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New Opera, Old Opera: Perspectives on Critical Interpretation

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Some preliminary self-analysis

In 1974 I wrote an article resonantly entitled 'A War and a Wedding: Two Modern British Operas', which began with the slightly cautious declaration that 'Britten's *Billy Budd* and Tippett's *The Midsummer Marriage*' are 'in many respects the two best twentieth-century British operas so far'. Common ground stemmed from closeness of completion – the Britten in November 1951, the Tippett in October 1952 – but focused primarily on 'the way that they both approach the one great post-*Tristan* operatic theme, which concerns the human need for self-knowledge. In so doing, both works accept that music itself is capable of expressing psychological insight as well as of depicting emotional states and situations'.[1]

By the time I came to compose a more elaborate essay on *Billy Budd* for volume 2 of this journal, my own focus had shifted to the way in which 'as a composer Britten moves inevitably into the expressively ambivalent, the technically multivalent'.[2] It is not that I had discovered ambiguity in twentieth-century music sometime between 1974 and 1990: indeed, a version of the concept was prominent in one of my earliest pieces of writing, 'Tonal Instability in Britten's *War Requiem*'.[3] But by 1989 critical musicology had begun to show the kind of concern with levels of multiplicity, especially as a property of modernism, that the conclusions of my 1974 essay about tensions or conflicts ('wars') that are either resolved (Tippett) or not resolved (Britten) could not adequately address. Whether or not my 1990 essay on *Billy Budd* successfully rectifies the imbalances and naiveties of its predecessor as far as Britten's opera is concerned, it seems to me not inappropriate to complement that effort twenty years on with some comments on *The Midsummer Marriage* – not least because Tippett's operas have not so far been given close readings in the *Cambridge Opera Journal*. First, however, some more general reflections on the current state of opera and its critical interpretation.

Opera and (late) modernity

At the time of writing, new opera might seem to be holding its own against old opera: a relatively less common phenomenon, to be sure, but not simply something

[1] Arnold Whittall, 'A War and a Wedding: Two Modern British Operas', *Music & Letters*, 55 (1974), 299.
[2] Arnold Whittall, '"Twisted Relations": Method and Meaning in Britten's *Billy Budd*', *this journal*, 2 (1990), 169.
[3] *Music Review*, 24 (1963), 201–4.

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arcane, to be relegated to the distant margins of musical culture. The first performances, in 2008, of Harrison Birtwistle's *The Minotaur* (London), Louis Andriessen's *La Commedia* (Amsterdam), Georg Friedrich Haas's *Melancholia* (Paris), Pascal Dusapin's *Passion* (Aix en Provence) and Heiner Goebbel's 'staged concert' *I went to the house and did not enter* (Geneva) is by no means a complete list, and follows on from such high-profile 2007 premières as Jonathan Harvey's *Wagner Dream* (Luxembourg), Unsuk Chin's *Alice in Wonderland* (Munich) and Hans Werner Henze's *Phaedra* (Berlin) all proving beyond doubt that considerable time and money are still being invested in enterprises that cannot be expected to provide substantial financial returns in the short term, if ever. When the work of the most prominent living opera composer, John Adams, is added to the picture (a DVD of *Doctor Atomic* was released in 2008), and complemented by such grandly ambitious and demanding projects as Stockhausen's seven-opera *Licht* cycle (1978–2003), the refusal of opera to lie down and die, and the reluctance of contemporary composers to abandon a genre with such strong associations with earlier eras and very different historical contexts, is something to wonder at.

Nevertheless, sober reflection might suggest a need to temper such an upbeat assessment. A large number of old operas ('old' here suggesting written before 1945) have acquired an aura of timelessness simply by being performed regularly down the years, whereas few operas written since 1945 – some by Britten and Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* are the most obvious exceptions – have as yet been heard and seen often enough to acquire any such quasi-immortality. Nor, it is usually assumed, are more than a very small number – if any – likely to send down the necessary roots in the future. The familiar image of the modern opera house essentially as a museum of antiquities might be simplistic, but it surely has a core of truth.

Musicology since 1945 has often assumed that this situation is a reflection of the wider and self-evident truth that the culturally new, challenging (and expensive) can no longer expect to be at the centre of an audience's attention. Since the Enlightenment, education and appreciation have focused increasingly on the well established, the historically validated. In addition, opera – far more than symphonic, instrumental music – has found itself under scrutiny by scholars who regard the period since 1900 (with significant foreshadowings in the previous century) as an age of modernism, one of whose defining attributes has been to question the aesthetic and technical fundamentals of the genre. In a straightforward summary of this complex matter, Björn Heile has given Gary Tomlinson particular credit for advancing the argument that 'the nature of operatic voice is contingent on constructions of subjectivity, and emotional expression in lyrical song is grounded in an idea of unified and integral subjectivity that is fundamentally at odds with the alienation of modernity'. Heile then aligns this position with Carolyn Abbate's view that 'the concepts of realism, illusionism, and representation implicit in the division between stage and orchestra pit, which is foundational for opera, are ill equipped to deal with the dual challenge of the kind of modernism prevalent in the visual arts and literature on the one hand and the apotheosis of realism in the new genre of cinema on the other'. Heile's own conclusion is that 'any new opera that wants to

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be taken seriously needs radically to question the genre and its implicit conventions and expectations', and he finds evidence that 'exciting new work for the operatic stage' will invariably involve 'a critique of opera' in such composers as Salvatore Sciarrino, Helmut Lachenmann and Olga Neuwirth. The implication is that many new operas, including in all probability some of those premièred in 2007–8, do not wish 'to be taken seriously'.[4]

It might not always be a simple matter to determine whether the qualities of a new opera are the result of some kind of serious genre critique – a composer's considered reaction to the traditions and conventions of the form – or of a composer's inspired, re-creative embrace of such conventions. But present-day musicology will tend by definition to engage in critique, whether the opera in question is old or new. Only the purest kind of source study, concerned solely with establishing an authentic text or texts, in relation to how an opera was initially performed, is likely to downplay, if not completely avoid, those topics of meaning and quality which the practice of criticism commonly engages. And in those rare cases of an extended, book-length study of a single recent opera, the provision of context will often involve aspects of critique in which Heile's basic requirement for questioning the nature of the chosen genre can be projected back from musicologist to composer. A good example is John Richardson's *Singing Archaeology: Philip Glass's 'Akhnaten'*, which draws some bold cultural-historical conclusions about the relationship of Glass's 1984 opera to more 'mainstream' manifestations of opera and music theatre in the twentieth century.

