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Arnold Whittall
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Prologue

Benjamin Britten and Michael Tippett have already been the subject of several separate studies, the number of which can confidently be expected to increase with some rapidity. For this reason alone, it might seem sound economic sense to compress two books into one. Nevertheless, my intention is to offer one book about two composers, rather than two books in one, since I believe that Britten and Tippett complement and illuminate each other in striking and distinctive ways.

Precedents for such a double portrait, as a means of focusing on matters of similarity and contrast, are not hard to find, though the result, at least in studies of composers, has often run the risk of either diluting or exaggerating both the differences and the similarities. One of the most successful examples of the genre can be found outside music altogether: George Steiner's *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. An Essay in Contrast.*[1] My own title refers to Britten *and* Tippett, rather than Britten *or* Tippett, because my principal concern is with their responses to similar and, at times, identical situations and circumstances. And yet it may ultimately appear that my two subjects, for all their similarities, represent significantly different aspects of that 'relation to tradition' which no composer can wholly escape. As a result, the critic may come to develop a strong preference for one or the other. But the analyst may well feel a less pressing need to evaluate or discriminate: for him, the definition and interpretation of a composer's means and methods is a sufficiently demanding (and rewarding) task.

Comparisons – and judgements – are only too easy. But those compared and evaluated must be important and interesting enough, as well as sufficiently similar and different, to justify the kind of focused treatment which detaches them from their contemporaries and precursors, and yet implies that there is something special about their 'historical' significance. Steiner's choice was made in the belief that Tolstoy and Dostoevsky 'are the two greatest of novelists',[2] and his discussion centres on one crucial difference between them – what he calls at one point 'an inherent antagonism'.[3] Tolstoy, like Homer, is essentially an epic artist: Dostoevsky, like Shakespeare, essentially a dramatic artist. As Steiner elaborates the point, therefore, the two 'stand in contrareity', and this justifies his decision 'to consider their achievements and define the nature of their respective genius through contrast'.[4]

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Steiner's claims on behalf of his subject are contentiously but plausibly extreme. I would not claim that Tippett and Britten are 'the two greatest' of composers. But I do believe that they are the two best British composers of that first twentieth-century generation, born between 1900 and the outbreak of the First World War, and among the best of all composers born in the first two decades of the twentieth century. That, perhaps, is sufficient to justify the enterprise – if not to the composers themselves.

Evaluations, comparisons – the whole apparatus; does it mean anything to you? It doesn't to me, much . . . We have known each other now for more than twenty years; we have been very close often, at other times we have seemed to be moving in different directions. But whenever I see our names bracketed together (as they often are, I am glad to say) I am reminded of the spirit of courage and integrity, sympathy, gaiety and profound musical independence which is yours, and I am proud to call you my friend.[5]

In this tribute to Tippett on his sixtieth birthday, Britten expressed his intense dislike not only of criticism, but of the critical medium – words. 'Criticism likes to separate, to dislodge, to imply rivalries, to provoke jealousies', he wrote. And although Tippett has been far less wary about plunging into verbal expression, his greeting to Britten on the latter's fiftieth birthday similarly complains of 'the inability of so many music critics and others to distinguish between the facts of public acclaim and the pretensions (and maybe necessity) of value judgements'.[6] Britten's belief that 'criticism likes to separate' could well have arisen in part because the bracketing together of 'Britten-and-Tippett' was so often undertaken, even by enthusiasts, more from the desire to point up obvious differences than to explore more complex similarities. Perhaps the emphasis on contrast was encouraged by the common knowledge, from the early 1940s, that both men were pacifists. In one such early comparison, Edward Sackville West remarked that Tippett's music 'has none of the vivid colour, the immediate dramatic effectiveness, the winning sensuous beauty, of Britten's best work. Its strength is that of consistency and rational construction informed by an emotional and intransigent nature.'[7] At much the same time, Eric Blom described Tippett as 'perhaps the only one among the outstanding modern creative musical Englishmen who shows none of the leaning towards romanticism or nostalgia for the past discernible more or less clearly in others of similar standing, even in Britten, when all is said'.[8] And Wilfrid Mellers, while admitting that 'Britten approaches the setting of his native language with a sensitivity that rivals Tippett's', thought that

it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that Britten's development has been exactly opposite to Tippett's. Tippett started very tentatively and his career has been a continual probing outwards, an exploration intended to comprehend and

