

Michael Tippett (1905-1998)
Symphony in B flat (1932-3, rev. 1934, 1938)

1. Lento – Allegro con fuoco – Lento
2. Adagio – Poco piu andante – Adagio – Poco piu andante
3. Allegro e cantabile

In 1933 Michael Tippett was rapturously in love, politically aflame, and all but completely unknown as a composer. He was twenty-eight, and not long returned from a trip to North Yorkshire, where he had been the musical director of workcamps set up to help unemployed miners. Europe was drifting, country by country, towards the far right of the political spectrum. Hitler was recently appointed Chancellor of the Third Reich; Spain tottered on the brink of civil war; and in England Oswald Mosley's followers were sprouting around the country in black-shirted clumps.

Like so many artists of the time Tippett's response to the political situation was to hold fast to Marxism. He was critical of Stalin's repressive policies in the Soviet Union, believing instead, with a violent passion, in the revolutionary views of the exiled Leon Trotsky. Much of Tippett's music composed in the nineteen thirties followed the propagandist path. But the Symphony in B flat clung to its apolitical course.

The piece was the occasion for more thought, and more second thoughts, than any of Tippett's published orchestral music. He had studied for five years at the Royal College of Music, gained a Bachelor's degree from London University in 1928, and over the next years, while teaching at a small prep school in Surrey, composed some twenty works, all of which he soon dismissed as immature. He arranged a further course of private study with the renowned teacher R.O. Morris, alongside lessons in orchestration from composer Gordon Jacob. The result was a String Trio in B flat, which he then orchestrated into a symphony. With this he was dissatisfied, and, retaining the central movement, composed outer movements from scratch, forming the thirty-minute piece now known as the Symphony in B flat. Initially he considered the work to mark his arrival at musical maturity, considering it his 'Opus 1'. But eventually he withdrew it in favour of his official 'first' symphony, begun over a decade later.

There is little in the Symphony in B flat that hints at the works that were to follow hard on its heels, which combine the techniques of Tudor and Baroque composers with the counterpoint of Hindemith and the smoky blues of Bessie Smith to form a seductive rhythmic gallop all Tippett's own. The symphony's most remarkable innovation is the way it ignores all but completely every new musical trend or school in vogue during the nineteen thirties. Instead it reaches for a neo-romantic idiom, alluding to – or merely imitative of? – composers such as Brahms and, especially, Sibelius. The mid-century dip in the latter's reputation was yet to come, and the Finnish composer's influence on British symphonies of the time (not least William Walton's first) was marked.

Tippett's admiration for Sibelius is shown most clearly in the first movement of the Symphony in B flat, which is a slow movement (as in Sibelius's fourth), beginning with

a solo clarinet (as in Sibelius's first). After a slow introduction that oozes into D-flat major, the movement is laid out across five sections, in sonata form. The first is an allegro that introduces two subjects, one vigorous, the other graceful. There follow two development sections, in which Tippett's later-characteristic rhythms begin to make their presence felt, with accents on the 'wrong' beat that make the music dance rather than limp. The recapitulation of the original themes comes with a blazing fourth section of shifting tectonic plates, returned to the original, slow, tempo, which persists for a shadowy coda that finishes the movement in B flat minor.

The central movement is in ternary form, its long unspooling melodies reminiscent of the folk tunes that Tippett would use in later work. Most startling is the middle section, where a blithe song on the oboe is entangled with a chromatic clarinet that sends the whole movement harmonically haywire, amid a tapestry of densely woven counterpoint.

The final movement, a rondo, tugs the symphony into a golden, sunlit world of Wagner: the "Faith motif" from *Parsifal* seems to hover in the background. The movement unfurls a three-note phrase that hints at the folksong 'Ca' the Yowes' (important in Tippett's first piano sonata and Double Concerto), before a second subject is introduced, explicitly borrowing a horn call from the finale of Sibelius's Symphony No 5, with a syncopated bass line chugging underneath. Already Tippett's ability to handle lengthy build-up and earned climax is in place, and the symphony ends in a joyous blaze of its eponymous key.