For Richardson, there is a clear line to be drawn between Glass and 'the one "great" British opera composer of the twentieth century'. Benjamin Britten 'wrote accessible and imaginative music, and was an important icon to the gay community and others, but for many socially committed young people growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in the United Kingdom, his credibility was undermined by his close associations with the monarchy and the upper classes'. By contrast, both Philip Glass and his nearest British equivalent, Michael Nyman, 'greatly admired the ideological and philosophical precepts of 1960s experimentalism, both were strongly influenced by Cage, and both grappled with the problem of how to take the "message" of avant-garde experimentalism to a larger audience'. Richardson's critique (in tune to a degree with Heile's notion of seriousness) then focuses on his doubts about whether even Nyman and Glass might not be 'a little *too* keen to be accepted by their peers . . . Glass maintains a post-Brechtian distance from the music of his ancestors in much of his music – most effectively in *Akhnaten* – but is that distance always enough? . . . *Akhnaten* walks a very thin line between ancestor worship and iconoclasm, and precisely because of its self-reflexive ambiguity largely manages to avoid many of the pitfalls of such material. It is both a powerful critique of earlier practices and a testimony to the nurturing and replenishing qualities

[4] Björn Heile, review of *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge University Press, 2005), in *Music & Letters*, 88 (2007), 347–53, with citations from Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1991) and Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton, 1999).

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(which conventionally carry feminine connotations) of a healthy rapport with the past. But it could not be any of this effectively if it was not also a complex and compelling work of art.'[5]

Richardson's picture of numerous young idealists being disillusioned by Britten's establishment ties seems a touch unreal, if not surreal – a case of the critic riskily projecting his own sense of what is socially significant onto society as a whole. Even so, his actual conclusion comes close to a 'classic' statement of opera's archetypal ambiguities such as is provided by Carolyn Abbate.[6] Thinking primarily of *Akhnaten*, Richardson sets a 'healthy rapport with the past' against 'a powerful critique of earlier practices'. Make the critique less 'powerful', the 'rapport with the past' more explicit (and possibly thereby less 'healthy'), and you could be describing *Peter Grimes* or *Death in Venice*. Reduce the rapport with the past, bulk up the critique and you introduce Heile's radicals – Lachenmann's *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern*, Sciarrino's *Lohengrin*, Neuwirth's *Lost Highway* – which nevertheless have their own links with earlier theatre (theatrical) pieces by Nono and Kagel, among others. To be acceptably radical is not to be totally rootless.

Modern musicology's engagement with older opera represents a positive response to the perceived social and cultural significance of the genre, with a particular focus on court and city life as they evolved from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Only with Wagner's Bayreuth does the focus shift from city to small town, and from the opera house as secular social centre to a Festival Theatre as a shrine within which to contemplate, or even be seduced by, the sublime and the beautiful as Wagner conceived them. Such cathedrals of operatic art would have little chance of prospering today were it not for shrewd commercial underpinning (bolstered in Bayreuth's case by generous state funding) and by carefully nurtured rarity value – too few performances for the mass of aspirants to be able to buy tickets on the open market more than once in a decade or so. At the other extreme, the kind of initiatives launched in the twentieth century by Britten in and around Aldeburgh and Hans Werner Henze in Montepulciano promoted the possibility of a non-elitist, community-based opera, very much to involve that 'larger audience' of which Richardson writes, and which is assumed to be a good thing – presumably as long as the basic standards of (high) art are not compromised; especially, its ability to 'challenge' in the way more overtly 'popular' enterprises like musicals, whether by Sondheim or Lloyd Webber, do not do. Such works – Britten's *Noye's Fludde*, Henze's *Pollicino* – might embody nicely ambiguous relations with mainstream operatic traditions and practices without providing the kind of strong critique they would need to enter the modernist canon, as defined by Heile. Instead, Henze's description of his opera's first night in 1980 evokes a well-nigh Utopian vision of social harmony: 'I still recall the first night of *Pollicino* as vividly as if it were yesterday – the excitement in the packed hall, the atmosphere of a great family celebration, the ethereal, fresh-sounding voices of the *bambini*, the *gravitas* of the amateur actors who

[5] John Richardson, *Singing Archaeology: Philip Glass's 'Akhnaten'* (Hanover, NH, and London, 1999), 246–7.

[6] Carolyn Abbate, 'Analysis', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. Stanley Sadie, 4 vols. (London, 1992), I, 116–20.

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played the parts of grown-ups, and the irresistible magic of Pollicino and Clothilda, the one-eyed Man-Eater's daughter who is helplessly in love with him. It gave me particular pleasure to write a little opera in which two wonderful Tuscan melodies that were no longer sung in the Orcia Valley and elsewhere in southern Tuscany found their way back into the world of Montepulciano's folk music. Long after the performance was over, we could still hear groups of young people wandering through the town and singing these songs at the tops of their voices.'[7] Of such exceptional yet ephemeral events is cultural history made, and contextual, critical musicology, as it has become increasingly confident of its brief over the past two or three decades, has increasingly concerned itself with such things. I will now take a slightly closer look at some aspects of this scholarly phenomenon, as it relates to opera, to the *Cambridge Opera Journal*, and to some of the compositional and critical priorities this phenomenon helps to identify and interpret, before homing in on *The Midsummer Marriage* and its satisfyingly complex relationship with modernist aesthetics.

Music and music theory since 1900

Born at the end of the Cold War, the *Cambridge Opera Journal* has evolved alongside developments in musical composition and music theory which can be seen as reflecting the most important cultural-historical trends of this new era. The end of the Cold War is widely interpreted as representing the definitive failure of Soviet-style Marxism, and it also seems to have encouraged the view that relative conservatism in matters of musical style so characteristic of Soviet-style culture need not be merely tolerated in the West, as it had been since 1945, but positively encouraged. Nor was such conservatism a wholly negative phenomenon, as (in particular) the long-term and far-reaching admiration for Shostakovich showed. Since at least the mid-1970s, the retreat from avant-garde ideals in Western music had made it possible for a leading radical like Pierre Boulez to find new ways of exploiting harmonic centricity and even quasi-thematic recognisability, without wholesale surrender either to Shostakovich-style conservatism or to the newly approachable progressiveness found in the repetitive consonances of minimalism.[8] As for music theory and analysis, what had begun, during the 1960s, to seem like an unbridgeable opposition between Schenkerian reinforcement of diatonic fundamentals and a Babbitt-derived understanding of serialism and atonality best explained in terms of set–structural relations, began to reflect the possibilities of transformational procedures often situated (via David Lewin's initiatives) in the broad categories of late nineteenth-century harmonic theory, particularly that of Hugo Riemann: then, still later, this post-tonal (as opposed to atonal) way of thinking came to absorb the earlier twentieth-century Schoenbergian categories

[7] Hans Werner Henze, *Bohemian Fifth: An Autobiography*, trans. Stewart Spencer (London, 1998), 384.

[8] For additional discussion, see Arnold Whittall, 'Boulez at 80: The Path from the New Music', *Tempo*, 233 (2005), 3–15.

