Introduction

A Child of Our Time is now widely recognised as a significant musical and extra-musical statement, a work that reflects its own historical moment and assumes a position of importance within Tippett's general stylistic and technical development. This was the work through which his own idiosyncratic yet effective relationship to the written word first emerged (a factor that was to become integral to Tippett's subsequent identity as a composer), and, in conjunction with the Concerto for Double String Orchestra (1938–39), it represents a new level of technical confidence and maturity. Yet within this new-found confidence there remains a sense of struggle, with Tippett's efforts to unify his disparate musical and extra-musical sources into a technically and aesthetically integrated whole seeming never quite to succeed. Nevertheless, it is through this apparent failure that the true essence of the work may finally emerge: a paradox that will be clarified through the consideration of the text and its musical representation. The critical and technical issues surrounding Tippett's attempts to impose unity over such a wide range of diverse sources will be illuminated at various points in the subsequent discussion.

Prior to this point in Tippett's career his music seemed to be searching for an appropriate context and direction, in terms of both formal processes and stylistic identity. His protracted apprenticeship has received a certain degree of consideration,[1] with the struggle to construct large-scale musical forms evident in both the first String Quartet (1935, rev. 1943) and the first Piano Sonata (1938). Within these works Tippett's developing relationship to pre-existing large-scale forms and their realisation comes increasingly into focus, as does his fascination with images of musical pasts, a preoccupation that becomes central to *A Child of Our Time.* Within this work the encounter with past images is

realised through both Tippett's own text and its musical representation: a process that often takes the form of references to pre-existing stylistic and formal sources, with the allusions to these images becoming a defining characteristic of the work. The emergence of an understanding of the work as defined essentially through its intertextuality, through the interaction of its text with other texts, will provide a certain degree of background for this study. The concept of intertextuality has evolved through literary theory, the most accessible discussion of the concept being provided by Judith Still and Michael Worton. Following reference to the importance of Julia Kristeva's seminal writing on intertextuality, they state:

> The theory of intertextuality insists that a text (for the moment to be understood in the narrower sense) cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system. This is for two reasons. Firstly, the writer is a reader of texts (in the broadest sense) before s/he is a creator of texts, and therefore the work of art is inevitably shot through with references, quotations and influences of every kind . . .
>
> Secondly, a text is available only through some process of reading; what is produced at the moment of reading is due to the cross-fertilisation of the packaged textual material (say, a book) by all the texts which the reader brings to it.[2]

Although the second of Worton and Still's conditions has a clear applicability to the interpretation of music, it is the first possibility, that which views the text as a product of its relationship to other texts, which I wish to appropriate as a loosely defined background to the subsequent discussion.

Central to the overview of the work will be the reference to Tippett's own written comments and recollections. Tippett, more than most composers, often sought clarification and justification through the written word, although with varying degrees of success; with specific relevance to *A Child of Our Time*, however, his published comments form a valuable source of insight.

1

Background

Tippett – politics – pacifism

> People come to pacifism for many reasons. My own conviction is based on the incompatibility of the acts of modern war with the concept I hold of what man is at all. That good men do these acts, I am well aware. But I hold their actions to spring from an inability or unwillingness to face the fact that modern wars debase our moral coinage to a greater degree than could be counterbalanced by political gains; so that the necessity to find other means of political struggle is absolute. That was certainly my conviction during the Second World War. My refusal to take part was thus for me inescapable, and my punishment with a relatively light term of imprisonment logical.[1]

Tippett's initial impulse to compose *A Child of Our Time* is widely understood as a reaction to an immediate historical event and a response to a more generalised predicament. However, beyond the specific circumstances of this work, Tippett was, and remained, a deeply conscious, committed composer, a figure who was always uniquely aware of his own position in relation to broader social, political and historical developments.

