

Concerto for double string orchestra, 1st Movement Michael Tippett

(a) Background information and performance circumstances

Tippett was born in London in 1905 and studied composition, conducting and piano at the Royal College of Music in London. Some years later, he studied with R O Morris, a noted expert on sixteenth-century music. This proved formative, and he developed a fascination and flair for counterpoint which gave rise to the first significant works of his maturity, the String Quartet No.1 (1935, revised 1944) and Piano Sonata No.1 (1936-7).

During the 1930s Tippett worked as a conductor at Morley College in London, and this gave him the opportunity to conduct the first performance of the Concerto for Double String Orchestra in a benefit concert there on 21 April 1940 with The South London Orchestra, described in a sub-heading as 'Morley College Professional Orchestra'. This was an orchestra of unemployed musicians, many thrown out of work by the arrival of sound films, which operated under the auspices of Morley College between 1932 and 1940.

The Concerto also received an important second performance in a Wigmore Hall concert on 17 July 1943, conducted by Tippett's Morley College colleague Walter Goehr. *The Times* reviewed it as a brand new work, calling it *a well knit, skilfully contrived composition, in which intricacy of detail in rhythm and texture was made to serve the ends of a larger design*.

Tippett has come to be regarded as a most significant figure in twentieth-century composition, his music presenting a highly original interpretation of neoclassical style. In the Concerto, he achieved a seamless blend of features of contemporary European music with elements of folk music and jazz and the sprung rhythm and polyphonic exuberance he admired in English madrigals.

(b) Performing forces and their handling

The instrumentation of the Concerto for two antiphonally-opposed yet equally-balanced string orchestras had few precedents. Similar string orchestra works from the early years of the twentieth century by Elgar and by Vaughan Williams, and subsequent works by Warlock, Bliss and Britten, had established an English tradition of string orchestral writing (in 1932 a further impetus to the English string orchestra was given by the formation of the Boyd Neel Orchestra whose aim was to revive early string repertoire), but few had explored the medium of a double string orchestra. Despite the title there is no solo writing at all in the Concerto and it would seem that the term refers to the Baroque principle of contrasting groups of instruments in order to achieve textural and dynamic variety. The opposition of equal groups is also reminiscent of the early Baroque 'concertato' style of writing, when composers such as Monteverdi and Gabrieli composed 'sacred concertos' (for example, Gabrieli's *Symphoniae Sacrum*). These works were written for contrasted antiphonal groups of choral voices, solo voices, strings, brass and continuo.

Tippett said that in calling the piece 'Concerto' he was harking back to the concerti grossi of Handel, although the writing in the Concerto seems removed from Handel's principles of opposition between concertino and ripieno. The style of writing in the first movement is essentially conservative and there are few exceptional demands on the players, other than the accurate interpretation of the rhythmic complexities and in the stamina required to maintain the momentum.

A summary of general features of the instrumental writing in the first movement follows.

- All instruments have active lines, with only the double basses having a lighter load.
- Textures are very varied: e.g. monophonic, homophonic, contrapuntal and antiphonal textures (see section below on texture) with many different forms of the last three of these.
- Counterpoint is often intricate, with lines being passed between instrumental parts and between orchestras.
- Individual lines can be angular and rhythmically intricate, with syncopation, anticipatory rhythms, unpredictable emphasis and unusual note groupings.
- Few idiomatic techniques are used, and are scored for only a few instruments in each case: double-stopping (almost exclusively in the coda, e.g. bb.209-212), *pizzicato* (rarely, e.g. b.51), *sul tasto* (one section, from b.107).
- Performance instructions are very specific; dynamics or articulation marks are detailed in every bar, character markings are frequent (e.g. *scherzando*, *dolce cantabile*) and bowing marks are common.

(c) Texture

Tippett described his Concerto for Double String Orchestra as *a study in polyphony*. The string orchestras are presented as two antiphonal groups, but with much of the writing in a freely polyphonic style reminiscent of the seventeenth-century English fantasy. Noting that he attached himself partly to the special English tradition of Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro* and Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*, he also commented that he did not regard the two orchestras as vehicles for concertante writing but as antiphonal groups.

SUMMARY OF TEXTURES EMPLOYED

OCTAVES

- Used Only Rarely, E.G. Bb.40-41, Bb.48-49.