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of extended or suspended tonality and developing variation.[9] These tendencies in both composition and theory grew stronger after 1990, perhaps (as suggested above) in response to the sense that 'conservatism' in culture could actually prosper by absorbing progressive elements into itself.

The principal aesthetic consequence of these developments has nevertheless been a reinvigoration of modernism, already in its 'late' (if not 'post') phase by 1990. That said, it is clear not only that any 'aesthetic' categorisation of music theory is far less apposite than it is for composition, but also that developments in transformational and 'neo-Riemannian' analytical techniques usually had the effect of suggesting extended networks of connections and relations which give less status to conflicts and oppositions. Dialogues between disjunct entities have often been downgraded, and assumptions about the need for 'classical' ideals of unity and integration have persisted. All the more important, then, has been the role of the technical study of vocal music, and opera in particular, in encouraging resistance to facile attempts to treat these genres in the same way as forms of instrumental music. With typical polemical verve, Carolyn Abbate inveighed against the 'repression of the non-musical' in operatic analysis, as a result of 'the desire to purify operatic music through a purgative association with genres uncorrupted by non-musical systems', and she felt able to assure her readers in 1992 that 'this purifying gesture seems doomed to fail'. Not only would it fail because of the refusal of most commentators on opera to exclude the 'non-musical' from their interpretations: even when the music alone is the primary focus of the discourse, plurality and polarity seem to be of the essence. As Abbate declared, 'the dialogue-like nature of opera seems in the end to suggest a general rejection of totalizing approaches, and an adoption of plural strategies with the capacity to acknowledge its diversity and richness'. And operatic music itself, at least in the eras of early, high and late modernism, embodies dialogic qualities that require 'plural strategies' for their adequate critical and technical interpretation.[10]

The current state of opera studies

There can be no more striking evidence of the continued vitality of opera, and of its appeal to composers born since 1900, than the fact that the two great composers born in 1908, Olivier Messiaen and Elliott Carter, both wrote operas of utterly different character in their later years. Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise* (1975–83), the grandiose apotheosis of pageant-like concern with the transcendent, contrasts neatly with Carter's small-scale, ultra-secular *What Next?* (1998), where the French associations of Paul Griffiths's libretto suggest an alliance of Jacques Tati and Samuel Beckett. It was, however, the earlier non-operatic music of these composers that made it possible for them to have the chance to essay the genre, whereas not a few of their successors among the twentieth century's progressive masters have

[9] This process is charted in depth in *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. Thomas Christensen (Cambridge, 2002).

[10] Abbate, 'Analysis', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, I, 120.

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had the opportunity and inclination to write operas regularly: Berio, Henze, Stockhausen, Birtwistle, Glass, Andriessen and Adams is a 'core' list of those who have added to already significant contributions since 1990, and who could scarcely be excluded from a history of the genre at the turn of the century. This essay cannot provide an in-depth account. Rather, I aim to reflect on some of the opportunities and challenges which opera composers have offered to critics and analysts, especially when the response to challenges from new operas leads to new perspectives on older operas as well, and to look in some detail at a mid-twentieth-century opera with particularly rich contexts in cultural history and literature. First, however, it must be stressed that some of the most stimulating contributions to opera criticism and analysis since 1990 have not been concerned with operas written since 1945 – even if those contributions can be shown to have relevance for the study of later works.

It is certainly not the case that large numbers of book-length studies of opera concerned primary with theory-based analysis have appeared since 1990. Books combining archivally sourced studies in genesis with critical interpretation of the completed work are more common, and as far as post-tonal opera is concerned, Patricia Hall's *A View of Berg's Lulu Through the Autograph Sources*[11] – when read in conjunction with her other writings on the opera – is a concise but particularly telling demonstration of the strengths of the genre. However, Carl Leafstedt's *Inside Bluebeard's Castle: Music and Drama in Béla Bartók's Opera*[12] is probably more representative of recent practice in seeking to place what might be regarded as systematic elements in musical material and design within a framework of 'cultural practice' and genetic process, relating to both text and music. Leafstedt does not so much apply a theory of Bartókian modality or of the kind of cyclic and symmetrical features so widely discussed elsewhere to the work as acknowledge the value such initiatives can have in informing a more pluralistic reading of the opera.

With pre-twentieth-century opera a comparable evolution can be observed, as the ever-increasing bibliographies around Monteverdi, Handel, Mozart, Verdi and their lesser contemporaries attest. Even so, it is surely Wagner who occupies pride of place in the recent history of opera studies. Indeed, Alfred Lorenz's book-length accounts of *The Ring*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger*, and *Parsifal*, first published between 1924 and 1933, following on from an already extensive tradition of detailed Wagner exegesis, can be seen as the first substantial theory-based analyses, and for all the ridicule that has been heaped upon Lorenz's beliefs about the twin roles of *Barform* and *Bogenform*, detailed study of his actual work has shown that he was rather less inflexible and imperceptive than legend had alleged.[13] Given that the major contributor to tonal harmonic theory in the early twentieth century, Heinrich Schenker, was comprehensively dismissive of Wagner's work, it is perhaps

[11] Patricia Hall, *A View of Berg's Lulu Through the Autograph Sources* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1996).

[12] Carl S. Leafstedt, *Inside Bluebeard's Castle: Music and Drama in Béla Bartók's Opera* (New York, 1999).

[13] See in particular Stephen McClatchie, *Analyzing Wagner's Operas: Alfred Lorenz and German Nationalist Ideology* (Rochester, 1998).

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understandable that it was not until 1993 that a Schenker-inspired study of a complete Wagner music drama was published in book form. However, Warren Darcy's *Wagner's Das Rheingold* appeared in a series called 'Studies in Musical Genesis and Structure',[14] and as with Hall's *Lulu*, Janet Schmalfeldt's *Wozzeck* or Pamela White's *Moses und Aron*,[15] the aim was more to contextualise the theory-based analysis and to indicate its particular usefulness in relation to textual and dramatic matters, than to suggest that it was of such value that it was worth treating in isolation from all other factors.

While several book-length studies of single Wagner dramas have been published since 1993, none has attempted to emulate Darcy's method, and in one of the most ambitious – *The Tragic and the Ecstatic: The Musical Revolution of Wagner's Tristan und Isolde* (2005)[16] – Eric Chafe prefers to follow the model of an engagement with a wide range of different strands from the Wagner analytical tradition which consider matters of musico-poetic design without the degree of specific technical detail that Schenkerian analysis requires. Chafe refers to such analyses of extracts from *Tristan* by Matthew Brown,[17] but in order to place them within the broad context of analytical initiatives, not to provide a starting point for his own applications of the theory. If anything, there is a strong implication that to home in on any such theoretical construct is not only counterproductive, given what Chafe interprets as the opera's transitional place between tonal and 'atonal' music, but risks distracting critical interpretation from the crucial task of explaining the work's place in the evolution of nineteenth-century thought and culture, an evolution in which music was one factor only. Ultimately, for Chafe, it is Schopenhauer who is a more important and illuminating guide to Wagner's musico-poetic thinking than any theorist of tonality. The result is that even Wagner's own theorising about musico-poetic practice is less fully interpreted than can and should be the case.

