

6. Michael Tippett

Concerto for double string orchestra: movement I

(For Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Michael Tippett was born in London in 1905 and studied composition, conducting and piano at the Royal College of Music in London. Some years later, he studied with R. O. Morris, an expert on sixteenth-century music. This proved formative, and he developed a fascination and flair for counterpoint which gave rise to the first significant works of his maturity, the String Quartet No.1 (1935, revised 1944) and Piano Sonata No.1 (1936-7).

During the 1930s, Tippett worked as a conductor at Morley College in London, and this gave him the opportunity to conduct the first performance of the *Concerto for Double String Orchestra* in a benefit concert there on 21 April 1940 with The South London Orchestra, otherwise known as 'Morley College Professional Orchestra'. This was an orchestra of unemployed musicians, many of them thrown out of work by the arrival of sound films, operating under the auspices of Morley College between 1932 and 1940.

The *Concerto* also received an important second performance at the Wigmore Hall on 17 July 1943, conducted by Tippett's Morley College colleague, Walter Goehr. The reviewer from *The Times* described it as 'a well-knit, skillfully contrived composition, in which intricacy of detail in rhythm and texture was made to serve the ends of a larger design'.

Tippett is now regarded as one of the most significant figures in British music of the twentieth century. His early music reveals Neo-Classical traits, and in the *Concerto* he achieved a seamless blend of contemporary European features, elements of folk music, jazz, and the sprung rhythms and polyphonic exuberance he admired in the English madrigals.

Performing forces and their handling

The instrumentation of the *Concerto* for two antiphonally opposed yet equally balanced string orchestras had few precedents. Similar string orchestra works from the early years of the twentieth century by Elgar and by Vaughan Williams, and subsequent works by Warlock, Bliss and Britten, had established an English tradition of string orchestral writing. (In 1932, a further impetus to the English string orchestra was given by the formation of the Boyd Neel Orchestra whose aim was to revive the early string repertoire.) However, few had explored the medium of a double string orchestra. Despite the title there is no solo writing at all in the *Concerto* and it would seem that the term refers to the Baroque principle of contrasting groups of instruments in order to achieve textural and dynamic variety. The opposition of equal groups is also reminiscent of the early Baroque 'concertato' style of writing, in which composers such as Monteverdi and Gabrieli composed 'sacred concertos' (for example, Gabrieli's *Symphoniae Sacrae*). These works were written for contrasted antiphonal groups of choral voices, solo voices, strings, brass and continuo.

Tippett said that in calling the piece *Concerto* he was harking back to the concerti grossi of Handel, although the writing in the *Concerto* avoids concertino and ripieno oppositions. The style of writing in the first movement is traditional and there are few exceptional demands on the players, other than the accurate interpretation of rhythmic complexities and the stamina required to maintain momentum.

A summary of general features of the instrumental writing in the first movement follows.

- All instruments have active lines, with only the double basses having a lighter load.
- Textures are very varied, ranging between octaves, homophony, counterpoint and antiphony (see the section below on texture), with many different forms of the last three of these.
- Counterpoint is often intricate, with lines being passed between instrumental parts and orchestras.
- Individual lines can be angular and rhythmically intricate, with syncopation, anticipatory rhythms, unpredictable emphasis and unusual note groupings.
- Few idiomatic techniques are used, and involve only a few instruments in each case: for example, double-stopping (almost exclusively in the coda, e.g. bb.209-212), *pizzicato* (rare, e.g. b.51), *sul tasto* (one section, from b.107).
- Performance instructions are very specific; dynamics or articulation marks are detailed in every bar, 'character' indications are frequent (e.g. *scherzando*, *dolce cantabile*) and bowing is given on occasion.

Texture

Tippett described his *Concerto for Double String Orchestra* as a study in polyphony. The string orchestras are presented as two antiphonal groups, but with much of the writing in a freely polyphonic style reminiscent of the seventeenth-century English fantasy. Noting that he attached himself partly to the special English tradition of Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro* and Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*, he also commented that he did not regard the two orchestras as vehicles for concertante writing but as antiphonal groups.