MELODY AND ACCOMPANIMENT

- Rare, But Significant In The Transition Second Section Where A Melody Is Played Against A Simple Ostinato Accompaniment (B.21-29)

HOMOPHONY.

- Forceful Block Chords At Important Cadence Points Such As B.20-21, B.38 And B.164 (The Ends Of Sections Of The Transition) And For Similar Punctuating Effect In The 2nd Subject At B.59 And B.185
- At B.99 Detached Accompanying Chords Against Sustained 'Cello And Bass Line

COUNTERPOINT

The Majority Of The Movement Is Contrapuntal

- B.1 Two Rhythmically Contrasted Themes Presented Simultaneously.
- B.8 Close Imitation Of A Simple Motif, Also Using Inversion.
- B.129 As The Recapitulation Begins The Opening 2-Part Counterpoint Is Extended Into 3 Parts With The Addition Of A New Line.
- B.213 The Most Complex Passage Of Counterpoint Involving All Instrumental Parts, In Which The Main Motifs Of The Movement Return Superimposed, Used In Imitation And Finally In Canon.

ANTIPHONY

The movement goes some way towards exploiting antiphonal textures between the two orchestras. Much of the time Tippett combines the orchestras as a single force, doubling lines across the two groups or working contrapuntal interplay across the two. Elsewhere they preserve their independent identity but are used in combination, then occasionally as separate opposing entities. For example:

- b.8 The orchestras are heard in alternation.
- b.68 This passage begins as the opening, then Tippett clearly works with alternating orchestras from b.74, until they finally come together in b.87.
- b.107 This antiphonal exchange begins the exciting ascent to the recapitulation.

(d) Structure

Having studied Beethoven's works exhaustively as a student and realising that here there was an essential fundamental archetype, it was only natural that in writing a concerto Tippett's structures would relate to classical ideals of form. The work is reminiscent of a three-movement concerto grosso, but in the choice of sonata, ternary (modelled on Beethoven's String Quartet in F minor, op.95) and sonata-rondo forms it also clearly belongs to the late classical tradition.

Its seamless flow, however, is hardly interrupted by thematic contrast, and conventional articulation of the journey through tonal relationships is only weakly evident. However, the standard divisions of a sonata structure are clear, marked out by the return of the opening music which acts not only as a first subject, but also punctuates the movement in the way of a ritornello theme.

SUMMARY OF THE FORM of the first movement of the Concerto, showing the sonata structure and its link with ritornello form. Only the principal tonal centres are identified..

Bars	Main tonal centres	SONATA FORM	RITORNELLO FORM
1-67		• EXPOSITION	
1-8	A	• 1 st subject	• <i>RITORNELLO 1</i>
8-21		• Transition section 1	• <i>Episode 1</i>
21-38		• Transition section 2	
39-67	G	• 2 nd subject	
68-128		• DEVELOPMENT	
68-71	E		• <i>RITORNELLO 2</i>
71-128	C# Fm Ebm Ab		• <i>Episode 2</i>
129-193		• RECAPITULATION	
129-136	A	• 1 st subject	• <i>RITORNELLO 3</i>
129-147		• Transition section 1	• <i>Episode 3</i>
147-155		• New transition passage	
156-164		• Transition section 2	
165-193	A	• 2 nd subject	
194-232		• CODA	
194-201	F#m		• <i>RITORNELLO 4</i>
202-232	C A		• <i>Episode 4</i>

Note the presentation of two themes as one at the opening of this movement . It is an unusual and fascinating approach to thematic structure. The classical model of a bold and active first subject being followed after a period of transition by a lyrical and restful second subject is immediately collapsed here by the simultaneous sounding of one theme (*marcato*) against a second theme (*espressivo*)..

(e) Tonality

Tippett's music depends on modality in its widest sense, that is the free movement of melody and harmony within a modal set of pitches. The lack of stability of certain pitches in the modal system (7ths, 3rds, 6ths) led Tippett to a **variable tonality** in which alternative notes within a standard mode became part of an increasingly chromatic tonality. The central modality of the first movement of the Concerto is **mixolydian**, so, for example, the first subject, with its two completely independent themes, is partly unified by its mixolydian mode on A. These opening themes in fact contain 9 different pitches, easily offering alternatives to two of those from the natural mixolydian mode.

