Between Englishness and Modernism: The Critical Reception of Tippett's Operas

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The relationship between that particular form of national identity and consciousness we term 'Englishness' and modernism has been much discussed[1]. It is my contention in this essay that the critical reception of the operas of Michael Tippett sheds an interesting and revealing light on the relationship at a moment when it was particularly fraught, in the decades following the Second World War.

Before approaching that topic, one has to deal first with the thorny and many-sided question as to how and to what extent those operas really do manifest a quality of Englishness. This is more than a parochial question of whether Tippett is a composer whose special significance for listeners and opera-goers in the UK is rooted in qualities that only we on these islands can perceive. It would hardly be judged a triumph for Tippett if that question were answered in the affirmative. On the contrary, it would be perceived as a limiting factor — perhaps the very factor that prevents Tippett from exporting overseas as successfully as his great rival and antipode, Benjamin Britten. But even without that hard evidence of Tippett's limited appeal, the very idea that his Englishness forms a major part of his significance could in itself be a disabling feature of the music. We are squeamish these days about granting a substantive aesthetic value to music on the grounds of its national qualities, if the composer in question is not safely locked away in the relatively remote past. This is partly because nationalism has itself become such a fraught issue, in the current political climate.

Added to these political anxieties is a more specifically cultural objection to giving weight to the topic of Tippett's Englishness. Here was a composer most

1. See e.g. Baucom 1999, Gervais 1993, Samuel 1989, Sinfield 2004.

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of whose creative life took place within the post-war second-wave of musical modernism, a trend which had enormous cultural prestige even if its appeal to the public was fairly minimal. The relationship between musical modernism and nationalism is hugely complicated, but one can draw a broad distinction between the first, pre-World War II wave, and the second, post-War wave. In its earlier incarnation, modernism could not only co-exist but even draw nourishment and legitimation from nationalism. One only has to remember the examples of Béla Bartók, who was never more nationalist than when he was being pugnaciously modern[2], and Arnold Schoenberg, who was convinced that his invention of the 12-note method would ensure the supremacy of German music «for the next hundred years»[3].

The second, post-War wave of musical modernism was by contrast profoundly anti-nationalist. It's whole *raison d'être* was to surmount local and national vernaculars and appeal to universal principals. One speaks of 'international modernism' in architecture and there was undoubtedly an 'international modernist' style in music as well, which embraced Elliott Carter in America as well as the Frenchman Boulez, the Italian Berio and (later) the Englishman Harrison Birtwistle. One could perceive local tendencies within this movement — the French decorative qualities of Boulez were often remarked on, as was the 'Italian lyricism' of Berio — but these flavours were precisely that; an intermittently attractive or amusing surface feature of something whose deep essence was actually anti-national.

Given all this, an attempt to root Tippett's meaning and value in his Englishness might be a touchy and perhaps unwise venture at this particular moment in history, perhaps more likely to diminish his output and make it seem parochial and retrogressive. Nevertheless I intend to persist with the venture over the course of this essay, by looking at the critical reception in the press to Tippett's work, both here and elsewhere, across a period of more than sixty years. I do this out of two convictions, over and above a hunch that the exercise will be interesting and revealing; firstly, that to pass a negative judgment on a body of music as parochial and retrogressive merely because it is rooted in Englishness as defined above is itself parochial. It reveals an unreflective, uncritical attachment to modernist ideals, which is odd at a time when modernism has itself come under question from so many points of view, not all of them to do with post-colonial resentments. Secondly, viewing Tippett through the lens of his Englishness can

2. For an illuminating discussion of this example see Frigyesi 2005.

3. Arnold Schoenberg, testimony of his pupil Josef Rufer.

be more widely revealing, because nationalism is after all a complex thing which hardly exists in a pure state but is always intertwined with other issues; indeed one might say that it is actually constituted by this very 'entwining'. Among these is its antipode, a consciously pursued internationalism or cosmopolitanism, and also modernism, whose relationship with nationalism as already pointed out is more complex than the ideologues of modernism allow.

However, it could be that my enterprise falls at the first fence. What if Tippett is actually profoundly un-English, in terms both of his creative enterprise as he and musical scholars conceived it, and in its reception in the eyes of critics? It's not hard to find this point of view vigorously expressed. Tippett's recent biographer Oliver Soden feels that, particularly in comparison with Britten, Tippett seems self-consciously internationalist and is for him among the least English of English composers[4]. Arnold Whittall has a similar take on the topic, in an essay from 1998 where he begins by asserting that the 'principal godfathers' of the modernist mainstream in the UK are Tippett and Birtwistle, and then contrasts both with Britten and Maxwell Davies:

> Despite obvious differences of style, Tippett and Birtwistle share a basic predisposition to internationalism and modernism. By contrast, Britten's resistance to modernism and Davies's aspiration to classicism combine with a more direct response from both composers to local, if not exactly 'national' features, and, by the criteria for mainstream membership given above, this means that they belong on the margins of contemporary musical life in Britain, not at the centre[5].

One might observe in passing how long ago and far away Whittall's definition of the musical mainstream now seems, after only twenty years. More germane to this discussion is his assertion that works bearing a local or nationalist quality have a lesser status — are more 'marginal' — than those which show internationalist and modern features, and that is why Britten and Maxwell Davies seem marginal. The *Guardian*'s critic Andrew Clements takes a very different view:

> Tippett was a quintessentially an English composer — in the same way that Birtwistle is fundamentally English, and Britten, just as fundamentally, never was — and the *Midsummer Marriage*

4. Personal communication from the author. See Soden 2019.

5. Whittall 1998, p. 5.

> is rooted firmly in an English milieu, even if Sosostris seems to belong to another opera altogether. Though there are the often-remarked-upon parallels with *Die Zauberflöte*, Tippett's characters are English stereotypes even if what they experience belongs to a central-European cultural tradition[6].

So what is this quintessentially English quality of Tippett (if it exists) and how does this quality shed light on other aspects of Tippett, such as his oft-asserted lack of technical skill, his anti-intellectualism, and his ambiguous stance towards modernism? This essay looks for a tentative answer in the writings of broadsheet critics, with the occasional glance at specialist (but not academic) musical and operatic journals, both in the UK and elsewhere. I have focused on reviews of the 1960s and 1970s, as this was a period when the modernist ideology was still in the ascendant, so the relationship between modernist and national features in Tippett will — one hopes — stand out with particular clarity.

