1 'Only half rebelling': tonal strategies, folksong and 'Englishness' in Tippett's Concerto for Double String Orchestra

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One of the greatest challenges facing musicologists is that of adequately interpreting the interpenetration of a composer's life and works. As the division of labour between music analysts and music historians makes plain (notwithstanding the potential deconstruction of this order by the emerging 'new' or 'critical' musicologies), explanation of the precise arrangement of actual notes and sounds in a musical work and reconstruction of the historical and biographical contingencies of its composition tend to resist conflation into a single narrative activity. I raise this dichotomy less to resolve than to explore it, in relation to Tippett's Concerto for Double String Orchestra (1938–9) and its status as the first work in the composer's *œuvre* to reveal his full creative stature. Decisive in the piece's aesthetic merit – happily reflected in its continuing popularity with audiences – is its cogent synthesis of a variety of musical influences that impinged on Tippett during the long process of his artistic maturation. Yet the dynamics of these musical forces, played out in the abstract inner space of an autonomous musical work, have their external counterpart in Tippett's socially rooted encounters with individual people – whom he knew either directly or through their writings – and with debates that shaped English musical culture at the time of his student years and the decade or so thereafter. In what follows I examine aspects of both the musical language of the Double Concerto and the historical and biographical context from which it emerged, in the belief that these separate accounts may be mutually illuminating. But the two resulting narratives will want to remain exactly that. Hence while I shall venture to examine possible points of contact between them, their discreteness will also need to be respected.

A potential interrelationship between these stories is none the less suggested by a cluster of issues that motivates the telling of both. These centre around Tippett's attitude towards folksong and towards the exponents of a pastoral aesthetic within the so-called English 'musical renaissance' in the first part of the twentieth century. The movement, of which Vaughan Williams was the figurehead, is known for having commandeered both folksong and a legacy of Tudor music as part of a discourse around 'Englishness' fuelled by anxieties over the hegemony of the Austro-German tradition within British musical life. It might be tempting to dismiss the influence on Tippett of the pastoral inclinations of his forebears. After all, he is known as a figure of more cosmopolitan leanings who learned German in order to read Goethe, who succumbed entirely to the music of Beethoven in his younger days, and whose later style reflects a receptiveness to the soundworlds of European modernism. Yet nearly all principal commentators on Tippett at some point confirm the view that, in Stephen Banfield's words, the composer was 'only half rebelling against Vaughan Williams and Holst in the 1930s':[1] both Ian Kemp and Arnold Whittall, for example, draw attention to folk-related elements in the Concerto for Double String Orchestra.[2] In this essay I shall attempt to investigate further Tippett's ambiguous connection with English pastoralism and the folksong traditions of the British Isles, and evaluate its implications for his compositional practice in the period of his first maturity.[3] Although there will not be space

1 Stephen Banfield, Introduction to *The Blackwell History of Music in Britain: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Stephen Banfield (Oxford, and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1995), 3.

2 See Ian Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1984), 138, 142–3,146; Arnold Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett: Studies in Themes and Techniques* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 54.

3 This account needs also to be seen in the context of a broader musicological reassessment of English pastoralism and the folksong revival. For example, a timely essay which sets the agenda for a re-evaluation of Vaughan Williams can be found in Alain Frogley's 'Constructing Englishness in music: national character and the reception of Ralph Vaughan Williams', in *Vaughan Williams Studies*, ed. Alain Frogley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–22; see also the chapters by Hugh Cobbe, Julian Onderdonk and Anthony Pople in the same volume. Paul Harrington's 'Holst and Vaughan Williams: radical pastoral', in *Music and the Politics of Culture*, ed. Christopher Norris (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), 106–27, addresses the influence of William Morris's socialism on both composers. Frogley underlines the role of this essay and others in offering a potential corrective to the casting of Vaughan Williams 'as a cosy Establishment figure playing opposite the left-wing young bloods of

to pursue all relevant avenues of inquiry, I hope nevertheless to introduce some new perspectives on the matter, both by piecing together items of evidence available from Tippett's own writings and elsewhere, and through an analysis of certain tonal strategies adopted within the Concerto for Double String Orchestra. To focus on tonality is not to belittle the relevance of other facets of the work, not least the originality of its rhythmic structures and their relationship to the English madrigal and consort fantasia styles; but as these have been discussed elsewhere, I will confine my argument to the less well explored issue of the Concerto's refashioning of a diatonic language. First, however, to matters of context.

