

Michael Tippett: The Shadow and the Light—BBC film on the life of the British composer

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Michael Tippett: The Shadow and the Light, recently shown on BBC2 in Britain, is devoted to the life and career of one of the major composers of the 20th century, Michael Tippett (1905-1998), who died a quarter-century ago at the age of 93.

The documentary uses the customary technique of conducting numerous interviews with leading musicians, colleagues, biographers and personal friends of the composer. What makes it especially effective, however, is the way it interweaves the discussion of Tippett's life with frequent and in a few cases extended excerpts of his music, played by the Scottish BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Harish Shankar.

We hear passages from the Concerto for Double String Orchestra (1939), as well as the *Fantasia Concertante on a Theme of Corelli* (1953), the 2nd and 4th Symphonies, the String Quartet No. 5, and the Piano Concerto. The most extended excerpts are from Tippett's most popular and enduring work, the oratorio *A Child of Our Time*, which was composed between 1939 and 1941, and premiered in 1944.

Tippett's name is often linked with that of the better-known Benjamin Britten (1913-1976). British composer Mark-Anthony Turnage claims that it is possible for him to identify a piece of music is by Tippett by merely listening to one bar. There is a reference to "Tippett energy," and his work is described as alternately ecstatic and exuberant. Turnage calls Tippett's music "life-giving," as opposed to a certain "melancholia" he finds in Britten, although he hastens to add this is not meant as a criticism of the latter.

As a young man Tippett plunged into the classical repertoire, imbibing Beethoven, Bach and Handel. His interest in the Baroque is indicated by the above-mentioned work on a Corelli theme. Tippett integrated the influences of his predecessors into his own compositions, which could include English folk music and other more contemporary forms. Although he avoided nationalist or patriotic themes, his music inevitably was touched by his origins and by the work of those who preceded him. The most famous of these were Edward Elgar and Ralph Vaughn Williams. A list of prominent British composers of the past century would also include Frank Bridge, Gerald Finzi, Eric Coates and Frederick Delius.

Following Britten's death, Tippett, who was a decade older but lived for 22 years longer than Britten, became recognized as the most famous living British composer. He received many commissions for new work, especially from the US.

His music is not as well-known as Britten's, however, and with one or two exceptions it is not often performed today, especially outside his native Britain. The mid-20th century promotion of serialism and atonality, which Tippett generally avoided, was a factor. This prejudice did not have a similarly negative impact on Britten's popularity, however. Tippett's work was often considered challenging, and it was not until late in his life that his music won wider acclaim. The excerpts of some of his well-

known works in the BBC film, particularly those from his middle years, are in some cases quite appealing, and indicate those works deserve to be programmed more often.

Tippett's Piano Concerto (1955), complex and difficult to perform, is available on YouTube in a performance marking the 90th birthday of the composer, in 1995. The sparkling finale of the three-movement concerto lives up to the descriptions of his music as "life-giving" and exuberant.

Also worth listening to is Tippett's 2nd Symphony, completed in 1957. At the premiere of the work, broadcast live in February 1958, it had to be restarted after several minutes, a reflection of its notorious difficulty. Both the concerto and the 2nd Symphony are examples of work that was being composed in opposition to the prevailing dogma against tonality in the US and Western Europe at the time. The Third Symphony, for soprano and orchestra, is a less accessible work, composed between 1970 and 1972, and noteworthy for its several quotations from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The film also includes excerpts from Tippett's later, more experimental efforts.

As the documentary (directed by John Bridcut) makes clear, Tippett has no lack of admirers among fellow composers, as well as conductors and other musicians. Some of these individuals pay tribute to him, and stress how much he influenced their own musical development. Among those featured is Colin Davis, the longtime conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra and perhaps the most prominent champion of Tippett's music. Others include Turnage, conductors Andrew Davis and Sian Edwards, and pianist Steven Osborne.