However before embarking on this exercise in reception history, two issues need to be addressed. One is the nature of my sources. The term 'broadsheet critic' refers to a writer of critical articles on the arts for what used to be called the 'quality press', i.e. those daily and Sunday newspapers that in the decades under discussion were printed on large broadsheet-sized paper. These were aimed at a more educated, middle-class reader than those catered for by the popular 'tabloid' sized newspapers. Like newspapers as a whole, the broadsheets were divided into those that were right-wing to a greater or lesser degree, such as the *Financial Times*, *Times*, *Sunday Times* and *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph*, and those that were broadly on the left, such as the *Guardian* and *Observer* (published on Sundays). The bias towards the right suggested by this list was a cause of constant complaint by Labour Party politicians, but in fact the bias was less sharp than it seems. As a contemporary academic observer of media Colin Seymour-Ure pointed out, «Attitudes of readers are broadly in line with those of their newspapers, but not to such an extent that similarity of outlook is a prerequisite of readership»[7]. There was actually considerable fluidity in the relationship between the readers' politics and the political affiliation of a newspaper, though readers on the right were more closely aligned ideologically to their favourite newspaper than those on the left. The historian of the British press Stephen Koss says that «The *Telegraph* and the *Mirror* drew as many as two-thirds of their readers from the supporters of the parties with which they

6. Clements 2005, p. 28.

7. Seymour-Ure 1968, pp. 52-53.

themselves identified […]. The *Guardian*'s preference for Labour was shared by only 35 per cent of its readers»[8].

The ideological alignment between a newspaper and its writers was similarly varied. One would expect it to be close among leader writers and political and business reporters and feature writers, and so it was. When it came to arts writers, the situation seems pretty much as it is today, namely that the arts and culture pages of newspapers on both the left and right were committed to an ideal image of the arts as 'apolitical'. The arts pages of these newspapers taken collectively constitute a sort of amiable «republic of arts and letters» where the noise of politics was firmly shut out. The latest Lucien Freud exhibition and Frederick Ashton ballet would be given just as many column inches and analysed just as earnestly for their artistic values in the *Daily Telegraph* as in the *Guardian*. And if the politics of a left-wing opera by Hans Werner Henze were not to the liking of the *Telegraph*'s opera critic one would never know, because it would be vulgar to declare one's political affiliations in a review, and in any case artistic values were what really mattered. Systematic differences in the choice of topics covered in the arts pages of different newspapers are hard to discern, and there are far more examples of overlap than of difference. If the critic from the *Financial Times* attended an interesting Wigmore Hall debut by a young pianist, one could be sure the critics from the *Times* and the *Guardian* and quite possibly one or two Sunday newspapers would be there too.

This ideology of «art for art's sake» was hospitable to the rise of a certain kind of critic who could move easily from newspaper to another without the smallest sign of ideological discomfort. One sees the evidence for that in the frequent moves back and forth across the ideological divide. Colin Mason moved from the *Guardian* to the *Daily Telegraph*, Andrew Porter went from the *Financial Times* to the *Observer*. The reason they experienced no discomfort was that like the editors of the newspapers they served, they believed in an artistic realm separate from political concerns. They could afford to hold that belief, coming as they did from a class on which the exigencies of life pressed very lightly. Several of the critics I discuss were educated at a public school (one at Charterhouse, two at Winchester, two at Harrow) and nearly all were educated at either Oxford or Cambridge Universities. The one American critic I include came from a similar elite background, having been educated at Harvard. They combined their critical activities with other things; becoming a serious Verdi scholar in the case of Andrew Porter, writing extensively on Handel in the

[8]. Koss 1984, p. 664.

case of Winton Dean. David Cairns wrote what is still the standard biography of Berlioz, as well as creating the Chelsea Opera Group. David Drew stands somewhat to one side, as his culture was much more German-orientated — he was a notable scholar of the works of Kurt Weill — which may account for his more sceptical attitude towards Tippett.

Naturally enough these critics, being all white men born mostly in the 1910s or 1920s (though Clements and Whittall are twenty years younger), all from the same social and educational background, had a very similar set of cultural and intellectual presuppositions. The Second World War had marked them deeply, not least through the enormous affirmation the victory over Fascism afforded to British ways of thinking and feeling. Freud was a giant figure, and terms from psychoanalysis such as ego and suppression and subconscious had passed into everyday discourse. This meant that these critics were sympathetic in principle to Michael Tippett's fervent attachment to the ideas of C. G. Jung, and their embodiment in the characters and themes of his operas — even though they might complain about the obscurities this attachment led to in practice.

Most importantly they were caught up in post-war debates about the rise of popular culture and the implications of this for the 'high' arts. The rise of 'mass culture' was a constant source of concern, on the left and right. Mass culture was perceived as a largely American phenomenon—there was much talk of the 'Coca-colaisation' of culture. One way to resist this was to cultivate forms of art that appealed to the deepest, universal aspects of human nature, and C. G. Jung's theory of depth-psychology offered a comfortingly sure, scientifically validated route to those universal aspects. Another kind of protection from mass culture was offered by ancient forms of national culture, such as folk song, and historically validated forms of cultural expression embodied in the canon of great English writers and artists and musicians. The importance of such icons of national culture as Shakespeare during the years of reconstruction after the Second World War can hardly be overestimated[9].

All this meant the issue of Tippett's perceived Englishness was bound to be a fraught one for these critics. Before tackling their response to it we should ask another question first, namely whether we can identify a quality of Englishness in Tippett's works as they exist on the page, when interpreted in the light of his own words on the subject. Doing this, however sketchily, allows us to anchor the aesthetics of reception in the aesthetics of *poeisis* or 'making' as

[9]. For the anxieties of the intellectual class about the rise of mass culture, see Carey 1992; for the post-war debate over the threat to the national culture, see Hewison 1997.