Rhetorical dialectics and post-Wagnerian operatic analysis

One generalises in the field of Wagner studies at one's peril, but it is difficult to deny that the most straightforward and stimulating presentation of Wagner's ideas as embodied in the late essay 'On the Application of Music to the Drama' (1879) came in a book published in the same year as Warren Darcy's study of *Das Rheingold*, John Daverio's *Nineteenth-Century Music and the German Romantic Ideology*.[18] Coming early in the 'post-Cold-War' phase of musicology, and when it was already possible to evaluate the early initiatives of – for example – Carolyn Abbate, Lawrence Kramer, and Anthony Newcomb in seeking a plural but not anti-systematic position for the

[14] Warren Darcy, *Wagner's Das Rheingold* (Oxford, 1993).
[15] Janet Schmalfeldt, *Berg's Wozzeck*: *Harmonic Language and Dramatic Design* (New Haven, 1983); Pamela White, *Schoenberg and the God-idea: The Opera Moses und Aron* (Ann Arbor, 1985).
[16] Eric Chafe, *The Tragic and the Ecstatic: The Musical Revolution of Wagner's Tristan und Isolde* (New York, 2005).
[17] Matthew Brown, 'Isolde's Narrative: From *Hauptmotiv* to Tonal Model', in *Analyzing Opera. Verdi and Wagner*, ed. Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1989), 180–201.
[18] John Daverio, *Nineteenth-Century Music and the German Romantic Ideology* (New York, 1993).

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critical interpretation of Wagner, Daverio explored the analytical possibilities for dialogue between the subtly seamless 'art of transition' and the fragmented, discontinuous contexts of what Wagner himself called 'rhetorical dialectics' in ways which make one the more regretful that Daverio was never able to explore the functioning of this dialogue within a complete music drama. Nevertheless, even those most strongly persuaded by the potential of Daverio's exposition, as applied by him to passages from *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, might suspect that book-length analyses would succeed only in underlining and overemphasising the obvious, at the expense of comparative studies within the aesthetic and cultural world of modernism, which tensions between connectedness and disjunction are ideally suited to facilitate, and which turn out to be relevant to operas, and composers, initially seen as strikingly different. Certainly, Daverio's initiative lay behind my suggestion, in an essay published in 2003, that comparing the endings of Berg's *Wozzeck* and Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* reveals a rich blend of similarity and difference: 'the parallelism is in the shared generic allusion [to lament], and the reliance of both composers on the particular emotional impact of ostinato. Seekers after similarity might also be struck by the role of G as a concluding centre for both *Wozzeck* and *Oedipus*, although Berg's post-tonal stratification is very different from Stravinsky's more homogenous modality'.[19]

The issue here is to determine how critical interpretation of opera's role within, and contribution to, the continuing evolution of modernism can best be conducted. Binary oppositions of all shapes and sizes can easily be applied mechanically, even mindlessly, and so the challenge is not to dismiss such very basic divisions and tensions as those between through-composition and separate numbers, tragic and comic subjects, convergence and divergence of the various media which contribute to the operatic experience: rather the challenge is to retain the basics but to refine them in ways which do justice to the experience as recalled and reflected upon. For most of the genre's history, opera composers have encouraged such in-depth comparison by regularly revisiting the same subjects, and since 1900 these seem to have stabilised within the two broad categories of realist and mythic – categories which begin to converge to the extent that the flawed but often quasi-heroic protagonists of veristic music drama (from *Jenufa* to *Peter Grimes* to *The Death of Klinghoffer* and beyond) intersect with the fallible heroics of mythic opera's superhumans, male and female.

While an opera as recent as Henze's *Phaedra* can treat mythic subject matter as more surreal and even urbane than menacing and primitive, it has been rather more common since 1900 to focus on Dionysian abandonment and violence. From Strauss's *Elektra*, Tippett's *King Priam* and Henze's *The Bassarids* to James Dillon's *Philomela*, cruelty and despair are shown to have the longest of long histories, and offer telling examples of individual vulnerability which can easily be set alongside operatic treatments of human tragedy or menace, whether in the ritualised, anti-naturalistic vein of Ferneyhough's *Shadowtime*, dealing at a distance with the

[19] Arnold Whittall, 'Stravinsky in Context', in *The Cambridge Companion to Stravinsky*, ed. Jonathan Cross (Cambridge, 2003), 46.

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death of Walter Benjamin, or in the real-life city environments depicted in Britten's *Death in Venice* and Andriessen's *Letters to Vermeer*. As the next section will show, *The Midsummer Marriage* is at odds with this trend to the extent that the topics of cruelty and vulnerability are offset, if not by the kind of heroics that wholly mythological subjects make available, then by the celebration of the human ability to progress to the fulfilment of enlightenment – to 'grow up'. Opera, like spoken drama and other literary genres which have flourished since Freud and Jung, is easily absorbed into the socio-cultural phenomenon of the psychological case study, where critical musicologists are much more at home than they are with the more rarefied contexts of 'pure' philosophy. All the more important, then, for critical analysis of opera to centre itself on interpretative categories which derive from within the genre itself. A comparative study of the roles of connection (transition) and juxtaposition (rhetorical dialectics) in operas separated by century but related by subject – the Orpheus operas by Monteverdi, Gluck and Birtwistle, the subject of a wide-ranging but non-technical survey by Wilfrid Mellers,[20] is an obvious example – would not need to consider these works as somehow fixed in pre-Wagnerian and post-Wagnerian worlds, as if that composer's canon constituted a template for opera which all composers contributing to the genre must acknowledge, whether intentionally or not. And even relatively short studies of single operas (like that which follows) are rarely likely to reduce the context for the work itself to such an extent that no other musico-dramatic work receives more than the barest mention.

Celebrating – sceptically

As 'a drama of renewal'[21] with a happy ending, Michael Tippett's *The Midsummer Marriage* (1946–52) is a fitting topic for a celebration of this journal's twentieth birthday. The opera might also be said to 'stand for' twentieth-century opera in general in that it is not a permanent part of any current company's repertory. To this extent, the element of scepticism concerning such matters as politics, religion, and social psychology which can be teased out of the opera's celebratory subject matter is matched by the not un-sceptical response of opera companies to the work. When first performed at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden in 1954 it was not greatly admired, but on revival and recording in the 1960s its strengths and virtues were more widely recognised, and it has been discussed at some length in several publications.[22] In moving that discussion on to a further stage I am not consciously aiming to provide either a 'model' example or a sceptical deconstruction of the kind of critical interpretation recommended earlier in this essay. I must therefore leave it for readers to consider (if they wish) what kinds of connection – positive and/or negative – between this essay's earlier and later stages there might be.

