

## Concerto for Double String Orchestra, Movement I Michael Tippett

### Background information and performance circumstances

Michael Tippett (1905–1998) was a major British composer active from the 1920s until the mid 1990s. His five operas are highly original, and he wrote important symphonies, string quartets, concertos, choral works and piano music.

For general interest, see the article and bibliography on Tippett in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, Macmillan, 2nd edition, 2001) – available online, e.g. at some major libraries. For a list of recordings of the Concerto, visit [http://www.schott-music.com/shop/persons/featured/19099/discography/?ID\\_DSKZ=573](http://www.schott-music.com/shop/persons/featured/19099/discography/?ID_DSKZ=573)

Michael Tippett's Concerto for Double String Orchestra (composed 1938–1939) was one of his major achievements. It is a highly successful and original fusion of different elements, being indebted in particular to:

- English music of the 16th and early 17th centuries (notably madrigals and string fantasias):
  - Note the fascination with counterpoint and the rhythmic exuberance.
- Baroque concertos for strings of the type without clear solo parts sometimes called 'orchestral concertos' or 'concerto-sinfonias':
  - Note the name 'Concerto' and the scoring for strings without soloists.
- Beethoven, whom Tippett idolised:
  - Note especially use of sonata form.
- English music for strings from the early 20th century:
  - Other works had sonorous string scoring (compare Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro* and Vaughan Williams's *Tallis Fantasia*), although Tippett's choice and treatment of forces is original.
- British folk music...
  - ...influenced the melodic character of some themes (notably in movements II and III), and helped to steer Tippett away from conventional tonality.
- Jazz and blues...
  - ...contributed to the rhythmic 'feel', and like folk song was valued as a non-classical musical vernacular.

There are enough debts to the past to justify the term *neoclassical*. This does not imply that Tippett was copying slavishly any previous style(s) – the music is completely his own.

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## Performing forces and their handling

The concerto is scored for two string orchestras, each with the normal arrangement of violins I and II, violas, cellos and double basses. Both orchestras are of equal importance – Tippett did not label them *first* and *second*.

There is great variety in the use of forces. Basically:

- both orchestras are heard together *in full* when great weight and sonority are required.
  - Parts from one orchestra may double parts from the other – e.g. in the ‘phrygian cadence’ near the start (bars 20–21).
- most frequently the orchestras play together, but with some part(s) from one or both silent. There may be part-doubling within an orchestra or between orchestras.
  - The permutations are almost endless from small numbers of parts to almost full.
- briefly, and not often, one orchestra plays alone.

Note also:

- all instruments are very active – there are no filling-in parts.
- each part usually plays one note at a time, with the bow. Only a few ‘special’ string techniques are used, and then sparingly:
  - Double stopping (in the coda, bars 209–212), mostly to reinforce *sforzando* chords
  - *Pizzicato* for double bass (to accompany staccato in higher parts, as in bars 51–52)
  - *Sul tasto* – upper string parts at bar 107 (Development section). This requires playing near or over the fingerboard. The resulting tone quality, thought by some to be a little like that of a flute, accounts for the alternative name *flautando*.
- performance instructions are many and detailed:
  - Dynamics, and marks of articulation
  - Indications of character (e.g. *scherzando*)
  - Up- and down-bow indications\* (especially to achieve a particular rhythmic emphasis or accentuation contrary to what a string player would instinctively do – notably at bar 99, with (unexpected) up-bow indications on main beats in some parts .

\*An up-bow indication resembles the letter ‘v’; down-bows are shown by signs that look like miniature goalposts.

## Texture

In short, the texture is:

- varied in number of parts and doubling
- *contrapuntal* mostly
- *antiphonal* occasionally
- *homophonic* occasionally.

*Number of parts and doubling.* With two string orchestras, Tippett could in theory write in ten parts (violin I, II, viola, cello, bass – times 2). But even where everyone is playing, the number of 'real' parts is always fewer, because of doubling (i.e. where two sets of players have the same melodic line). So, in the final *tutti* (from bar 220), the number of real parts varies from just three to six. Doubling in this movement is usually in octaves rather than at the unison; but there is also some use of parallel 3rds.

Sometimes there is an intense textural clarity because there are only two real parts. At the start (bars 1–4), for example:

- Orchestra 1: three upper strings, doubled, in three different octaves
- Orchestra 2: three lower string parts, likewise.

*Counterpoint.* Counterpoint is heard where all (or both) parts have different rhythms simultaneously – as opposed to chordal homophony – where all parts move together – or melody-dominated homophony, where one part stands out with the melody while the others work together to accompany.

