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TIPPETT AND "THE KNOT GARDEN"

Operatic drama has been central to Michael Tippett's creative output since A Child of Our Time. As with many of Handel's, Tippett's oratorio is not far removed from theatrical expression. The operas - The Midsummer Marriage, King Priam and The Knot Garden - respectively embody the most crucial aspects of his development: regeneration from traditional precepts, exploration, and accumulation and synthesis. Each of Tippett's operas represents a culmination (the closest comparison that comes to mind is Busoni and Doktor Faust) but each also is a beginning and propagates smaller works employing similar techniques or developing central or related ideas. The Midsummer Marriage, completed in 1952, spawned the Piano Concerto and the Sonata for Four Horns (both 1955), King Priam (1961) the Songs for Achilles (1961), the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis, the Second Piano Sonata (both 1962) and the Concerto for Orchestra (1963).

Tippett's other central concern has been abstract symphony/sonata and inevitably the products of this have overlapped with the chippings from his operatic workbench. The Second Symphony was the turning-point; the need for a change of style created by King Priam provided the impetus for exploration and the Second Piano Sonata and the first movement of the Concerto for Orchestra were the most radical outcomes of his experiments in formal procedures. Now, after The Vision of Saint Augustine (1965) - a work I believe it will be exceedingly difficult to assess properly for some time yet - we have The Knot Garden and the Third Symphony.

The recent Covent Garden revival of the opera (December 6), coming between the third (at the Proms) and fourth (BBCSO, RFH, Feb. 14) performances of the new symphony, has given us the chance to estimate the present state and relationship of Tippett's two fundamental concerns. Certainly the opportunity to do so could not have been improved on. Surely four performances within eight months must be something of a record for a major new symphonic work? Critics who care about such things have had an unprecedented opportunity to avoid a hasty judgement of the Third Symphony; the increasing confidence of the LSO and Colin Davis in the work indicated the success of concentrated attention. Amazingly, the BBC orchestra turned in an equally confident first stab at the piece on February 14 (only Margaret Kingsley disappointed to any degree), but of course they did have the indefatigable Davis in charge.

Davis is undoubtedly one of the stars of The Knot Garden. A striking feature of the revival was the wealth of orchestral detail that penetrated Tippett's dense textures. A great deal of that detail provides the musical underlining to the drama's psychological manoeuvring. However, what with one hand Davis winningly provides, with the other he sometimes takes away: singers' words were

occasionally over-powered by orchestral sound. The cast for the revival had generally improved (if that's possible) on their former excellence, and, probably thanks to a production 're-think' by Ande Anderson, seemed far more relaxed and consequently brought greater flexibility to the staging. The one newcomer, Katherine Pring, made Thea a more vulnerable yet (curiously) more positive figure than Yvonne Minton had previously. This, as has been remarked elsewhere, inclines to suggest Thea as the central character, though, with a different emphasis, the same might happen with any of the others.

Of course the kernel of The Knot Garden, the central 'problem', is the friction in Thea and Faber's marriage. It is resolved not in direct confrontation but by holding a mirror to the other characters' third act charades. As the psychoanalyst, Mangus, remarks, the others are merely pawns. Thea greets the resolution with a key aria, florid and almost ecstatically relieved.

Apart from Thea, the only other character to remain outside the Charade is Denise, Thea's sister, 'a dedicated freedom-fighter'. She could not have received stronger characterisation than she did, both musically and dramatically at Covent Garden, from the marvellous Josephine Barstow. Yet Denise, strongly characterised as she is, seems unlikely ever to become the central character. Nevertheless, there is a strong case for suggesting her, if not as central, then as the dramatic and musical catalyst, far more so than the obvious candidate, Mangus, turns out to be.

Denise is the last of the seven characters to appear. The others have reacted to each other until then simply in duos and trios, nothing larger and never concerted. Potential ensembles that would have released tension built up by the characters' interaction have constantly been thwarted. When Denise enters, 'half-majestic, half-sinister.... twisted or otherwise disfigured from the effects of torture....she entirely dominates the stage'. With her long, jagged and impassioned aria she dominates the music and drama as well, screwing the tension to the point of release for all except herself: the blues sequence that ends Act I in which each expresses his or her situation or dilemma. From that point on Denise is not a foreground figure, yet in Act II her strength influences Thea, Faber and Mel directly and Dov (through Mel) and Flora (through Thea and Faber) indirectly. Again, she precipitates tension (the Thea-Faber confrontation) and release (Mel's sudden remembrance of external identity amid personal confusion in Scene 7). Only once, in the charade of Act III, is her self-possession disturbed, when she becomes, momentarily, a character with a dilemma (Mel's homosexual relationship with Dov) rather than a catalyst. Her equilibrium and independence, it seems, are soon restored: at the end it is Mel who goes with Denise, not vice-versa.