[20] Wilfrid Mellers, *The Masks of Orpheus: Seven Stages in the Story of European Music* (Manchester, 1987).
[21] Michael Tippett, *Tippett on Music*, ed. Meirion Bowen (Oxford, 1995), 51.
[22] For the most important study not directly cited here, see David Clarke, *The Music and Thought of Michael Tippett: Modern Times and Metaphysics* (Cambridge, 2001).

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One of the rewards (and also one of the challenges) of considering a Tippett opera is that the composer left a considerable body of writing about the genre in general as well as most of his own operas in particular. During his years of work on *The Midsummer Marriage* one of the most relevant texts is a radio talk from 1947 about Stravinsky's 'choreographic scenes' *The Wedding* – a work which, Tippett declares, 'ends in a kind of timeless magic'.[23] It is tempting to look for clues to his own opera's character in Tippett's talk, and one possible clue concerns the way he compares *The Wedding* with *Le Sacre du printemps*. Noting that both share 'Dionysian tendencies', Tippett finds a degree of pessimism in the earlier work, since 'renewal comes only at the cost of sacrificing a virgin girl. Life is renewed only by death . . . by an ecstatic religious rite.' Like *Le Sacre du printemps*, *The Wedding* 'is also a drama of renewal, through marriage and the begetting of children. But where *The Rite* is deadly serious, *The Wedding* is fundamentally comic (in the high sense), though the same ingredients of religious feeling and sceptical pessimism are in the theatrical mixture.'[24]

That Tippett might have seen his first opera in comparable terms is clear from a letter, written in June 1946, saying that it would be 'a sort of complement to the dark, over-compassionate score' of his renewal-celebrating oratorio *A Child of Our Time*.[25] During the summer of 1945 he had written that 'the story is taking on a more naturalistically human dressing and the allegorical and mythological element is receding behind. It constantly gets warmer – but is as unsentimental as before.'[26] Even this early, then, Tippett could have been thinking of ending the opera with a pair of lines from Yeats's 'Lapis Lazuli' – 'all things fall and are built again / And those that build them again are gay'. Yeats's allusion is to the defiance and self-belief of the genuine artist, for whom 'gaiety' is not simple cheerfulness, but the result of 'an ecstatic devotion' to the demands of art.[27] And in 1971 (perhaps indulging in one of his periodic expressions of doubt about the later works of Benjamin Britten), Tippett commented on how impressed he had been to learn that Yeats had refused to include poems by Wilfred Owen in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936 edition) 'on the grounds that no true poetry can be made out of pity'.[28] Tippett also spoke of his concern to temper such a commitment to 'gaiety against self-pity' with a degree of compassion. And as far as the ending of *The Midsummer Marriage* is concerned, he seems to have sensed that the fine line between compassion and sentimentality needed to be drawn as firmly as possible.

The Midsummer Marriage can also be aligned with *The Wedding* if we believe that what Tippett calls 'religious feeling', which in Stravinsky means Christianity, has its parallel in Tippett's own Dionysian dance-rituals. Nevertheless, during the early

[23] Tippett, *Tippett on Music*, 56.
[24] Tippett, 50–1.
[25] Michael Tippett, *The Selected Letters of Michael Tippett*, ed. Thomas Schuttenhelm (London, 2005), 292.
[26] Tippett, 258.
[27] M. L. Rosenthal, *Running to Paradise: Yeats's Poetic Art* (Oxford, 1994), 347–8.
[28] Michael Tippett, 'The Relation of Autobiographical Experience to the Created Work of Art', in *Michael Tippett: Music and Literature*, ed. Suzanne Robinson (Aldershot, 2002), 26.

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stages of the opera's evolution he told a correspondent that 'as far as I can guess the material in the masque is more pagan than that in the oratorio. Syncretistic of course, but leaving more to Apollo than to Dionysus . . . Union . . . is part of the final symbol – but I hope it won't get too transcendental.'[29] One way in which Stravinsky avoided getting too transcendental was by that 'sceptical pessimism' which clearly intrigued Tippett. We might guess that it suggested to him something like Richard Taruskin's idea that in *The Wedding* there is 'a dark side to this celebration of the unquestioning subjection of human personality to an implacably demanding – and by Enlightened standards, unjust – social order'.[30]

Is there any sense of such 'subjection' in *The Midsummer Marriage*? Commentary on the opera has tended to underline how it differs from the Stravinsky ballets. As Ian Kemp has noted, Tippett's final ritual dance 'is subtitled "the voluntary human sacrifice" – the wiling, knowing submission of individuality in the transcendence of love. Strephon dances the rite of midsummer. Like Stravinsky's sacrificial virgin, he eventually dies, having relinquished his individuality, the lighted stick, to his true self, the transfigured Mark and Jenifer. But unlike Stravinsky, Tippett does not stop here. The dance continues. And in Tippett's scheme of things it is vital that it should continue, for unless transcendence springs from sacrifice or, in other words, unless Mark and Jenifer experience an absolute from which they can draw limitless strength for their future lives together, then the whole opera is prejudiced.'[31]

In Kemp's reading, there is a natural progression from a transcendence-creating sacrifice to an ending in which an idyllic brightness is all-pervasive. 'The chorus offers a beautiful invocation to the sun . . . the birds begin to sing and soon the dawn chorus is in full voice while a wordless hymn of thanksgiving forms in the background . . . As Mark and Jenifer disappear with their friends, their voices echoing in the distance . . . two final stanzas of the hymn ring out to welcome the dawn . . . Halting as if unable to suppress delight at its newly gained freedom, *The Midsummer Marriage* ends with as certain, splendid and uninhibited a celebration of its art as can be heard in twentieth-century opera.'[32] In this way, Kemp suggests, Tippett has 'launched his characters on the assurance of an idyllically happy life together'.[33]

Utopia/dystopia?

In an effort to provide a constructive response to Kemp's interpretation, I will focus mainly on that 'wordless hymn of thanksgiving' as 'a C major song'. This definition derives from David Clarke's commentary on Tippett's *Concerto for Double String Orchestra* (1939), the concluding C major tune of which is more folk song than hymn. In Clarke's analysis, 'folk materials' are 'drawn into an interplay of musical materials within an abstract symphonic framework', and 'the resulting synthesis

[29] Tippett, *Selected Letters*, 242.
[30] Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton, 1997), 391.
[31] Ian Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and His Music* (Oxford, 1984), 275.
[32] Kemp, 277.
[33] Kemp, 323.

