

## **Michael Tippett (1905-1998)**

### **Triple concerto for violin, viola, cello and orchestra (1978-9)**

I Medium fast – fast – medium fast (as at beginning) - fast

*Interlude:* Medium slow

II Very slow

*Interlude:* Medium fast

III Medium slow – medium fast – fast – medium fast – fast – medium fast – fast

1979 was a year of pleasing symmetry for Michael Tippett: he set up his musical foundation to support young composers, and received funding for his Triple Concerto from the trust of his one-time supporter Ralph Vaughan Williams. By now, at seventy-four, Tippett was seen as the patriarch of British music. The Triple Concerto, commissioned and performed by the LSO, was premièred during the 1980 Proms, with Colin Davis conducting György Pauk, Nobuko Imai, and Ralph Kirshbaum. It was played some thirty times over the following three years. Initial critical reception, as had become predictable with Tippett's music, ranged from the ecstatic to the sceptical, but initial naysayers (as had also become the pattern) often found themselves retracting their earlier dismay.

The concerto can be seen as the moment in which Tippett regained his initial lyricism, thought forever subsumed into his angular patchworks of the 1960s. Certainly Tippett himself consciously set out to move into a new sound-world, one with the purity and tenderness of late Beethoven (and the format of triple concerto has a Beethovenian blueprint).

A major influence on the work is the music of the gamelan (a traditional Indonesian ensemble) which Tippett had heard in Java and Bali. He had evoked the gongs of the gamelan in his first piano sonata of 1936, and the concerto's virtuosity and the sudden changes of mood, tempo, and dynamic, are typical of gamelan music. Tippett recalled the 'serenely flowing music of a gamelan (with singer) in the hotel lobby at Jogjakarta [which] suggested at once the kind of melodic line I wanted all three instruments to play in the slow movement. I noted its general pattern on a piece of card which had been used to stiffen a shirt back from the laundry!'

The bit of card evolved into a score of remarkable detail and exoticism, which calls for 'velvety' double basses, 'murmuring' clarinets, and 'sitar-like' glissandi. The orchestra includes an alto flute, bass oboe, and five tuned gongs (to be hit with hard sticks).

Tippett told his biographer and friend, the late Ian Kemp, that the concerto represented a 'natural cycle from one day to the next'. It is played through without a break but its span is made up of three movements, punctuated with two soloist-free interludes either side of the central movement. Kemp casts this central movement as 'night', and its surrounding interludes as, respectively, twilight and dawn.

The first movement opens with distinct birth-pangs, coughing a troubled, double-stopped viola solo out into the light, followed by the cello and then the violin. All three play together, the violin and viola wandering in and out of each other's clefs, before a rude brass interruption. The mood turns with the introduction of yearning glissandi. Often in the concerto each solo voice is assigned a companion from the body of the orchestra and here the glockenspiel and marimba are marked as 'colouring and pointing vln. solo'. The 'fast' section begins with rippling bells and marimba, the

soloists struggling to stay afloat. The whole thing then repeats, but with each recapitulation substantially developed and elaborated by the soloists.

The first interlude is one of perfumed, wispy beauty, with close-to-the-soundboard twangs of the harp, marimba ripples and sugar-plum-fairy duets for the celesta and alto flute which later morph into a bass oboe solo. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a play that stands behind much of Tippett's work, the characters are separated until the island works its magic upon them. In the concerto's central movement it is as if the protagonists are brought together by the noises, sounds and sweet airs of the first interlude. A portentous, drowned-cathedral ground-bass briefly paves the way for an F-major 'heart-easing tune' (as Tippett had it), spread across three octaves in the now unison trio. The orchestra occasionally threatens engulfment, with a moment of perilous exposure for a high first trombone, but the movement's prevailing mood is of heart-stopping, as well as heart-easing, beauty: at its centre the violin and alto flute dance an exquisite pas de deux.

The second interlude threatens to rock the foundations of the piece altogether, after the middle movement's somnambulant air from another planet. Jazzy syncopation from a Hi-Hat combines with bluesy cascading trumpets: a cheeky – and literal – wake-up call. If the middle movement is a nocturne, this interlude stands as the dawn of a new day and, in relation to it, Tippett mentioned to Kemp the words of Yeats's poem 'High Talk': '... night splits and the dawn breaks loose / I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk on'.

The episodic finale stalks on into a new day. A dreamy trio for the soloists, quoting *The Midsummer Marriage*. Then unison strings and brass at full *ff* throttle. Then pulsing brass under a dusting of pizzicato. Then, seeming to come full circle, the two sections of the first movement return - but scrunched up, fighting each other for prominence, while rapidly losing their battery life. The soloists try desperately to stay afloat. Gamelan performances peter out similarly: at the end the players just put down their instruments ... and stop.

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