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reconcile ever more elements of his complex personality. Tippett's work is based on a struggle between spontaneous creativity and the modern self-consciousness in which each side must be accorded its rights. In Britten's work there is no struggle. He early acquired a virtuoso command of many – one nearly said all – stylizations; in his development he has learned to purge his language of extraneous elements, to make the stylization subservient to the musical purpose.[9]

Such summary judgements were rather easier to formulate in the 1940s than in later years, of course. And it has since become easier to observe certain common features; for example, Arthur Hutchings has noted that

despite the disparity of their ages, Tippett and Britten have temperamental affinities. They read more widely than most musicians and are interested in other arts than music. They differ greatly as composers yet are both attracted by subjects (in songs, operas or cantatas) dominated less by the expression of the primitive passions than by the pity, fear, disgust or amusement with which we contemplate their survival or perversion among supposedly civilized men.[10]

Direct comparison of the two is, no doubt, all the easier if the object is simply to observe parallels between personal circumstances – middle-class background, pacifism, sexual orientation – and the subject-matter of their compositions. Starting with the fact that, as David Matthews has put it, 'the two dominating English composers of our time were brought up within 40 miles of each other in the same county'[11] and were born a mere eight years apart, they can be shown as responding creatively and consistently to the various personal, national and international events which occurred in their lifetimes. On the technical level alone, these responses are of the greatest interest, and it is to matters of technique that this study is primarily addressed. Yet at the same time I have attempted to produce a reasonably comprehensive narrative, rather than a series of separate analytical commentaries. Although not every work by each composer is discussed in detail, and some are not even mentioned, the presentation tends more to the chronological than the generic, and the discussion is by no means exclusively 'analytical': hence the distinction in my title between themes and techniques. There is a certain amount of aesthetic comment and biographical information, even some literary criticism. But such elements form a background to the main area of discussion, and that area itself can be defined through some consideration of the ways in which technical developments in music during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can best be verbally explored.

The principal change in the language of music during this period has been variously described, but the two principal and often interacting tendencies are, respectively, 'harmonic' and 'thematic': they refer either to a 'breakdown' in the tonal system, or to a shift of emphasis from harmonic to thematic organization in compositional technique. One of the effects of the advance of Schoenberg and others into 'atonality'

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around 1908 was to make possible a distinction between composers who believed that the structural and expressive potential of tonality had been exhausted – that music must be transformed or die: and those who believed that it was still possible to continue technically, or even technically *and* stylistically, along the paths of those nineteenth-century composers who had enriched traditional harmony to the extent that certain fundamental structural features of the tonal system were enhanced rather than undermined. Something of this enrichment and enhancement can be understood by the concept of 'extended tonality', which features prominently in what follows.