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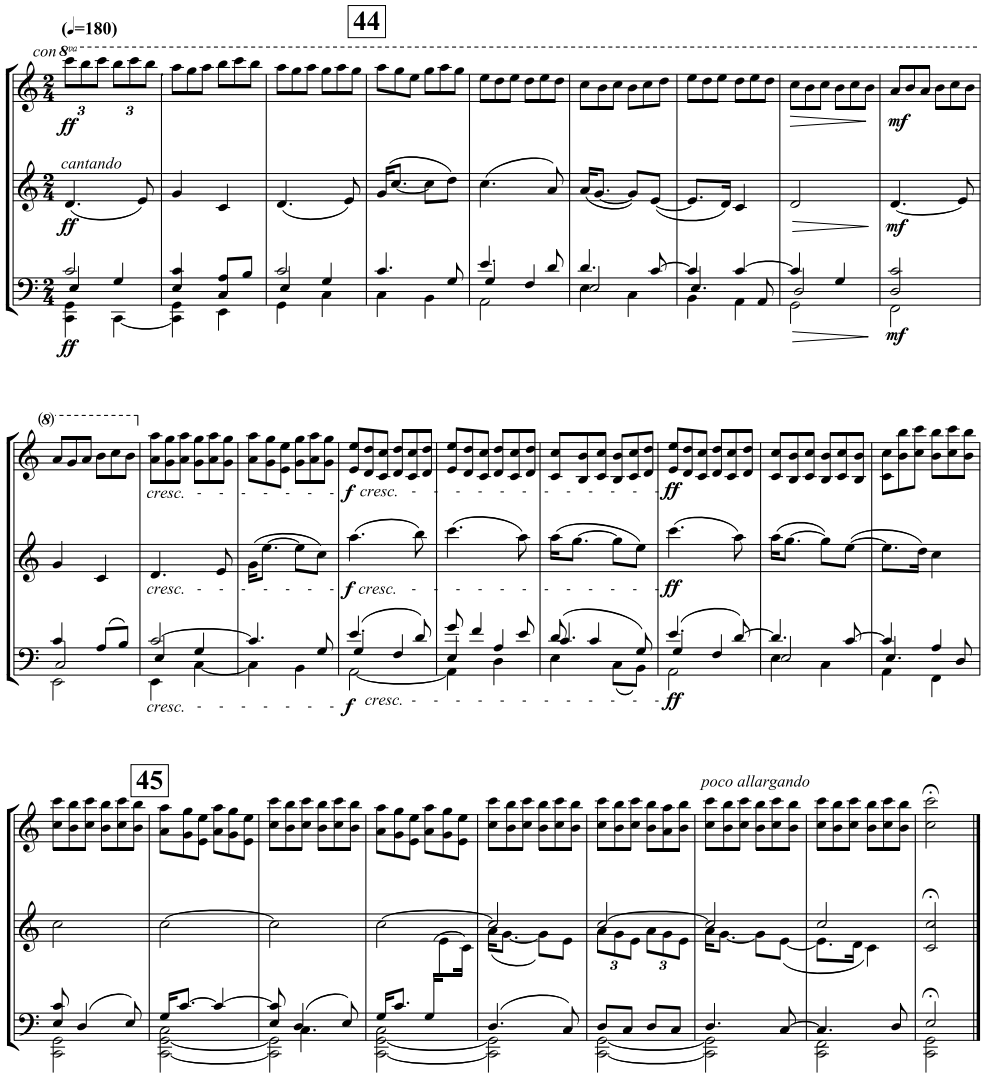
could be construed as projecting a utopian vision where social differences . . . may be seen not as grounds for social division, but as cross-fertilising forces within an integrated whole'.[34] This C major song, 'perhaps representing the collective voice of a community . . . is a potent gesture of a renewal: a renewal immanent in its very structural function as the consummative moment of a remodelled diatonicism: . . . the synthesis of the Double Concerto presents an image of a social order where "cross-currents" between its constitutive forces made for an image of an invigorated future rather than a mythologised past'.[35] Clarke can describe the vision embodied in this music as 'utopian' precisely because it sounds wholly positive. The three textural elements of uninterrupted melody, bass and decorative triplet figuration are integrated in the cause of purely diatonic resolution (Ex. 1). This fits with the perception that the social order is not – unlike that of *The Wedding* – 'unjust'. Hardly surprisingly, the ending of *The Midsummer Marriage* is not so straightforward. But it is possibly even more remarkable, refining and intensifying the work's dramatic themes without dissolving all traces of darkness, or even of scepticism.

There has been much discussion in Tippett studies of the role of twin tonalities, and their relation to possible models in Wagner. It is also possible to find Wagnerian precedents for marking the resolution of the drama with chorale-like statements, as in *Tannhäuser*, *Die Meistersinger* or the *Ring* cycle's final orchestral fantasia around the noble sarabande of the Valhalla theme. Wagner's use of compassionate but not self-pitying music to represent both destruction and the prospect of renewal might be seen as more ironic than utopian, however, and the possibility of combining utopian with dystopian can also be sensed in Tippett, where the C major tonality of *The Midsummer Marriage*'s final chorale is never fully absorbed by the framing A major tonality. As confirmed by its intense assertion at the end of the fourth ritual dance, A major is indelibly marked with the spirit of Dionysus. So it would be logical for the C major hymn, bringing with it such different religious associations, to stand not only for all those non- or anti-Dionysian qualities that tend to be connected, after Nietzsche, with Apollo: it might also have those Christian, Protestant affiliations which were the focus of Tippett's scepticism. After all, its initial repeated notes (see Ex. 2a) suggest affinities with tunes like 'Ein' Feste Burg' or 'Nun Danket alle Gott', as well as – a little more remotely – with *Die Meistersinger*'s opening chorale (Ex. 2b).

If we detach Tippett's tune from its context, it sounds almost archaic, with steady rhythm and pure diatonicism. It is as if the aim is to create a spiritual allusion with strong overtones of the everyday – religion as earthly social routine. Here, of course, we invoke the binary pairing with which Tippett sought to characterise the opera's essence: 'the interaction of two worlds', the 'marvellous' and the 'everyday'.[36] Yet these two worlds are not meant to be of equal significance: Tippett writes of the marriage of Mark and Jenifer becoming 'a spiritual, even supernatural symbol,

[34] David Clarke, '"Only Half Rebelling": Tonal Strategies, Folk Song and "Englishness" in Tippett's Concerto for Double String Orchestra', in *Tippett Studies*, ed. David Clarke (Cambridge, 1999), 25.
[35] Clarke, 9.
[36] Tippett, *Tippett on Music*, 200.

