PART I

Contexts and concepts

1 Tippett and twentieth-century polarities

ARNOLD WHITTALL

1998 and all that

Michael Tippett's death, on 8 January 1998, six days after his ninety-third birthday, came at a time when performers' interest in his music was buoyant, and scholarly writing about his life and work was flourishing. A comprehensive collection of his own writings, *Tippett on Music*, appeared in 1995, the year of his ninetieth birthday, and this was soon followed by the second edition of Meirion Bowen's relatively brief survey of his life and works (1997); then came *Tippett Studies* (edited by David Clarke) and Kenneth Gloag's book on *A Child of Our Time* (both 1999), Clarke's own monograph on *The Music and Thought of Michael Tippett* (2001), and a further collection of essays, *Michael Tippett: Music and Literature*, edited by Suzanne Robinson (2002).[1] By then it was only three years to 2005 and the Tippett centenary, an event less well marked than it might have been had his death been less recent. The only major publication of that year was Thomas Schuttenhelm's edition of *Selected Letters*, with its fervent prefatory declaration by David Matthews that Tippett 'was such a central figure in our musical life that his absence is still strongly felt, not simply as a composer but as a man whose integrity and conviction were evident in everything he said and did'.[2]

Since then, there has been little or nothing. Performances and recordings have also tailed off, and it has not been difficult for those who sincerely believed that Tippett's prominence in the last quarter-century of his life was more to do with the premature death of Benjamin Britten in 1976 than with the positive qualities of his actual compositions to declare 'I told you so!', and point to the contrast in the way in which 'the Britten industry' has continued to flourish.[3] The argument that such speedy and summary dismissal bore out the verdict handed down by Robin Holloway in his brief obituary notice, where the 'marvellous personal synthesis' of the 'two visionary song cycles, two masterpieces for string orchestra, the first two symphonies, *The Midsummer Marriage*' was the prelude to 'a long, slow decline' in which 'feckless eclecticism and reckless trendiness' ruled,[4] is less persuasive than it might be simply because of the melancholy fact that the earlier music has been sidelined as much as the later.

Consideration of possible reasons why the cultural practice of British music has evolved in the way it has between 1998 and today cannot sensibly be confined to statistical tabulations claiming to measure degrees of prominence and obscurity. It is nevertheless natural to speculate about whether some composers have a definable 'staying power' denied to others, and whether it is reasonable to consider 'eclecticism and . . . trendiness' as proof of ephemerality – at least when proven to be 'feckless' and 'reckless' respectively. Since this chapter is concerned, among other things, with arguing that Tippett is more properly considered in terms of dialogues between eclecticism and consistency, trendiness and 'classic' timelessness, it should be clear that I tend to the view that in his case recent neglect is not an infallible index of musical value, any more than it was for Sibelius in the first decades after his death in 1957. It follows that now is not the time to pursue a topic that needs a longer timeframe: so, rather than continue with the subject of 'Tippett since his lifetime' I will take a fresh look at the rich cultural practice of that lifetime, so nearly coinciding with the twentieth century, and explore Tippett's relationship with that practice.

The background in outline

To list the British composers born between 1900 and 1914 is to establish a rough-and-ready context for Tippett himself (born in 1905) and for the century within which he and his contemporaries lived and worked. Born just before 1905, Alan Bush (1900–95), Gerald Finzi (1901–56), Edmund Rubbra (1901–86), William Walton (1902–83) and Lennox Berkeley (1903–89) were all involved to varying degrees with reinforcing rather than radically challenging the generic and stylistic predispositions of earlier generations. If – apart from Finzi – none of them could be thought of as essentially English in idiom after the model of Elgar, Vaughan Williams, or even Holst, their engagement with more radical (non-British) initiatives did not on the whole generate compositions as radically progressive as many in continental Europe or America before 1939.

Of those born alongside Tippett in 1905 itself, William Alwyn (d. 1985) would prove to be the most traditionally orientated symphonic composer of this vintage, while Alan Rawsthorne (d. 1971) would embody a more determinedly gritty reaction against what many perceived as the rather flabby effusions of Vaughan Williams or Arnold Bax. Likewise, both Walter Leigh (a casualty of the war in 1942) and Constant Lambert (who also died young, in 1951) found continental neoclassicism attractive as a means of evading the more pious and passive aspects of their national

musical heritage – the kind of tensions Tippett himself would deal with so resourcefully during the 1930s and 1940s. (Lambert was also very perceptive about the significance of Sibelius in his book *Music Ho!* (1934)[5] – but it was Walton's music which grew closer to Sibelius's during these years, not Lambert's.)

