

## - REVIEW -

## Michael Tippett: The Biography

Oliver Soden

Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2019

750 pp.

A revolutionary and a pacifist; a profoundly serious intellectual and a giggly eccentric; an outsider and pillar of the Establishment—Michael Tippett's confoundingly paradoxical character (and music) continues to resist neat (re)appraisal. Alternately lauded and dismissed, Tippett occupies a tentative position in the pantheon of twentieth-century music. Some two decades on from the composer's death, the paucity of major new Tippett studies has done little to resolve this critical impasse.<sup>1</sup> Popular writing has lagged even further behind Tippett scholarship: until recently, biographical studies of Tippett were limited to important (but dated) works by Ian Kemp, Meirion Bowen, and the composer himself.<sup>2</sup> Oliver Soden's much-anticipated biography does much to redress this imbalance, collating the fragments of a near century-long life in a single, exhaustively researched volume. Encyclopaedic in scope, this debut biography does much to illuminate the life—if not the art—of a major British composer.

The ambitions of Soden's work, however, are by no means limited to addressing the gaping void in Tippett literature. Indeed, Soden hopes that by narrating the composer's life, his 'creations may more fully be understood'.<sup>3</sup> If a Tippett renaissance is on the horizon, its success will undoubtedly depend on deepening public understanding of music which is often abstruse and intellectually ambitious. Given this admirable remit, it is surprising that Soden conceives his work as a 'life' rather than a 'life-n-works'.<sup>4</sup> This neat sidestepping of critical responsibility (Soden delegates that to musicologists) does much to undermine the professed ambitions of the book, often limiting 'understanding' of Tippett's music to unobjectionable contextualisation. While undoubtedly an integral part of the meaning-making process, such contextualisation perhaps functions best when allied with a sense of

critical engagement. It is uncertain whether a comprehensive narrative of a composer's life is at all possible—or indeed desirable—without the degree of musical explication which this entails.

Although Soden never entirely bifurcates music and biography, his eschewal of the communicative capabilities of analysis, whether technical or evaluative, results in surface readings of Tippett's *oeuvre* which fail to convey an engagement with the music on its own terms. Naturally, the more technical reaches of musical analysis are inapposite in a work of biography, a genre which necessitates concessions to both accessibility and economy. Such concessions do not, however, preclude 'softer' types of analytical thought which may convey critical evaluation of a musical work without resorting to technical pedantry on the one hand or journalistic description on the other.<sup>5</sup>

Failing to navigate a successful course between these poles, Soden's readings of musical works often veer towards inarticulacy, relying heavily on forced metaphors as shortcuts to musical understanding. Extravagantly rococo turns of phrase – on *The Midsummer Marriage*'s orchestration, for example: 'sunspots from the celesta or glockenspiel, flutes and oboes ruffling the lakes, the sun and moon emerging from the clouds in great rays of brass'<sup>6</sup> – all too often dominate Soden's prose, doing little to advance either critical argument or biographical narrative. Equally gauche is Soden's appraisal of the Third String Quartet (1945–6) as a 'club sandwich of fugue',<sup>7</sup> imagery which entirely fails to convey the contrapuntal intricacies of the work. Occasionally, Soden's disregard for analytical precision results in factual errors: of the passacaglia movement in Tippett's Symphony No. 1 (1944–5), the biographer claims migratory bass lines as an innovation unique to that work when, in fact, such practices had become standardised by the mid-twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

The musical articulacy offered by even a modicum of analysis by no means subverts the biographical project, supplanting it with critical evaluation. Rather, deep(er) readings of musical works may articulate the intersection of a composer's creative and exterior lives, colouring biographical narratives and illuminating artistic trajectories. Elsewhere, Soden tracks Tippett's intellectual development remarkably well, examining the composer's shifting literary tastes and political sensibilities. It

is a shame that Tippett's music, surely the *raison d'être* of the entire project, is not treated with similar critical commitment.

If not entirely convincing in its explication of Tippett's compositional life, Soden's biography excels in its historical contextualisation. Witness to two World Wars, the dismantling of Empire, and the rise and fall of the Berlin Wall, Tippett's century-spanning life was most certainly lived, as the volume's dustjacket aptly proclaims, 'at the forefront of the twentieth century'. Uncannily alert to the shifting tenor of public affairs, Tippett viewed the artist's role as an essentially communicative one, reflecting on the deepest needs of society. Soden allows this major trope to inform much of his work, mediating between Tippett's life and works and their myriad socio-historical contexts, whether 1930s left-wing politics or mid-century attitudes towards homosexuality.

