

Press Articles:

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By John Bridcut

My first encounter with Michael Tippett was like jumping in at the deep end, without being sure I could swim. The relatively few people who have tackled his fiendishly difficult cantata *The Vision of Saint Augustine* would probably say the same.

It was the summer of 1971: Tippett was to conduct only the fourth performance of this work, and then record it, with the London Symphony Orchestra and its chorus, in which I was a teenage tenor. At school, I had enjoyed singing the spirituals from his early oratorio *A Child of Our Time*, but *The Vision* was something quite different.

In preparing my documentary *Michael Tippett: The Shadow and The Light*, I was determined to include part of this uncompromising, transcendental work, as it depicts better than anything else his appetite for ecstasy. By setting words from St Augustine's *Confessions*, Tippett had created his most spiritual piece, culminating in choral glossolalia (getting the choir to "speak in tongues" was surely a first, but he loved to experiment). It coalesces into a triumphant verse from Psalm 24: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors..."

"What better climax", Tippett delightedly told us in rehearsal, "could I have chosen at that point?" But, as its conductor in my film, Harish Shankar, shrewdly observed, he omits the rest of the verse: "...and the King of glory shall come in". One step too far, perhaps, for this avowed agnostic.

Tippett's long life spanned almost the whole of the 20th century. But his musical language dived back into previous centuries – to Orlando Gibbons, Thomas Tallis and the rhythms of Elizabethan England, and to Bach and Handel as well. He imbibed elements of Hindemith and Stravinsky, and Beethoven, his god, was never far away. In looking to the future, he steered clear of serialism or electronic music, forging his own distinctive sound and ideas – whether the "breathing" effect in his fourth symphony, or the rototom drums that interrupt his iridescent swan song, *The Rose Lake*.



The Liberator from Blake's 7, the show which prompted ideas for his opera New Year. An omnivorous approach to television played its part: Jacob Bronowski's series The Ascent of Man inspired his vast choral work The Mask of Time. But he was equally at home with Taggart, Dallas or Blake's 7 (which prompted ideas for his final opera, New Year). His two devoted housekeepers remember his passion for TV: "Oh, love, it was fantastic last night – those singing monkeys!"

For years, Josey and Heather kept Tippett fed and watered at his Wiltshire hideaway, Nocketts, where he devoted mornings to composition, achieving only one or two bars a day – without the facility that he so much admired in his younger contemporary, Benjamin Britten. Yet he completed five symphonies, five operas, two concertos, five string quartets, three big choral works and much more.

He had been slow off the mark, distracted by his youthful obsession with Trotskyism. Thanks to Oliver Soden and his magisterial biography of the composer, we unearthed new footage of him rehearsing his early opera Robin Hood, written in 1934 for unemployed miners at workcamps in north-east England. He looks and sounds quite the prep-school master he was then – a far cry from the eccentrically dressed and sockless grand old man he became, who so nonplussed the lunchtime waiters in the Savoy Grill that they hid him behind a pillar.

Preparing a Tippett opera, his publisher Sally Groves recalls, was as complex as building a ship, even though the manuscript reached the publishers only page by page. When the ship had sailed, he almost forsook ownership of it (again unlike Britten, who remained proprietorial till the end). "Is this an E flat, Michael, or should it be E natural?", the conductor Andrew Davis asked. "I don't know, love," came the helpful reply: "I wrote it so long ago, I can't remember!"



'I wrote it so long ago, I can't remember': Michael Tippett in December 1974 CREDIT: Don Smith/Radio Times/Getty Images

He never made it easy for players or singers, for whom breezing through a Tippett piece in one rehearsal was out of the question. “The number of notes,” said his champion Colin Davis, “is utterly bewildering!” The second symphony’s premiere in 1958 broke down a few minutes in and the conductor, Adrian Boult, had to apologise to the audience and start again.

For the vast choral piece, *The Mask of Time*, Andrew Davis advised a reluctant chorus master in America to start rehearsals 18 months ahead: in the eventual concert, his worry was not so much that the chorus might come in on the wrong notes, but that it wouldn’t come in at all. “What could I do,” he said, “except pray?!”

Tippett himself found his music tough to conduct. The American tenor Tom Randle had the nerve to demonstrate to the composer how to conduct four in a bar. My own memory of singing under Tippett in 1971 is that his elusive beat could be found somewhere between his baton, his elbow and his shoulder: indeed there was one heartstopping moment near the end of the concert when the whole piece was coming apart. Providentially, Tippett had scored one bar’s “general pause” at that very point, so with a huge hand-swipe he saved the day.

Indeed, the rewards of persevering through all the difficulties are substantial. The sprung rhythms of the *Concerto for Double String Orchestra*; the exhilaration of his first mature opera *The Midsummer Marriage*; the brittle excitement of his second, *King Priam*; the exuberance of his *Corelli Fantasia*; the bouncing trampoline that opens the second symphony – these are triumphs of 20th-century music.



For the documentary, The BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra (in a shamefully rare appearance on network television) took Tippett in their virtuosic stride. Glasgow's amateur Bearsden Choir rose magnificently to the challenge of his angular choral lines.

Tippett believed that the embrace of both shadow and light was essential to humanity, and he himself exemplified this creed. The irrepressible optimism of his music is darkened by the tragedies of his personal life. His intimate relationship with Francesca Allinson before and during the war ended abruptly with her suicide, and his later long-term partner, the artist Karl Hawker, felt betrayed, and years after their split also took his own life. Tippett was always, as Oliver Soden says, "adulterous... to the music".

"I would know my shadow and my light" are his own words in the work that made his name in 1944, *A Child of Our Time*. It was inspiring to film sections of it in February in the unlikely setting of Glasgow's Old Fruitmarket, after three Covid-related delays across three years. It's not a perfect work, but it finds its context unerringly in every generation – whether the Nazis' persecution of Jews, or racial segregation in America, the Bucha massacre in Ukraine, or refugees seeking asylum across Europe. Overwhelming in its power, it stirs the soul. As the conductor Martyn Brabbins says, for those new to Tippett it's the perfect place to start. Not the deep end, for certain.