Among composers born between 1906 and 1913 the only clear sign of those stronger disparities between radical and conservative which would define twentieth-century musical life and compositional practice is provided by Elisabeth Lutyens (1906–83); it would be another ten years before two other composers of comparable progressiveness, Humphrey Searle (1915–82) and Denis ApIvor (1916–2004), came along. Nevertheless, while Arnold Cooke (1906–2005), Grace Williams (1906–77), William Wordsworth (1908–88), Robin Orr (1909–2006), Stanley Bate (1911–59), Daniel Jones (1912–93) and George Lloyd (1913–98) were all in their different and in some cases quite distinctive ways on the conservative end of the formal and stylistic spectrum, Elizabeth Maconchy (1907–94) would show particular skill in crafting a progressive path leading closer to Bartók as model than to her teacher Vaughan Williams, and by this means to a kind of 'mainstream' engagement with modernism after 1950 that was as personable as Tippett's own. By the early 1930s, of course, it was Benjamin Britten (1913–76) who was the most promising and successful exponent of mainstream progressiveness, his various 'continental' affinities – Mahler, Berg, Ravel, Stravinsky, Prokofiev – and the internationalist sympathies of his most important teacher, Frank Bridge, proving no hindrance to the rapid forging of a well-integrated personal language.

Britten was a challenge to those like Tippett, Rawsthorne and Maconchy who might have had comparable instincts and ambitions in relation to the British inheritance as it seemed to define itself after the watershed year of 1934, when Elgar, Delius and Holst all died. Tippett may never have been likely to strive for a less explicitly mainstream stylistic and technical amalgam than that which Britten was deploying to such effect immediately after 1935, but he seems gradually to have defined his own relation to the established and emerging polarities between radical and conservative in ways which reinforced the differences between his own personal compositional voice and that of his contemporaries, especially Britten. Nowhere was the contrast between Britten's economical intensity and Tippett's more flamboyantly decorative idiom greater than in two compositions written for Peter Pears and Britten to perform – Britten's *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* (1940) and Tippett's *Boyhood's End* (1943). By the mid-1950s, with the first performances of *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) and *The Midsummer Marriage* (1955), the contrast in opera was

even more apparent: and contrast remained of the essence, as Tippett's dedication of his notably progressive Concerto for Orchestra to Britten in 1963 was complemented the following year by Britten's dedication to Tippett of one of his most intensely constrained later works, the first parable for church performance, *Curlew River*.

In the years immediately after 1945, it was evident that British musical life was robust enough to sustain a diversity of styles, embracing Vaughan Williams, Britten and a younger, more internationalist figure like Peter Racine Fricker (1920–90), who, together with others born during the 1920s, including Malcolm Arnold (1921–2006), Robert Simpson (1921–97), Kenneth Leighton (1929–88) and Alun Hoddinott (1929–2008), bridged the divide between the 1900–14 generation and the new radicals born in the 1930s – Alexander Goehr (b. 1932), Peter Maxwell Davies (b. 1934), Harrison Birtwistle (b. 1934) and Jonathan Harvey (b. 1939). It was from within this pluralism that Tippett emerged as something more than just another distinctively English composer born in the years between 1900 and 1914. Yet it was only with Britten's premature death in 1976 that he achieved the unambiguous prominence of a leader within a spectrum of compositional activity in which the generation of the 1930s was in turn finding itself complemented by younger minimalists – John Tavener (b. 1944) and Michael Nyman (b. 1944) – and those more conservative (Robin Holloway, b. 1943) and more radical (Brian Ferneyhough, b. 1943). This context of supreme heterogeneity suited Tippett's own probingly pragmatic aesthetic, as well as his consistently internationalist outlook.

Interactive oppositions

There is perhaps more than a touch of irony in the fact that, had Tippett died at Britten's age of (barely) 63 – in 1968 – he would be seen in terms of a career that ended with one of his most demanding scores, *The Vision of Saint Augustine* (1963–5), a work which showed him beginning to reassert his belief in the positively visionary – and blues-healing – nature of music after the upheavals occasioned by the stark tragedy shown in the opera *King Priam* (1958–61). As it was, Tippett survived and prospered for thirty years after 1968, and David Clarke encapsulated that near-century of life with admirable percipience in 2001, declaring that 'one result of his longevity was an engagement with the radically different social and cultural climates across the century, particularly reflected in a dramatic, modernist change of style in the 1960s'.[6] That 'engagement' with radical difference is also a crucial theme in Clarke's book of the same year, the most

penetrating and far-reaching critical study of the composer yet published, whose blurb sonorously declares that 'Tippett's complex creative imagination' involves a 'dialogue between a romantic's aspirations to the ideal and absolute, and a modernist's sceptical realism'. The book itself ends with the declaration that 'Tippett's is a music that contains a continuing and salutary reminder to face up to contradictions and to keep our minds and imaginations open'.[7] 'Contradictions' can be another term for 'polarities', and facing up to them realistically, as they are, is a clear alternative to seeking compromise. If fusing – integrating – rather than merely balancing out the opposites is the most fundamental quality of a classicist aesthetic, then maintaining, even revelling in the persistent polarity of centrifugal superimpositions would seem to be the essence of modernism, celebrating twentieth-century culture's distinctive embrace of fragmentation, stratification and disparity.

