

WIGMORE



HALL

LIVE

HEATH QUARTET

Tippett
String Quartets



SIR MICHAEL TIPPETT: STRING QUARTETS

Early in his career Michael Tippett wanted to write, as if in homage to T. S. Eliot (the poet he called his ‘artistic mentor’), a series of four string quartets in quick succession. The first three, in their finished forms, all emerged in a mainly war-torn period of five years (1941–6), but, for whatever reason, the planned series was interrupted, and it was over three decades before he added a fourth (1977–8) and, later, a fifth (1990–91). He found the form a medium to which he was ‘invincibly drawn’ – partly because he worshipped at the musical altar of one of its greatest exponents: Beethoven.

When he began work on String Quartet No. 1, Tippett was all but unknown as a composer. Since his graduation – at the second attempt, in 1928 – from the Royal College of Music, he had variously focused on amateur performance, involvement in left-wing political groups, further lessons in counterpoint and orchestration at the RCM, and a short-lived career as a French teacher. He chose to make this quartet his first official composition, dismissing as juvenilia over twenty previous efforts (which included another two quartets, one in F major, the other in F minor). String Quartet No. 1, of which the première in 1935 was the first professional performance of Tippett’s music, can now be heard, along with Sonata No. 1 for piano (1936–8) and the Concerto for Double String Orchestra (1938–9), as a crystallisation of Tippett’s hard-earned individual voice: one of powerful melodic and rhythmical inspiration.

The quartet has a darker, more shadowed quality than the sonata and double concerto, re-

minding us that it was revised extensively during wartime (and was re-premiered, at Wigmore Hall, in 1943). Tippett replaced the first two of the original four movements with one single opening movement, in Beethovenian sonata form: an exposition of musical ideas, their development, and their recapitulation. The music flicks between ‘arrest and movement’ (to use Tippett’s later description of his third symphony), alternating between surging ahead, and coming to abrupt, stuttering halts. The violins have moments of delicacy, but the last word is reserved for the second of two haunting micro-cadenzas for solo cello. The central movement, cast as an Elizabethan pavane, arose from ‘the deepest, most shattering experience of falling in love [with Wilfred Franks, the concerto’s dedicatee]; all that love flowed out in the slow movement ... an unbroken span of lyrical music in which all four instruments sing ardently from start to finish’. The melodies, long-breathed but never long-winded, rove up and down the stave as if in search of something (the first violin traverses two octaves in the first bar alone), eventually reaching a repose that, after such complex, yearning, harmonies, could suggest resignation, rather than peace.

The finale is an energetic fugue that mixes the rhythmic influences of Beethoven, jazz, and sixteenth-century counterpoint into an irregular patterning of note-groupings, accents, and metres, which pays scant attention to bar-lines. This caused problems to the first performers of Tippett’s music, then unused to such a style

and its notation. One of the violinists of the first quartet's première (Wilfred Franks's father) knocked a rehearsal chair over in his angry conviction that the finale was unplayable, and Tippett later recalled with typical good humour that in performance all the players could be heard 'furiously counting quavers'. With the rhythmical ground between performers' and listeners' feet shifting so often, the resulting energy is irresistible. Almost ascetically, Tippett denies the movement any melody to speak of. The first violin occasionally breaks free into a snatch of tune, only to be pulled back into the maelstrom of rhythm. Whereas the first piano sonata and double concerto culminate with a joyous use of folk song, the quartet ends with a sudden application of brakes. But, like anything moving at speed, it takes the piece a little while to stop.

String Quartet No. 2, its classically shaped four movements combining the now familiar influences of Tippett's musical gods – Purcell, Beethoven, English madrigalists – has as its slow movement a fugue, the theme of which Tippett first jotted down in 1938 in response to the Munich Agreement, the settlement permitting Nazi Germany's annexation of portions of Czechoslovakia. Tippett, a committed pacifist, had conflicting views on the agreement, and on the costs of appeasement and 'peace with honour'. Three years later, when he came to write the quartet, war raged and the prospect of a prison sentence loomed: he had refused the condition of his conscientious objection tribunal, arguing that music was his most constructive

contribution to society. As he wrote to a friend during the quartet's composition: 'Work has gone well & the 4tet moves. But the prison walls worry me & sometimes dry everything up. I am frightened in my body tho' unafraid in my mind'. The quartet (which its composer called 'a mild wow in its way') was premièred at the end of March 1943; by the end of June, Tippett was serving a three-month sentence in Wormwood Scrubs, though he was released a month early, on 23 August, in time to hear a performance of the quartet that very evening. The piece, for all the bar-line-defying energy of its lyrical first movement, its quicksilver Scherzo, and dramatic finale, has at its centre that shuffling five-bar shard of a theme from 1938, its halting quality exacerbated by a carefully marked awkwardness in the use of up-bows and down-bows. It is worked into a harmonically unsettled fugue, from the memory of which even the eventual repose of the finale struggles to escape.