Summary of textures employed

Octaves

- Used only rarely, e.g. bb.40-41, bb.48-49.

Melody and accompaniment

- Rare, but significant in the transition second section where a melody is played against a simple ostinato accompaniment (b.21-29).

Homophony

- Forceful block chords at important cadence points such as b.20-21, b.38 and b.164 (the ends of sections of the transition) and for similar punctuating effect in the 2nd subject at b.59 and b.185.
- At b.99, there are detached accompanying chords against a sustained cello and bass line.

Counterpoint

Much of the movement is contrapuntal.

- b.1 Two rhythmically contrasted themes presented simultaneously.
- b.8 Close imitation of a simple motif, involving inversion.
- b.129 As the Recapitulation begins, the opening 2-part counterpoint is expanded to 3 parts with the addition of a new line.
- b.213 This the most complex passage of counterpoint, involving all instrumental parts. Here the main motifs of the movement return superimposed and in imitation.

Antiphony

The movement goes some way towards exploiting antiphonal textures between the two orchestras. Much of the time Tippett combines the orchestras as a single force, doubling lines across the two groups or introducing contrapuntal interplay between the two. Elsewhere they preserve their independent identity, occasionally being heard as separate opposing entities.

- bb. 8-12 The orchestras are heard in alternation.
- b.68 This passage begins as the opening, then Tippett works with alternating orchestras from b.74, until they come together again in b.87.
- b.107 This antiphonal exchange begins the exciting ascent to the recapitulation.

Structure

Having studied Beethoven's works exhaustively as a student and realising that here there was an essential fundamental archetype, it was only natural that in writing a concerto Tippett's structures would relate to classical ideals of form. The work is reminiscent of a three-movement concerto grosso, but in the choice of sonata, ternary (modelled on Beethoven's String Quartet in F minor, op.95) and sonata-rondo forms it also clearly belongs to the late classical tradition.

Its seamless flow, however, is hardly interrupted by thematic contrast, and conventional articulation of the journey through tonal relationships is not strongly evident. However, the standard divisions of sonata structure are clear, indicated by the return of the opening music which acts both as a first subject, and a ritornello theme.

The following is the summary of the form of the first movement of the *Concerto*, showing the sonata structure and its link with ritornello form. Only the principal tonal centres are identified.

Bars	Main tonal centres	Sonata form	Ritornello form
1-67		● Exposition	
1-8	A	● 1 st subject	● Ritornello 1
8-21		● Transition section 1	● Episode 1
21-38		● Transition section 2	
39-67	G	● 2 nd subject	
68-128		● Development	
68-71	E		● Ritornello 2
71-128	C# (b. 80) Fm (b. 93) E flat m (b. 97) A flat (b. 107)		● Episode 2
129-193		● Recapitulation	
129-136	A	● 1 st subject	● Ritornello 3
136-147		● Transition section 1	● Episode 3
147-155		● New transition passage	
156-164		● Transition section 2	
165-193	A	● 2 nd subject	
194-232		● Coda	
194-201	F#m		● Ritornello 4
202-232	C A		● Episode 4

Tonality

Tippett's music depends on modality in its widest sense, that is the free movement of melody and harmony within a modal set of pitches. The lack of stability of certain pitches in the modal system (7ths, 3rds, 6ths) led Tippett to a **variable tonality** with alternative notes within a standard mode. There is, for example, ambiguity in the opening bars of the movement, as it is possible to detect pentatonicism in the first orchestra as well as elements of Aeolian mode (C and F) and Mixolydian (C# and F#).