For some commentators, the pursuit of fragmentation and juxtaposition, at the expense of unity and connectedness, amounts to something 'post-modern' – especially when materials and stylistic associations with 'pre-modern' art materials are involved. While it is a symptom of current terminological diversity to note that what, for some, is 'post-modern' is, for others, 'late modernist', there is still likely to be broad agreement that the stylistic heterogeneity this kind of music displays demonstrates the willingness of the composer in question to challenge conventional concepts of stylistic consistency and 'integrity'. Such issues became very relevant to Tippett's later compositions. Indeed, of all the images that have clung to him, that of the magpie maverick is probably the most persistent. It allows for Robin Holloway's pejoratively slanted 'eclecticism' as well as Clarke's more positive 'empiricism';[8] but, more importantly, it lays the foundations for a productive dialogue between the 'formative' and the 'found' – something whose varied manifestations helped to determine the Tippett ethos and the Tippett idiom. Since for Tippett the found – from spirituals and blues to Renaissance polyphony and the music of Beethoven or Schubert – tends to be tonal, and the formative to question the basics of tonality as much as to reinscribe them, it is by means of such very basic binary oppositions – or complements – that a critical and theoretical context for the informed reception of Tippett's compositions in terms of meaningfully deployed polarities has been forged.

Tonality and polarity: a theoretical interlude

In the *Poetics of Music* lectures delivered by Igor Stravinsky at Harvard University in 1939 there is a straightforward statement showing how

thinking about tonality had evolved since the earliest, nineteenth-century attempts to systematize those processes which were primarily concerned to enrich (if also to undermine) the essential stability of 'classical' diatonicism: 'our chief concern is not so much what is known as tonality as what one might term the polar attraction of sound, of an interval, or even of a complex of tones . . . In view of the fact that our poles of attraction are no longer within the closed system which was the diatonic system, we can bring the poles together without being compelled to conform to the exigencies of tonality.'[9]

Had the great twentieth-century theorist of classical tonality, Heinrich Schenker, still been alive to read those comments they would have reinforced his conviction that Stravinsky was a destroyer of music's most fundamental, most natural materials, not a real composer at all.[10] However, by the 1930s such anti-progressive views were far less salient than the more enlightened and progressive understanding of post-Beethovenian processes of change found in such prominent twentieth-century composer-theorists as Vincent d'Indy, Paul Hindemith and Arnold Schoenberg.[11] Indeed, despite the obvious and strong contrasts in style between Schoenberg and Stravinsky during the inter-war decades, the ideas about tonal harmony set out in *The Poetics of Music* demonstrate considerable convergence with Schoenbergian beliefs about the need to retain tonality as a flexible conceptual basis for meaningful composition, and to reject the wholly negative concept of 'atonality'. In his *Harmonielehre*, Schoenberg had forcefully declared that 'a piece of music will always have to be tonal, at least in so far as a relation has to exist from tone to tone by virtue of which the tones, placed next to or above one another, yield a perceptible continuity. The tonality itself may perhaps be neither perceptible nor provable . . . Nevertheless, to call any relation of tones atonal is just as far-fetched as it would be to designate a relation of colours aspectral . . . If one insists on looking for a name, "polytonal" or "pantonal" could be considered.'[12]

Music theorists have not been slow to seize on the implications of these statements and to try to tease out the terminological and technical consequences of regarding 'polar attraction' as a factor in the establishment of 'pantonality' or – alternatively – 'suspended tonality'.[13] For Tippett, who responded to and wrote about both Stravinsky and Schoenberg,[14] the possibility that they might have significant similarities as well as essential differences could have been part of the attraction to an aesthetic instinct that acknowledged and worked with the tensions between two very fundamental artistic categories – classicism and modernism – both of which were accessible by way of the kind of thinking about harmony and