In counterpoint the parts may

- combine different melodic ideas, or
- share the same melodic ideas.

If parts that share an idea start at different times but still clearly overlap, there is imitation.

Tippett uses both methods. For example,

- at the start, orchestras 1 and 2 combine different melodic ideas
- in bars 8–10 and 10–12, the lower part imitates the upper (but in inversion – i.e. upside-down)
- near the end (bars 221 and 228), the violins of one orchestra imitate the violins of the other); because the imitation is substantial and exact it can be termed *canon*.

*Antiphony.* The alternation of different groups of performers, usually with one group repeating another, exactly or otherwise, is *antiphony*.

Tippett uses antiphony with subtlety, for example letting the second group overlap with the first. See for example:

- bars 8–12 (third and fourth phrases of the movement): orchestra 2 answers orchestra 1 a 3rd higher
- bars 74 (soon after start of Development): more extended and varied antiphony, until the two orchestras are combined at bar 87 before the climax on the **sf** chords in bar 90.

*Homophony.* Tippett uses both

- *chordal (homorhythmic)* texture, notably with a three-chord pattern first heard at the end of the Transition (bar 38) and
- *melody and accompaniment style*, notably earlier in the Transition (from bar 21).

## Structure

The movement is in a kind of *sonata form* (with Exposition, Development and Recapitulation, first and second subjects, etc.). Consult *The New Grove* or other authoritative source for full description of sonata form.

A common element in traditional sonata form is strong thematic contrast between first and second subjects. This is present, but Tippett adds a further twist: at the very beginning he *combines* two contrasting themes, one *marcato*, the other *espressivo*. Essential to Classical sonata form were clearly defined key relationships. However, Tippett was working after traditional tonality and functional harmony had been largely superseded by more 'modern' developments, and he provides looser forms of tonal contrast. Comment on these is most conveniently dealt with under *Tonality* below.

To some extent the movement seems to be indebted to *ritornello* form (with a recurring main theme and contrasting episodes – the basis for many late Baroque concertos). But the presence of an episode at the end, after the final ritornello, perhaps undermines this interpretation. So it is probably more useful just to view the movement as a sonata form structure.

The following table details Tippett's highly original approach, showing both sonata and ritornello form interpretations of the structure. Bar numbers need not be memorised for the AS examination.

### SUMMARY of the FORM

Bars	SONATA FORM	RITORNELLO FORM
1-67	EXPOSITION	
1-8	1st subject	RITORNELLO 1
8-21		Episode 1
21-38	Transition	
39-67	2nd subject	
68-128	DEVELOPMENT	
68-71		RITORNELLO 2
71-128		Episode 2
129-193	RECAPITULATION	
129-136	1st subject	RITORNELLO 3
136-155		Episode 3
156-164	Transition	
165-193	2nd subject	
194-232	CODA	
194-201		RITORNELLO 4
202-232		Episode 4

## Tonality

Tippett does not use major and minor keys reinforced by functional harmony in the 'traditional' way. Instead he employs a sometimes ambiguous tonality that depends to some extent on modes and pentatonic scales. For AS level, the following brief explanation is sufficient.

The movement can broadly be said to be 'in A'.

- Bar 1 begins with the note A
- The last chord consists of A and E
- The note A is prominent from bar 129, and from 165...
- ...and in parts of the Coda...
  - ...although near the end (from bar 220) there are few As, and the music is in a kind of Lydian-mode G major with C#s before the final 'bare fifth' A-E chord emerges.

The movement is not, however, straightforwardly in A major or A minor.

- The opening melody in the first orchestra (bars 1–4) uses the pentatonic set A B D E G, without either C# or C natural – although *both* these pitches are present in the other orchestra.
- In parts of the Recapitulation and Coda (e.g. bars 165–167) C# is prominent, and A major strongly suggested.

As customary with sonata form, the tonalities of the first and second subjects of the Exposition are different. The first subject is basically in A, the second in G.\*

\*For a more sophisticated explanation than is necessary for AS Music, you may wish to see D. Clarke (ed.), *Tippett Studies*, Cambridge University Press, page 14.

The second subject is transposed in the Recapitulation (bar 165), so it is now in A like the first subject (bar 129) – again as usual in sonata form. More distant tonal areas are visited in the Development. These include C# minor at bar 80 and F minor at bar 91. The most ambiguous section tonally begins at bar 113, as the ascent to the Recapitulation begins.