Tippett completed the Symphony in B flat on 15 November 1933, after roughly a year's work (for him a youthful speediness – a piece of comparable length in his later career could take three times as long). He had resigned from his teaching post to direct a number of amateur choirs in South London, and had also taken a job as a conductor of the South London Orchestra, founded to employ musicians put out-of-work when the talkies negated the need for live music in cinemas. The symphony was premiered by the South London Orchestra at its Lambeth base, Morley College, on 4 March 1934. The critics were more than happy: 'a remarkably capable piece of writing'; 'a significant addition to contemporary music'; 'the first appearance of a big talent'. But already Tippett was expressing dissatisfaction with the symphony, considering the first movement 'badly written', and the style 'too new to me to be quite free of the scores I have looked at'. Nevertheless the work received at least four further performances over the next eighteen months (more in fact than his next symphony was given in the comparable period after its premiere, a decade later): there was a run-through at the BBC, who rejected the idea of a broadcast, and in July 1935 Tippett conducted the London Symphony Orchestra for an open rehearsal of the first movement.

Lack of publication was initially an enforced, rather than a chosen, delay. Tippett had been provisionally accepted by the German publisher Schott, and had sent them the manuscript of the symphony as representing the best of his back catalogue. But the paper shortages of the second world war, and the fact that Schott printed all contemporary music in their German offices, made publication impossible. This granted Tippett the odd privilege of being able to shape his List of Works in hindsight. When peace was declared he had still not abandoned this early orchestral work, which

was locked in a vault lest it not survive the Blitz. When, in 1944, he embarked upon another symphony, he headed the manuscript 'No 2', and had it performed under the title 'Symphony 1945'. It was published as 'No 1' in 1948, by which time the Symphony in B flat had evidently been discarded.

As Tippett roved into ever more original soundscapes, his early debt to the romantic composers he had venerated perhaps began to seem all too clear, and exhuming the symphony after the war, at a time when Sibelius was deeply out of fashion, may have seemed a career-damagingly retrograde step. He had decided to cover his musical tracks. It was also the case that a number of his early works were bound up with his short-lived Trotskyism, and withdrawing them was a way of burying his political past. The symphony may have got caught up in this wiping-clean of troubled slates. In his lifetime Tippett was not too strict about mounting withdrawn pieces, and in 1965 permitted a performance of the string trio on which the symphony was based. But, by the terms of his will, his unpublished works are not to be performed until 2048.

By unanimous vote of the Tippett Foundation and Will Trust it was decided that the composer had been too severe towards a work that deserved a performance. During preparation of the symphony from a copyist's score, the manuscript in Tippett's hand was discovered, allowing a final set of revisions to the piece (a few nips and tucks made in 1938) to be heard for the very first time. This manuscript also revealed the symphony's epigraph, from Hölderlin's poem 'Vulcan': 'And there's always at least one friendly spirit who gladly blesses him, and even when the fierce, uneducated spirit-powers are angry, love still loves.' The quotation is a reference to Tippett's great friend and benefactress, Evelyn Maude, who is the symphony's dedicatee. But it is also a reminder that he composed it while in the first throes of a passionate love affair with the artist Wilfred Franks. If the symphony shares one quality with Tippett's later music, it is the capacity to respond to a darkling world by leading its listener through shadowy terrain into the realm of exultation.

Mounting the symphony allows, for the first time, a true understanding of Tippett's creative development, and restores a vital missing paving stone on his road to international renown. So different from the works that were to follow, it makes greater sense of the sea-changes that came in Tippett's career, and challenges all the received wisdom about his late development as a composer. Cries of 'lost masterpiece' must be tentative. But the Symphony in B flat is unique among Tippett's withdrawn works for being neither juvenilia nor agitprop, but a substantial work of considerable power and skill. Composed at the age of twenty-eight it proves its composer to be not a late starter but an ambitious one, who would refuse to settle into a career of comfortable competency, and instead determinedly embrace the struggle involved in widening the parameters of his musical vision.

It is often remarked how youthful Tippett's music remained throughout his long life. But ironically we have never had the chance to hear the music he wrote in his youth. Until now.