Jean-Jacques Nattiez called it[10]. And before embarking on that, it is worth noting that Englishness is a complex quality rather than a simple, which will reveal itself in different levels of the work, in different degrees of specificity. It may be something as concrete as an English false relation, though that example reminds us that no simple is ever that simple; some continental musicians seem to have been just as fond of the English cadence as English composers. At a higher, middle-ground level of abstraction are certain technical procedures and forms typical of the national tradition, that may be used literally or alluded to. At a higher level still are those mental strategies, habits of mind, intellectual interests, metaphysical and religious outlooks that go to shaping a composer's musical output, consciously or unconsciously, which can be said to have a national character.

This is not the place to essay a thorough investigation into how Englishness manifests itself in Tippett's music from the point of view of *poeisis*, partly because space does not allow it, but also because several writers have done the job so well already, notably Christopher Mark in his 'Tippett and the English Traditions'[11]. He reminds us that Tippett himself had very definite views about the nature and role of Englishness in his music, as he did about everything else to do with his own mental world, and was keen to tell the world about them. In March 1942, shortly after completing *A Child of our Time*, he wrote to his close friend Francesca Allinson:

> Your feeling that the work was Continental is really my feeling too. And I think it's come for good. It's a sort of growing up inside. And it goes hand in hand with my increasing knowledge of the English tradition! I think the oratorio [*A Child of Our Time*] will sound even more Continental too — the point is that the temper is of that order, irrespective of myself. I am quite happy about this, and indeed welcome it. Not but what the English ancestry is really there all the time — it's the technical equipment that is growing intellectually maturer and consequently then English, as per Bax, V.W. [Vaughan Williams] and Ireland etc[12].

What's striking is Tippett's insistence that the English ancestry of his music is so to speak enabled, allowed to speak, by an increasingly mature technical

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10. Nattiez 1990.

11. Mark 2013, pp. 25-47.

12. Michael Tippett, Letter to Francesca Allinson, undated (March 1942), in: Tippett 2005, p. 91.

equipment which is continental in origin, a phenomenon he notices in earlier English composers. The use of the oratorio form is itself an English trait, and Tippett was keenly aware of this in adopting the form — though at the same time he refers to the use of spirituals as a specifically 'continental' trait, derived from Bach's Passions. This distanced quality towards Englishness, his unwillingness to simply embrace it uncritically, is reflected in a letter written almost three decades later to William Glock:

> Might I suggest, however, since the matter of British music is in general very near my heart, that we have a talk about it over lunch… I have ideas on this theme, that is, what kind of voice our national music is, at its best, and how it can find its true place in the general variety of our Western musical experience. I mean, why the Tallis 40-part motet is probably the most extraordinary piece of European music of its period; what can be successfully performed of Purcell in the concert hall; the real gap in the English tradition during the 18th and 19th centuries. why, at the return, Elgar is a creative genius and Bax is second rate; what is the core of Vaughan Williams? And earlier of Delius? And so on…[13].

Tippett's interest in Englishness is always refracted through a specific technical procedure — apart from those rare moments in earlier works where folk materials, sometimes English, sometimes Scottish, are either incorporated literally or evoked by the use of for example a pentatonic mode, as in the slow movement of the Concerto for Double String Orchestra of 1938-1939. This is why pastoralism as such — that instantly recognisable marker of Englishness in the 20th century — held no great interest for him (a fact that's hard to keep in mind because of the emphatically English-countryside setting of Tippett's entire biography, apart from a few months spent in London at the very end of his life. And not just any England, but the West-country, a region associated with the Celtic (Tippett was proud of his Celtic roots), the spiritual and the mysterious, as opposed to the down-to-earth East and North[14]).

It's worth noting that in those places where one might expect Tippett to evoke this idiom he avoids it. Madame Sosostris, the mysterious seer in his first opera *The Midsummer Marriage* offers a vision of a pastoral idyll in her great aria, which is actually marked by Tippett «tranquilmente à la pastorale». And yet the aria makes no reference to the English pastoral idiom as elaborated by

13. Michael Tippett, letter to Robert Ponsonby (28 July 1972), in: *ibidem*, p. 23.

14. This distinction is explored in Smiles 1994.

composers such as Warlock and Delius. It is essentially an Italianate arioso, spun over a texture consisting of layers of ostinato or different lengths — a very apt symbol of the eternal which as Ian Kemp says has parallels in Stravinsky and medieval isorhythm (and in Messiaen, one might add).

One example Tippett gives of a another middle-level English influence, i.e. one manifested through the adoption of a technical procedure rather than the use of specifically English materials or 'turns of phrase' comes in another letter, where he writes of the use of a block-like form in *A Child of our Time*. He tells us he learned this from Purcell, particularly the *Ode to Cecilia*, whose form he says derives its clarity and grandeur from this technique. He points out that this technique was itself derived from a foreign source, namely the Italian madrigal. Purcell (as several early commentators including Colin Mason noted)[15] had a special attraction to Tippett because he was a palimpsest of influences, some ancient deriving from English Renaissance polyphony, some from the latest French and Italian trends.

Tippett's music has the same many-layered quality, though with the all-important difference that in his case the co-existence of disparate influences was self-consciously contrived. In another letter he points to the way one particular aria in *A Child of our Time* has a double temporal reference.

> I like to think I was influenced by Purcellian examples when I needed to express an aria from some of the relatively simple situations of *A Child of Our Time*. I am thinking particularly of the air for tenor to a tango-like bass […]. The things that influence one, in a composition of this kind, are never simple, but always complex. The sense of our time — that is, in this case, of the period between the two world wars — lies musically in the tango, not in any Purcellian turn of phrase. Purcellian is the setting of the scene by a short orchestral introduction, and the manner of repeating a simple, easily understood phrase. Such a phrase is that to the first words the tenor sings — 'I have no money for my bread'[16].

This might remind of us certain moments in T. S. Eliot, a poet close to Tippett's heart whom he consulted over the composition of *A Midsummer Marriage* (there was even a discussion of the poet writing the libretto, an invitation the poet shrewdly declined). Eliot too tried to weave together different sorts of

15. Mason 1946, pp. 137-141.

16. Tippett 1995, p. 63.

cultural reference drawing on different eras and different 'registers' (high, low or middle-brow). One thinks of such lines as these in Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

> I remember
> Those are pearls that were his eyes.
> "Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?"
> But
> O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag —
> It's so elegant
> So intelligent…[17]

Here lines from Shakespeare's *Tempest* and a pop song from 1921 rub shoulders, with lines that could come from a Pinter-like drama placed disconcertingly between. It is this self-conscious attempt to unite disparate elements in a new synthesis that would stave off the threat of cultural and spiritual chaos that is at the heart of Eliot's form of modernism («these fragments have I shored against my ruin» as he puts it ironically, again in *The Waste Land*)[18].

