

# Michael Tippett

## A Man for All Times



Michael Tippett

### Michael Tippett and “A Child of Our Time”

“A Child of Our Time” was written by Michael Tippett between 1939 and 1941. A pacifist, agnostic and humanist, he composed one of the most deeply moving and spiritually uplifting choral works of the 20th century.

The London-based composer and conductor was born in 1905 and died in 1998. Throughout his life he was a person who was not afraid to be himself, or to speak out about his beliefs or for those who needed help. At school he became aware that he was gay, and because of when he lived, had to cope with being marginalised. As a pacifist he refused to join the military cadet corps, and was expelled for acting on his atheist beliefs by refusing to play the piano for the daily hymn singing. He worked with unemployed miners during the Depression in the early 1930s. He watched Nazism and fascism spreading through Europe as the decade progressed, and tried being politically active for a while, including a period in the Communist Party. On the eve of World War II he registered as a conscientious objector, and spent a short time in prison for refusing to give up his music college work to help the war effort. He knew that the way he could best respond to the escalating events was through his musical composition.

### Herschel Grynszpan

“A Child of Our Time” was his first major artistic work. It was inspired by the actions of Herschel Grynszpan, a Jewish teenager who shot dead a German diplomat, Ernst vom Rath, in Paris in 1938. This act by a young man desperate to do something about the plight of the Jews, and his family in particular, gave the Nazis their excuse for a week long campaign of terror against the Jews. 10,000 shops owned by Jews were destroyed and their contents stolen. Jewish homes and over 200 synagogues were set on fire and left to burn. Jews were abused and attacked; about 100 were killed and 1 in 10 rounded up for detention in concentration camps. The Jewish community was ordered to pay a one billion mark fine to pay for the eventual clear-up and was forced to scrub the streets clean. It was these events of Kristallnacht (the “night of the broken glass”) which shook Tippett into action.

Find out about the turbulent life of Herschel Grynszpan up to the assassination and what happened to him



Herschel Grynszpan



Bessie Smith

consequently. There are conflicting theories.

### Bach and Bessie...

Using Bach’s Passions and Handel’s “Messiah” as his model Tippett composed a three-part oratorio telling a story of long drawn out fear, stark terror, shattered lives, and a mother’s love, yet concluding with a sense of hope. He believed that if we accept our capacity for light *and* darkness we can come to some sort of resolution; a sense of understanding that will make us whole; winter *will* pass and spring will renew us.

He wanted a contrasting style for his chorales, so chose traditional Negro spirituals. He was a great admirer of American Blues singer Bessie Smith, who was popular in the 1920’s and 30’s with both white and black audiences. He recognised that there is something simple and fundamental in the Negro spiritual that we can all relate to. He drew parallels between this music of oppression with what was happening in Europe. He used the spirituals to help tell the story, and as “time outs” for contemplation and healing, but also to represent the emergence of the strength to fight back, to challenge what was taking place. He took a specific event in history and made it universal; he meant the spirituals to represent persecuted people of all times.

Tippett approached the poet TS Eliot to write the libretto, but he declined. Eliot could see Tippett’s passionate interest in the dilemmas of human society and the enduring strength of the human spirit, so he suggested he do it himself. Tippett would continue to write his own words for all his operas and choral works.

### Wartime premiere

The first performance of “A Child of Our Time” took place on 19 March 1944 at the Adelphi Theatre, London, conducted by Walter Goehr, with Joan Cross, Margaret McArthur, Peter Pears, Roderick Lloyd, the Morley College and Civil Defence Choirs and London Philharmonic Orchestra. It was to be a year of epic struggle to bring the war to a conclusion. 6 June was “D Day”, when Allied forces landed in Normandy. During the summer Hitler’s deadly super weapons, the V1 and V2 rockets, landed in Britain, and plans were made for an attack on the Germans at Arnhem bridge. It was hoped it would bring the war to an

end; it was to fail. On 1 August the Jewish teenager Anne Frank made her final entry in her diary. Three days later her family's secret hiding place is stormed by German security police. Interrogation, transit to concentration camps, separation, starvation and disease followed. Anne died of typhus in Bergen-Belsen camp, days before the camp was liberated by the British on 15 April.