I

At least five protagonists ought properly to feature in the complete historical account of Tippett's relationship with English pastoralism. Two of these, Vaughan Williams and Holst, were prominent figures on the staff of the Royal College of Music (one of the key institutions associated with the English musical renaissance) when Tippett was a student there between 1923 and 1928.[4] Two others, Francesca Allinson and Jeffrey Mark, were personal friends also dating back to his student days. They had strong interests in folk music of the British Isles, and it is probably not coincidental that they were the dedicatees of the two early published works by Tippett that feature folk-type material: the Sonata No. 1 for Piano (1936–8) and the Concerto for Double String Orchestra respectively. The fifth protagonist, Cecil Sharp, is significant because aspects of his construction (to use today's language) of English folk music were challenged in research by Allinson with which Tippett was also associated. Limitations of space, however, mean that not all these figures will receive their due here. Perhaps perversely, I will say little about the Percy Grainger-like figure of Jeffrey Mark, precisely because his significance for Tippett requires far fuller com-

Tippett and Britten in the 1930s' (Frogley, 'Constructing Englishness', 13). The present study attempts to demonstrate the need for a complementary reappraisal on Tippett's side of this perceived divide. For a recent reconsideration of Britten's stance towards English pastoralism see Philip Brett, 'Toeing the line', *The Musical Times* 137, No. 1843 (September 1996), 7–13.

4 See Robert Stradling and Meirion Hughes's account of the place of the RCM in the cultural politics of the time, in their book, *The English Musical Renaissance 1860–1940: Construction and Deconstruction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), especially part I, 'The history and politics of renaissance', 11–92.

mentary than is possible in this essay. Suffice it to say for now that his researches into Northumbrian and Scottish folk music, as well as his related activities as a composer and his belief in having found 'a new model for diatonicism', were in various ways influential on the composition of the Concerto for Double String Orchestra.[5]

Vaughan Williams and Holst also warrant greater coverage than is possible here, though what does call for comment is the way in which Tippett seemed to have projected onto them the different aspects of a personal ambivalence towards Englishness and English music. On the one hand, Vaughan Williams was a focus of anxious sentiments, possibly because of his position as a key figure of the contemporary cultural establishment. Tippett writes in his autobiography, 'at the RCM and subsequently, in English musical life in general, I found an anti-intellectualism which disturbed and irritated me. The Vaughan Williams School was a part of this.'[6] Tippett avoided studying composition with Vaughan Williams both for this reason and because 'his pupils simply wrote feeble, watered down V. W.'[7] This association of Englishness with intellectual and technical laxity is reinforced when Tippett later writes of his own development: 'it's the technical equipment that is growing intellectually maturer *& consequently un-English*, as per Bax – V. W. & Ireland etc.'[8] On the other hand, Holst is a figure whom Tippett admired with less reservation, perhaps because the former shared with Stravinsky a 'rootedness in national *and* European traditions'.[9] Tippett's enthusiastic comments about *The Hymn of Jesus*, in which he sang as a student, also reveal that he was attuned to the

5 See Michael Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues: An Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1991), 45–6; and Kemp, *Tippett*, 488–9 n. 12.

6 Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues*, 16. 7 Ibid., 15.

8 Letter to Francesca Allinson, dated March 1941; quoted in ibid., 136 (emphasis mine). It is important to add the caveat that Tippett's self-distancing from Vaughan Williams on an artistic level does not seem to have been matched by any personal antipathy. Kemp (*Tippett*, 44) states that 'in general Vaughan Williams was a warm and fatherly figure with whom [Tippett] got on well enough' – evidenced, one might surmise, by the fact that Vaughan Williams spoke up for Tippett at the latter's trial as a conscientious objector in 1943. Nor should it be overlooked that Tippett mounted Vaughan Williams's opera *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains* as his first music-theatrical venture at Oxted in 1927.

