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| Tippett, Sir Michael (1905-1998) |
| Tippett, Sir Michael (Kemp) |
| Michael Tippett was one of the leading British composers of the twentieth century. His music and his writings are characterised by an enduring commitment to humanist values and traditions, mediated by an increasingly ironic and critically self-aware modern subjectivity.  Born into a relatively affluent middle-class family from rural Suffolk, Tippett’s environment at home and at boarding school cultivated his life-long intellectual curiosity and independence, but provided him with a patchy musical education. Adamant that he would be a composer nevertheless, he enrolled twice at the Royal College of Music where he painstakingly sought to develop both compositional technique and a heightened awareness of the Western classical musical tradition.  The experience of the global economic depression in the first half of the 1930s, heightened by working with unemployed musicians and providing musical opportunities at North Yorkshire work camps, politicised Tippett’s nascent left-wing sensibilities, though a brief spell in the British Communist party ended due to the incompatibility of his Trotskyist orientation with prevailing Stalinist thought. A more lasting commitment came through his pacifism, for which he was jailed in 1943; having joined the Peace Pledge Union in 1940, he went on to serve on its council in the 1950s and was Honorary President from 1958 until his death. |
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The experience of the global economic depression in the first half of the 1930s, heightened by working with unemployed musicians and providing musical opportunities at North Yorkshire work camps, politicised Tippett’s nascent left-wing sensibilities, though a brief spell in the British Communist party ended due to the incompatibility of his Trotskyist orientation with prevailing Stalinist thought. A more lasting commitment came through his pacifism, for which he was jailed in 1943; having joined the Peace Pledge Union in 1940, he went on to serve on its council in the 1950s and was Honorary President from 1958 until his death.  The end of a six-year relationship with the painter Wilfred Franks prompted a course of Jungian analysis, through which Tippett came to the conclusion that music could provide a corrective to the psychological and spiritual ruptures of modernity. This, in conjunction with concurrent conversations about the nature of art with T. S. Eliot, who Tippett was later to describe as a ‘spiritual mentor,’ resulted in the oratorio *A Child of Our Time* (1939-41). The subject of the oratorio is ostensibly the assassination of the German diplomat Ernst von Rath by the Polish Jew Herschel Grynzpan in 1938, and the subsequent pogrom in Germany (the *Kristallnacht*), though the underlying argument centres on the potentially catastrophic consequences of the lack of (Jungian) self-knowledge. The work reflects the influence of Eliot in its multiple stylistic, musical and literary allusions and quotations; the use of negro spirituals to universalise the underlying message of the work is not without controversy.  Tippett continued to explore the musical and philosophical implications of the oratorio in works both non-texted (String Quartet No. 2 (1941-42), Symphony No. 1 (1944-45)) and texted. *The Midsummer Marriage* (1946-52) offers an extended allegory of the Jungian process of individuation, offering a wider frame of reference and an altogether more positive conclusion than any work of Tippett’s at that time, and concerns far from those of his contemporaries.  Reflecting on the changing ‘feel of our time’ in the 1950s, Tippett’s music began to evince a shift in sensibilities from the bracing yet affirmative qualities offered as a corrective to the war years to a stance that rejected the increasing faith in scientific rationalism. The Symphony No. 2 (1956-57) is, on the surface, an invigorating reappraisal of the symphonic genre in the light of Stravinskian neo-classicism; yet it is musically poised between the hard-won tonal and textural richness of Tippett’s earlier music and the music of the coming decades. By the early 1960s, and in the opera King Priam (1958-61), this process came to fruition with an apparent change of style from rich lyricism and driving rhythms to a fragmented, rebarbative language that seemed to owe much to late Stravinsky and the new music being written in continental Europe. In a string of works in the 1960s and early 1970s, Tippett’s music is characterised by the presentation of a fragmented subjectivity that nevertheless strives for some measure of reconciliation, as in *The Vision Of Saint Augustine* for baritone solo, chorus and orchestra (1963-65), the opera *The Knot Garden* (1966-69), *Songs For Dov* for tenor and small orchestra (1969-70) and the Symphony No. 3 (1970-72). The latter three works in particular foreground the use of musical quotations, complementing the use of literary quotations that had been a feature of Tippett’s self-penned libretti from the outset.  