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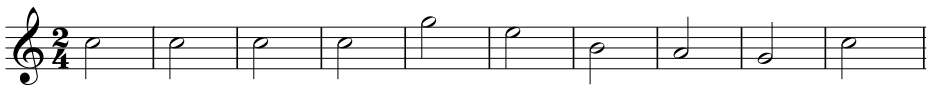


Ex. 1: Tippett, *Concerto for Double String Orchestra*, 3rd movement, ending.

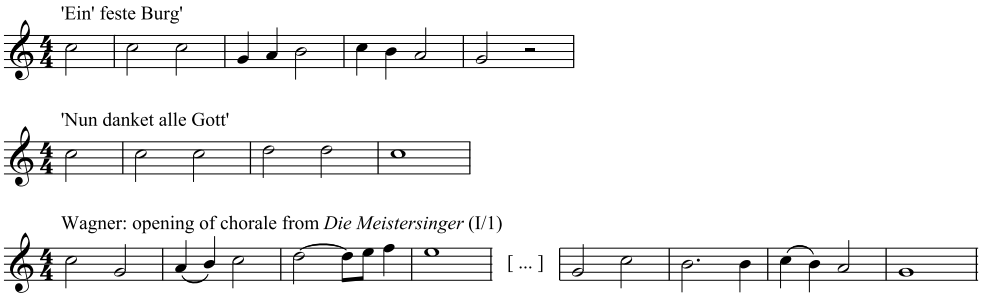
transcending the purely social and biological significance of the eventual marriage of the second pair', Jack and Bella.[37] In seeking to transcend the purely social, and to fulfil his own self-defined role as 'the instrument of some collective imaginative experience' in which 'a myth is coming once more to life',[38] Tippett the advocate of Jungian psychology was particularly concerned to avoid what he saw as the failings of T. S. Eliot's recent play *The Cocktail Party*, which had transmuted 'the mythological material into commonplace, so that there is little of it left to experience'.[39]

[37] Tippett, 200.
[38] Tippett, 201.
[39] Tippett, 203.

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Ex. 2a: Tippett, *The Midsummer Marriage*, Act III, beginning of chorale melody.
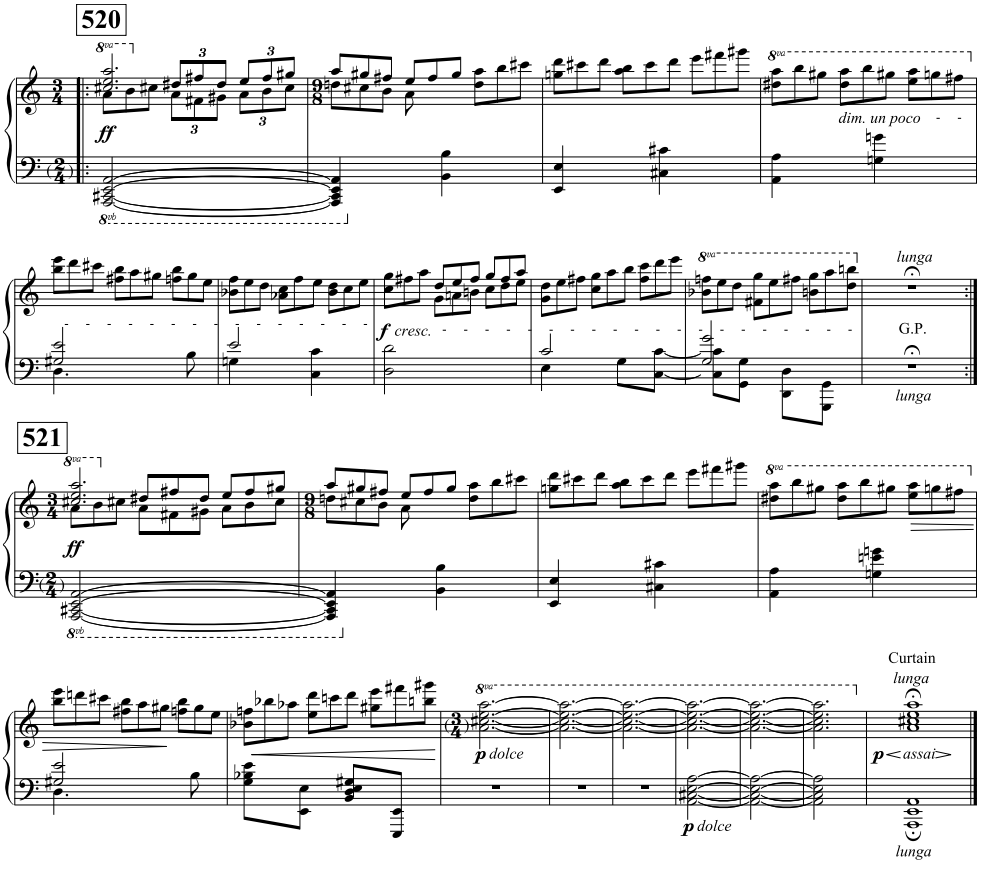


Ex. 2b: Three C major chorale melodies.

But does Tippett fail in *The Midsummer Marriage* by allowing the marvellous to overshadow the everyday too decisively for every element of his plot, and every character represented in that plot, to be equally convincing? Anticipating this criticism, Tippett cited *Orfeo*, *Der Freischütz*, *Hänsel und Gretel*, *Le Coq d'Or* and *The Rake's Progress* as evidence for the justification of having 'a greater percentage of the marvellous to a smaller amount of the everyday: . . . the greater percentage of the marvellous will allow the opera composer to present the collective spiritual experience more nakedly and immediately – the music helping to suspend the critical and analytical judgement, without which happening no experience of the numinous can be immediate at all'.[40] Tippett's comparisons are shrewd: and even if we feel that his achievement in *The Midsummer Marriage* is surpassed by another twentieth-century example of a socially nuanced operatic fairy tale, the Strauss/Hofmannsthal *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, we will in all likelihood accept that in Tippett's terms that work probably ranks as 'over-compassionate', or even downright sentimental – at least in its final stages.

The folk-tune-like C major melody which ends the Double Concerto is truly in harmony with its bass and its counterpoints. But in *The Midsummer Marriage* there is always some disparity between the diatonic chorale melody (for which words are never provided) and its restless, more chromatic bass line. Similarly, the surrounding counterpoints are not so much decorations of the hymn as active alternatives to its relative immobility. The melodic phrases are interrupted rather than resolved, and the conclusive harmonic move involves the leap of faith – an instance of rhetorical dialectics? – from the C major dominant to the Dionysian, new-dance-affirming A major tonic (Ex. 3). Is Tippett's strategy to emphasise the ability of dance-like Yeatsian gaiety to distance itself from the stolid everyday hymn of thanksgiving? And does the intensifying hymn fail either to absorb or to transcend the increasingly fragmented affirmations of the gradually disappearing singers?