9 Michael Tippett, 'Holst', in *Tippett on Music*, ed. Meirion Bowen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 75 (emphasis added). This essay is closely modelled on an earlier article by Tippett, 'Holst: figure of our time', *The Listener* 60 (1958), 800.

cultural vibrancy of the period: 'for those of us embarking on a musical career at that time, it was all part of the exciting spectrum of English musical life – later to be described as a "second Renaissance" in English music'.[10]

Tippett's stance towards these various aspects of English musical culture was in fact far from one of rejection. We might surmise that his reservations were directed less to the actual sound the music made, so to speak, than to its perceived technical limitations and ideological connotations.[11] Regarding folk music in particular, he seems to have reached a position during the course of the 1930s where both its potential for integration into a high-art aesthetic and its socio-cultural meanings could be reassessed and implemented. It is in this latter respect that his liaison with Francesca Allinson was important, and for this reason that she will become a focus for this study. Allinson, whom Tippett first came to know through his cousin, Phyllis Kemp, was a musician and aspirant writer, and although for a while she had a significant role in the composer's personal life,[12] it is her researches into folk music that are a more direct concern for our present purposes. Two further, related elements also feature in this story: a genre and a book. The genre was ballad opera, in which Tippett was involved practically as a composer and arranger in the late 1920s and 1930s; the book was a monograph by Allinson entitled *The Irish Contribution to English Traditional Tunes*, left uncompleted at the time of her tragic suicide in 1945.[13]

10 Tippett, 'Holst', in *Tippett on Music*, 71.

11 See Kemp, *Tippett*, 68–70.

12 For more details see: ibid., 25; Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues*, 17, 41–2, 56, 163–87; and my 'Tippett in and out of "Those Twentieth Century Blues": the context and significance of an autobiography', *Music & Letters* 74/3 (1993), 399–411.

13 The monograph is briefly mentioned by Kemp (see *Tippett*, 69, 488 n. 2), but much of the following discussion is based on direct consultation of the original manuscript of the unpublished text, lodged in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. The MS comprises three sections, all unfoliated: (1) an exchange of six letters between Tippett and Maud Karpeles (dated between 17 November 1964 and 28 January 1965), which documents the process that led to Allinson's manuscript being unearthed and presented to the library; (2) a looseleaf typescript of sections of the monograph itself, bearing the annotation 'master copy'; (3) a music MS book comprising groups of folk tunes to which Allinson refers in the text.

As implied, the typescript is incomplete. A table of contents lists seven chapters, but only the first two, accounting for a substantial part of the document, are presented in their entirety; extracts from the remaining chapters

A number of Tippett's early musico-dramatic ventures, all of which entail grass-roots community involvement, adopt ballad opera as their basic model. In this preoccupation *The Beggar's Opera* looms large. Tippett knew the work from his early days in London, and when he wanted to produce a ballad opera for his second season at Oxted he sought out an eighteenth-century edition of an opera in the same genre, *The Village Opera*. He made his own version of the piece, significantly recomposing part of it. Other ballad or folksong operas followed, with varying degrees of original compositional involvement. *The Beggar's Opera* itself and *Robin Hood* were produced at the Boosbeck work-camps in 1933 and 1934 respectively, and Allinson sang the role of Lucy in the former. *Robert of Sicily* was a play for children produced in 1938, for which Allinson 'helped . . . find the right [folk] tunes'[14] (a sequel, *Seven at One Stroke,* followed the next year, but appears to have been musically less consequential[15]).

The fact that ballad opera was the chief outlet for Tippett's interest in folk music might raise the question of whether the songs purveyed by the genre constituted 'authentic' folk material. However, the assumptions behind such reservations were exactly part of what Tippett and Allinson wanted to challenge, refuting certain ideological notions of purity that were at the heart of the English folksong revival, as most prominently promulgated by Cecil Sharp and Vaughan Williams. Sharp, in his seminal book *English Folk-song: Some Conclusions,* dismissed the folksongs which appear in *The Beggar's Opera* as 'well-nigh worthless' because of the 'devastating

form the rest of the typescript. In his correspondence with Karpeles, Tippett mentions the possible existence of a further copy which he describes as 'cleaner' and 'perhaps more definitive', but at that time it seems not to have come to light. A further collection of papers relating to the monograph was found during Tippett's final house-move; at the time of writing this study the supplementary material was still privately held, and I am indebted to Meirion Bowen for making it available to me. Unfortunately the newly surfaced material does little to fill in the gaps in the main MS: there are a few, non-consecutive pages of the seventh chapter, earlier drafts of fragments of chapters found in the main MS, another version of the tune book, and an index of tunes cited. More significant, however, are three differently typed transcriptions of comments on the book made by Vaughan Williams, and two letters from Oxford University Press: one to Allinson (dated 19 September 1944), and one to Tippett (dated 4 November 1947). From this correspondence it is clear that Allinson had sent a draft of at least part of the monograph for consideration for publication, and that Tippett did begin to follow up the process after her death, albeit to no avail.

