

SIR MICHAEL TIPPETT

David C F Wright, DMus

As a boy, I was brought up to always tell the truth. As an adult, I have followed that principle. Most children are told that lies can, and do, get you into trouble but I have also found that telling the truth causes trouble as well... and, often, hostility. When I have written about the poor compositional methods of some composers and evidenced what I have said, I have been subjected to verbal abuse, character assassinations and smear campaigns and often by people who cannot even read music. This hypocrisy is rife.



But I shall continue to be honest. Sir Michael Tippett was a fine musician, a fascinating man, but I am not espoused to all his music. Some of it is 'disjunct' and leaves me cold. And I am aware that this is not just my response. He was a better musician than he was a composer and yet there is something compelling about much of his music and this, coupled with his integrity, makes him a man who will always be admired and discussed.

Tippett was an extraordinary man. All his life he was engaged in a quest into the three subjects which we are often advised never to discuss, namely sex, politics and religion. He seems to have had a love/hate relationship with all three and this only serves to make him even more fascinating.

He was born in London on 2 January 1905 but he spent his early years in a sixteenth century house in the Suffolk village of Wetherden. His father, Henry William (1858-1944), was a solicitor and immersed in Liberal politics. His mother, Isabel Clementina Binny Kemp (1880-1969), wrote novels, was a member of the Labour party and a theosophist; one of the originators of that society was C.W. Leadbetter who was a notorious paedophile. She was also a suffragette and went to prison for her beliefs.

Henry Tippett owned a hotel in Cannes and it was in France that Michael began to develop a gift for languages. At 13, he went to a public school in Edinburgh and two years later, went to Stamford Grammar School in Lincolnshire. He attended the Royal College of Music studying composition with Charles Wood who probably introduced Tippett to the first love of his life, Beethoven.

Tippett also studied with C.H. Kitson and R.O. Morris and conducting with both Sargeant and Boult. He achieved his BMus in 1928 and the following year took up a teaching post at Hazelwood Preparatory School where the headmaster was Christopher Fry.

With all the influences of his respective parents' philosophies and liberalities, Tippett became a left wing sympathiser and joined the Communist party in 1935. He gave up teaching in 1932 and turned to conducting and directing two choirs. He wrote a ballad opera, Robin Hood but his first acknowledged work is the String Quartet No 1 of 1935 which clearly shows the influence of Beethoven. But Tippett was anxious to retain his Englishness and therefore included the influence of the English madrigal.

The Piano Sonata No 1 was completed in 1937 and revised in 1942 and 1954. Tippett was not a pianist and there are artistic weaknesses in his piano writing which have serious drawbacks. The Sonata is dedicated to his close friend and fellow musician Francesca Allinson and it was premiered by Phyllis Sellick.

Although Tippett was a homosexual he did have lady friends such as the cellist Evelyn Maude who was clearly in love with him and with Francesca did consider adopting children. But she committed suicide in 1944.

Among Tippett's gay partners were two painters. First, there was Karl Hawker and then Wilfred Franks.

But to return to his music. Tippett was anxious to be English and the folk song style is predominant in the Piano Sonata no. 1. It is remarkable, tuneful and joyful for the first five minutes and the simplicity gives way to more ambitious material which is stylistically different. The slow movement is introspective and melodic. Tippett loses his way here since the work becomes somewhat hybrid, a sort of conglomeration of styles. The finale has an energy and sparkle but without much substance. The music sometimes sounds rather cheap and has a music-hall or 'salon' feel about it.

The influence of folk song is evident in his first masterpiece, the Concerto for Double String Orchestra completed in 1939. The usual comparison between this and Elgar's Introduction and Allegro is both misleading and offensive. Tippett is not interested in decadent arrogance but in a natural and spontaneous utterance. He is not self-conscious or self-indulgent as was Elgar. Tippett also maintains a classical structure... the first movement is in sonata form and the finale is a rondo. The slow movement is based on a Scottish folk song 'Ca' the Yowes'. There is a more accurate comparison to be made with Beethoven's middle string quartets.

