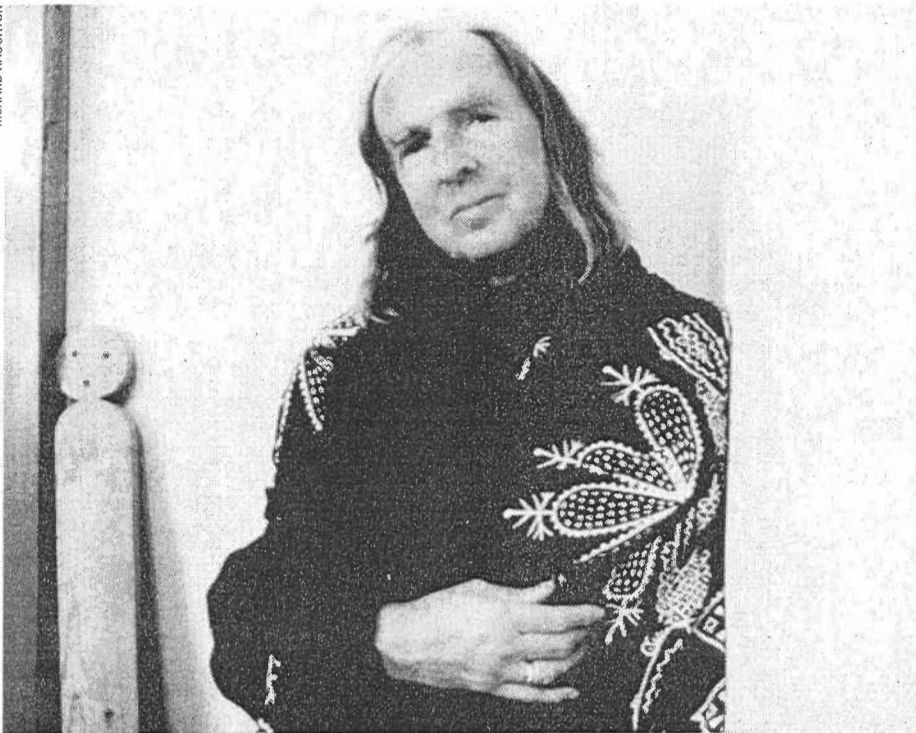


England's Choral Tradition Still Nurtures That Nation's Boldest Composers

QUITE BY CHANTS

BY KYLE GANN



RICHARD HAUGHTON

JOHN TAVENER: RADICAL ORIGINALITY FROM AN UNEXPECTED SOURCE

LONDON—My long-held image of Europe is that of a continent endlessly spellbound by the Darmstadt composers who became famous during the 1960s. It may be that a longer sojourn here would have laid that impression to rest, but an early-season, three-week stay happened to mostly confirm it. I was here for the beginning of the South Bank Center's month-long festival, *Hans Werner Henze at 75*; I heard some student performances at Goldsmiths College, led by John Lely, of Stockhausen's electronic music of the '70s; and I will stay long enough to witness the beginning of an intensive four-day tribute to Mauricio Kagel. I eagerly devoured the music of these three composers as an undergrad some two to three decades ago, and find them a little old-hat now, yet no European generation born after 1935 has risen up to inspire a fraction of the adulation still poured onto these celebrated names.