String Quartet No. 3 was premièred by the Zorian Quartet at Wigmore Hall on 19 October 1946. The influence of Beethoven is still clearly audible in Tippett's use of fugue, but the quartet's structure owes more to Bartók, with all of whose quartets Tippett had, by 1945, become acquainted. Like Bartók's fourth and fifth quartets, Tippett's third has five movements. Movements 1, 3, and 5, eschewing sonata form, are all fugues of startling brilliance. Whereas the players in String Quartet No. 2 seemed to be shackled into the fugal lattice, here the form allows four independent voices to fly free,

together. The first movement's fugue emerges gradually from the sonorous opening chords. The fugal subject itself is of daring length, and is spun into an exhilaratingly freewheeling counterpoint punctuated with sudden snaps of tension, as the various parts worry away at one note. Movements 2 and 4 are slow glimmering pools of respite, both written in strophes (or verses). The second movement has two – major, then minor, each introduced by a guitar-like plucked motif on the cello, which returns at the end.

The central movement is dazzling: two skidding virtuosic fugues punctuated by extended unison passages, with two or more players in cahoots, before an abrupt halt is reached, as if the quartet can no longer wait to introduce its fourth movement. The two violins and viola slowly enter, one by one, until we realise a chord has been floated on the air. It is the cello which, through a gradually ascending and accelerating bass line, leads this first verse of the movement to breaking point. The three other players abandon ship, leaving the cellist sawing away, like some odd parody of a child practising scales. This pattern is repeated twice more, with the parts reallocated. All three verses attempt to reach some kind of vision, and the third succeeds, ending in rapture with exhilarating kaleidoscopic rotations, seemingly eternal – and indeed, in 1975, Tippett unravell'd its end and re-stitched it to the beginning of the finale, so that the shift between movements would continue without a break. This last fugue, while its invention ensures it is never dull, seems designed to remind us that visions do

not last, and Tippett later admitted to its slight sense of anti-climax (endings always his *bête noir*). But the closing chord is affirmatory.

Then came, as far as string quartets were concerned, a more than thirty-year gap. When Tippett returned to the genre, he had become an internationally acclaimed composer of four operas and much else besides. In the early 1960s, with his second opera, *King Priam* (1958–61), and the works in its orbit, Tippett's style underwent something of a sea-change, with counterpoint and dense orchestration often giving way to something sparer, more bony and dissonant. String Quartet No. 4 was the second of three major experiments in one-movement forms, following the Symphony No. 4 (1976–7), and preceding the Triple Concerto (1978–9). The quartet's four sections (Molto legato. Slow – Fast – Moderately slow – Very fast) are played without a break. They drag the players (originally the Lindsay String Quartet) through the wringer, in a score of noticeable detail that makes ferocious demands on its performers, calling throughout for lightning switches between bowing and pizzicato, the navigation of speedy and complex rhythms, bowing close to the instruments' bridges, and the production (particularly in the finale) of notes unbelievably high. Despite a rhythmic quotation from Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* in the quartet's final section, Tippett discards the use of fugue in favour of extended passages of unison, or homophony (where the players are rhythmically together, but harmonically independent). All of this makes for a fierce, complex, sometimes

grotesque piece, often a product of what Tippett called his own 'acid, ironic world of harmony'. He frequently had to put it aside during composition, suffering from what he called 'violent nervous attacks'. Yet out of such turmoil emerge moments of great beauty, as is always the case in Tippett's music, which seeks to portray the chaos from which peace can be born, or re-built. The third, slow, section has passages of delicacy and stillness, as the lower strings trace a steady melody under a violin duet that is almost courtly. The long finale (which Tippett directed should open 'ablaze with radiant sound') puts into practice Tippett's interest in the balance of opposite or conflicting forces, constantly alternating dynamics and tempi ('very fast' interchanging with 'medium slow'), and pitching extended passages of skittering semi-quavers against 'very tranquil' chords, no louder than breathing, the first violin impossibly but painlessly high. With balance achieved the quartet could go on for ever, or for no time at all – but the piece ends on a 'tranquil' passage, melting into air, into thin air, the last bars nothing but some faint outline or intimation of music, a long way off.

The String Quartet No. 5 (1990–91) is the work of an 86-year-old composer – a fact at odds with its energy and invention, but corroborated by its wise, twilight beauty. Tippett would write only one more major piece – *The Rose Lake* (1991–3) – before his death in 1998. Much of his later music has failed to fasten its hold on the repertoire, but these compositions mix the angular structural experiments of the 1960s and 1970s with a

renewed interest in melody, in what Tippett described as the 'heart-easing tune'. The result is often uniquely beautiful, questing rather than valedictory.

The final quartet is divided into two movements. Tradition is once again combined with innovation: conventional sonata form works in tandem with layers and juxtapositions of different building blocks. It is in the second movement that Tippett's lyrical inspiration comes most to the fore, although it is hard-won. The movement at first struggles to gain impetus, and promising lines often tail off into a contagious sigh that is picked up by the whole quartet. Eventually the first violin is allowed to soar, in a melody the score instructs should be 'singing'.