Like Britten and many other artists and musicians, Tippett was politically influenced by the conditions of the Great Depression and the mass sympathy for socialism within the working class in this period. While Britten's "socialism" remained of a reformist-pacifist variety, Tippett embraced, for a period in the 1930s, the cause of revolutionary socialism as embodied in the 1917 Russian Revolution. For a few years, he was part of the British Trotskyist movement.

A key influence in Tippett's political involvement, as well as his artistic evolution, was Wilfred Franks, a young artist who attended the Bauhaus Art School in Germany for a few years beginning in 1929, and joined anti-Nazi demonstrations before Hitler came to power. Franks later participated in the well-known Battle of Cable Street against the British Fascists in October 1936. Tippett met Franks in 1932, and the two became political, artistic and personal soulmates for much of the rest of the decade. Tippett, beginning to come to terms with his homosexuality, later described his meeting Franks as "the deepest, most shattering experience of falling in love." Although Franks later married, and his close friendship with Tippett ended in 1938, they reconnected decades later. Franks died in 2003 at the age of 95. He was a lifelong adherent of Trotskyism, and a loyal supporter of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Stefan Steinberg, one of the authors of this article, was acquainted with Franks, who worked for many years as an art teacher at the Leeds Polytechnic. Veteran British Trotskyist Barbara Slaughter interviewed Franks in 1999 for the WSWS. For readers seeking more information on Franks' life, a biography by his grandson, Danyel P. Gilgan, is also available.

A closer look at Tippett's political development in the 1930s is instructive. In the early part of the decade, before he was 30 years old, he organized musical activities for unemployed miners at work camps in the north of England. His work included a performance of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, and he also co-wrote his own "people's opera," *Robin Hood*. In his autobiography, Tippett includes an excerpt from the text of *Robin Hood*, terming it a reinterpretation of "the legend of the famous outlaw in terms of the class war then dividing English society":

So God he made us outlaws,
To beat the devil's man,
To rob the rich, to feed the poor
By Robin's ten-year plan.

The BBC documentary includes excerpts from rehearsals of the original production of *Robin Hood*. In October 1934 Tippett was also involved in a musical tribute to the Tolpuddle Martyrs, who fought for agricultural labourers' rights in the 1830s.

Tippett's sympathy for the oppressed found expression in *A Child of Our Time*, although he was by that time no longer involved in the socialist movement. Tippett composed the piece between 1939 and 1941. He began work on it on the very first day of the Second World War, and its anti-war message is prominent throughout. He was inspired in particular by the tragic fate of Herschel Grynszpan, a 17-year-old Jewish refugee in Paris who sought to protest the vicious antisemitism of the Nazis by assassinating a German diplomat. The Hitler regime responded to this courageous if misguided act of individual terror by unleashing the notorious *Kristallnacht* pogrom throughout Germany on November 9, 1938.

While clearly expressing support and sympathy for Jews facing persecution at the hands of the Nazis, Tippett's libretto for *A Child of Our Time* is directed against all forms of oppression, including Jim Crow racism and segregation in the US. The libretto refers starkly and powerfully to "pogroms in the East, lynchings in the West." In a 1944 letter Tippett wrote that the oppressed referred to in the oratorio—"The scapegoat! The child of our time"—included "Jews, Negroes—and in my opinion political groups like anarchists, Trotskyists."

The oratorio draws upon the three-part format used, for example, in Handel's *Messiah*, and its structure is also influenced by Bach's Passions. While relying heavily on classical forms, Tippett effectively integrated African American spirituals into the work, using them—including "Steal Away," "Deep River" and "Go Down, Moses"—for his chorales. The result is immediate and powerful, as Colin Davis explains.

Predictably, in the current cultural atmosphere dominated by identity politics, Tippett's use of spirituals has been labeled an example of "cultural appropriation." This claim is answered in the documentary by conductor Edwards as well as by pianist and composer David Owen Norris, who, discussing the theme of the fight against injustice, argues that Tippett sought to "stretch it across the world." Norris explains that Tippett's main source was *The Book of American Spirituals*, edited by the famous poet and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson. Norris quotes Johnson, almost 100 years ago, in words that could have been applied to Tippett: "I do not think the composers of any country have at their hand any mine of richer material than American composers have in the

spirituals."