[40] Tippett, 204.

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Ex. 3: Tippett, *The Midsummer Marriage*, Act III, ending.

The interaction of two worlds is given special intensity by being dramatised spatially, the 'here' of the hymn in the orchestra, the 'there' of the receding singers: and this suggests that the element of 'timeless magic' implied by the stage picture of sunlight on a ruined temple is not completely stable and secure. Do the rather sudden quietness and textural homogeneity of the final A major chords create a degree of doubt about the ability of the new order to survive resurgent, insurgent activities on the part of the old, intolerant, chorale-intoning religion? If so, some scepticism about the kind of religious feeling represented by that 'hymn of thanksgiving' is reinforced, and this suits the carnivalesque comedy, within which unequivocally heroic characters are notable by their absence, and in which Apollo can metamorphose into Dionysus as readily as Madame Sosostris can dissolve into the Shiva–Shakti manifestation of Mark and Jenifer.

Trying to interpret the subject matter of *The Midsummer Marriage* in ways that give the everyday equality with the marvellous can nevertheless lead to absurdity. After hearing *Peter Grimes*, Tippett was more than happy to leave the fate of British *verismo* in Britten's hands. His concern is not with showing how socially superior but not physically superhuman young people like Mark and Jenifer develop vocations for

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teaching, preaching or even industrial management, but with how – Jungianly – they become 'aware of their real selves'.[41] Furthermore, Tippett was probably keen to avoid what he had come to see as a problem with the immediacy and political ramifications of *A Child of Our Time*. He wrote in a letter from September 1944 that 'I'm afraid I got caught up in the drama of the whole thing beyond my political powers, so to speak. I chose the spirituals by instinct, because I knew of no positive social songs with just those terrific common emotional powers',[42] and he was clearly not persuaded that real or invented chorales would fulfil this purpose. Tippett also noted that he had used the spirituals 'to show the shadow world by means of the shadow, or bogus, hymn-tunes';[43] and throughout the period which spanned *A Child of Our Time* and *The Midsummer Marriage* he remained sceptical about the roles of Protestantism and Calvinism in the modern state.

Does *The Midsummer Marriage*, like *A Child of Our Time*, end with a 'bogus' hymn-tune, and, if so, why? Even if inspired by perceptions about social, political and sexual injustice, the opera homes in on the conviction that, if privileged individuals can find wholeness and peace, the general social and political consequences of this transformation are likely to be beneficial. After what Tippett saw as the failings of his 1935 agitprop play *War Ramp*, he gave up on trying to make major artistic statements 'of all that I felt about the state of the world'[44] in such a direct, naturalistic fashion. And so *The Midsummer Marriage*'s anti-naturalism inevitably brings with it many ambiguities, one consequence of what Ian Kemp has neatly characterised as an 'inherent contradiction between his egalitarian principles in political affairs and what must be called his elitist principles in matters of artistic quality':[45] to which one might add his idealism in psychology. There is ambiguity on the more personal level, too. It is difficult not to read into the opera some of the traumas that had helped to ensure that what for the gay composer was a core symbol of Otherness – heterosexual marriage – should turn out to be the central topic of his current work in progress. The opera had begun to take definitive shape around the time of the suicide of Francesca Allinson, with whom Tippett had once entertained fantasies of marriage and parenthood. This remains an issue, even if it is argued that, in the opera, matters of gender are secondary: that the real theme is that of a physically and spiritually compatible couple – which could be same-sex – finding fulfilment and 'psychic equilibrium' together.

In both *A Child of Our Time* and *The Midsummer Marriage* Tippett was in retreat from the wholehearted, bright-side utopianism, the unambiguous idealism of the Double Concerto, and beginning the long march towards the troubled scepticism of the later works, from *King Priam* onwards. We are still a long way from the emphatically dissonant concluding cadence of Henze's *The Bassarids* (1964–5), an opera which in some respects can be seen as *The Midsummer Marriage*'s 'dark brother', a 'twilight of the humans' which seems to depict the total subjugation of

[41] Tippett, 200.
[42] Tippett, *Selected Letters*, 131.
[43] Tippett, 144.
[44] Michael Tippett, *Those Twentieth-Century Blues: An Autobiography* (London, 1991), 49.
[45] Kemp, *Tippett*, 38.

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compassionate, mortal humanity by the godlike, with their Dionysian rituals. Yet even in *The Midsummer Marriage*, Utopia begins to turn towards its dark side, reminding us of the common perception that all such paradises are, at least potentially, varieties of hell. Eros is stalked by Thanatos and, as in *Le Sacre du printemps*, renewal comes at the price of death. Perhaps it is this inevitable shadowing of the light by the dark that encouraged Tippett to introduce questions as well as affirmations into the opera's orchestral coda, and to reinforce those gaps between the dominant of C major which represents the ancient, repressive dignity of the hymn, and the tonic of an A major in which the genuine fulfilment, mature self-knowledge and self-belief of Mark and Jenifer seem to be embodied.

Would it have been better if Jack and Bella had been included in that final demonstration of fulfilment? Would that have created a better balance between the human interest of the everyday and the marvellous aura of the collective spiritual experience? That might have required the kind of unequivocal confirmation and enrichment of a single tonal resolution, as in the great (if sentimental) C major peroration of *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, where the superhuman Emperor and Empress unite with the earthbound Barak and his wife in listening to the hymn of thanksgiving sung to them by their as yet unborn children.

One of Tippett's most familiar statements about his opera is this: 'as the moral of *The Midsummer Marriage* is enlightenment, then the music must be lucid'.[46] Does the closing music represent that moral in inviting us to make an enlightened leap across silence from C major to A major? Despite the gap, which is only precariously bridged by the sketch of a perfect cadence in A eight bars from the end (see again Ex. 3), lucidity is not seriously threatened. Because of the gap, the sense of successful attainment of enlightenment – if only for the charismatic, spiritually aristocratic elite – is enhanced. The horror has been confronted, exorcised, at least if we can accept the final A major consonance as genuine closure. If at the same time the C major hymn seems to be giving a voice to the Christian priest as the agent of a certain moral tradition, this could be just the kind of irony – the kind of Eliot/Yeats dialogue – to hint at where Tippett's later operatic representations of personal and family relationships would situate themselves. Not for Tippett a Stravinskian 'timeless magic', then. More a dynamic social engagement and questioning, a utopian vision ripe for deconstruction, as the horrific implications of Dionysian sacrifice make themselves felt in later works: Apollo yields to Saturn, joy turns towards melancholy, comedy to tragedy. And such transformations set the scene for the many and varied operatic projects, some seriously questioning traditions, others not, that have come to fruition since *The Midsummer Marriage* itself had its troubled, troubling birth.

[46] Tippett, *Tippett on Music*, 206.

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