A	B	C/C#	D	E	F/F#	G
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Despite the potential complexity of this resource, the music never loses sight of its diatonic character, although it tends to glide around its tonal centres, treating them as reference points rather than establishing them firmly. There is little feeling here that harmony guides and supports the tonality - there are few instances where a new tonic is

preceded by a dominant for example (bb.90⁴-91 is a rare case, where the bass moving from dominant to tonic leads the tonal centre as it plunges from C to F, but even here it is a minor chord on C that precedes the new key of F minor). Elsewhere the tonal centres are created by the implications of melodic shapes and intervals, and often in particular by the strength of the main oscillating motif from the opening of the movement which recurs persistently, and unfailingly gives weight to the prevailing tonality.

Interestingly, in 1938, around the time of the composition of the Concerto, Tippett came across Vincent D'Indy's *Cours de Composition Musicale*, a study of which led him to a new understanding of the structural use of tonality.

D'Indy's tonal theories explained the process of controlling modulation in relation to an ascending or descending cycle of 5ths, thereby creating emotional effects of varying intensity and power. Tippett was fascinated by this and in 1938, in response to an 'accusation' that contemporary music lacked sense of tonality, he wrote:

The artistic use of the tonal system is based on the fact that music whose tonal centres are rising in the scale of fifths produces the effect of ascent (struggle, illumination), while tonal centres descending the scale of fifths produce an effect of descent (resignation, despair). Beethoven was the great master of these effects. The first movement of the *Hammerklavier* sonata is a skilfully

continuous use of ascent, while the first movement of the *Appassionata* is an equally continuous descent. The listener is not directly conscious of these effects.

Tippett interpreted D'Indy's theories as being means for creating logical tonal schemes within a broadly functional environment as well as for affecting the expressive intent of the music. The tonal scheme of the first movement of the Concerto bears out Tippett's adoption of D'Indy's theories.

Principal Tonal Centres In The First Movement Of The Concerto

- The movement begins centred on A (mixolydian mode).
- The exposition moves through D to G major for the 2nd subject
- The development takes E (the dominant) to start, and, as at the opening, this has a freely constructed mixolydian mode as its base, but it soon moves headlong towards 'C#' (b.80) - up three fifths - for maximum brilliance.
- At b.91 the tonal centre reaches the opposite pole, down three fifths from A to F minor; theoretically this should be the point of maximum darkness, and in fact it corresponds with the start of the collapse of the frenetic movement of the development.
- A series of descending fifths leads to Eb minor (b.99) - a point of ambiguity as this is the enharmonic of D#, also 6 stages, but rising, from home.
- A further step to Ab (b.107) is significant because this is the same pitch as would have been next in sequence in the rising pattern after C# (b.80). In fact some phrases here are written enharmonically - it is as if the music has come full circle, and this is the point that marks the ultimate disintegration of the development and the start of the gradual return to the recapitulation.
- Interestingly, Tippett chooses to use **whole tone** melodic patterns for much of the following section, thereby obscuring the sense of tonality.
- As the recapitulation is reached (b.129) there is a firm return to A, which is maintained thereafter as the centre of tonality until the coda.

- o The coda matches the opposing poles of the third rising fifth (F#) (b.194) with the third lower fifth (C) (b.202) before returning to A and completing a cycle in which all possible tonal centres have been referenced in some way during the course of the movement. Both F# and C are within easy reach of the central tonality of A, but the effect of the unexpected emergence into C following F# is remarkable and heralds the climactic close to the movement.

Summary table showing the movement between tonal centres

7	6	5	4	3	2	1	HOME	1	2	3	4
Ab	Eb	(Bb)	F	C	G	D	A	E	(B)	F#	C#
Dev ^t b.107	Dev ^t b.99		Dev ^t b.91		2 nd subject b.39	Transition b.21	1 st subject b.1	Dev ^t b.68			Dev ^t b.80
				Coda b.202			Recap ⁿ b.129				Coda b.194
							Coda b.212				

(f) Harmony

Developing as a composer in the early twentieth century Tippett had at his fingertips the rich harmonic language of the late nineteenth century. However, he found there little to stimulate him in what he felt was over-indulgent use of harmony and extreme dependence on the exploitation of harmonic tension.