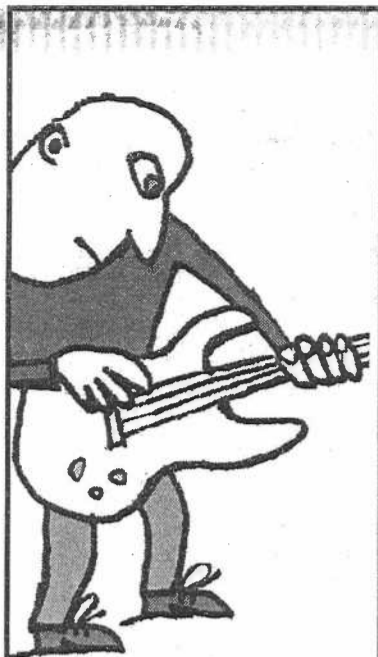
But I did find newer music at a type of concert that would be unthinkable in the States. On March 8, at Queen Elizabeth Hall, conductor Guy Protheroe led the robust English Chamber Choir in a concert of avant-garde choral works all inspired by, and/or based on, the chants of the Byzantine church. In America, this last fact would have ensured that the music was conservative, but it was not. In America, no chorus would have had the slightest interest in assembling a whole evening of living composers. In America, no conductor could have located four interesting choral works by living local composers. Out of the entire Western world, perhaps only England has never suffered a divorce between its composers and its indigenous choral tradition, as evidenced, for instance, by an impressive amount of contemporary repertoire among the recordings sold as souvenirs from Saint Paul's Cathedral. The English Chamber Choir's concert was something without counterpart in American music, and rewarding to boot.

There was one world premiere, a *Lament for Christ*, by 37-year-old Ivan Moody: tonal, nonmodulating, simple in its counterpoint, and a little bland despite well-wrought solos by soprano Patricia Rozario and Jeremy Birchall. There was one older work by an older composer, Michael Adams's *Photonymon* of

1973. This was surprising. On the surface it was full of the gimmicks that make the early '70s a musico-historical embarrassment: the singers rattling jingle bells, jumbles of vocal phrases sung in free rhythm. The work started with only women, and the men entered from backstage in mid-work, carrying candles, a theatrical effect handled with taste. Moreover, the evocative use of chimes, Balkan-style singing, and percussive echoes by singers occasionally hitting boards lifted *Photonymon* far above the platitudes of its era.

The piece that deepened my sense of the English musical situation, however, was *The Last Discourse* by John Tavener. I had been aware of Tavener since his George Crumb-like cantata *The Whale* of 1968, and knew that, after a rather dramatic 1977 conversion to the Russian Orthodox Church, he had reemerged as a composer of slow, portentously spiritual works somewhat in the Arvo Pärt line. None of this prepared me, however, for the *The Last Discourse's* radical originality. First of all, Rozario sang solos against the choir with a striking reversal of foreground and background: While they moved in active counterpoint, she often merely alternated between two notes, hovering above the chorus with gorgeous—and indeed, spiritual—effect.

Even more interesting, Birchall's bass interruptions, representing the voice of Christ, were doubled in unison with an upright string bass, though the lines—slow glissandos, fast flurries of melody—were impossible to really keep in unison, the imprecision producing a fascinating shadow effect. The concert ended with the lushly romantic *Everlasting Light*, by a Greek composer in his forties, Christos Hatzis, enlivened by a powerful male trio and almost Brahmsian harmonies played on a marimba. These works by younger composers were in no way inferior to the Darmstadt standards that keep being trotted out by the major institutions—quite the contrary. My wish for younger European composers is that they will develop a sense of Oedipal rebellion and knock these old geezers off of center stage. After all, you want to be assured when you apply to a country for political asylum that it has a lively music scene. **V** PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD HAUGHTON



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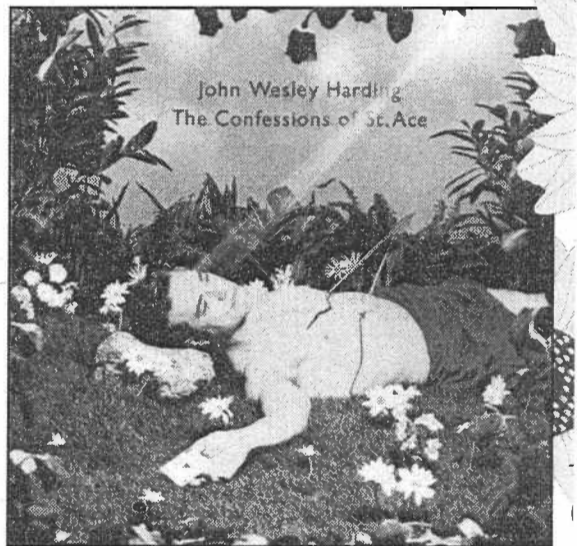
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