Tippett’s penchant for lyricism, mostly suppressed during the 1960s, returns as a counterbalance to the more abrasive material, as in the Triple Concerto For Violin, Viola, Cello And Orchestra (1978-79) and *The Rose Lake* (1991-93). At the same time the questioning of certainties — philosophical, artistic, scientific and musical — continues to colour his later music. The Symphony No. 3 offers a critique of the humanist message of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, and in *The Mask Of Time* (1980-82) Tippett explores mankind’s continued and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to comprehend the world through artistic, religious, and scientific means. In both cases, and in the operas *The Ice Break* (1973-76) and *New Year* (1985-88), affirmation and hope is counterbalanced by ironic undercutting that questions both the possibilities of such states as well as the ability of art to effect meaningful spiritual transformations. Key Writings: *Moving into Aquarius* (1958, 2/1974)  *E. William Doty Lectures in Fine Arts*, 2nd ser. (1976)  *Music of the Angels: Essays and Sketchbooks of Michael Tippett*, ed. Bowe, Meirion (1980)  *Those Twentieth-Century Blues: an Autobiography* (1991)  *Tippett on Music*, ed. Bowen, Meirion (1995) Chronological List of All Compositions: String Quartet No. 1 (1934-5 [rev. 1943])  Sonata No. 1 for piano (1936-8 [rev 1942 and 1954])  Concerto for Double String Orchestra (1938-39)  Fantasia on a Theme of Handel for piano and orchestra (1939-41)  *A Child of our Time*: Oratorio for SATB soloists, chorus and orchestra (1939-41)  String Quartet No. 2 (1941-42)  *Two Madrigals* for unaccompanied chorus (1942)  *Boyhood’s End*: Cantata for tenor and piano (1943)  Fanfare No. 1 for four horns, three trumpets and three trombones (1943)  *Plebs Angelica*: Motet for double choir (1943-44)  Symphony No. 1 (1944-45)  *The Weeping Babe*: Motet for soprano solo and mixed choir (1944)  String Quartet No. 3(1945-46)  *Preludio al Vespro di Monteverdi* for organ (1946)  *Little Music* for string orchestra (1946)  *The Midsummer Marriage* (1946-52)  *Suite for the Birthday of Prince Charles* (Suite in D) (1948)  *The Heart’s Assurance*: song-cycle for high voice and piano (1950-51)  *Dance, Clarion Air*: Madrigal for five voices SSATB (1952)  Fantasia Concertante on a theme of Corelli for string orchestra (1953)  Fanfare No. 2 for four trumpets (1954)  Fanfare No. 3 for three trumpets (1954)  Divertimento on ‘Sellinger’s Round’ for chamber orchestra (1953-54)  Concerto for piano and orchestra (1953-55)  Four Inventions for descant and treble recorders (1954)  Sonata for Four Horns (1955)  *Bonny at Morn*: Northumbrian Folksong set for unison voice and recorders (1956)  Four Songs from the British Isles for unaccompanied chorus SATB (1956)  *Over the Sea to Skye* (1956)  Symphony No. 2 (1956-57)  *Crown of the Year*: Cantata for chorus SSA and instruments (1958)  ‘Unto the Hills’: Wadhurst (Hymn Tune) (1958)  *King Priam*: Opera in three acts (1958-61)  Lullaby for Six Voices or alto solo and small choir SSTTB (1959)  *Music*: Unison song for voices, strings and piano or voices and strings (1960)  *Words for Music Perhaps*: A sequence of love poems for speaking voice or voices and chamber ensemble (1960)  *Songs for Achilles* for tenor and guitar (1961)  *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* for chorus SATB and organ (1961)  Sonata No. 2 for piano (1962)  Incidental music for Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1962)  *Songs for Ariel* for voice and piano or harpsichord (1962)  *Praeludium* for brass, bells and percussion (1962)  Concerto for Orchestra (1962-63)  *The Vision of Saint Augustine* for baritone solo, chorus and orchestra (1963-65)  *The Shires Suite* for orchestra and chorus (1965-70)  *Braint*: the final variation in ‘Severn Bridge Variations’ (1966)  *The Knot Garden*: Opera in Three Acts (1966-69)  *Songs for Dov* for tenor and small orchestra (1969-70)  Symphony No. 3 for soprano and orchestra (1970-72)  *In Memoriam Magistri* for flute, clarinet and string quartet (1971)  Sontata No. 3 for piano (1972-73)  *The Ice Break*: Opera in Three Acts (1973-76)  Symphony No. 4 (1976-77)  String Quartet No. 4 (1977-78)  Triple Concerto for violin, viola, cello and orchestra (1978-79)  *Wolf Trap Fanfare* for three trumpets, two trombones and tuba (1980)  *The Mask of Time* for voices and instruments (SATB soloists, chorus and orchestra) (1980-82)  *The Blue Guitar* for solo guitar (1982-83)  Festal Brass with Blues for brass band (1983)  Sonata No. 4 for piano (1983-84)  *New Year*: Opera in Three acts (1985-88)  *Byzantium* for soprano and orchestra (1988-90)  String Quartet No. 5 (1990-91)  ‘Triumph’: A paraphrase on music from *The Mask of Time* for symphonic wind band (1992)  *The Rose Lake*: A song without words for orchestra (1991-93)  *Caliban’s Song* (1995) |
| Further reading:  (Bowen)  (Clarke)  (Gloag and Jones)  (Kemp)  (Robinson)  (Whittall) |