity of the Mother of God | 8:49 | 64-134 | ▶ A heavily decorated, chromatic solo cello line is set against a texture of long-held notes and glissandos in the string orchestra.<br>▶ A later contrasting section brings together the soloist and two solo orchestral cellos (marked to be played without vibrato, 'like viols'), who follow the soloist's line in the same shape and in inversion, resulting in rich, sometimes dissonant music.<br>▶ The bell-like clusters return, now interspersed between slow cello solos making strong use of double-stopping.<br>▶ Tavener repeats the same closing section that he used in the introduction, now finishing in D major. |
| 3. The Annunciation | 15:11 | 135-180 | ▶ The section opens with a texture built from three layers: a faster-moving solo cello line; consistent minims in the lower strings; and regular crotchets high in the first violins.<br>▶ The bell-like clusters return, now interspersed with heavily chromatic and decorated cello solos.<br>▶ The closing section returns, now ending in C major. |
| 4. The Incarnation | 18:28 | 181-225 | ▶ A fast-moving, declamatory solo cello line is set against sustained harmonies in the string orchestra.<br>▶ The bell-like clusters return again, separating cello solos as before (though here the bells dominate).<br>▶ The closing section returns, now ending in B flat major. |
| 5. The Lament of the Mother of God at the Cross | 22:08 | 226-247 | ▶ The section's first half is a long, rhythmically free, heavily decorated cello solo, generally low in the instrument's register, using a mute, and mainly quiet.<br>▶ In the second half, the string orchestra joins the soloist, playing quieter, minor-mode variations on its bell-like sounds.<br>▶ The closing section returns, now ending in A major. |
| 6. The Resurrection | 31:46 | 248-287 | ▶ After the sadness of the previous section, this section offers faster, more joyful music, with the cello's solo line doubled in the string orchestra, faster-moving accompaniment lines, and scrubbing tremolos for cellos and basses.<br>▶ The bell-like figures return, now faster than previously, and interspersed between cello solos again.<br>▶ The closing section returns, now ending in G major. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 7. The Dormition of the Mother of God | 34:23 | 288-321 | ▶ The word 'dormition' in this section's title essentially refers to the death of the Virgin Mary, in the sense of passing from earthly life without suffering.<br>▶ There are three versions of the same melody: first a slow-moving, tender cello line in G major, accompanied by just the orchestra's cellos; second with the soloist accompanied by just two orchestral cellos, as in section two; and third with the soloist accompanied by violins, violas and cellos in parallel harmonies.<br>▶ The bell-like figures return again, separating cello solos that are more chromatic and make much use of double-stopping.<br>▶ Tavener's closing section begins as it has done throughout the rest of the piece, but ends by simply tracing the tonal centres of its previous occurrences – E, D, C, B flat, A and G – before returning to its opening tonality of F. |
| 8. The Protecting Veil | 41:58 | 322-341 | ▶ The music from the very opening of the piece returns, now building to a sonorous climax marked *fff*.<br>▶ Tavener's final closing section is new material, though clearly based around the opening E/F dissonance of earlier closing sections, marked as 'Like tears of the Mother of God'. |

**Listening and discussion activity: holy minimalism**



*Composer Arvo Pärt in 2008*

'Holy minimalism' is the term that's been applied to music – like Tavener's *The Protecting Veil* – that employs some of the minimalist techniques of American composers such as Steve Reich or John Adams (for example pared-back simplicity, consonant tonality and repetition), but also has a strong sense of spirituality or mysticism, and sometimes an explicitly religious theme. It's worth pointing out, too, that 'holy minimalism' is often seen as quite a dismissive, even downright pejorative term, but it's one that also encapsulates the mix of simplicity and spirituality that pervades certain music written during the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

John Tavener, Henryk Górecki and Arvo Pärt are often cited as the three most prominent 'holy minimalist' composers. Here are examples of some of their music you might want to explore with your students:

- Górecki: Symphony No. 3 ('Symphony of Sorrowful Songs') (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFKVjM1iMVU**). Written in 1976, Polish composer Górecki's Third Symphony was another phenomenal success when it was released on CD in 1991. It's a monumental, hour-long symphonic lament in three long, slow movements, written for solo soprano and symphony orchestra. The first movement sets a 15th-century Polish lament by the Virgin Mary; the second uses as its text a prayer scrawled on the wall of a Gestapo prison cell by its anonymous occupant; and the third is a Polish folk song about a mother searching for her son who's been killed in war.
- Górecki: *Lerchenmusik* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYKZBduEPbI**). At times extremely loud, violent and dissonant, Górecki's 1985 *Lerchenmusik* is a very different piece from his Third Symphony, but employs many similar techniques of repetition, slow development, and gradual change or accumulation of material. It ultimately reveals its inspiration in the opening of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 in a very moving way.
- Arvo Pärt: *Tabula rasa* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcinEEnul6M**). Estonian composer Arvo Pärt's 1977 work for two solo violins, prepared piano and string orchestra takes inspiration from the Baroque concerto grosso in its opening movement, 'Ludus'. Its second movement, 'Silentium', contains its most minimalist material, however, tracing a slow process of descending from the ensemble's highest notes to its lowest, interspersed with a chiming, bell-like figure from the prepared piano.
- Arvo Pärt: *Cantus in memoriam Benjamin Britten* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=KImKBJ1jQfU**). Pärt never met Britten, but felt a kinship with the simplicity and directness of the British composer's own music. Pärt's short work, also from 1977, is written for string orchestra and bell. It's based around descending scales in A minor, moving at different speeds across different instruments of the orchestra, and generating an overall sense of the music slowing as its pitches get lower, so that by the end it hardly seems to be moving at all.

You might like to discuss these questions with your students:

- Why do you think composers dislike the term 'holy minimalism'? Is it the 'holy' part they object to, or the 'minimalism' part, or both? Why might musicians of any musical style not feel entirely comfortable with labels being applied to their music?
- How does listening to one of these pieces make you feel? Do you become hypnotised by the music, or does it make you bored? Is it easier to have on in the background while you're doing something else, or do you prefer to listen to it closely?
- Many people find listening to pieces like Górecki's Third Symphony or Pärt's *Tabula rasa* a profoundly moving experience. How was it for you? Can music generate emotions in listeners in this way, do you think? How might it go about doing that?