14 Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues*, 57. 15 See Kemp, *Tippett*, 84.

hand of the editing musician'.[16] This was indicative of a more general aversion to traditional songs transmitted through the published page, which he contrasted against a putatively more authentic folksong transmitted entirely orally – an opposition which idealised both folksong and folk-singer. Although Sharp later slightly qualified his original formulation of this opposition as a difference between urban and rural cultures (in the light of comments from Vaughan Williams, as it turns out), he nevertheless retained the romantic notion of the unlettered peasant artist:

> Strictly speaking . . . the real antithesis is not between the music of the town and that of the country, but between that which is the product of the spontaneous and intuitive exercise of untrained faculties, and that which is due to the conscious and intentional use of faculties which have been especially cultivated and developed for the purpose.[17]

In her monograph *The Irish Contribution to English Traditional Tunes* – a project onto which Tippett was in some way co-opted – Allinson counters Sharp's claim that the edited, published tunes of the early English tradition are any less 'authentic' than those transmitted orally: 'we may be thankful', she writes, 'that cultivated society in general, pu[bl]ishers and makers of ballad opera in particular, valued our traditional tunes and knew how to put them to active use – a problem which we to-day are hard set to solve'.[18] The presence of such published songs within the traditional repertory is seen by her not as corruption of a pure 'peasant' song, but rather as indicating that 'they were sung by all classes of people and not by the peasantry alone'.[19] Whereas Sharp distinguished between earlier published collections of traditional tunes, such as William Chappell's *Popular Music of the Olden Time*, and the songs he collected in the field, Allinson makes an alternative interpretative demarcation, which in fact constitutes her book's main thesis. She holds that a distinction obtains *within* the collections made by late nineteenth-century collectors such as Sharp: a distinction between tunes 'that faithfully carry on the old tradition' (i.e. of the published songbook and ballad opera) and those characterised by 'the strangeness of their melodic line, of their form and of the emotions that they evoke'.[20] In short,

16 Cecil Sharp, *English Folk-song: Some Conclusions*, 1st edn (London: Simpkin/Novello, 1907), 114, 116; also quoted in chapter 2 of Allinson's monograph. 17 Sharp, *English Folk-song*, 4. 18 Allinson, chapter 2.
19 Ibid. 20 Ibid.

she construes the latter group as being of fundamentally different, specifically Irish, provenance, having entered the repertory during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when large numbers of Irish labourers emigrated to England. Technically, this distinction is manifested, in Allinson's view, in the modal characteristics of the tunes as well as their tendency to fall into ABBA or ABBC form.[21] Thus, she argues not only that one portion of the peasant songs collected by Sharp and others provides a living stylistic link with the tunes published in previous centuries, but also that the complementary portion develops from a Celtic tradition. Her challenge to Sharp's beliefs (and the whole nationalist edifice built on it) that these songs represented pure, quintessential Englishness is therefore forthright.[22]

Quite how far Tippett's role in Allinson's investigation extended is a matter of conjecture. In a letter to Maud Karpeles[23] he retrospectively describes himself as having been 'a kind of sitting collaborator' – which is probably accurate. On the one hand, it seems unlikely that he participated in the actual writing process. None of the annotations on Allinson's typescript is in his hand; indeed work on the text probably took place during the years of the Second World War, when Allinson moved out of London and the two kept in touch largely by letter.[24] On the other hand, Tippett was clearly interested in the issues and the manner of their argument: certain of his letters to Allinson include suggestions regarding both the content and the form of the monograph, as well as references to both '*our* contention' and '*our* book'[25] – all of which suggest at least a measure of identification with the project. The latter comment might indicate an intention to become more actively involved in the book's production, and

21 The question of the tunes' form is also reported by Kemp (*Tippett*, 69), who additionally recounts Allinson's refutation of Sharp's assertion that quintuple and septuple metres constituted essential features of English folksong. For references to both these features in Tippett's correspondence see Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues*, 127, 148.

22 Vaughan Willliams certainly seemed to have thought so. His comments on the draft monograph (found with the supplementary portion of the MS – see note 13 above) begin: 'this is not a merely academic question, the whole edifice of English music depends on it'. He continues: 'we cannot view this matter in a calm, detached manner, our very musical life seems to depend on it'.

23 Part of the exchange described in n. 13 above.

24 The address on the manuscript tune book accompanying the typescript is that of the Mill House, West Wickham, where Allinson is mentioned as residing in letters dating from the 1940s; see Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues*, 141, 152.