A study of Tippett's early works confirms his own suggestion that at that stage of his career he did not write chords! Certainly this is borne out by the first movement of the Concerto for Double String Orchestra, where for the most part harmony arises incidentally as a result of counterpoint; there are a few block chords, but only at crucial punctuation points in the structure, and even then they do not display conventional progression. Such chords often contain only two pitches and move by contrary motion of their outer parts (b.38, b.59). Tippett's main concern is with the interplay of counterpoint and his harmony becomes subsidiary. In the Concerto this free linear movement gives rise to mild but brittle dissonance brought about in a number of ways:

- o The contrapuntal collision of dissonant intervals in independent lines (e.g. in the interplay of fragmented figures in the section from b.51).
- o The introduction of notes of anticipation.
- o Dissonance resulting from modal inflections, such as the flattened seventh and the leading note being superposed or used in consecutive chords, so common in the music of the sixteenth century and in Purcell (there are many subtle examples of this in different contexts here: b.6 C/C#; b.26 E/E#; b.71 G/G#).
- o The construction of chords from unusual intervals, e.g. chords in fourths, stemming from the emphasis on seconds, fourths and sevenths in his melodic language (see b.213 onwards).
- o Pandiatonicism (free use of dissonance), as in bb. 85-89

Certain chords and harmonic progressions which are familiar in other Western traditions appear in Tippett's music, many having modal origins, for example the exploitation of relationships involving the supertonic, flattened seventh and subdominant chords.

- A simple, although rare, example of a modal cadence is found in bb.20-21 (phrygian cadence).
- In contrast, notice the perfect cadence in G (bb. 45-47)
- The lack of a third in the final chord of the movement is a characteristic feature of cadence chords in earlier music, and here is both reminiscent of such influences as well as reinforcing, by the absence of the third, the ambiguity of Tippett's modal language
- Augmented triad (bars 118-122).
- The use of a tonic chord with a minor third and added sixth is a characteristic sound which permeates Tippett's later music and is heard here occasionally at important moments such as the abrupt move to F minor at b.91

(g) Melody

Features of Tippett's melodic style include:

- Use of motifs, leading to
- phrase structures of varying lengths and
- Phrase extension, e.g. b. 39, arising from opening motif
- Sequence, e.g. bars 18-20, Vn I, orchestra II.
- Inversion, e.g. b.8.
- Interval extension, e.g. lower instruments from b.13.
- Ostinato, e.g. b.21
- Varied intervallic shapes, comprising both conjunct and disjunct patterns
- Modality pervasive (involving Lydian as well as Mixolydian)
- Ornamentation

(h) Rhythm and metre

Aaron Copland heard the Concerto for Double String Orchestra by chance and had thought it American because of its liberal use of syncopated rhythms, cross-accented and asymmetrical grouping of quavers. Rhythmic vitality is a distinctive feature of Tippett's style, the inspiration for which lay in the regeneration of earlier styles - in the re-creation of the rhythmic style of Weelkes, Byrd, Gibbons and Dowland.

Features of Tippett's approach to rhythm and metre include:

Rhythmic polyphony, clearly evident at the opening with only intermittent alignment of stress. The melodic lines are drawn together by the regular bar lines of the 8/8 metre, but this is not significant to the natural accentuation of the two lines; they exist as two separate strands.

Additive Rhythm: a crucial and remarkably original feature of Tippett's technique is the use of additive rhythm. The basic rhythmic unit is the quaver, from which all the unpredictable patterns evolve. The result is a restless, sprung rhythm.

Tippett had some difficulty notating the additive rhythm. He worked closely with the conductor Walter Goehr, collaborating on the notation of the most complex passages. It



was concern about the interpretation of the rhythms by performers that led to the metre's notation as 8/8, which allowed quaver groups of 4 + 4 and 3 + 3 + 2 to exist without confusion. Tippett wrote in his 'Notes for Performance':

Though many bars of the first movement are felt to be '*alla breve*', the time signature is 8/8, not 2/2, because of the unequal beats of many other bars. Such unequal beats are shown by the groupings and ligatures [brackets], which give the proper rhythms intended for that part at that time. Certain bars have been marked "Beat 3..." to ensure that they are played as 3 real beats (which in 8/8 cannot all be equal) and not as a syncopation of 4/4 or 2/2... (An example of this can be found in bar 15 where the 8 quavers are grouped 3+3+2.)

Augmentation: see bars 95-106

Syncopation: see bar 1, both lines.

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