I have developed this at length since it seems to me that Denise is Tippett's representative on stage. Her social conscience and personal experience move the others to self-examination in the Act I blues; all the time they have her high standards to live up to.

The blues she provokes is the most obvious link with the Third Symphony and its vocal finale for soprano solo. To my mind, the soprano soloist is Denise; just as Tippett seems to have found it necessary to develop Dov in Songs for Dov (he is certainly undercharacterised in the opera), so we see Denise's compassionate, care-worn view extended in the symphony's blues. Some commentators have seen little in common between the two works apart from the blues, but with repeated hearings of both works a large amount of cross-reference emerges. The most significant feature in common is this 'accumulation and synthesis' mentioned earlier. To match The Knot Garden's 'magpie' libretto, Tippett has accumulated a myriad of musical references, gleaned from his own development and from any stylistic element that suits his purpose or has special associations for him. The opera being a more suitable structure, the references are wider and more obvious than those of the symphony. Reminiscences and quotes of his own and other people's music in the opera have dramatic point and purpose. However, it must be said that the first act is entirely original, presenting characters with their important accompanying musical figures and creating a unique, personal blues idiom for the finale that jars not for musical reasons (except that it's over-complex) but only in its dated jazz language.

The most striking references occur in Act II which is the act most concerned with the characters' thoughts and fears; thus, free association is musically and dramatically appropriate. The significance of the instances I isolate here is not always clear (nor need there be any significance) but the strength and importance of these is that all are easily perceived after one or two hearings, particularly by someone acquainted with Tippett's other works.

The striking opening horn motif to the Second Symphony is recalled in the very first scene of Act II (Thea and Denise). The prominent strains of 'We shall overcome' pour warmly from beneath the rather Ivesian string texture of Scene 7, underlining Denise's convictions and moving Mel, it seems, to resolve his dilemma. Even more prominent is Flora's rendering of Schubert's 'Die liebe Farbe', magically 'translated' by Tippett as Dov translates; the wholesale lifting of a Schubert lied may offend some but it is difficult to deny its dramatic effect. Flora is still 'little-girl-lost', unsure of herself, a trifle unimaginative. Her 'party-piece' contrasts vividly with Dov the musician's original, outgoing, yet deeply personal song that follows.

Is it also too fanciful to suggest two, more tenuous, references in Act II? Dov's consoling of Flora after the *mêlée* of the labyrinth has subsided is surely a reminiscence of Ellen's plea to Grimes after his 'mad scene' in Act III of *Peter Grimes*; and am I alone in hearing the single piano chord (G major, first inversion) that punctuates the end of Dov's Schubert 'translation' as a peculiarly Beethovenian chord, straight out of the Fourth Concerto? (Or am I just remembering the influence of that concerto on Tippett's own?) The most substantial self-quotation is at the 'lights-up' confrontation with the audience by Mangus. The *Tempest* charades have been interrupted but they echo on in music from *Songs for Ariel* (written in 1962).

The world of the symphony is recognisably the same as that of the opera. To take just three instances: the opera's 'Dissolves' relate directly in technique and effect to the Ivesian third movement of the symphony with its simultaneous five different types of music; some of the harsh brass and percussion interruptions in Denise's Act I aria have more than a cursory relationship to parts of the symphony's first movement; and the rocking bass clarinet figure to which Dov comforts Flora in Act II reappears as underlay to the 'I gave him milk and kisses' refrain in the symphony's third blues.

Perhaps the greatest shock that the symphony affords to the system is the triple quotation from Beethoven's *Choral*. One can understand the extra-musical logic from Tippett's point of view and the coherence of the final blues is quite substantially achieved through that very exciting distillation of Beethovenian dialect. But there is a marked lack of musical logic about the use of Beethoven's discordant flourish as dismissive gesture to Tippett's first three movements.

Overall, from both opera and symphony, one is left with an impression of Tippett's work process as a collage or even a pyramid of images. This is inevitably the product of his trend towards more precise statement (especially dramatic statement), towards a more careful balance between idea and expression - both the result of a desire for greater ease of communication. Ironically, in this period of accumulation and synthesis Tippett may well alienate many listeners but in the end his music will be unquestionably richer still.

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