Tippett's humanitarianism led him to write his next masterpiece the oratorio, *A Child of Our Time* which was completed in 1941. He asked T. S. Eliot to write the libretto. On a hiking tour with one of his lovers, he encountered some children living in abject poverty and this was one inspiration of this oratorio.

Throughout his life Tippett had 'crazes'. It was, at first Jung, then Freud; Beethoven then Handel; heterosexuality then homosexuality; left-wing politics then a personal view that was formed from his intense intellectualism. It is curious that his conversations were often oppressive, but not malicious, often arid, yet he sought to campaign for the oppressed. This is the message of *A Child of Our Time* and the influence is not longer Beethoven, but Handel. This explains why the companion piece to this oratorio is the *Fantasia on a theme of Handel* for piano and orchestra. Not only is Nazi oppression the subject of this major choral work but so is the oppression of the Negroes hence the inclusion of five spirituals in the score. It has much to do with his interest in folk song and his dislike for Christianity.

At the time he began to write this work, his pacifist views came to the fore. He joined the Peace Pledge in 1940, the year in which he was appointed director of music at Morley College.

His third masterpiece was completed in 1942 and this is his *String Quartet No 2* in which he returns to the influence of Beethoven. It is a work of tremendous vigour and communicates magnificently.

Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears also considered themselves to be pacifists. But, in saying that, it demeans Tippett. Tippett was not a coward whereas Britten and Pears fled to the USA to escape conscription and only returned to England when they believed the US Army would call them up. In 1943, Tippett appeared before a tribunal to explain his objection to war service. He was ordered to farm work and failed to comply. He was sentenced to three months imprisonment. He had completed *Boyhood's End* to texts by W.H. Hudson for Pears and Britten.

An early *Symphony in B flat* of 1934 was discarded but, by the end of the Second World War, he had produced his *Symphony No 1* but it is not an easy work to bring off. And it shows the influence of Beethoven and Brahms. There is, as yet, no personal voice although there are hints of it in the masterly *String Quartet No 2*. But now, a new 'craze' has set in... the fugue. There are two in the finale. The *String Quartet No 3*, completed in 1946, elevates this craze into obsession. There are three fugal

movements and, on the positive side, Beethoven's influence still remains.

From 1946 to 1952 he was engaged in his first opera, *The Midsummer Marriage* clearly inspired by his next crazes... Mozart and, in particular, *The Magic Flute*, and the psychology of Jung. The Ritual Dances from the opera have become very popular and there is some other fine music in this impressive score. What some find worrying is the extended vocal melismata (a device also used by Britten) and, indeed, by Handel but in his case, to great effect. Sometimes the simplicity of utterance, as in Mozart, works much better.

In 1944, Francesca Allinson committed suicide. *The Heart's Assurance* for high voice and piano enabled Tippett to come to terms with personal emotions. It is a remarkable marriage of words and music but, as in *Boyhood's End* the music varies in quality.

It was 1957 which saw the completion of his fourth masterpiece. *The Symphony No 2* has pounding bass Cs, direct from Vivaldi, and Stravinsky's neo-classical style. The Beethovenian classical structure is still there and the music has an amazing vigour. The slow movement is full of interest; the scherzo has an exuberance and the finale, the least successful movement, is a set of variations. But when the pounding Cs start up again we are reminded of the tremendous communicative skill of this incredible score.

If this work is a great success then its orchestral predecessor, the *Piano Concerto* of 1955 is not. Tippett admitted that it was based on Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No 4 in G*. It is a curious piece and adds to the conviction that, like Elgar and Berkeley, his piano writing is sadly lacking. His ideas are often fascinating but the piano does not always suit him. This concerto lacks drama, tension and it is somewhat anaemic and his dependence on fourths becomes wearisome. Julius Katchen refused to play it since it was 'horrible'

With his second opera, *King Priam*, completed in 1961, Tippett expounds new 'crazes' and revives old ones. We are into the grim psychological Jungian mode and a sort of macho-homosexuality with its mini-skirted soldiers and the cruel powers of the strong man... the evil Darwinian teaching that only the strong deserve to survive. And here begins Tippett's 'disjunct' music, this quest for a personal idiom and in *King Priam* a sparseness of texture. Economy is now a consideration with a solo piano taking a major role. But the worrying aspect is that the music gets nowhere and the sound world is confusing, as if Tippett is wanting to approach Stravinsky's serialism.