Tippett was profoundly influenced by this idea, and it surely lies behind many of the more startling juxtapositions in his operas, such as the moment in *The Knot Garden* where the character Flora suddenly gives voice to her feelings through the medium of Schubert's song *Die Liebe Farbe*. It stands out in startling (and as all the critics agree, deeply moving) contrast from the fragmented, declamatory idiom that characterises much of the opera. All these things taken together make for richly many-sided works of art, with many features existing in fruitful tension. They are modernist and traditional, English and international, demotic and high-brow, all at once. Moreover their impact was during Tippett's lifetime mediated by the constant presence of the exuberantly loquacious, explicating presence of Tippett himself in print and on the radio. It is a peculiar complicating factor in the reception study of all composers from the recent past that the sensuous experience of their work itself is inflected and shaped by the creator's own discourse about the music, as broadcast in CD liner notes, broadsheet interviews, radio interviews etc. But it's an especial difficulty with Tippett, who more than most composers seems to have wanted to shape the reception of his music almost as much as the music itself. This is another feature that distinguishes him from Britten, who disliked expatiating on his art and motivations, and whose few meditations on the composer's calling are

17. Eliot 1999, lines 128-130.

18. *Ibidem*, line 431.

remarkably modest, focusing on the composer's duty towards his public and his community[19]. Tippett by contrast is keen — perhaps too keen — to point to the depth-psychological meanings of his works, the way they act as revelations of Jungian processes of self-individuation — almost as if the composer were acting as his own thaumaturge.

One more factor I should mention, before moving on to the critical response to the works themselves, and that is the oft-asserted (but nevertheless disputed) evidence of Tippett's technical inadequacy as a composer, a problem identified in such things as a tendency to unclear, clotted textures, and a shaky grasp of instrumental and ensemble possibilities which leads him to write passages of excruciating technical difficulty. To this day the string parts of *King Priam* are reckoned to be near-unplayable[20], and no less a piano-player than Benjamin Britten complained of the difficulty of Tippett's piano parts in the songs. This is relevant to a discussion of Tippett reception, because awkwardness in writing can be received in (at least) two ways; as a simple failure, prompting feelings of frustration or disappointment, or as something admirable, a sign that Tippett's music plumbs depths which can't be reached by (perhaps more facile?) composers with a superbly honed technique. The way a critic reads these difficult moments is not a side-issue; it connects with his/her estimate of the value of the work as a whole. It may also affect the listener's judgement as to whether Tippett's works belong (as Whittall asserts) within modernism. A refusal of technical polish, an embrace of awkwardness, has been asserted by some writers to be a mark of modernity[21]. So for these reasons, perceived 'awkwardness' is as much an expressive feature of Tippett's works as their harmonies, melodies and forms (and stage action in the operas), and we should look out for its presence in critical writings.

Moving on to those writings, one might expect that the co-existence of apparently contrary qualities in tension, together with the alleged technical awkwardness, might result in many reviews where cautious uncertainty, veering towards confusion and even exasperation, is the keynote. One certainly finds those things, as we shall see, but one also finds the straightforward unabashed attribution of distinct expressive qualities, in defiance of the ambiguity the

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19. Britten 1964.

20. The 'sprung rhythms' of Tippett's music cause particularly difficulty to German orchestras, a fact attested in personal communications from Simon Rattle and from Sally Groves, until recently a director at Tippett's publisher Schott Music. This fact may be relevant to the generally cool reception given to Tippett's operas by German critics, a topic I visit later.

21. An idea eloquently expressed in Steiner 1980.

academic commentator (and in this case, the composer) finds on the page. One such quality, interestingly, is the pastoral, that very quality which Tippett seems almost consciously to eschew (he wanted clear blue water between himself and earlier composers such as Vaughan Williams, and also spoke of himself in contradistinction with Williams, rather than as his heir). The British-born Australian critic and academic Andrew Ford wrote in 2005 of the experience of listening to a CD of Tippett's *Fantasie Concertante on a Theme of Corelli*, conducted by the composer himself, while motoring across the Australian outback:

> As I listened, it occurred to me how English this music sounded […]. In terms of its form, Tippett's piece is a sort of baroque concerto grosso […]. But there's a pastoral quality to the music, a sense of nostalgia that is strongly redolent of England, or at least of an idealised Englishness. Above all, perhaps, there's an oddness — I am tempted to call it eccentricity — that sets it apart from the European mainstream. The piece's immediate model is surely Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*. Like Vaughan Williams's piece, Tippett's is a free-wheeling fantasy about music from another time. With the Vaughan Williams, that other time is obviously Tallis's Tudor England, and oddly enough it's also Tudor England with the Tippett. Nominally, the piece might celebrate the 300th anniversary of the birth of Arcangelo Corelli, but the sprung rhythms of Tippett's string writing and the knotted lyricism of his counterpoint owe less to the European baroque than to Elizabethan and Jacobean composers of madrigals and consort music. The fantasias of William Byrd and Orlando Gibbons were always close to Tippett's heart, and their presence is felt here, while the harmony of this piece is often in thrall to Henry Purcell, especially in that 'pastoral' interlude just before the end. This was the bit that sounded so 'English' to me as I motored down the Hume Highway to Victoria that sweltering day[22].

I quote this at some length because it's such an eloquent example of how a composer's best-laid plans to curate his/her future reception can be scuppered by reality. Ford hears all the features of Tippett's music that the composer hoped he would hear, but then ties them to two categories which might not have pleased him — the pastoral, and another category of Englishness, namely eccentricity. It is almost a definition of eccentricity that it avoids systematic and rationally explicable modes of behaviour. It is the extreme manifestation of a quality

[22]. Ford 2005.

often attributed to quintessentially English artists such as Blake and Bewick that they are ruggedly individualistic, avoid technical 'finish' and stand aside from schools and 'isms'. This puts Englishness at odds with a particular conception of modernism, one that roots it in a systematic, generalising approach to issues of artistic creation, often involving elaborate constructive principles purged of local attachments and feelings. In music it is exemplified by Schoenberg's twelve-note method, which by its nature is hard to reconcile with the assertion of national or local features in music.