Throughout the 1930s Tippett's increasing awareness of the surrounding political climate had large-scale implications for both his own music and his relationship to a wider community. His understanding of the position of the composer within society first manifested itself through his involvement with amateur events at Oxted, the small town that was his home from 1929 to 1951. However, this involvement with community-based activities was gradually to take more explicitly political forms as the 1930s descended into an atmosphere of impending crisis. Tippett's increasing politicisation was accelerated through his involvement with the work-camps (a source of activity for the unemployed),

which allowed him to continue his interaction with amateur forces in a more politicised context. As a consequence of his participation in these activities he was invited to direct a group of unemployed musicians at Morley College. Thus began a long relationship between Tippett and the college, a relationship that would enable him to explore a diverse range of musical interests as well as providing a context for his own work.

His developing political concerns were to lead him in the direction of attempting to make specific statements through his work, the most overt example being the play *War Ramp*, which took the form of 'agitprop'. Performed in 1935, this play would seem to reflect Tippett's particular pacifist beliefs as well as his more general political concerns. The conclusion to the play's foreword sums up the nature of these concerns:

> The question we ask in this play is a serious one for us all. If the murderous weapons of war are to be forced once again into our hands, what are we going to do with them; where is the real enemy ?[2]

However, although Tippett was involved with a community as well as with the attempt to fuse the political and the musical, his engagement with organised political activity was to remain somewhat problematic. *War Ramp* was performed under the auspices of the Labour League of Youth, yet it was to the politics of Trotsky that Tippett was most attracted. This attraction was to lead to his brief membership of the British Communist Party and the optimistic illusion that he could convert it to the Trotskyist agenda:

> In the mid-1930s I was persuaded by Phyl [Phyllis Kemp] to read Marx, but found Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* more in tune with my thinking. Another book, John Reed's *Ten Days that shook the World* – an eyewitness account of the October Revolution by an American, which Trotsky approved – drew me in the direction of Trotskyism. I found Stalin antipathetic, inherently a tyrant. When Phyl persuaded me to join the British Communist Party, which was slavishly Stalinist, I agreed, thinking I would set about converting them to Trotskyism.[3]

This statement immediately reflects Tippett's own powerful and sincere outlook, an outlook that can at times seem excessively optimistic. It is difficult to speculate as to how close Tippett was, intellectually, to a Trotskyist ideology, but in the light of his existing and subsequent humanitarian concerns, it seems logical to suggest that he was attracted

by the seemingly relative openness of the Trotskyist project, rather than engaging intellectually with theories of the 'permanent revolution' or with the pragmatic consequences of a systematic political commitment. In any event his involvement was short-lived, as was his initial desire to project his political and social concerns through his work. It is notable that up to *A Child of Our Time,* his most successful works – String Quartet No. 1, Sonata No. 1 for Piano and the Concerto for Double String Orchestra – are all instrumental works that reflect an ongoing preoccupation with 'abstract' musical forms and genres. Nevertheless, it is clear that the interaction of the political and the musical leads directly to *A Child of Our Time*. Even if Tippett's direct involvement in organised politics was to be short-lived, his profoundly held commitment to pacifism was to remain constant throughout the rest of his life.

Tippett provides his own descriptive recollection of the initial motivations for *A Child of Our Time*:

> A whole succession of ideas and events impinged on the oratorio that I now began to formulate: most important of all was the shooting of a German diplomat in Paris by a 17-year old Jewish boy, Herschel Grynspan, and the terrible pogrom against the Jews that followed. Grynspan seemed to me the protagonist of a modern passion story – not of a man-god, but of a man as such. When Paul Dienes showed me a review in *The Times Literary Supplement* of Odon Von Horvath's recently translated short novel, *Ein Kind unserer Zeit* (A Child of Our Time), I knew that here I had a title that was absolutely right. I sent for it and discovered in it another of the many scapegoats I wished to commemorate – the unnamed, deranged soldier/murderer, who sleeps on a park bench in the snow, at the end, frozen to death like a snowman. The work began to come together with the sounds of the shot itself – prophetic of the immanent gunfire of the war – and the shattering of glass in the *Kristallnacht*.[4]

However, a statement by Tippett which is more contemporary with the final work attracts attention not only to the fate of Grynspan but also to the impact made by a radio broadcast of Berlioz's *L' Enfance du Christ*:

> I don't remember precisely how a *Child of Our Time* first came into my head . . . I can remember being much affected by Grynspan's shooting of vom Rath at the German Legation in Paris in the Autumn of '38. And I remember listening, on Christmas Day of that year, to the broadcast of

> Berlioz's lovely *Childhood of Christ*, and afterwards trying to think out what had become nowadays of the emotional power in the once universally accepted image of the Christ Child, a power which at one time could make all Europe bend its knee – at least for a season.[5]

However, although the tripartite shape of Berlioz's work could be seen in relation to the final outline of Tippett's oratorio, it does not function as a model in the way that Handel's *Messiah* and the Bach Passions will be seen to do. It is more in terms of providing an initial impulse, in conjunction with the Grynspan story, that it achieves a degree of significance.[6]

This convergence of events and ideas clearly has the figure of Herschel Grynspan at its centre, a figure who comes to symbolise individual tragedy subsumed within dramatically changing historical circumstances. Grynspan, a young German Jew of Polish origin, was living in Paris when, in August 1938, he was served with an expulsion order by the French authorities because he lacked the required permit for residency. After a period of being illegally concealed by relatives, he received news on 3 November from his sister informing him of his family's predicament following changing legal circumstances in Poland. In an act of frustration and protest, Grynspan went to the German Embassy in Paris and shot a German official, Ernst vom Rath. The historian Alan Bullock explains the background of mounting expectation leading towards this event, through the desire for just such a pretext, before outlining the true nature of the situation:

> The atmosphere of expectation . . . only needed an incident to produce an explosion. This was provided by the assassination of a German diplomat in Paris, vom Rath, on 7 November. The shots were fired by a seventeen-year-old Jew, Herschel Grünspan [Grynspan], in a despairing act of protest at the treatment of his parents and some fifty thousand other Polish Jews who were deported back to Poland, by the Gestapo, without notice. Grünspan's action was at once seized upon by Goebbels to create an atmosphere of crisis and tension. In a directive to all German newspapers, he instructed editors to see that the news of the attack should 'completely dominate the front page'. Comment must make clear that the attack would have the most serious consequences for the Jewish population.[7]

The response to this pretext by the Nazis was the unleashing of a pogrom, the so-called *Kristallnacht*. Tippett was to read of this event in

the press, most notably the coverage in the magazine *Picture Post*, and his reaction to the horror was to lead to his interpretation from the specificity of the event to part of a generalised statement of reconciliation ('to at last be whole') in the form of a large-scale oratorio.

Tippett began the actual composition of the work on 3 September 1939, the day the war began. In his autobiography he connects the convergence of these events with a profound turning point within his own psychology. Following consideration of the at times turbulent nature of his personal identity, he states:

> This was the turning point in the therapy. Running parallel was the worrying affair of what had happened to the imaginative life out of which the music must come. If I succeeded in analysing myself totally, I might lose the music. I was also concerned about the matter of individuation – about the four sides to yourself, as Jung would have depicted them. Then, three nights before war broke out, I had the classic dream of a forced death: I was going to be strangled by four men. I accepted it – I said, 'Let what must, happen' – and realised afterwards that I had turned a corner. A kind of rebirth was now happening. I stopped writing down my dreams. Three days later, on 3 September 1939, the war began: simultaneously, I started writing the music for *A Child of Our Time*.[8]

2

The text

Tippett – T. S. Eliot – allusion

Central to the development of the work as a whole and the text in particular was Tippett's association with T. S. Eliot. During his student days Tippett had familiarised himself with Eliot's poetry, which was to become a significant preoccupation along with Eliot's critical writings, with 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' providing a profound point of contact and resulting influence on Tippett's wider cultural horizons.[1] Eliot's concern with the so-called 'dissociation of sensibility' and his interpretation of what he considered as the resulting corruption of English poetic traditions resonated with Tippett's own involvement with earlier English musical styles and forms, particularly the music of Purcell.[2]

The personal association between Tippett and Eliot began in 1937 and developed into deep discussions concerning poetry and language, with Eliot acting as unofficial tutor for Tippett's wider intellectual and aesthetic development. According to Tippett,