## Harmony

1. *When the music is in two real parts:*

- we hear *harmonic intervals* not complete triads or seventh chords.
- these harmonic intervals tend to be the by-products of counterpoint that is based on largely diatonic, modal or pentatonic lines – 'horizontal' melodic considerations often outweigh 'vertical' harmonic ones.

The harmony is *not* random or accidental, however. Tippett avoids repeated aggressive dissonances and provides plenty of consonances (3rds, 6ths, 5ths and octaves). For example:

- in bars 1–4 most intervals are consonant.
- the few 2nds are major and the 7ths are minor, avoiding harshness, and the 4ths are perfect not augmented.

Interestingly, the C# minor passage from the Development (beginning at bar 80) has more dissonant intervals because Tippett requires greater tension here (as in some fuller textures later in the Development).

2. *When the music is in more than two real parts.*

There are some root-position triads, notably in the second subject, and some first inversions, especially in the coda. Occasionally these help reinforce the tonality, and even correspond somewhat to traditional functional harmony. We may, for example, hear the

G major harmony in bar 39 (second subject) as I and the D major chords in bars 43-44 as V.

But several important false relations are symptomatic of the broader rejection of functional harmony. For example, the D major chord of bar 51 (second subject) is followed by an F major chord – something which recalls English Renaissance music in the Mixolydian mode.

## Melody

The movement is built largely on a small number of melodic ideas heard in the opening four bars. The most important comes at the start in the first orchestra:

- The first four notes: A–B–A–B.

Detailed investigation of motivic development is not expected at AS level. But perhaps one or both of the following manipulations of the A–B–A–B motif will prove easy to remember:

- Inversion in the lower strings (third and fourth phrases of the movement – bars 8–11), in imitation with the uninverted version
- Major 2nds are sometimes replaced by *minor* 2nds in transitional and developmental passages (first in bar 21 at the start of the transition) – sometimes to provide additional tension.

Other important motifs in the first orchestra (bars 1–4) are:

- the three notes A–B–E that follow the opening A–B–A–B
- the following notes in the higher octave: G–E–G–A–G–E
- the concluding three notes: G–E–D.

The second orchestra begins with another very important motif: D –D– D–C#–B–D.

All four motifs from the first orchestra come from the pentatonic set A–B–D–E–G, suggesting the influence of folk song. At various points in the movement there are hints of Mixolydian and Lydian modes.

Two further points about melody. Tippett sometimes uses:

- melodic sequence, notably in the lead-up to the Recapitulation (e.g. bar 126)
- periodic phrasing (with regular multiples of two and four bars), notably at the start of the movement. Elsewhere, there is often greater freedom and irregularity.

## Rhythm and metre

The movement owes its character above all to Tippett's rhythmic style, with widespread use of unequal or uneven groupings.

Influences are both:

- ancient – 16th- and early 17th-century English secular music, which is very flexible in metre, and

- modern – jazz and blues, witness many syncopations with a quaver tied across the barline or over the middle of a bar.

Tippett's performance note, part of it quoted in the anthology, begins:

*Though many bars of the first movement are felt to be "alla breve" [or 'cut common' time], the time-signature is given as 8/8, not 2/2, because of the unequal beats of many other bars. Such unequal beats are always shown by the groupings and ligatures [beaming], which give the proper rhythms intended for that part at that time. Certain bars have been marked "Beat 3..." [e.g. bar 15, with dotted barlines to separate the beats] to ensure that they are played as 3 real beats (which in 8/8 cannot be all equal) and not as a syncopation of 4/4 or 2/2.*

Emphasising this distinction between bars with beats of unequal length (or *additive rhythms*) and *syncopated patterns*, Tippett adds that:

- *a bar with 3 + 3 + 2 quavers has a real beat on the fourth quaver, and no beat on the 5th, while...*
- *...in a bar notated as a group of four quavers, plus a tied quaver, crotchet and quaver: the accent thrown on to the 4th quaver is a syncopation, and the true beat is on the 5th quaver.*

Occasionally in the second subject, Tippett finds it best to indicate the prevailing rhythm by changing time signature – with two bars of 6/8 plus one of 4/8 (16 quavers in all) in place of two bars of 8/8.

Towards the end of the Development (bars 95–106), there is *rhythmic augmentation*. In effect, Tippett slows down the first (A–B–A–B) motif by playing it in longer notes, while still at the original tempo. The motif was originally in quavers; in bars 95–106 it is heard in crotchets, minims, and then with one note per bar (minim tied to quaver, plus rests). Here the characteristic energy has drained away, *and (from bar 99) we hear the only passage in the movement without additive rhythms or syncopations.*