Sir Michael Tippett

Concerto for Double String Orchestra

Tippett began his concerto for double string orchestra in 1938; completed the score on June 6, 1939; and conducted the first performance on April 4, 1940, in London. Performance time is approximately twenty-two minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s only previous subscription concert performances of Tippett’s Concerto for Double String Orchestra were given on April 9, 10, and 11, 1970, with Aaron Copland conducting.

Michael Tipte was just nine years old at the outbreak of the First World War. By refusing to join the Officer Training Corps at Fettes College at the age of nineteen, he made the first of his many public statements about war and its cost. Later, after seeing a newsreel of the endless rows of crosses in Flanders, he “knew I must work towards a climate in which repetition of such brutalities would never be accepted.” He joined the Peace Pledge Union in 1940, the same year he conducted the premiere of this Concerto for Double String Orchestra, at Morley College in London, where he had just become director of music. In June 1943, he refused to honor the condition of his conscientious objection status that required him to undertake full-time fire service or land work, arguing, with Ralph Vaughan Williams as his witness, that music was his most constructive contribution to society. He was sentenced to three months in prison. When the double string concerto was performed at the Wigmore Hall that July, “circumstances beyond his control prevented the composer from attending,” as the Conscientious Objectors’ Bulletin reported.

The Concerto for Double String Orchestra is the earliest orchestral work Tippett acknowledged. It was composed in 1938 and 1939, when Tippett was already in his thirties. Tippett didn’t begin to study music until he was eighteen; he was slow to develop and his entire career got off to a late start. Although he was born in London, he spent most of his childhood in Suffolk, far from the music scene. His parents weren’t musical; when he first heard an orchestral concert in his teens and announced that he wanted to compose music, they were baffled. Even though he eventually studied at the Royal College of Music, starting in 1923, he remained, in the truest sense, largely self-taught as a composer, finding the traditional academic training irrelevant to the kind of music he wanted to write.

In 1930, while he was working part-time as a schoolteacher and composing in his off hours, he gave a concert of his own music that made him acutely aware of his technical limitations as a composer. He set aside the scores he had written and decided to try formal training once again, this time with a Royal College professor he remember fondly from just one tutorial, R.O. Morris, who specialized in sixteenth-century counterpoint and the music of Bach. Although he found it hard going at first, the lessons only strengthened Tippett’s own innate feeling for the linear aspect of music—the interweaving of lines, the play of melody and counterpoint. The earliest of Tippett’s compositions that he was willing to acknowledge—a string quartet and a piano sonata from the mid-thirties and this Concerto for Double String Orchestra—all show Tippett’s flair for contrapuntal virtuosity.

Tippett may have gotten the idea of writing for two string orchestras from Vaughan Williams’s Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis, although he doesn’t use the different ensembles for the same kind of back-and-forth echo effects. Like the eighteenth-century concerti grossi by Handel, works which Tippett knew
and loved, the Concerto for Double String Orchestras has three movements in a fast-slow-fast pattern, each movement making the most of the contrast between a full sonority and that of smaller groups of instruments. Yet, for all its references to older music, Tippett’s concerto is highly original—the first important indication of his singular mature style to come. From the opening of the first movement, where both string orchestras have a single melodic line, each seeming to move independently of the other, there is a counterpoint not only of thematic strands, but of rhythmic ideas as well. Although Tippett has notated this music in a straight 8/8, his melodies unfold as if unaware of the bar lines—each strand is a freewheeling accumulation of long and short notes, and of irregular and unpredictable accents, the kind of “additive” rhythm Tippett discovered listening to jazz and folk music.

The two outer movements are based on sonata form and indebted, in particular, to the model of Beethoven’s great achievements in that form (Tippett had idolized Beethoven since his student days, when he went to the Proms to hear all the Beethoven symphonies). The central Adagio cantabile is even more closely attuned to a specific Beethoven model—the slow movement of the String Quartet in F minor, op. 95, with a songlike opening followed by a fugal passage and then, at the end, the return of the song. The entire score is filled with rhythmic energy and dancing melodies, and delights in good-natured banter between the two orchestras.

Scarcely three months after finishing this concerto, Tippett began the work that would bring him international attention and crystallize his anti-war views, A Child of Our Time.

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