

A man of our time

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Classical music - **Jessica Duchen** celebrates a composer whose ideals can be heard at the heart of his work

The composer Michael Tippett, whose centenary falls on 2 January 2005, is second only to Benjamin Britten among his 20th-century British colleagues. Both the man and his music had a unique charisma that inspired widespread love and loyalty. His work encompassed almost every classical genre, from piano sonatas to operas, string quartets to symphonies and concertos, solo songs to oratorios. On occasions, his music baffled listeners not only with its rhythmic complexity, but also with its sense of striving for a greater good - a quality that sometimes worked wonderfully, and sometimes didn't.

Certain detractors regarded Tippett as an overenthusiastic, overintellectual and rather amateurish figure, an English eccentric obsessed with Jungian dream imagery and the onset of the Age of Aquarius. His devoted fans, on the other hand, considered him a genius. Perhaps his charm was that he was both.

Tippett died at the age of 93 just seven years ago, but the dizzying number of performances and recordings planned to mark his centenary suggests that his music is both ripe for reassessment and as fresh as ever. A pacifist, homosexual and intellectual idealist, Tippett was once regarded as rather an outsider in British music. With hindsight, it is clear that he was ahead of his time, especially in the way he invested his work with his social and psychological ideals. During much of Tippett's lifetime, the musical establishment generally avoided engaging with such matters, but for him they were inescapable, constantly dominating his view of life and art.

Tippett was born into a middle-class family in London (they moved to a small Suffolk village while he was a child) and was steeped in social conscience thanks to his mother, a suffragette and charity worker. During the Second World War, his pacifist views made him a conscientious objector, for which he was imprisoned for three months in Wormwood Scrubs. Earlier he had joined the Communist Party in the hope of converting his branch to Trotskyism (although, that mission proving impossible, he left after a few months). Yet despite Tippett's left-wing principles, his artistic mentors included the conservative T S Eliot. It was Eliot who advised him to write his own libretto for his oratorio *A Child of Our*

Time, and Tippett went on to write the words for all his operas and choral works.

A Child of Our Time remains Tippett's most celebrated work and probably the most representative of his talent for transforming specific historical events into symbolic, universal statements. In 1938, he was searching for an appropriate subject for a full-scale oratorio modelled on Handel's *Messiah* and Bach's *Passions*. The news of Kristallnacht in Nazi Germany, following the shooting of a German diplomat in Paris by a young Polish Jew, gave his ideas the focus he was after. He enriched the work with Negro spirituals, which he felt were the perfect modern equivalent to Bach's chorales. The result is an exultant assertion of compassion and brotherhood against all divisions of race or religion, conveyed with Tippett's infectious *joie de vivre*. At one point, he gave the chorus the prayer: "I would know my shadow and my light/So shall I at last be whole."

This exhortation to spiritual and psychological self-knowledge, closely connected to social conscience, lies at the core of all Tippett's works, but especially his operas. *The Midsummer Marriage* (first performed in 1955), with its convoluted storyline concerning a young couple's search for self-understanding before they marry, was initially greeted with incomprehension. But the opera's luscious music and sense of humanity ultimately overrode all else to make it one of the most popular British operas.

The Knot Garden (first performed in 1970) contains the operatic stage's first homosexual kiss - Tippett, who was open-ly gay, was up there with Britten as an icon for Britain's homosexual artistic fraternity. However, that did not prevent him from writing strong and sympathetic roles for women. In his last opera, *New Year* (1989), the heroine Jo-Ann, a children's doctor terrified of the world she must face to do her job, undergoes a learning process that opens her heart and helps her overcome her fears. Involving a love affair through time travel, the apparently dotty and heavily symbolic plot is nevertheless brought together by the stated ideal: "One humanity, one justice."

The many performances and new recordings of Tippett's work in 2005 provide ample material for those wanting to become better acquainted with this stimulating and life-affirming composer. Among the highlights is an addition to his operatic oeuvre: English National Opera's first ever staging of *A Child of Our Time*. Tippett would undoubtedly have approved, as this work is perhaps more relevant than ever. "Images of the past, shapes of the future," he wrote of his creative endeavour. "Images of vigour for a decadent period, images of calm for one too violent. Images of reconciliation for worlds torn by division. And in an age of mediocrity and shattered dreams, images of abounding, generous, exuberant beauty."