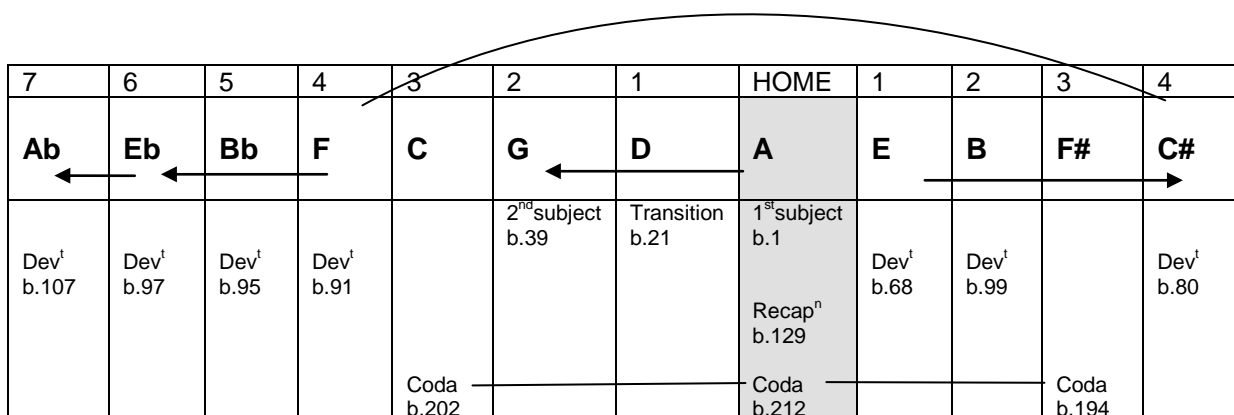
Despite the potential complexity of this resource, the music never loses sight of its diatonic character, although it tends to glide around its tonal centres, treating them as reference points rather than establishing them firmly. There is little feeling here that harmony guides and supports the tonality – there are few instances where a new tonic is preceded by a dominant for example (bb.90⁴-91 is a rare case, where the bass moving from dominant to tonic establishes the tonal centre as it plunges from C to F, but even here it is a minor chord on C that precedes the new key of F minor). Elsewhere the tonal centres are created by the implications of melodic shapes and intervals, and often in particular by the strength of the main oscillating motif from the opening of the movement which recurs persistently, and unfailingly gives weight to the prevailing tonality.

Principal tonal centres in the first movement of the Concerto

- The movement begins centred on A (mixed mode).
- The Exposition moves through D to G major for the 2nd subject.
- The Development takes E (the dominant) to start, but soon moves towards 'C#' (b.80).
- At b.91 the tonal centre reaches F minor, relatively far removed from the home key and marking the start of the collapse of the frenetic movement of the Development.
- A series of descending fifths leads to E flat minor (b.97).
- A further step to A flat occurs at b. 107, the point that marks the ultimate disintegration of the development and the start of the gradual return to the Recapitulation.
- Interestingly, Tippett chooses to use **whole tone** melodic patterns for much of the following section, thereby obscuring the sense of tonality.
- As the Recapitulation is reached (b.129) there is a firm return to A, which is maintained thereafter as the centre of tonality until the coda.
- The Coda contrasts F# in b.194 with C in b.202 before returning to A.

Summary table showing the movement between tonal centres

7	6	5	4	3	2	1	HOME	1	2	3	4
Ab	Eb	Bb	F	C	G	D	A	E	B	F#	C#
Dev ^t b.107	Dev ^t b.97	Dev ^t b.95	Dev ^t b.91		2 nd subject b.39	Transition b.21	1 st subject b.1 Recap ⁿ b.129	Dev ^t b.68	Dev ^t b.99		Dev ^t b.80
				Coda b.202			Coda b.212			Coda b.194	



Harmony

Developing as a composer in the early twentieth century, Tippett had at his fingertips the rich harmonic language of the late nineteenth century. However, he found there little to

stimulate him in what he felt was overindulgent use of harmony and extreme dependence on the exploitation of harmonic tension.

A study of Tippett's early works confirms his own suggestion that at that stage of his career he did not write chords. Certainly, this is borne out by the first movement of the *Concerto for Double String Orchestra*, where for the most part harmony arises incidentally as a result of counterpoint; there are a few block chords, but only at crucial punctuation points in the structure, and even then they do not display conventional progression. Such chords often contain only two pitches and move by contrary motion of their outer parts (b.38, b.59). Tippett's main concern is with the interplay of counterpoint and his harmony becomes subsidiary. In the *Concerto* this free linear movement gives rise to mild but brittle dissonance brought about in a number of ways:

- the contrapuntal collision of dissonant intervals in independent lines (e.g. in the interplay of fragmented figures in the section from b.51)
- false relation, sometimes resulting from modal inflections, e.g. b.6 C/C#; b.26 E/E#; b.71 G/G#)
- the construction of chords from unusual intervals, e.g. chords in fourths, stemming from the emphasis on seconds, fourths and sevenths in his melodic language (see b.213 onwards)
- pandiatonicism (free use of dissonance), as in bb. 85-89.