This conflation of intellectualism with system and constructivism is itself highly questionable, and Tippett's music questions it, as we shall see. It gained a particular hold on discussions of intellectualism in music because of the dominance of the model in musical modernism, as exemplified above all in Schoenberg's twelve-note method. So it is hardly surprising to discover that twelve-note music was the subject of much hostile comment as being an expression of German 'intellectualism', out of temper with the English spirit. The interesting thing about Tippett is that he stands to one side of this discourse, as he was accused of both eccentricity *and* intellectualism. Sir Malcolm Sargent complained of the 'intellectuality' of Tippett's music, which led him to turn down the invitation to conduct the premiere of *Fantasia Concertante on a Theme of Corelli*. Tippett was never (apart from the odd moment in later works, such as the 12-note passages in *The Knot Garden*) an advocate of system, so where exactly did the problem lie? Was it connected with the co-existence of apparently contrary qualities named above? There's no doubt that the critical reception of Tippett's operas did often focus on perceived obscurities and difficulties in the operas, a feature which certainly caused some annoyance at their premieres, and continued to do so when they were revived. Winton Dean in the *Musical Times* was both sympathetic and irritated at the 1970 premiere of *The Knot Garden*:

> Ambivalence is even more characteristic of Tippett's operas than of Britten's; multivalence indeed, if the word exists. It can be highly stimulating, since it sends the mind in many directions and can uncover ideas and connections of which we were hitherto unaware. It is a function of great art. *The Knot Garden* (Dec 2) has this quality; but it has defects too, which may confuse the wider public that opera needs to capture. One is Tippett's apparent inability to distinguish between open-endedness that inspires, and obscurity that baffles, the receptive listener […][23].

[23]. Dean 1971, p. 47.

Dean goes on to list the variety of sources he discerns in the work:

> The libretto of *The Knot Garden* reads like a cross between T. S. Eliot and Iris Murdoch, with excerpts from *The Tempest* awkwardly superimposed and countless other echoes from the world of myth to that of pop and the police court. Much of the obscurity seems wilful or careless[24].

Andrew Porter, a life-long fan of Tippett is similarly bothered, but he expresses the worry in milder terms, as in this remark from his review of the 1968 revival of *The Midsummer Marriage*:

> The plot is simple: a quarrel between an engaged couple, and their final reconciliation, with an added complication in the form of an attempt by the girl's father to break off the match. The presentation of these events, however, is far from simple: Olympian, Mithraic, Hindu, Christian and Arthurian mythologies are drawn on to desk the action in a series of 'dramatic metaphors' into and out of which the action keeps moving. And even though the general line is clear, the exact sense of some of the metaphors continues to elude me[25].

David Cairns defends the piece in interesting terms

> […] we can readily admit the dramaturgical skill of the libretto once we cease to be embarrassed by it. What if it can be shown to draw with Powys-like exuberance on many dissimilar elements — Shaw, Jung, T. S. Eliot, Arthurian legend, Hindu philosophy, the Greek myths[26]?

Cairns's defensive tone suggests that we might be predisposed to be embarrassed by the profusion of references. This many-layeredness of Tippett, the range of intellectual reference, is one aspect of his operas that certainly doesn't embarrass German critics. H. H. Stuckenschmidt, one-time student at the Bauhaus and noted commentator on modern music attended the London premiere of *The Knot Garden* and observed the link between the Hero Faber and the eponymous hero of Max Frisch's novel (a reference missed by the British critics), and adds:

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24. *Ibidem*.
25. Porter 1968.
26. Cairns 1968.

> Thea is presented as a goddess Flora, 'of the virginal flower'. Tippett also names Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak house* and a book about *Shakespeare's Comedies of Forgiveness* as some of his sources and inspiration. Besides these the influence of the processes and complexities of modern theatre are evident with situations similar to Beckett or Albee and psychological cases reminiscent of T. S. Eliot[27].

All very 'intellectual' — but we might expect this quality to arouse some suspicion in British critics. What we actually find is a curious ambivalence about this quality in Tippett. Some of them are annoyed when the public respond badly to it, and leap to his defence, as John Warrack did in his review of the premiere of *The Knot Garden* in 1970, when he referred crossly to the fact that the work's complexities «earned the usual barrage of jeering incomprehension»[28]. One senses a desire to celebrate this aspect of Tippett, but also to rescue him from the charge of being a European intellectual. That's difficult if he shows a tendency to obscurity, a problem constantly identified with European modernism, which is why he must be severely ticked off for it. Martin Cooper achieves this elegantly in his review of that same premiere:

> He is the perfect example of Buffon's *le style, c'est l'homme même;* for his mid-20th-century syncretism ranges as widely as his independent, *profoundly un-academic intelligence,* while its individuality is guaranteed by a personality in which intellectual interests are often indistinguishable from emotional enthusiasms and serve primarily as sparking points for the creative imagination. (my emphasis)[29].

Here Cooper calls on the well-worn trope of English creativity as something essentially unsystematic, empirical, and 'natural'[30]. This faith in the composer's intuition is something one finds constantly asserted, often in terms which suggest the critic must set aside his or her bafflement, at least temporarily, until a deeper sense emerges — as in this review in the *Observer* of the same premiere:

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27. Stuckenschmidt 1970.

28. Warrack 1968.

29. Cooper 1970.

30. See for instance the description of Shakespeare's 'genius' in exactly those terms by 18th-century critics, an episode described in Bate 1997, pp. 157-186.

> There is much that still baffles me in an opera that has a disconcerting habit of switching from the sublime to — well let us call it the bizarre. Of course Tippett's deepest sense often underlies what at first appears his most arrant nonsense[31].

In Martin Cooper's review of the 1968 revival of The Midsummer Marriage one finds the same idea expressed in more extreme terms:

> There is no question of 'cleaning up' the libretto, nor (as has more than once been mooted) of asking some distinguished poet to collaborate. Tippett has access to an extraordinary world of concepts which he 'reports' in music: and I do not see how this could be done for him by anyone else[32].