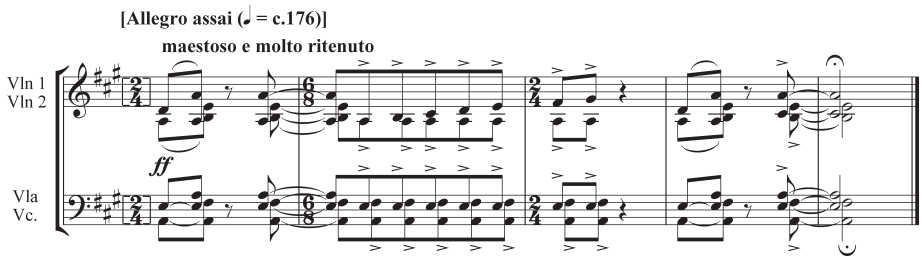
principles of formation that the views on tonality of Stravinsky and Schoenberg exemplified.

Classicism, modernism, modern classicism

When work on *The Midsummer Marriage* was drawing to a close, Tippett wrote that he considered 'the general classicizing tendency of our day [the 1930s and 40s] less as evidence of a new classic period than as a fresh endeavour ... to contain and clarify inchoate material. We must both submit to the overwhelming experience and clarify it into a magical unity. In the event, sometimes Dionysus wins, sometimes Apollo.'[15] The blithe self-confidence of this declaration is very much of a piece with the thumpingly upbeat tone of the Yeats couplet that ends the opera's text – 'All things fall and are built again, and those that build them again are gay' – and it strongly suggests that any possible confrontation between such 'classicizing' and Schoenbergian modernism (which around 1950 meant, essentially, 'atonal' twelve-tone technique) was of much less significance than a continuingly productive contest between Dionysian romanticism and Apollonian classicism.

Such formulations reflect the general reluctance before the mid-1950s – particularly strong in British music – to follow through on the consequences of the expressionist, avant-garde initiatives, primarily in Schoenberg and Webern, which had emerged before 1914. These initiatives had been countered in the years after the First World War by a neoclassicism much more far-reaching than that developed by Stravinsky alone (it can also be traced in such twelve-tone exercises as Schoenberg's Third and Fourth String Quartets). In addition, many of the most established and successful composers of the time – seniors like Richard Strauss, Sibelius and Janáček (even if his music was much less well-known until the second half of the century), the younger generation around Bartók, Hindemith and Prokofiev, and juniors like Britten and Shostakovich – refused to embrace fully that 'emancipation of the dissonance' which, coupled with resistance to harmonic centredness, was proving to be the most fundamental strategy in modernism's principled resistance to classicism's dissonance-resolving, unity-prioritizing qualities. While it is true that these composers often adopted harmonic characteristics that replaced simple major and minor triads with less standard chordal formations, such characteristics did not require the complete abandonment of degrees of relative consonance and dissonance, any more than the textures in which they appeared required the rejection of all points of contact with harmonic and contrapuntal

Ex. 1.1 String Quartet No. 1, third movement, ending



techniques that had flourished in the time of diatonicism – the kind of chords, like those with which Tippett ended his First String Quartet (1934–5, rev. 1943) (Ex. 1.1), that are sometimes termed 'higher consonances'.[16] This ending is not a 'perfect cadence' in A major of the precise, traditional kind, but its relationship with such a cadence is unambiguous and depends for its meaning and function on recognition of that relationship.

Tippett might well have been prepared to concede that the kind of unsparingly sordid modern expression found in Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck* (1914–22) could provide a humanly compassionate as well as psychologically penetrating experience, thereby to a degree cathartically transcending the unrelievedly tragic aura of its subject matter. But he himself needed a stronger degree of idealism, and he was never more determined than in his early years to equate the musical representation of the visionary, the transcendent, with the triumphantly 'cohesive . . . mingling of disparate ingredients' he admired in Holst, and (eventually) in Ives: in both Holst's *The Hymn of Jesus* and Ives's Fourth Symphony, he would eventually argue, 'the constituent elements and methods may be disparate, but their essence is one of distillation'.[17] Berg might have been a master when it came to distillations of the disparate, but a modernism that downplayed the cohesive – the aspiration to renewal that was also an advance socially, politically and culturally – was initially far less appealing to Tippett than an aesthetic that retained enough of classical and romantic qualities to give space to his sense of how the modern world of the 1930s and 1940s needed to evolve if its political and spiritual crises were not to prove terminally destructive.

The heady mix of Marxist political progressiveness and Jungian psychological self-exploration, so typical of the 1930s, fuelled Tippett's conviction that the 'everyday' world in itself was an inadequate environment for properly aspirational and inspiring art. Even Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* had to be seen as something other than an unsparingly vivid portrait of human cruelty and social repression: it was 'a drama of