> It was quite by accident that I came into contact with T. S. Eliot. Yet soon he was to turn into a sort of artistic mentor . . . Although we had no professional involvement, I managed to talk to Eliot extensively then about the nature of poetry and drama: matters which were deeply occupying his own mind at that time [i.e. 1936–8]. Our talks took place later in his room at Faber and Faber's. I would indicate that I'd like to see him, and he would generally invite me to tea. At these tea-time conversations he (above all others) helped me clarify my notions of the aesthetics of theatre and opera. Unwittingly, he became my spiritual father. Sometimes he even guided my reading. For instance, it was through Eliot, later, that I came to read and identify closely with Yeats.[3]

This clarification of his notions of the aesthetics of theatre and opera would not manifest itself directly until between 1946 and 1952 and the composition of *The Midsummer Marriage*. But given this point of intellectual contact between the two figures, it comes as no surprise that Tippett, as is widely known, sought Eliot's involvement in the construction of the text for *A Child of Our Time*. However, rather than providing a text as Tippett had suggested, Eliot finally encouraged him to construct his own. Again, Tippett provides his own description of the dialogue with Eliot:

> In the early days, before the war, I must have known Eliot better than I can now recall; for when I came to write *A Child of Our Time*, I plucked up courage to ask him if he would provide a text. This he agreed to do, as long as I gave him a precise scheme of musical numbers and an exact indication of the number and kinds of words I considered necessary for each musical section . . . I put down on paper for Eliot a 'scenario' under the title 'Sketch for a Modern Oratorio' (the final title of the piece had not then appeared). Eliot considered this sketch for some weeks, and then gave me the surprising advice to write all the words myself. He felt that the sketch was already a text in embryo (as, in fact, it was), and whatever words he, Eliot, wrote would be of such greater *poetic* quality they would 'stick out a mile'. While remaining true to his belief in the primacy of the *musical* imagination in opera and oratorio, he considered the *poetically* imaginative words of a real poet to be often unnecessary.[4]

This discovery of his own ability to generate text was the starting-point for a method of working that would extend across the rest of Tippett's career.

The sketch which Tippett refers to does in fact contain the final text in embryo; many of the most striking poetic images were already in place, as was the overall form. In the essay that would accompany the eventual publication of the sketch, and to which reference has already been made, Tippett makes the following interesting comparison between the sketch and the final version:

> Comparing the sketch with the published work, it is clear that I was able to set down straightaway a musico-dramatic scheme (of three parts, each containing several numbers) which could remain unchanged.[5]

This tripartite scheme does, as Tippett suggests, remain unchanged, reflecting the influence of Handel's *Messiah*, the significance of which will come into focus within the next chapter.

The sketch as now published consists of a short section of text with explanatory and descriptive comments on the left-hand page. The first entry consists of what will become the first lines of the final version with its accompanying explanation:

Part 1

1.

> This is to be a short constructed Chorus on a 'text', or two 'texts'. To last about a minute or more. Enough to set the mood of descent. The metaphor of winter and spring is perhaps a necessary one, as will be seen later.
>
> ('War broke. And now the winter of the world
> with perishing great darkness closes in')

The lines given in brackets are a quotation from Wilfred Owen's poem 'The Seed', a text which has obvious resonance for the subject matter of and motivations for *A Child of Our Time*. According to Tippett, 'I joined this notion of seasons in history with personal experience concerning the "dark" and the "shadow" in Jung's terminology, and then wrote for Eliot the two texts of Chorus 1 in my own over-simple words':

> The World turns on its dark side.
> It is winter.[6]

Tippett goes on to discuss the construction and presentation of the sketch:

> On the opposite left-hand page [see above], I explained discursively for Eliot what I needed, and quoted the lines from Wilfred Owen. I proceeded in this way for every number. I considered carefully the function of the proposed number, its duration, and so forth; invented or borrowed words that could stand as example; and wrote an explanation. Where I could think of no example, I wrote only the explanation and left the right-hand page free.[7]

What is most immediately apparent from this first example from the text and Tippett's description of the process is his relationship to existing texts ('invented or borrowed'): the reconstruction of Owen's words is