It was inevitable that attempts by musicologists to define 'tonality' should lead to attempts to subdivide it. And since the systematic study of the properties and potential of tonality was something which really got under way only after Fétis in the second half of the nineteenth century, it is hardly surprising that a central concern of theorists has been the distinction between what Ernst Kurth identified in *Tristan* as 'a clinging to the basic paths of tonality', and a complementary 'striving for expansion and disintegration'.[12] The variety and complexity of the terms devised by later theorists to reflect the various types of procedure which they have observed in tonal music can be imagined. But all agree that what is involved after Wagner is a shift of emphasis in which the traditionally strong association between a tonic and its close relatives, especially at cadence points, is reduced by techniques which bring the more chromatically remote areas of the tonal system into a relationship with that tonic which is not merely arbitrary in effect and momentary in significance. A leading practitioner of 'atonality', and of music which proceeded primarily through the developing variation of its basic motives, Schoenberg was also a leading harmonic theorist, and by the time he had completed his *Structural Functions of Harmony* in the late 1940s he had arrived at a view of what he termed 'extended tonality'. For Schoenberg, to extend tonality by moving beyond the diatonic degrees into distant chromatic regions, was not to disrupt or destroy it. He argued that 'remote transformations and successions of harmonies were understood as remaining within the tonality', and that the progressions which extend the tonality 'function chiefly as enrichments of the harmony'.[13] For Schoenberg there was no theoretical problem about extended tonality because there was no aesthetic problem: 'the ear of the contemporary musician is no longer disturbed by far-reaching deviations from diatonic harmonies'.[14] And this echoes a statement he had made many years before in the *Theory of Harmony*: 'a piece can also be intelligible . . . even when the tonality is kept, so to speak, flexible, fluctuating. Many examples give evidence that nothing is lost from the impression of completeness if the tonality is merely hinted at, yes, even if it is erased.'[15]

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Several points arise in considering the connection between these general technical issues and the music of Britten and Tippett. To ask, technically, of any twentieth-century composer, 'what kind of music did they write?' seems to invite, at least as a preliminary answer, the single word 'tonal' or 'atonal'; and it is certainly in the field of tonal and harmonic organization that the most fundamental distinctions between the achievements of Britten and Tippett may emerge. Perhaps the most interesting contrast is in the sense that, while Britten remained faithful to the first principle of musical modernity, the emancipation of the dissonance, to the extent that this was consistent with the retention of an essentially hierarchic view of harmonic organization and tonal structure, Tippett advanced to what I would describe as the emancipation of the consonance; the structurally significant use of chords – they will be called 'higher consonances' – which, while giving some priority to triadic elements, no longer require the exclusive presence of those elements in any privileged contexts: their function is mediation rather than resolution. The final bars of Tippett's String Quartet No. 4 (1978) offer a good example of the nature and function of such harmony in his later music (Ex. 1). The work is not 'tonal', since the initial emphasis on E flat and the final arrival on A are both too local to acquire the larger functions of genuinely tonal relations; yet tonal procedures have not totally been lost sight of. The music is not merely textural or colouristic, and the sense of hierarchic procedures being called on occasionally rather than consistently is appropriate in view of the fact that such procedures can easily acquire an even stronger focus in the works that follow the fourth quartet.

Ex. 1 Tippett, String Quartet No. 4

127 Very tranquil

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(8va)
trem: bridge
fingerboard: no vibrato
ppp
trem: bridge
fingerboard: no vibrato
ppp
trem: bridge
fingerboard: no vibrato
ppp
trem: bridge
fingerboard: no vibrato
ppp

As for Britten, the music of his last decade did show distinct signs, under the influence of totally chromatic and twelve-note techniques, of shaking itself free of the continuous presence of a tonic triad as a structural pivot: but it remained focused on tonics whose relevance is to establish certain large-scale connections, even when the effect of the music is more to threaten than to confirm any single tonic. The ending of Britten's String Quartet No. 3 (1975) shows how near to a pure, triadic E major harmony the composer could come, and the effect is compounded both of the implications the music sets up with respect to such a close, tangible background, and of its actual contradiction and evasion of those implications (Ex. 2).

The limitations of such summary comparisons will be obvious. Yet it is clear that there is much more in common between the early Britten of the Phantasy Quartet (1932), with its non-tonic, tonal ending (see Ex. 5, p. 21) and the late Britten of the Quartet No. 3, than between the tonal affirmations of early Tippett and the use of higher consonance to control the essentially atonal tendencies of his later works. Only very rarely, even when surface features of thematic manipulation and rhythmic patterning seem to be carrying the argument, might one form the opinion that the vertical aspects of Tippett's textures are devoid of all harmonic significance.