25 Ibid., 127, 129 (emphasis added).

from Allinson's request in her final letter to Tippett to 'give it the finishing touches & see it into print'[26] we may infer a level of familiarity with its contents and progress. As is known, however, he never did complete it: in the end (that is, after twenty years) he presented the unfinished manuscript to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library in Cecil Sharp House, London – the ironies of which have not been lost in accounts of the story.[27]

Whether Allinson's thesis regarding the provenance of English folk tunes was indeed correct is a moot point. In his correspondence with Karpeles, Tippett retrospectively admits to being persuaded that the theory was wrong (although, in mitigation, Karpeles's response stresses the problems of studying the folk music of a bilingual country).[28] What remains noteworthy none the less is the monograph's questioning of Sharp's romanticised view of folk music, and hence, implicitly, the entire hegemony of the English folk revival[29] and its associated school of composing. It is significant, though, that the Allinson–Tippett critique entails not a dismissal of the folksong enterprise, but an attempt to reconceive it from within. This finds a parallel in Tippett's attitude towards English musical traditions, which are not to be rejected in favour of some kind of internationalist agenda, but to be embraced without specious, nostalgic distinctions between urban and rural cultures. He defines his stance in a letter written to Allinson in 1941 regarding the folksong monograph:

> we shall probably eventually get a sort of ladder – the roots in romantic, immediate expression – what Sharp went to find – & the heaven of the ladder will be the classical, artistic, turned, articulated stuff. And what we shall seek to show is the elements wh[ich] were at work to form it: such as

26 Ibid., 185.
27 See ibid., 57. Although Tippett admitted to being 'rather dilatory about it', the correspondence found in the supplementary portion of the MS (see n. 13 above) suggests that he did at least make an attempt to follow up the possibilities for publication. Given the incomplete nature of the MS, it may well have been a case of providing rather more than 'finishing touches'.
28 Tippett–Karpeles correspondence (see n. 13 above), 25 and 28 January 1965.
29 Perhaps anticipating aspects of more recent critical studies, for example: Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993); Dave Harker, *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British 'Folksong' – 1700 to the Present Day* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985); and Stradling and Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance*.

> the necessary formulation of dancing, the influence of poetic forms, the artistic feeling in the composer. The B[eggar's] O[pera] is a good English work of art because it faces both ways – it protests against the excessive influence of the foreigner & the romantic inchoate expressiveness of the Sharp 'natural' peasant. Hence again we erect it (& it doesn't matter altogether how factual all this is) as a standard for our day. There *must* be cross-currents in art & tension – & again now there are 2 ways to face (if not 3!) – against the German *Schwermut*, against the jazz-nostalgia, against the Celtic Twilight. Positively, on the other hand, for roots in the 'town' & 'country' streams of English tradition, for balance between them, for full artistic integrity – & a historical immediate sense of the good models.
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> . . . It is not the 'country', as such, that we define against the 'town'. It is the nostalgic, vague hovering with the excellent quality of folk-expressiveness, as opposed to the *consciously* artistic articulation of it. Sharp was probably stymied before it. It got him on his weak, undeveloped side – so he either toned it up with jokey fortes, or tried to present it under the guise of the irrational peasant. We show, if we can, that in an articulated mastered form, it is just good, English, & highly presentable, differing in no necessary inferiority, or superiority, from the gay stuff. What we refuse is inchoate subjectiveness (except as folklore) & Sharp's subterfuges & lack of integrity, let alone maturity.[30]

Despite its obscurities, this statement gives a strong indication of where Tippett sees himself in relation to certain of the dominant discourses of contemporary English musical culture. On the one hand his is a position of non-alignment with any prevailing ideology: Sharp is castigated for his suspect view of the 'natural' peasant (no doubt for Tippett a further example of English intellectual flaccidity); Germanic modes of expression (a reference perhaps to Elgar and Richard Strauss) are also to be resisted; but 'jazz-nostalgia' (Walton and Lambert are presumably intended here) and the 'Celtic twilight' (Bax) are not seen as viable alternatives either. On the other hand, Tippett's position is still defined in relation to, rather than avoidance of, these ideologies – the key phrase is 'tension against'. His metaphor of a ladder as a mediating notion between orally transmitted folksong and 'classical, artistic, turned, articulated' musical material in fact suggests a value placed on a synthesis, emerging perhaps from the 'cross-currents' and 'tension' to which he refers. Particularly significant in this respect is his representation of *The Beggar's Opera* as an ideal model, exemplifying a dis-

30 Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues*, 128 (original emphases).