The Piano Sonata No 2 dates from 1962. As with the *Piano Concerto* it lacks coherence. It is in one movement lasting about twelve minutes but has 38 sections or changes of tempo. Michael Finnissy writes that 'it can and should confuse and irritate you.' That statement is as annoying as the sonata itself. The sound world is not unlike that of *King Priam*.

Tippett's search for a personal, or experimental, style is taken up again in his *Concerto for Orchestra* of 1963 in which he divides the orchestra into small groups or sets thus trying to identify himself with the avant garde. Abstract music needs to be composed with immense skill but Tippett did not have the ability to write convincing abstract music. His confusion about his sexuality at this time, the homosexual suggestion of *King Priam* and his association with Pears and Britten all coincide with his 'disjunct' music. The trumpet tune in the finale of the *Concerto for Orchestra* is not far away from the trumpet tune of the finale of Britten's *Cello Symphony*. Britten is the dedicatee of the *Concerto* and so your guess is as good as mine.

By the mid 1960s Tippett re-approached the inspiration that produced his four masterpieces. *The Vision of St Augustine* for baritone, chorus and orchestra is like the curate's egg, good in parts. The choral parts are often spiritually uplifting but the melismata is overdone, a weakness Tippett shared with Britten. The use of both Latin and English may add to the tendency to make this another hybrid work.

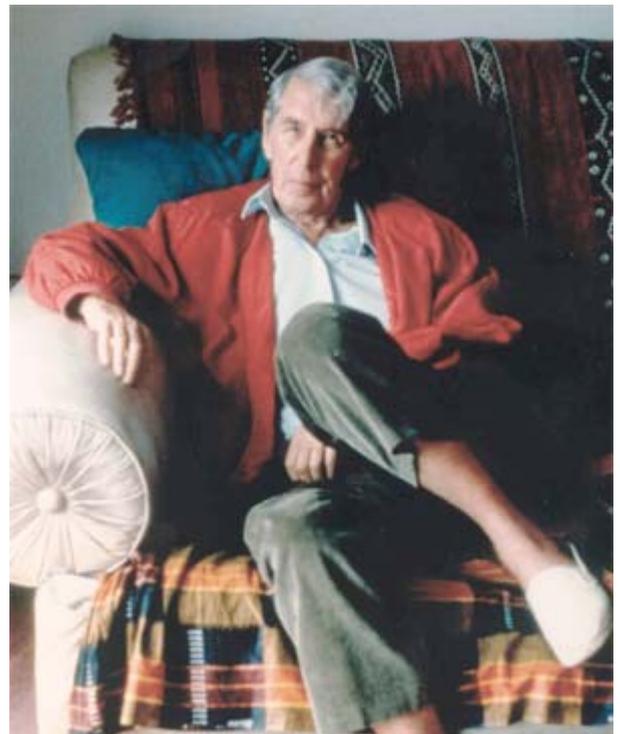
Economy is a feature of the third opera, *The Knot Garden*, which consists of thirty-two scenes in an hour and a half. It is another psychological drama and a study in human relationships. It is the first opera to introduce gays and therefore a 'modern' opera; but it is the employment of several styles that makes it another hybrid work. Again, it takes a really great composer to write a multi-styled composition such as Alfred Schnittke in his *Faust Cantata* and his terrific hair-raising blues makes Tippett's blues in *The Knot Garden* very feeble. It is a strange work since it is not what we expect an opera to be. It is unlikely to ever become a favourite. Music for electric guitar in an opera takes some getting used to.