To focus the discussion of any two composers on the same technical issue naturally invites distortion and dangerous selectiveness, but to avoid any focus at all invites vagueness and imprecision. The differences between Britten and Tippett are indeed obvious and not to be obscured: but even if we acknowledge that Tippett was a composer whose 'indifference to functional harmonic progression is well attested',[16] and that an essential aspect of Britten's development is the sense in which his pre-

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Ex. 2 Britten, String Quartet No. 3, Recitative and Passacaglia (finale)

sentation of the 'symbolism of conflict . . . moved from the tonal plane to the motivic, even intervallic',[17] it remains essential to determine the extent to which vertical relationships, and the function of harmonies, chords, or 'aggregates' are anything more than the inevitable but arbitrary consequence of writing more than one note at a time. Little of technical value can be discerned in music unless the nature and significance of vertical combinations is determined, and even if the music is monodic, the linear implications and relations retain a 'harmonic' dimension (see the discussion of the 'Lamento' from Britten's first suite for solo cello, p. 221). However accidental or unintentional the composition of such ele-

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ments may appear to be, they have an innate capacity to relate and to generate; to conflict, contradict, clarify, resolve, integrate, and, in the world of extended tonality, to imply – by allusion and association.

The technical discussion which follows will certainly not exclude matters of rhythm, theme or motive, nor shun the dangerous generalities of the traditional formal categories, since these never cease to be relevant to either composer. Nevertheless, these are the aspects which have already been well aired by other commentators in studies with more pretensions to completeness than mine. The world embracing both extended tonality, still defined by the presence of a tonic, and the kind of harmonic allusiveness in which focused higher consonances perform a pivotal but not all-pervading role is a rich and complex one, and there is a corresponding richness and openness in the music of Britten and Tippett, even when the effect is spare and concentrated, which gives the lie to glib comments about austerity and meagreness.

Even if it is accepted that a consideration of the music of these two composers which is primarily tonal and harmonic is of value in focusing on the extent to which such relationships are indeed 'essential', there nevertheless remains the large question of how a discussion of extended tonality and 'higher consonance' (whether alongside other features or not) should be conducted. The difficulty here is considerable, since there is little sign of consensus even with respect to the 'mainstream' tonal–harmonic music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was Heinrich Schenker who, during the first three decades of the twentieth century, provided the most fundamental and far-reaching insights into exactly how Kurth's 'basic paths of tonality' functioned in the music of those composers from Bach to Brahms whom Schenker regarded as the bearers of the Great Tradition. However, composers who seemed to be 'striving for expansion and disintegration' were anathema to Schenker himself, and none more so than Schoenberg with his yearning to be 'the godfather of new chords' and his heresy, argued in the *Theory of Harmony*, that there were no such things as 'non-harmonic tones'.[18] As his theoretical works and textbooks indicate, Schoenberg's preferred technique for the presentation of harmonic analysis of tonal music of all kinds remained, in essence, that of identifying and labelling chords according to their relationship to the tonic of the work in question. Certain hierarchic distinctions emerge automatically in this way, simply through the degree of distance from that tonic, but the more subtle and far-reaching distinctions of function and level which the voice-leading techniques of Schenkerian method make possible are not in evidence. It was one of Schenker's pupils, Felix Salzer, who began the attempt to adapt and extend the master's analytical methods in order to reveal structural

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principles in much earlier and much more recent music. Salzer's examples range from chant to Stravinsky, and other analysts, notably Roy Travis, have carried the extension further, into 'atonal' music itself, arguing that it is possible to identify a 'dissonant tonic sonority' which assumes a position of hierarchic pre-eminence in the structure.[19]

Of course, the difference between Schenker and Schoenberg was not simply one of analytical technique but of analytical emphasis: as Carl Dahlhaus has put it,

> it is manifest that Schenker, when speaking of coherence, meant primarily tonal coherence, whereas Schoenberg thought of motivic coherence . . . Schenker's *Ursatz* is a formula for the passage from the tonic to the dominant and back to the tonic. In Schoenberg's musical thought, on the other hand, the central category . . . is his concept of the developing variation.[20]

