

Tippett divides and conquers

The composer's centenary celebrations are sure to open ears - and reopen old disputes

By Jessica Duchon

Published: 03 February 2005

Just seven years after his death, the composer Sir Michael Tippett is adored and abhorred in equal measure. His music is programmed across the globe despite the charge that he was an amateurish creator of sprawling, over-complex and pseudo-intellectual works and wasn't a patch on his sometime friend Benjamin Britten. The Tippett centenary provides a chance to experience his music on its own terms.

Whether in his most famous choral work, *A Child of Our Time*, his five symbolic operas, his glittering orchestral works or his dizzying string quartets and piano sonatas, Tippett had something life-affirming to say about vitality, exploration and, most of all, universal humanity. Moreover, he is proving to have been decades ahead of his time. Today, his musical style could have been called postmodern: synthesised into his language were references to Elizabethan madrigals and masques, Purcell and Bach, negro spirituals, blues, rock and rap.

His social conscience was always integral to his music. His oratorio *A Child of Our Time* was a response, in 1939, to the horrors of Kristallnacht. Using negro spirituals as an equivalent of Bach's chorales, Tippett made a universal statement about injustice, racism and the destruction of humanity.

Sir Peter Hall knew Tippett well from the late 1950s onwards and produced the world premiere of his opera *The Knot Garden* at the Royal Opera House. "People misread his librettos," he suggests. "He had a very dry, self-mocking wit; the problem is that these qualities are very hard to sing. Sometimes a line of incredible banality wings its way through a rich orchestral texture and he is criticised for this - but it's meant to be funny! And unlike Britten's operas, which belong to the theatre, Tippett's belong to a mystical quest."

Paul Kildea, the artistic director of the Wigmore Hall, says: "People criticise Tippett for 'sprawlingness' - a term that was used first to describe his operas and then applied retrospectively to everything else. But works like the five string quartets, the four piano sonatas and the song cycles are incredibly well crafted. In the song cycles, *The Heart's Assurance* and *Boyhood's End*, the whole point of the musical language is... the impact of this great wash of sound."

Against the charge that Tippett was a dilettante, Hall insists: "He's not a primitive amateur at all. But he didn't mind not being of the establishment and

he was never pompous. And if you approach him as a naive spirit, without preconceptions, he can move you equally to laughter and to tears."

The centenary celebrations include a weekend in Manchester with the Hallé Orchestra conducted by Mark Elder (26-27 Feb); a series at the Royal College of Music, London; and a festival at The Sage, Gateshead (27 Feb to 13 March) with the Lindsay Quartet, LSO and Hallé Orchestras and the Northern Sinfonia under Thomas Zehetmair. Full details at www.tippett100.com