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Bowen on Tippett

Meirion Bowen, *Michael Tippett* (London: Robson Books, 1982), £7.95

In Britain it is quite easy to become acquainted with the music of Michael Tippett, by listening to the radio and making use of the record and music collections provided in public libraries. The situation in North America is very different. With few exceptions it is only in large university music libraries that one can find a good selection of Tippett's scores and recordings, and anyone who does not have access to such a library will stand little chance of experiencing the full range of his achievement. I know two generally well-informed American musicians, both of whom regard Tippett as a great composer: one of them has heard only the Concerto for Double String Orchestra and the other knows only the Third Symphony. For them and others like them a self-contained introductory study of Tippett's music would offer an overview that they have no means of achieving by their own researches.

Meirion Bowen's *Michael Tippett*, one of the first volumes in Robson's new series 'The Contemporary Composer', is designed to be 'readily accessible to the student and interested layman alike'. It would seem from this that it aims at the same general class of readers as David Matthews in his *Michael Tippett: an Introductory Study* (London: Faber, 1980), but closer examination reveals that this is not really the case. For one thing, some of Bowen's musical discussion demands a fairly sophisticated degree of musical knowledge. He does include 'A Glossary of Technical Terms' but this is of limited usefulness and only emphasises Bowen's indecision about the level of musical awareness required in his audience: the reader who needs definitions of 'oratorio' and 'recitative' is unlikely to know what a canon is either, but this term goes unexplained; and anyone who needs definitions of any such terms will not get far with Bowen's analyses. A further limitation of the book's usefulness as an introduction to Tippett is the absence of clear synopses of Tippett's operas—Bowen seems to suppose that the reader already knows the stories.¹ Finally, although there are 28 music examples, most of them are extremely brief, and for much of the time reference to the scores is essential if the reader is to follow Bowen's train of thought. In this respect Matthews's study, which has several very lengthy music examples, is a better introduction for the musically literate reader who is not already familiar with Tippett's style.

It is obvious, then, that Bowen's book aims a bit higher than Matthews's and, considered on that level, it is excellent. The chapters on the music are arranged neither chronologically nor by genre, but rather by theme, with some works discussed in more than one section. Chapter 7, 'Form and Fantasy', is especially good in its lucid presentation of the various formal procedures Tippett has employed in his large-scale works. Bowen contrasts three basic formal principles, which he calls 'sonata', 'fantasia', and 'mosaic' styles, and discusses relatively pure examples of each, before going on to tackle the problem of the interaction of these basically opposed techniques in many of Tippett's most complex works.

The following chapter, 'Time and Eternity', contains several pages on *The Vision of Saint Augustine*. Some of Bowen's most difficult as well as most illuminating writing is found here. He demonstrates that while a superficial examination of the score, with its lay-out in short sections in 14 different tempos, would lead one to assume that it is a sectional, 'mosaic'-style work like the Second Piano Sonata, the way in which the material is handled, with certain key motivic and harmonic formations developed through various stages of elaboration from section to section, creates a totally different effect. Bowen carefully traces some of the most significant strands in the resulting musical web and is particularly impressive in his correlation of the musical development with the progress of the text.² I cannot imagine that even the most devoted admirer of this work will not have his appreciation of it deepened by spending an hour or so reading Bowen's analysis and tracking down all his references in the score.

I now turn to criticisms of specific points raised by Bowen's book. Although I shall discuss some of them at length, proposing alternative interpretations of my own, I want to make clear that they concern only a small proportion of what Bowen writes about, and are not meant to reflect negatively on the overall high quality of his work.