This likens Tippett to those oracles which 'know not what they say' — he becomes the medium for thoughts that he himself cannot fathom, nor could anyone else. It essentially puts Tippett's librettos beyond criticism, and most critics shrink from such an extreme position. They find a different way to guide our (and their own) perception of Tippett's operas between the Scylla of over-intellectualism, and the Charybdis of 'arrant nonsense'. That way is — surprise, surprise — the music. But now a new difficulty lies in wait, which springs from the above-mentioned potential obscurity of the music, because of both its alleged technical insufficiencies, and its extraordinary cultural and temporal layerings, which are no less complex than the librettos themselves. What if the music turned out to be just as obscure and difficult as the words and stage action?

That is the danger the critics intuit and strive mightily to avoid, and it accounts for a peculiarly convoluted quality in their writing. One or two identify another problem with the music — that it may appear to be not fully up-to-date by properly modernist criteria. David Cairns defends it from the charge in tetchily nationalist terms:

> […] to German ears *The Midsummer Marriage* not only sounds old-fashioned. Worse still, it fits into no school or sect and that is disconcerting to a tidy-minded people, much given to categories and isms[33].

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31. Heyworth 1970.
32. Warrack 1968.
33. Cairns 1968.

Cairns is sometimes right, as we shall see. The implication is that Tippett aspires to and achieves a depth beyond categories and isms, which are shallow because historically bound and also hostile to intuition, that much-prized quality. Where Tippett does occasionally stoop to an 'ism' — as in the occasional use of a 12-note row in *The Knot Garden* — it is either not mentioned, or if it is, brushed off as something of no great importance, as in the review of the work's premiere by Andrew Porter:

> I hesitate to say anything about the 12-note theme which underpins some of the music, lest it scare off people who would otherwise enjoy an evening of uncommonly direct, un-difficult modern opera[34].

Compare that with the review by H. H. Stuckenschmidt already quoted, which doesn't mention a 12-note row, probably because his attention had not been brought to in advance (unlike the case of the British critics, who would have known about from the pre-performance publicity and programme booklet). But he certainly spots a «Schoenbergian espressivo», something not noticed by any British critic, mentioned in a passage notable for its careful observation of musical specifics:

> Unlike in Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress,* the musical language is not influenced by the classical tradition but rather distinct traces of Schoenberg's melodic gestures. The signs of this are not only in the wide intervals and 'oscillation-curves' (*oszillationskurven*) in Denise's big aria at the end of Act 1. Also the beginning in brass octaves - a recurring stylistic feature of the opera —— springs from a Schoenbergian espressivo[35].

As for the music's many-layered cultural ambiguities, for the Anglo-Saxon critics this is not a problem as they appear not to perceive it. Or rather, if those ambiguities are perceived, they are swept up and fused into a perception which is burningly singular. Winton Dean's review of *The Knot Garden* exemplifies this response:

> […] it is astonishing how much Tippett assimilates into his own very personal idiom. His visionary side (not that he can be

34. Porter 1970.

35. Stuckenschmidt 1970.

> subdivided) is liable at any moment to burst into a creative flame of such intense lyricism that it seems to purify the listener's ears[36].

Andrew Porter in his review of the revival of *Midsummer Marriage* already quoted, asserts that whatever intellectual worries are raised by the libretto are also assuaged by the music:

> And though the actual words of Tippett's opera are at times distinctly infelicitous, the libretto is made for music. And what marvellous music it is! It lifts the heart, ravishes the senses. Page after page presents an unfaltering stream of glorious new ideas. The visions are caught in sound. The strange adventures of our imagination, embodied in myth and fantasy, are made vivid by this richly coloured score. The music gives its own coherence to the turbulent whirl of verbal and visual images[37].

As Winton Dean puts it, «By the end of the opera we should be *musically* convinced that all the characters have gained in self-knowledge [my emphasis]»[38]. The idea that the music of an opera explains and so to speak excuses the absurdities of its libretto is a hoary old standby of operatic criticism, but in the case of Tippett this is harder to maintain because the critics — some of them at least — acknowledge that the music has its own obscurities. This is particularly true of *King Priam*, an opera which dismayed some of the critics who had been ravished by *Midsummer Marriage*. Among them was Peter Heyworth, who was only partially won over by the work's premiere:

> Many of the ideas in *King Priam* seem to me vague and generalised rather than specific. (Comparison with late Stravinsky ignores the fact that economy does not of itself secure precision.) The rushing string passages which are supposed to characterise the imperious Hecuba remain mere rushing string passages[39].

And yet the curious thing is that by the end of the review, Heyworth has been won round, almost in spite of himself:

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36. Dean 1971, p. 48.
37. Porter 1968.
38. Dean 1971, p. 48.
39. Heyworth 1962.

> […] even at its least successful the music is never less than intensely individual, and though the opera finally fails to illuminate Priam's tragic predicament it certainly works as a dramatic action[40].

As often happens, the tensions in these reviewers' minds leads to a peculiar tension in the writing. We are told at one moment that many of the ideas are «vague and generalised» and the next that the music is «never less than intensely individual». We see the same trajectory of puzzlement and disappointment leading to approval in the review by David Drew. He is even more severe, a fact which may have something to do with the fact that his musical culture was so thoroughly Germanic — he was a life-long scholar of Kurt Weill and the music of Weimar Germany — and so he had no particular *parti pris* for Tippett. In his review in the *New Statesman* of the premiere of *The Knot Garden* in 1962 he asserts that Tippett shared with Henze a tendency to «florid inaccuracy» and continues:

> The dissociation of voice and accompaniment has an effect curiously akin to that of certain of the less advanced modern scores based on, or dabbling in, aleatory principles. There has always been an improvisational element in Tippett's music, but its origins lie in the great ornamental past of English music. But now all this seems to have undergone a physical change. The thought becomes increasingly remote from traditional ideas of development. Blocks of sound are juxtaposed in a quite unsymphonic way, and the choice between them is arbitrary — willed[41].