The epigraph to the whole quartet, taken from a French folk song, refers to the power of song, and of birdsong in particular: 'Chantes, rossignol, chantes / Toi qui as le coeur gai' ('Sing, nightingale, sing / you who have a happy heart'). Tippett did not go on to complete the verse in his epigraph, but it ends, in translation, 'Your heart is for laughing / Mine is for weeping'. Yet he had referred previously to 'the peculiar, liquid tone' of the nightingale's song, which 'can sound like someone sobbing from heartbreak'. The quartet never seeks, Messiaen-like, accurately to imitate birdsong, but passages seem poised on the brink of laughter and tears, dawn and twilight. At several moments in the second movement the players come together to play a pattern of seven chords, a series of liquid drops that are transposed and varied throughout the movement.

This passage returns at the end of the quartet, shaped into a final chord that is a ray of sunlight as achingly beautiful as anything Tippett ever wrote. Again the inspiration seems to have been Beethoven – particularly the ‘Heiliger Dankgesang’ (Holy song of thanksgiving), from the String Quartet in A minor Op. 132, which the Heath Quartet has performed suspended in cages above the stage, in Calixto Bieito’s production of *Fidelio*. Bieito presumably wished to demonstrate the

power of music to transcend boundaries, to be made across seemingly insuperable barriers. Whether faced with the cage of a prison cell in *Wormwood Scrubs*, or the cage of a deliberately imprisoning fugue, Tippett’s quartets frequently throw off the shackles of bars and bar-lines, and prove, as well as any twentieth-century quartet series, the genre’s refined and contradictory power of free individuality and intimate togetherness.

Notes by Oliver Soden © 2015



HEATH QUARTET

Since being selected by YCAT and winning First Prize at the Tromp Competition in 2008 the Heath Quartet has forged a strong international presence. In 2011 the quartet was awarded a prestigious Borletti-Buitoni Ensemble Scholarship and in 2012 was awarded the Ensemble Prize at the Festspiele Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. In 2014 the Heath Quartet became the first ensemble in 15 years to receive the Royal Philharmonic Society Young Artist of the Year award.

The Heath Quartet enjoys a close relationship with Wigmore Hall, recently having premièred a new quartet by Luke Bedford and shared its stage with Stephen Hough, Carolyn Sampson and Michael Collins. Other highlights for the quartet include complete Beethoven cycles at Kilkenny Arts Festival, Fácyl Festival, Salamanca and Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh, and presenting the complete Bartók quartets at Ryedale Festival. Recent debuts include the Kissingen Winterzauber, Schwetzingen and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern

Festivals, the Louvre and Musée d'Orsay in Paris, Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, Berlin Konzerthaus and Het Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. The ensemble regularly visits the United States, where it recently made its first appearance at both Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center in New York, and is in residence at Middlebury College, Vermont. Other artists the Heath Quartet has enjoyed collaborating with include Ian Bostridge, the Tokyo String Quartet, Anna Caterina Antonacci, Colin Currie, Sunwook Kim, Joanna MacGregor, Lawrence Power and Bram van Sambeek, as well as composers Brett Dean, Steven Mackey and John Musto.

The Heath Quartet was formed in 2002 at the Royal Northern College of Music, under the guidance of Dr Christopher Rowland and Alasdair Tait. The members of the quartet are Professors of Chamber Music at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama.

Engineered by Steve Portnoi www.outhouseaudio.com

Produced by Jeremy Hayes

Recorded live at Wigmore Hall, London, on 3 December 2013 (Nos. 1 & 3),
17 January 2014 (No. 4), 16 March 2014 (No. 2) and 26 April 2014 (No. 5)

Director: John Gilhooly

Wigmore Hall Live — General Manager: Darius Weinberg

Photography by Benjamin Ealovega

Manufactured by Repeat Performance Multimedia, London

HEATH QUARTET

OLIVER HEATH violin CERYS JONES violin
 GARY POMEROY viola CHRISTOPHER MURRAY cello

Recorded live at Wigmore Hall, London
 on 3 December 2013, 17 January, 16 March and 26 April 2014

Sir Michael Tippett (1905–1998)

COMPACT DISC 1	71.01	COMPACT DISC 2	57.11
String Quartet No. 1	18.16	String Quartet No. 4	26.02
01 Allegro appassionato –	06.30	01 Molto legato. Slow –	03.23
02 Lento cantabile –	06.51	02 Fast –	06.22
03 Allegro assai	04.50	03 Moderately slow –	06.56
		04 Very fast alternating with medium slow – slow – very tranquil	09.18
String Quartet No. 2	20.15	String Quartet No. 5	28.45
04 Allegro grazioso	06.34	05 Medium fast – slower – very fast – medium fast – slower – very fast	11.01
05 Andante	04.46	06 Slow – medium fast – slower – medium fast – slow	17.39
06 Presto	03.02		
07 Allegro appassionato	05.36		
String Quartet No. 3	30.03		
08 Grave e sostenuto – Allegro moderato (doppio movimento)	08.02		
09 Andante	06.15		
10 Allegro molto e con brio	03.41		
11 Lento –	07.38		
12 Allegro comodo	04.12		
		Total time:	128.12