

Michael Tippett (1905-98)

Symphony No. 4 (1976-7)

Seven sections played without break:

1. Introduction and exposition
2. Development 1
3. Slow movement
4. Development 2
5. Scherzo
6. Development 3
7. Recapitulation and coda

In the 1920s Michael Tippett was taken to the Dorset Pitt-Rivers museum, where he saw a fast-motion film of a rabbit foetus developing from a single cell. Fifty years later, he used this well-stored memory in the composition of his fourth symphony.

The symphony was Tippett's first composition premiered outside the UK and his first following the death of Benjamin Britten: this was the beginning of a twenty-year Autumn, his place at the forefront of British music assured. The symphony was written for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Georg Solti, who recalled working on it 'with the greatest joy and love' and was astonished that the composer knew 'every single tone and articulation [and] described with the clearest imagination how things should sound'.

The commission was, originally, to have been a setting of Robert Lowell's poem 'For the Union Dead' and Lowell's line 'man's lovely/ peculiar power to choose life and die' resonates in the symphony Tippett eventually chose to write.

Tippett is often quoted as calling the fourth symphony a 'birth-to-death' piece: in fact, he was himself quoting Colin Davis on Sibelius' one-movement 7th symphony but realised the utility of the phrase in describing his own work. The life-cycle of Tippett's symphony is particularly brought to the fore by the inclusion of what the score calls a 'breathing effect', 'gently breathing' from the depths of the orchestra, a foetus in a womb, perhaps, or a life on its deathbed.

The wind-machine used at the premiere sounded less like breathing and rather more like a wind-machine, and subsequent attempts, with a player breathing into a microphone, were unsuccessful. Tippett eventually had a recording made that fully realised the power of this effect. Speakers are placed in the centre of the orchestra and the tape is introduced according to precise markings in the score.

The one-movement span of the piece is made up of seven sections: four movements that combine the conventions of sonata and symphonic form (exposition – slow movement – scherzo – recapitulation) are interleaved with three development sections. The orchestration is indebted to Tippett's earlier *Concerto for Orchestra* (1963) and darts similarly around the sections of the orchestra (not least a vastly inflated brass section comprising six horns, three trumpets, three trombones, and two tubas), juxtaposing, mosaic-like, blocks of material, side-by-side or on top of each other in often surprising combinations of light and dark, energy and calm.

The introduction is something of a 'birth-motif' in which the orchestra often seems to breathe in and out in duet with the tape (rocking clarinets and violins are marked as 'heaving'). The main exposition introduces three musical ideas in brass, strings, and woodwind, respectively, marked in the score as 'power', 'vigour', and 'lyric grace'. The first development section, which flies off into whirling fantasias on the exposition's original themes, is book-ended by something of a palate-cleanser, a sharp sorbet of tinkling, village-band, percussion, as out-of-place with what has come before as Beethoven's Turkish march in his Choral Symphony. The slow movement is one of haunting solos for the various woodwind leaders wafted over harp and piano.

The second development, at the centre of the piece, is a hurtling, terrifying, climax of rasping unison orchestra, heaving for breath, asthmatic. Tippett then marks the scherzo 'light, flying' and scores it for bubbling woodwind. The third and final development, as if remembering one cell dividing into many, is a whirling fugal paraphrase of a 3-part fantasia by Orlando Gibbons, starting for unison violins and splitting into the whole string section.

The finale gathers up in its arms all that has gone before, often piling the motifs on top of each other, or kaleidoscoping them into one another. This is something of a summation, a life flashing before one's eyes. The heavy brass chords of the opening 'birth-motif' return in a coda, as does the breath, but if then it was foetal, new-born, it is now more of a death-rattle. Music of great vitality on the horns and strings is contrasted with a slow dirge for trumpets and tubas. The orchestra fades into nothing and the piece stops breathing.

Emerging from the symphony's UK premiere at the Proms and having dutifully read his programme note, a small boy approached Tippett and asked 'And did the rabbit die at the end?'. This cautions us against too programmatic an approach in any reading of the symphony: its seven sections are not the seven ages of man. But in its offering of the same music for both 'birth' and 'death' it recalls a line in 'Journey of the Magi' by T. S. Eliot (whom Tippett called his 'spiritual father'):

'...I had seen birth and death,/ But had thought they were different; this Birth was... like Death...'

It was Tippett's last symphony.

OLIVER SODEN

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