And yet at the end of his review he declares:

> […] despite the 'memories' of other composers the music is memorably his own throughout. In recognizing that, we are half way to finding the kind of faith which may reconcile us to the most familiar of Tippettian mysteries — the mystery of how much that is so demonstrably lame can yet reach us and move us[42].

A mystery indeed, which the *Boston Globe* writer Richard Dyer tries to plumb, in his review of the American premiere of the *Ice Break* in 1979:

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40. *Ibidem*.
41. Drew 1962.
42. *Ibidem*.

> Sometimes the music is almost reportorial in its compression — it virtually becomes the thing it characterises. […] but at the crucial moments it flowers and expands, expressing all the yearning of physical love […][43].

And later in the same review he remarks:

> Certain parts of the opera, like this one, ought not to 'work' by any of the conventional criteria; if they do, it is because of the qualities of belief Sir Michael invests in everything — the weaknesses and inconsistencies have everything to do with the same authenticity of vision that communicates depth and meaning and, yes, beauty[44].

So here is the solution to the problem of the 'intellectuality' of these operas libretti — the confusing ambiguity of ideas is incarnated in music which seems to bypass intellect altogether. Andrew Porter in his review of the premiere of *The Knot Garden*, makes the same suggestion:

> Tippett's is the most direct of our day: often communicative to a point where the words seem unnecessary — in episodes where has not so much 'set the text' as 'set the situation' directly to music, music which speaks more eloquently that any words could do[45].

A few lines later in the same review, Porter remarks that «In Mr Hall *The Knot* has its right producer: instinctive rather than intellectual»[46]. And 20 lines later, astonishingly, we read this: «Tippett's music is among the most beautiful of our day. In Colin Davis *The Knot Garden* has its right conductor: instinctive rather than intellectual»[47]. So concerned is Porter to communicate this idea that he doesn't notice the repetition of the same phrase (neither does his editor, oddly).

A gestural onamatopeia and declamatory force are generally offered as defining characteristics of *King Priam*, which is why Richard Dyer can talk of the music as a form of 'reportage'. But this opera is the exception. More often Tippett's music works by lyrical effusiveness, which — so one often reads in these critics — gets its emotional force precisely from the fact that it is not

43. Dyer 1979.
44. *Ibidem*.
45. Porter 1970.
46. *Ibidem*.
47. *Ibidem*.

anchored to the specifics of the text — indeed could not be, given the frequent baffling obscurity of the text. This is what distinguishes the lyrical effusion of Madame Sostrosis's aria in *A Midsummer Marriage* from (say) the ecstatic duet of reconciliation of father and daughter in Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*. There the joy of rediscovery of a long-lost father/daughter is legible in the music as much as in the text. In the case of Tippett the mysteriousness of Madame Sosostris's oracular utterances are matched by a music whose lyricism is pure effusion, without a particular 'affect'. What then is the music's content? Trying to capture that 'contentless content' leads to a critical view of his music as taking on an unspecifiable force and value of its own, almost as if it's running in parallel with the opera, rather than being an integral part of it. John Warrack's review of the 1968 revival of *The Midsummer Marriage* (already quoted) is a good example, where he talks of:

> […] the marvellous grace at the heart of Tippett's elaborate textures and counterpoint is made lucid and light. Davis captures completely the music's dark luminosity of texture, its deep undertow of ecstasy, its atmosphere of curiosity and wonder, its fantastic sense of the dance[48].

Eloquent in the same way is Porter's review of the same occasion, already quoted:

> And though the actual words of Tippett's opera are at times distinctly infelicitous, the libretto is made for music. And what marvellous music it is! It lifts the heart, ravishes the senses. Page after page presents an unfaltering stream of glorious new ideas. The visions are caught in sound. The strange adventures of our imagination, embodied in myth and fantasy, are made vivid by this richly coloured score. The music gives its own coherence to the turbulent whirl of verbal and visual images[49].

Even more striking are Paul Driver's remarks about the music of *King Priam*, in his review of the 1995 revival.

> The mystery and terror of human choice itself is the subject […] the sufferers begin to wonder with Paris, «Is there a choice at all?». No, the opera (to the composer's own libretto)

48. Warrack 1968.
49. Porter 1969.

> suggests; there is only music, the «divine stream of sound» in which our baffled feelings and predicaments may be resolved, and of which Hermes enchantingly sings in Act 3. The work is a 'true' opera for this same reason, providing in its every bar the musical transcendence that it postulates[50].

In Driver's view the music doesn't need to engage with the action at all, or the feelings of the characters; it floats above them, becoming a symbol of a transcendent realm where the agonies of choice are magically assuaged. Driver's response to the music might seem to be the polar opposite of Richard Dyer's notion that the music is a form of gestural 'reportage'. But what both readings have in common is a circumvention of the rationalising mind. One achieves it by plunging below rationality, to instinctive gesture; the other by soaring above it. For the British and American critics, the stylistic many-layeredness of Tippett, its fusing of Elizabethan dance rhythms and jazz idioms and a sharp, gestural pungency that owes much to middle and later Stravinsky, is unproblematic. They are reconciled at the level of an ecstatic lyricism, which — being untethered to any stylistic era — can take on an aspect of timelessness. This is an aspect of the classic, perhaps *the* defining aspect, but it could be read also as a feature of that 'sublimated pastoral' mentioned earlier, a pastoralism defined not by the specific harmonic and melodic markers familiar from overtly pastoral composers such as Warlock and Vaughan Williams, but ecstatic lyricism *tout court* as a symbol of that which recurs eternally, in a cyclic motion of decay and burgeoning, unstoppable renewal.

This seems to be the critical consensus among British writers — but certainly not among the German critics. Their attitude towards Tippett's operas veers between appreciation of the exuberant intellectual richness of the librettos, and a rather more guarded estimate of the complexity of the music, which is coolly reported rather than relished; as in Stuckenschmidt's review of *The Knot Garden* premiere already quoted:

> Rhythmically Tippett goes in a completely different direction. His music avoids the rigidity of regular metres, heaping up syncopations and polymetres, subdivided into five or seven beat bars full of triplets and hemiolas, until all sense of accent and downbeat is lost […] the influence of Stravinsky and the post Webern School of composition is evident in the creative use of brass in percussive and inventive sound effects. Like Frank Martin

[50]. Driver 1995.