Since it follows that Schoenberg's preferred analytical technique, as opposed to his preferred method for teaching the 'structural functions' of harmony, was concerned with thematic transformation, it seems inescapable that any serious discussion of structural harmonic issues should seek to make use of the insights consequent on the application of Schenkerian methods. Yet the most radical aspect of those methods is not the conclusions they draw about harmonic relationships in music, but the fact that they demand presentation in graphic, non-verbal form: they therefore tend to the rejection of the book 'as we know it'. Such analyses, at their fullest and most authentic, need to be the subject of detailed discussion and study by those familiar with the graphic techniques concerned. Yet in the case of 'extended-tonal' music the codification of those techniques is still a matter of much debate, even among those who accept the principles of such analysis, and will probably remain so for some time. So, in a commentary which is concerned as much if not more with the general developments through a great number of individual compositions, some of which have moved beyond the limits of the most tenuously extended tonality, it is still necessary to retain the 'word' as the prime means of communication.

Although the term 'extended tonality' occurs frequently in this study, I should nevertheless stress that my 'words' are more the result of contemplating the post-Schenkerian debate about matters of line and level than the consequence of pursuing Schoenberg's ideas about harmony. In fact, as should soon become clear to the reader, I do not apply a 'theory' to the music of Britten and Tippett; still less do I demonstrate in detail how every structural level functions in every piece. But I do comment on how certain features which I regard as crucial to structure and expression establish contacts between the particular qualities of the individual piece and those more general aspects of hierarchic musical structure which Schenker and his successors have placed in high relief.

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Most analytically orientated writing retains the traditional concern with unity as the overriding aim of the artist and the one vital aesthetic and analytical criterion of the listener, critic and musicologist. In a sense, the shift of emphasis from harmonic to motivic processes in Schoenbergian thought is a means of retaining that emphasis. But it is more difficult to talk about harmonic or tonal unity in music where a single tonal or chordal construct does not rule throughout, however strong the sense may be of 'progressive' tonality in which a tonic is ultimately unveiled. 'Unity' may well be more evident through consistent harmonic elements and procedures, however: and music which is less unified than under the 'rules' of traditional tonality may be no less coherent, even if motivic considerations are not brought into play at all.

The value, and appeal, of ideas about unity and coherence is precisely that they seem to bridge the gulf between the aesthetic and the analytic. Once again, however, it should be admitted that the more technical the discussion of music, the less likely the composer himself is to approve:

> What is important . . . is *not* the scientific part, the analysable part of music, but the something which emerges from it but transcends it, which cannot be analysed because it is not *in* it, but *of* it . . . it is something to do with personality, with gift, with spirit. I quite simply call it – magic.[21]

> Music, in my opinion, should speak to us so far as possible immediately, directly and without analysis.[22]

It would be doubly parasitic to engage in a one-sided debate with these remarks of Britten and Tippett, and I would not deny for a moment that what music expresses should be felt – *must* be felt, rather than merely described. Yet if 'the analysable part of music' is not the 'expression' itself, it is the basis, the cause of that expression. To analyse should be to enhance the understanding, or at least the intensity, of feeling. If analysis inhibits emotional response, it should be abandoned. But it should not be automatically assumed that music might not speak to us *more* directly after analysis than it does before.

The real trouble with technical commentary is not in what it says about the music's structure but in what it implies about how the music was actually composed. In his *Theory of Harmony*, Schoenberg made a characteristically blunt distinction between pupil and master, student and composer, which could usefully be applied to analyst and composer: 'the pupil should think; but the artist, the master, composes by feeling. He no longer has to think, for he has reached a higher kind of response to his need for self-expression.'[23] If, as Schoenberg asserts, the essence of the act of composition is feeling rather than thought, then it is not surprising that the analyst can say little about how the music actually came into

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