While Tippett's political involvement in the 1930s did not continue, he never publicly repudiated his political past, and wrote about it briefly in his autobiography, published more than 50 years later. His humane and principled beliefs led him—from a pacifist standpoint—to refuse to fight on behalf of British imperialism in WWII, for which he, along with Franks, was imprisoned for several months in 1943.

Tippett writes in his autobiography about a meeting with Franks in 1985, when Franks would have been 77 and Tippett 82: "It was a fine Sunday morning and Wilf took me out for a stroll in the park. We were late back, for we became deeply embroiled in a political argument: Marxism had remained for Wilf a vivid reality." It clearly was not such a reality for Tippett by that time, but he still retained an element of his youthful interest.

This fuller appreciation of Tippett's life is rejected by Oliver Soden, one of Tippett's biographers and also a co-producer of the BBC film. Soden takes a cynical and somewhat tawdry approach, including a sneering anti-communism, which detracts greatly from the program's positive qualities. He heaps scorn on Tippett's left-wing views. According to Soden, Tippett's development was "thrown off course" by his interest in socialism. He caricatures Marxism, ignoring the role of the mass working class movement, mockingly referring to "machine guns ... against the bourgeoisie."

Soden claims that Tippett's rejection of Stalinism and his agreement with Trotsky's criticisms was jumping "from the frying pan into the fire"—in other words there was no difference, according to this "expert," between the October Revolution led by Lenin and Trotsky, and the Stalinist counterrevolution of the 1930s that executed virtually the entire surviving leadership of the revolution of 1917.

According to Soden, *Robin Hood*'s reference to a "ten-year plan" is really meant to refer to "Uncle Joe" (Stalin). The Five-Year Plan was "specifically Stalinist," says Soden. In fact, it was Trotsky, in 1925, a year after Lenin's death, who proposed what would become the basis of the Five-Year Plans: rapid industrialization and collectivization of agriculture, policies that were monstrously distorted by the Stalinist bureaucracy when it embarked on its ultra-left "Third Period." There is of course a fundamental difference between democratic planning with the full participation of the working class and the bureaucratic Stalinist variety, but this is of no concern to Soden.

This section of the BBC film places its emphasis on "psychobiography," focusing on Tippett's several long-term relationships. The one relationship virtually ignored is that with Franks, to whom Tippett dedicated his String Quartet No. 1, the first performance of which, in December 1935, gained the composer's first public recognition. Franks' influence was important for his music, and he helped shape Tippett's concern with the struggle against oppression and injustice. As longtime friend and colleague Edwards explains, the "longing for a better world" was an "ache that never entirely left Michael."

Tippett became respected and to some extent officially venerated in his later years. As the film describes, he occasionally composed works with his own librettos, with "pop" references (the massive choral work, *The Mask of Time*, from 1982) that call to mind some of the quite uneven later work of Leonard Bernstein, such as his *Mass*. At the same time, he continued to compose more "difficult" works, like the String Quartet No. 4, from 1978.

In his last decade, Tippett suffered some of the afflictions of old age, the gradual loss of his middle vision being the most frustrating, since it hindered (but did not halt) his work of musical composition. He was closely associated with the beloved and famous Lindsay String Quartet, which was active between 1965 and 2005, and for whom he composed several of his string quartets, including the final Quartet No. 5, in 1991. The closing minutes of the film include brief passages from this quartet

and, fittingly, from the closing section of *A Child of Our Time*.

Any conscientious examination of Tippett's long career must inevitably make reference to his longstanding egalitarian and humanist beliefs, as well as his relatively brief association with Marxism and Trotskyism as a young man. It is this outward-looking character of Tippett, though accompanied later in life by indications of pessimism, that is summed up by conductor Martyn Brabbins in the documentary: "He didn't just write pretty music. He wrote music from the perspective of understanding the complexity of life in the 20th century."

Michael Tippett: The Shadow and the Light is available on BBC iPlayer in the UK.



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