On pp.110 and 111 Bowen gives a table presenting the order of elements appearing in Tippett's Second Piano Sonata. The duration of each segment is given in number of bars, a procedure I find somewhat misleading as the bars are of many different lengths and of eight different tempos ranging from $\text{♩} = 40$ to $\text{♩} = 200$ (the shortest bar lasts less than 0.9" while the longest lasts 4.5"). Bowen does not try to draw any conclusions from his numbers, so no damage is done. He does, however, divide the piece into eight sections, each containing between one and 18 of the segments; nowhere does he give his criteria for defining the beginning of a new section, nor are they apparent from his table. The method employed results in an oversimplification of the structure of the piece. It is important to recognise that many of the segments begin by picking up a train of thought that started in an earlier segment in the same tempo.³ Furthermore, the important structural divisions of the piece do not necessarily occur at the point where a new segment begins. The arrival of the 'dolce cantabile' theme in bar 34 is a particularly clear example. The first appearance of Tempo 4 (bars 15-20) attempts a lead-in to this theme. The 'leggero scorrevole' music begins, however, at the 'wrong' pitch level and goes astray harmonically on the sixth quaver of bar 18, to be cut off at the end of bar 20. The segment in Tempo 5 intervenes, and in bar 30 (which Bowen calls the beginning of section B) the 'leggero scorrevole' material is picked up again, at a new pitch level and with slightly different harmonic implications; this time it leads to a major point of arrival in bar 34, the appearance of the 'dolce cantabile' theme. The sense of 'structural downbeat' that occurs here leads me to regard this, rather than bar 30, as the beginning of a new section.

On p.118 Bowen gives an outline of the sequence of segments in the opening movement of Tippett's Third Symphony. In this movement, which features the alternation and eventual combination of two types of music in different tempos, the bars—unlike those of the Second Piano Sonata—are all of the same duration⁴ so that tabular representation can vividly show one feature of the large-scale organisation of the movement. Unfortunately some misprints have crept into Bowen's table, some numbers are wrong and others are printed in the wrong order. I also think

that it is a mistake to split up the final Tempo 2 segment into two parts (the second beginning at fig.87), as an important feature of the combination of tempos is the listener's sense that the Tempo 2 music continues while the Tempo 1 material is brought in against it. Bowen's table also obscures the fact that the segments of each tempo get progressively longer until the 'early' arrival of the final segment of Tempo 1. I would therefore summarise the movement as follows (the figures show numbers of bars in each segment):

Tempo 1 'Arrest'	6	9	23	46	96	67
Tempo 2 'Movement'	9	17	54*	90	$\frac{30 + 67}{97}$	

*includes 2 bars of 2/4

Bowen, unlike Matthews who is almost consistently ecstatic in his praise, has quite severe reservations about some of Tippett's works. I think that at least one of his adverse judgments, that of *The Ice Break*, should not go unchallenged, especially as his low opinion of the work is so widely shared. I must preface my remarks with the admission that I know *The Ice Break* only from a study of the score—I have seen none of the productions; while this might seem to be a liability, I believe that it is just as likely to be an advantage. Tippett's stage directions for much of the opera are quite minimal, so the producer is faced with the problem of having to invent much action in order to realise the composer's sketchy indications.⁵ I think it possible that Bowen sometimes mistakes inadequacies of the productions he has seen for flaws in the opera itself.

Bowen has two principal complaints about *The Ice Break*: he considers that the characterisation (except for Hannah) relies on stereotypes and that the Astron scene (Act 3 scene 5) is a failure. Regarding the first problem he writes:

It is probably a weakness of Tippett's method that a number of figures here are only the sum of their parts. Their various traits are not fused, their private and public behaviour do not coalesce. They are in part prisoners of Tippett's theme. [p.87]

This is severe criticism indeed. In Tippett's defence I can only state that from my study of the score I can clearly see opportunities for talented performers, working in a production sympathetic to the composer's aims, to bring some very credible characters to life on the stage.

Bowen remarks about the Astron scene:

In *The Ice Break*, Astron . . . brings the opera to its intended climax of revelation in the scene entitled *The Psychedelic Trip*. Unfortunately, this scene does not live up to its aims. The flow of lyricism characteristic of Tippett's music in all such visionary episodes is subverted by the restless tempo and fragmented outline of the music . . . The scene is one of Tippett's few failures in a domain where normally he enjoys prodigious success. [pp.135-6]

I think that here Bowen has misread the purpose of the scene: in order to understand it one must see its place in the larger design. The third act emphasises for the most part very intense individual experiences. The Astron scene is, in its immediate context, an interruption of the principal dramatic argument. The music at the beginning of scene 6 picks up the same tempo and much of the musical content of scene 4. Dramatically, too, the Astron scene is meant more as a comic intermezzo than as the 'climax of revelation'. One of the principal themes of the opera is the submerging of individual personality in the crowd. Before Act 3 scene 5 the chorus was last involved in

the mindless violence of the race riot in Act 2; in the Astron scene their mood, though certainly more pacific, is just as mindless. Once again, individual personality is suppressed, this time in the drug-induced quest for revelation. The revelation, when it comes, takes the form of Astron's two platitudes, each greeted with extravagant expressions of awe by the chorus. (There is a definite element of parody in the choral reactions at figs.381 and 385; the brass writing in the latter passage strikes me as something like self-parody on Tippett's part.)