Particularly important for Tippett scholarship is Soden's illumination of the composer's ardent (if short-lived) Trotskyism.<sup>9</sup> Soden's sleuthing has uncovered the breadth of Tippett's socialism, details of which have long been obscured by authorised biographies. Rather than the anodyne socialism of workers' camps and communal music-making which these endorsed narratives depict, Tippett's Trotskyist views saw his active participation in the radical Youth Militant Group. This group, whose self-stated objective was the 'revolutionary overthrow[ing] of the capitalist system, and the establishment of the dictatorship of the new proletariat',<sup>10</sup> seems an unlikely home for a composer whose lasting political legacy has been an advocacy for pacifism. Indeed, the vehemence of Tippett's revolutionary views is startling. Welcoming a government white paper on British rearmament, the one-time pacifist writes, 'I say and those like me, "by all means prepare your white paper and when we get the guns so built, we will shoot you with them"'.<sup>11</sup>

Elsewhere, Soden's thorough research evinces itself in the illumination of Tippett's relationship with Priaux Rainier. Virtually ignored in Tippett literature, Rainier shared a remarkable personal and artistic sympathy with the younger composer. Indeed, such was their intimacy that the two composers seriously considered marriage as a plausible solution to their turbulent domestic affairs. In narrating such episodes, Soden sensitively probes the composer's fluid sexuality,<sup>12</sup>

examining his various romantic liaisons and the complex psychological needs which underpinned them. Indeed, in considering marriage (which the composer did on several occasions), Tippett was attempting to reconcile conflicting desires for emotional, domestic, and sexual fulfilment – a poignantly difficult task given the prejudices suffered by the queer community in mid-century Britain.

In his handling of Tippett's personal life, Soden captures something of Virginia Woolf's ideal biography which, as Lyndall Gordon has pointed out, suggests that 'the high-points of existence are not the traditional markers of birth, marriage, and death but hidden away among the ordinary events of an ordinary day'.<sup>13</sup> In this insistence on the interiority of biography writing, Woolf highlights the friction between the mystery of lived experience and its objectification as authoritative narrative. While such idealism is difficult to implement in practice,<sup>14</sup> the biographer is nevertheless tasked with reconciling the private aspirations and public manifestations of an artist's creative life. To understand Tippett's music in any meaningful sense, then, requires examination not only of the musical works themselves but of the fierce creative ambitions which underpin them. With intellectual preoccupations ranging from Jungian psychology to ancient Chinese divination, Tippett's work habitually belies the breadth of his thinking. Soden shows how such intellectual aspirations forced the traditional confines of Tippett's compositional craft, perceptively positing the composer as a 'thinker who chose music out of several possible modes of expression'.<sup>15</sup>

While such insights distinguish Soden's work, it is unfortunate that they are often lost within the vast bulk of the book. The author's *horror vacui* sees large swathes of undigested information crammed into the volume; this unnecessarily bloats the text and contributes little to its narrative shape. Indeed, Soden's irrepressible penchant for biographical detail occasionally sees his narrative lens swerve disturbingly far from Tippett's scores. The actual music of *King Priam* (1958–61), a seminal work in Tippett's musical development, attracts a paltry three paragraphs of metaphor-laden comment; Soden's account of the mental breakdown suffered by Karl Hawker (Tippett's then-lover), by contrast, sprawls over many pages. Elsewhere, such indifference is more brutal: the Third Piano Sonata

(1972–3), a fine example of Tippett's Beethovenian debt, is allocated a mere two sentences.

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Tippett appreciation and scholarship alike will undoubtedly benefit from Soden's work, plumbing as it does the depths of extant archival material. (In this respect, Soden's excellent bibliography and end matter is invaluable.) That Tippett literature has been furnished with a complete life is a major milestone, both for Tippett studies and for music writing in general. If not entirely successful as a critical synthesis of Tippett's life and music, the vitality of Soden's narration and a contagious enthusiasm for his subject ensures that this biography will remain a valuable addition to any music lover's shelves.

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<sup>1</sup> Notable exceptions to this posthumous critical silence include David Clarke, *The Music and Thought of Michael Tippett: Modern Times and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Suzanne Robinson (ed.), *Michael Tippett: Music and Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); and Kenneth Gloag and Nicholas Jones (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Michael Tippett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Ian Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1984); Meirion Bowen, *Michael Tippett* (London: Robson Books, 1982); Michael Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues: An Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Oliver Soden, *Michael Tippett: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2019), 614.

<sup>4</sup> Soden, *Michael Tippett*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Francis Tovey's *Essays in Musical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935–9), while dated, remain excellent examples of an accessible analytical criticism. In these essays, originally

conceived as extended programme notes, Tovey strikes a fine balance between analytical rigour and evaluative commentary, preserving his own critical integrity while ensuring a degree of accessibility to non-specialist readers.

<sup>6</sup> Soden, *Tippett*, 376.

<sup>7</sup> Soden, 356.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Schoenberg's 'Nacht' from *Pierrot Lunaire* Op. 21 (1921), Webern's Passacaglia for Orchestra Op. 1 (1908), and the "Pasacaille" movement of Ravel's Piano Trio (1914), all of which employ sophisticated contrapuntal dispersion of an ostinato ground. Indeed, such techniques are extensively explored in J.S. Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor BWV 582, a work predating Tippett's Symphony by some 250 years.

<sup>9</sup> While left-wing politics were by no means unusual in Tippett's artistic milieu, more moderate Stalinism prevailed amongst the composer's contemporaries. This brand of Marxism advocated the doctrine of socialism in one state, thereby perpetuating the influence of the Soviet Union. Trotskyism, by contrast, called for radical transformation of all capitalist societies by means of armed insurrection.

<sup>10</sup> Soden, 183.

<sup>11</sup> Soden, 160.

<sup>12</sup> Tippett resisted the term 'homosexual', preferring 'bisexual'

<sup>13</sup> Lyndall Gordon, *Virginia Woolf: A Writer's Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it is telling that Woolf employs works of fiction as vehicles for this model life-writing (see, for example, the experimental novels *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*).

<sup>15</sup> Soden, 611.