Songs for Dov is a set of songs *Dov*, a character in *The Knot Garden*, may have sung. Here Tippett enters another world of music at which he is not competent at and would have done well to leave alone, namely pop music, boogie-woogie, blues and the electric guitar. It is the stylish confusion in his work that adds to the 'disjunct'. While there is no excuse for snobbery in music there is a case for separation of styles to make a work coherent.

This desire to be all-embracing of styles mislead Tippett. His *Symphony No 3* of 1972 is in two parts the second of which employs a soprano, many styles, five blues, a quote from Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, which he foolishly tries to rewrite or reinterpret as if it is an unconscious attempt to improve it. Tippett revels in physical and sexual pleasure in his blues and ends with a distortion of Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech. It is Tippett's desire to change existing texts, musical or literary that can lead us to conclude that his intense intellectualism has led him down the cul-de-sac of egocentricity frequented by Elgar and Britten before him. Whether this is so, his *Symphony No 3* has a sense of compassion but is it at the expense of self seeking?

The *Piano Sonata No 3* was completed in 1973 and is in three movements. The central section lasts about fifteen minutes whereas the outer allegros last about twelve. Clearly he is using Beethoven as a model but his music does not approach the genius of Beethoven. Tippett's music is confusing, contradictory with a thick intensity which can only serve to defeat and annoy listeners. It is tortuous music and highlights the lack of smiles in his music since his earliest works.

An airport lounge is hardly the location one might expect for an opera but *The Ice Break* centres there. The main theme is racial inequality. It is another hybrid work with many literary influences from Solzhenitsyn to trashy television soap opera, rock music, UFOs and so on, presented in a tense dark mood. We also have a sort of psychedelic trip in Act Three. This weirdness overflows into the *Symphony No 4*, completed in 1977 and written for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Georg Solti. There are recorded sounds of heavy breathing which open and close the work. While Tippett may refer to this as his 'birth-to-death' piece it may have a concealed meaning as did some of Britten's work. At the time Tippett was writing books and giving many broadcast talks. His book, *Moving Into Aquarius* of 1959 had just been revised. In his talks he expressed his sexual thoughts and commented upon offensive telephone calls which employed merely breathing sounds. Are we to conclude that this might be the genesis of his *Symphony No 4*? It is a big work. The brass section is 6 - 6 - 3 - 2 and, as it was an American commission, Tippett, uncertain of himself again, imitates the grandeur of the rugged outdoors of such works as Roy Harris's *Symphony No 3* but his material is nowhere near as memorable or his orchestration so imaginative.



The end of the 1970s saw the appearance of the Concerto for string trio and orchestra or, as Beethoven may have termed it, Triple Concerto. His indebtedness to Beethoven is still his crutch and support, but the music is so self-conscious and largely introspective that it is tedious. The increasing intensity since the Piano Sonata No 2 has become oppressive; the joyful music of the Concerto for double string orchestra, the Piano Sonata No 1 and the Quartet No 2 is gone and gone forever.

In his massive oratorio *The Mask of Time* he tries to recapture the success of *A Child of Our Time* of fifty years earlier, but it is another hybrid work, a cauldron of political statements, such as the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan, and it employs vocal techniques he has unsuccessfully emulated from more able contemporary composers. It seems to be a summary of all his beliefs. His final opera, *New Year*, completed in 1988 has not caught on and still inhabits a strange world but, it has to be said that *The Midsummer Marriage* took about twenty years to establish itself.

He was awarded the CBE in 1959 and was knighted in 1966, made a CH in 1979 and OM in 1983. His contribution to music is, indeed, great. He has revived classical forms, the sonata, the string quartet, the concerto and the symphony. But he was hampered by his dependence on musical models and his crazes which fuelled and intensified his intellectualism which alienates much of the listening public who love his early works and, at best, are polite about his later ones. And yet *The Rose Lake*, his final orchestral work, does have a curious beauty about it.

He was an advanced intellectual. I have sat down with him and Humphrey Searle and listened to Tippett. Then, when he left the room, Searle and I would look at each other and say, "What was he talking about?" Neither of us had a clue!

He died on 8 January 1998 from a chill which developed into pneumonia following a trip to Sweden.

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