> in *Sturm*, Tippett uses jazz. However, jazz in a form that dates back a generation[51].

Rather than a rhapsodising about 'ecstatic lyricism', we get a careful description of a particular technical procedure whose expressive effect seems to be rather negative: «[…] until all sense of accent and downbeat is lost». It's a common feeling amongst German listeners that Tippett's 'sprung' rhythms and endlessly burgeoning melodic lines are a source of annoyance rather than bliss, a feeling summed up by the composer Wolfgang Rihm's remark to me that Tippett's music is «woolly»[52]. One hardly wants to suggest that German critics are immune to lyric ecstasy, so perhaps the problem lies elsewhere, in some other feature of the music that blocks the appreciation of something that to British critics shines out plainly. We get a hint as to what that could be in Stuckenschmidt's remark that the jazz references in *The Knot Garden* «date back a generation». This suggestion that Tippett's music is not properly of its time is more forthrightly stated elsewhere. K. H. Ruppel in the *Süddeutsscher Zeitung* in a review of the German premiere of *King Priam* remarks that Tippett, who like Britten had never studied on the continent,

> has composed a music which juxtaposes the strikingly naïve (such as a descending scale as musical symbol for death), beside precious, artful creations composed in the style of the virtuoso old English social music. The tonality is barely questioned and the recitative style declamation of the singing voices is influenced by the early Baroque and in part also by Handel[53].

The remark that Tippett and Britten never studied on the continent is surely meant as a warning that we should expect to find retrogressive and/or insular features in both composers, and those are exactly what the reviewer finds in Tippett's opera. Brigitte Schliffe commented in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* that

> In this opera Tippett has not altered his intellectual (*geistiger)* or stylistic position much since his first two operas *Midsummer Marriage* and *King Priam*. Despite his dodecaphonic writing style,

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51. Stuckenschmidt 1970.

52. Though he also described Tippett the man as 'lovely', a common sentiment amongst people who met Tippett, of whatever nationality.

53. Ruppel 1963.

> expressionistic melodic style and Jazz instrumentation his use of voice remains traditional above all in its ornamental aspects[54].

The implication seems to be that Tippett has failed to move with the times, and that creates a disabling inconsistency. It's interesting that it's only in a later era, when the high-noon of modernism is past, that one finds a German critic ready to offer a more sympathetic view of Tippet's failure to be a thorough-going modernist. In 1992 Hildegard Weber of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* described a Karlsruhe production of *A Midsummer Marriage* as «a sort of English Magic Flute, where the melodious sound with its imperturbable major and minor may sound more up to date today, in the decade of nostalgia, than at the time when it was composed and people believed more fanatically in musical progress»[55].

In conclusion, it seems that the weaknesses of Tippett's librettos are more visible and audible to the British critics than the German writers, who (perhaps because their ears are less well attuned to the toe-curling aspects of Tippett's librettos such as his attempts at black American slang) welcome his complexities. But they are not so welcoming of his musical eclecticism and his refusal to embrace a musical modernism, and this may be the stumbling-block to their appreciation of the lyrical effusiveness and the dancing energy that so ravishes the British writers. British critics of the 1960s and 1970s on the other hand are super-aware of the weaknesses in the librettos. But their willingness, or perhaps one should say their determination to overlook these and find a deeper truth in the music's power is a response, not so much to the music itself, but to the music as perceived in that particular time and place, from their particular vantage-point.

I say this because British reviews from a later era — the 1990s onwards — are noticeably cooler. Critics from more recent times, particularly the younger ones, are less prone to being swept off their feet by sprung rhythms and Tippett's own form of 'endless melody'. This maybe points to an irony in the critics' response of an earlier era (i.e. the 1960s and 1970s) which is that, in their efforts to find a transcendent substrate in Tippett's lyrical ecstasy, something beyond style and time, they were actually responding to cultural pressures which were very much of their time. A conception of Englishness, as manifested in music by composers of a previous generation, appeared to be under threat from a new aesthetic emanating from that scary place 'the continent', namely modernism.

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54. Schliffe 1963.
55. Weber 1992.

Its massive prestige derived as much from its claim to be the authentic voice of the modern (it manifested a 'historical necessity') — as much from its forbidding rationalist underpinning. Against that, how could something so local and so devoid of historical necessity and rational grandeur as 'Englishness' assert its right to exist? The response from critics as we have seen was subtle, not to say convoluted. Tippett could be seized on as a British riposte to modernism, because his works seemed to manifest their own way of being beyond time and style — just as those modernist works of Boulez and Stockhausen were held to be. The temporal indecision of Tippett's music, on several levels — its sprung rhythms, its deft interweaving of different musical forms and textures from different temporal and cultural sources, and its interweaving of mythical and contemporary references — all these were a different, less dogmatically rationalist route to that same condition, of dwelling in some unspecifiable time and place, beyond history.

At the same time, the English critics could not help but respond at a visceral level to those aspects of Tippett's musical language that resonated specifically for them. If it is true that much of the meaning and emotional heat of Tippett's music as experienced at that time derives from its role as a necessary British/English riposte to European modernism, that would account for the peculiar difficulty under which that music now labours. Modernism's prestige has almost entirely vanished, so in a sense there is no longer a historical role for Tippett's music to fulfil. It has been left high-and-dry by the advent of post-modernism, and more recently of the cultural pluralism that is increasingly the state of Britain in a post-colonial era. It's instructive to compare the condition of Tippett's music, hanging on to its place in the repertoire by its fingernails, with that of his rival Britten. By his overtly declared aesthetic stance, and by the fundamentally conservative nature of his musical materials and theatrical practice — however radically he may bend and extend them at moments — Britten remained aloof from 'second-wave' musical modernism, just as the modernists remained aloof from him. So it's hardly surprising that the fading of modernism's prestige has left the reception of Britten's music entirely undisturbed. The pin-pricks of the attacks from modernists may have ceased, but pin-pricks is all they ever were. Tippett by contrast has suffered. Now that the need to read his music as a counter-blast to European modernism has faded the lyrical ecstasies of his operas can seem evasive, and the obscurities for which they were once the fig-leaf all too glaringly evident.

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