Certain chords and harmonic progressions which are familiar in other western traditions appear in Tippett's music, many having modal origins.

- A simple, although rare, example of a modal cadence is found in bb.20-21 (phrygian cadence).
- In contrast, notice the perfect cadence in G (bb. 45-47).
- The lack of a third in the final chord of the movement is a characteristic feature of cadence chords in earlier music, and here is both reminiscent of such influences as well as reinforcing, by the absence of the third, the ambiguity of Tippett's modal language.
- Augmented triad (bars 118-122).
- The use of a tonic chord with a minor third and added sixth is a characteristic sound which permeates Tippett's later music and is heard here occasionally at important moments such as the abrupt move to F minor at b.91

Melody

Features of Tippett's melodic style include:

- use of motifs, leading to
 - phrase structures of varying lengths and
 - phrase extension, e.g. b. 39, arising from opening motif

- sequence, e.g. bars 18-20, violin I, orchestra II
- inversion, e.g. b.8
- interval extension, e.g. lower instruments from b.13
- ostinato, e.g. b.21
- varied intervallic shapes, comprising both conjunct and disjunct patterns
- modality pervasive, involving Aeolian, Lydian (see F# in b.56) and Mixolydian)
- ornamentation.

Rhythm and metre

Aaron Copland heard the *Concerto for Double String Orchestra* by chance and had thought it American because of its liberal use of syncopated rhythms, cross-accented and asymmetrical grouping of quavers. Rhythmic vitality is a distinctive feature of Tippett's style, the inspiration for which lay in the re-creation of the rhythmic style of Weelkes, Byrd, Gibbons and Dowland.

Features of Tippett's approach to rhythm and metre include the following:

Rhythmic polyphony, clearly evident at the opening with only intermittent alignment of stress. The melodic lines are drawn together by the regular bar lines of the 8/8 metre, but this is not significant to the natural accentuation of the two lines; they exist as two separate strands.

Additive rhythm: a crucial and remarkably original feature of Tippett's technique is the use of additive rhythm. The basic rhythmic unit is the quaver, from which all the unpredictable patterns evolve. The result is a restless, sprung rhythm.

Tippett had some difficulty notating the additive rhythm. He worked closely with the conductor Walter Goehr, collaborating on the notation of the most complex passages. It was concern about the interpretation of the rhythms by performers that led to the metre's notation as 8/8, which allowed quaver groups of 4 + 4 and 3 + 3 + 2 to exist without confusion. Tippett wrote in his 'Notes for Performance':

Though many bars of the first movement are felt to be '*alla breve*', the time signature is 8/8, not 2/2, because of the unequal beats of many other bars. Such unequal beats are shown by the groupings and ligatures [brackets], which give the proper rhythms intended for that part at that time. Certain bars have been marked 'Beat 3...' to ensure that they are played as 3 real beats (which in 8/8 cannot all be equal) and not as a syncopation of 4/4 or 2/2... (An example of this can be found in bar 15 where the 8 quavers are grouped 3+3+2.)

Augmentation: see bars 95-106.

Syncopation: see bar 1, both lines.

Further reading

David Matthews, *Michael Tippett: An Introductory Study* (London, 1980)

Meirion Bowen, *Michael Tippett* (The Contemporary Composers Series ed. Nicholas Snowman) (London, 1985)

Ian Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music* (Oxford, 1987)

Meirion Bowen (ed.) *Tippett on Music* (Oxford, 1995)

Anthony Burton, *Tippett: Concerto for Double String Orchestra*

Recording

Michael Tippett, *Concerto for Double String Orchestra*, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Andrew Davis (apex, Warner Classics UK, 2001)