

Tippett: *A Child of Our Time*



Kenneth Gloag



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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 Grynszpan, and the terrible pogrom against the Jews that followed. Grynszpan 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 Grynszpan 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 Grynszpan’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