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Chamber Orchestra premieres Tavener piece

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Listening to British composer John Tavener in a conventional, well-lit concert hall rarely seems right. My best encounters with his music have been while lying flat on my back - specifically, at New York's Avery Fisher Hall a few years ago when its seats were replaced with pillows for an all-night performance of his multihour *The Veil of the Temple*.

This 65-year-old British composer is not about writing music so much as conjuring experiences. Such was the point of the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia's Friday Kimmel Center concert, whose second half was given over entirely to his music, including the world premiere of *Tu ne sais pas* for orchestra and soprano.

Mainstream audiences know Tavener mostly from his cello-and-orchestra work *The Protecting Veil*, which sold well on disc but won him only limited critical credibility. Ears accustomed to hearing the Dvorák *Cello Concerto* experience diminishing returns with Tavener's purposeful reiteration of musical episodes - ones that aren't as simple as they sound (there may be meter changes in every bar), but still sound simple.

Since converting to the Russian Orthodox Church, he has composed more as a guileless spiritual messenger than as a creative artist - with the formality of iconic art. At his best, Tavener creates music whose aura suspends the listener's usual critical faculties. That did not always happen Friday.

The first two Tavener works, *The World* and *Eternal Memory*, consist of the usual repeated episodes, some conveying a sense of stillness, others quivering with Byzantine-flavored ornaments. Accept them on their own terms and, by the end of the piece, you realize you were on a journey without really realizing it. Their modest

scale meant that if you didn't make the journey, the music was at least pretty, especially with mezzo-soprano Katherine Pracht in *The World* and cellist James J. Cooper III in *Eternal Memory*.

With texts from Islamic and Hindu sources, *Tu ne sais pas* has longer, less-contemplative episodes, including the recurring, all-instrumental "Dance of Atma and Maya," which sounded most like the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby." The singer was directed in the score to perform "with petrified stillness - at the limit of intensity," along with other tall but open-ended orders. But Pracht could accomplish only so much (singers usually cannot function when petrified) with the instrumental interludes undercutting her and the rest of the piece (which needs revision).

The rest of the concert had conductor Ignat Solzhenitsyn drawing eloquence even from the tempo changes in Bach's *Orchestra Suite No. 3* (with some fine harpsichord improvisations from Diane Meredith Belcher) and revealing Britten's early, little-known *Prelude and Fugue (Op. 29)* as a major discovery. Whether or not the concert was entirely successful, musical windows were opened - and that should happen often.