That the scene cannot be regarded purely at the level of comic relief, however, is revealed in scene 8 when, at the climax of Yuri's operation, the 'chorus from the Paradise Garden whirls through the hospital like a Carnival rout. Somersaults and cart-wheels would be in order.'⁶ They sing Astron's second revelation, the hymn to spring. Clearly this is not a scene to be interpreted on the realistic level. Tippett is using, as he so often does, Blake's opposition of innocence and experience: the chorus in scene 5 can be understood as a representation of a state of unthinking innocence, a deliberate stunting of growth caused by the refusal to accept experience; the bell-ringing, cart-wheeling, spring-hymning crowd, running through the hospital as Yuri is 'reborn' from his cast, is an expression of innocence recaptured through experience, a visual and aural analogue to the transformation that Yuri and Lev are going through, which makes possible their reconciliation in the final scene.

Some small slips have crept into the text (especially where Roman numerals are concerned). Most of the music examples have been photocopied from the printed scores and it is time publishers realised that, if they are going to do this, care must be taken not to clip away essential information such as clefs (pp.66 and 75) and the keys of transposing instruments (the trumpets on p.60 are in B flat, the one on pp.149-50 is in C; the clarinet and bass clarinet on p.150 are in B flat). At the end of the book there is a section called 'Tippett in Interview' consisting of remarks by the composer from interviews covering the period from 1963 to 1980. I would have appreciated indications of when the various remarks were made since Tippett's views on some subjects may very well have changed over a 17-year period.

¹ They may be found, with some fascinating material on the genesis of *The Midsummer Marriage*, in Eric Walter White, *Tippett and his Operas* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1979).

² One quibble: the word 'tu', which the baritone ecstatically emphasises at fig.7 and which sets off the chorus's 'Deus, Creator omnium', surely refers to God, not to Monica, as Bowen states on p.137.

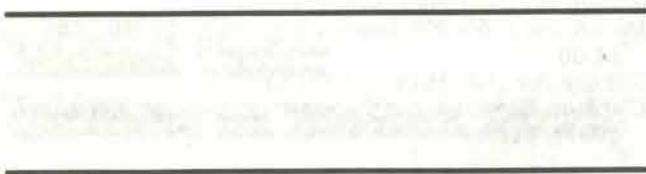
³ I do not mean to imply that the music is picked up again at exactly the same point at which it was cut off (the scissors-and-paste procedure described by Stravinsky in connection with the final section of his *Orpheus*). Instead, Tippett often creates the effect of a return to music that has been continuing somewhere else while the listener's attention was focused on the interrupting material; it is rather like jumping around the radio dial trying to listen to different pieces of music on eight different stations.

⁴ The 2/4 bars of Tempo 1 ($\downarrow = 88$) are equal in length to the 3/4 bars of Tempo 2 ($\downarrow = 132$). (The only exception occurs in one of the longer segments of Tempo 2: there are 2 bars of 2/4 between figs.27 and 28.)

⁵ The producer also has to find solutions to the problem of sudden changes from scenes of frantic mob activity to scenes of a private nature, featuring the soliloquies and conversations of the principal characters. These shifts, influenced by the cutting techniques of the cinema, are a

recurring feature of the opera. Solutions that rely on the virtuoso handling of stage machinery are unfortunately apt to distract the audience by drawing its attention to the producer's ingenuity when it should be focused on the intimate drama unfolding on the stage. I have the impression from reading reviews of the original production that the display of theatrical technology tended to dwarf the drama. I don't think that the problem is insoluble, but the solution must rely on theatrical imagination rather than technology.

⁶ Tippett's stage direction, Act 3 scene 8.



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