See [www.bbc.co.uk/topics/anne\\_frank](http://www.bbc.co.uk/topics/anne_frank) for her story and how the BBC's adaptation of her diary was made.

### Oppression and hate

Tippett used "A Child of our Time" to tell the world about the huge scale of oppression in Europe, using the power of an individual's experiences, reminding us all of the responsibilities and consequences of our individual actions, whether as participants or watchers.

How does oppression get started? How did Hitler build a case against the Jews which would persuade a nation to persecute them?

The first clue would have to be consistently, over a long time. You could start looking around 1920, but by 1933 the Jews in Nazi Germany were suffering intolerably as a direct result of his leadership. He accused them of planning to contaminate pure German blood, conspiring with Jews outside Germany, exploiting foreigners, seeking domination over the "white race", and manipulating the economy. He linked them to the many misfortunes that Germany had suffered in their recent past.

In the 1920's Jews were fully integrated in German society, but with the Nazi party in government in 1933 anti-Jewish propaganda was converted into laws designed to deny the Jews their legal and civil rights. "Non-Aryans" were excluded from working in the civil service, barred from attending German schools and from taking final state exams, denied the right to vote, prohibited from marrying Germans, had property confiscated, forced to wear a Jewish badge in public and by 1939, forbidden to emigrate. Hitler's anti-Jewish campaign was halted briefly by the arrival of the foreign press for the Berlin Olympics, but once they had gone the hatred and violence escalated, culminating in Kristallnacht.

How long would such a campaign of hate driven by one person be tolerated today?



Anne Frank



Richard Wagner



Arnold Schoenberg

### Music

Hitler used German music to support the building of a nationalistic culture. Beethoven and Wagner were his favourite composers, and Wagner's patriotic beliefs attracted Hitler's admiration.

If you listen to some music by Wagner you can see how it could have influenced the German nation during Hitler's time.

Is music used to boost nationalism today?

Both Jewish performers and jazz were banned; the latter was considered to be "non-Aryan Negroid". In fact any music that demonstrated abstract or expressionist traits or experimented with atonality was labelled degenerate.

Listen to a piece of music by Arnold Schoenberg. Why do you think the Nazi regime found his music objectionable?

Music was a form of resistance for those who opposed the regime and a sustaining force in the lives of many who survived Nazi oppression. Following the end of the war "A Child of our Time" was performed in several European countries that had been occupied by the Germans. Those who had escaped would use their experiences and skills to speak out

around the world, and responses to the Nazi treatment of the Jews continued for many decades. Arnold Schoenberg's "A Survivor from Warsaw", 1947, is an atonal twelve tone drama telling the story of a ghetto survivor. Krzysztof Penderecki's Dies Irae, 1967, is a memorial to the victims of Auschwitz. In Steve Reich's "Different Trains", 1988, he imagines a life as a European Jew rather than an American.

### The artist's role

In his major works Tippett tackled many important questions head on. He believed that it was an artist's proper role to confront such issues as intolerance, fate and choice, conscience and possible healings, and science as benefactor and destroyer. He believed that art, rather than simply document the times, should confront complacency and escapism, and should always fight the dehumanising forces in modern life. He felt compelled to take this stand, even though he knew he was looking at the world's suffering from a privileged



Totes Meer - Paul Nash

viewpoint. "I want to use what art I have and what I can make as directly as possible into the character of a weapon", he said. In "A Child of our Time" his explicit purpose was the defeat of Nazism.

A similar purpose was in the mind of Paul Nash, an official war artist during both world wars who poignantly captured the brutality and suffering of war. He saw his paintings as having value not just as art in their own right but as useful propaganda tools; he wanted his paintings produced as postcards and dropped over Germany to demonstrate the fate of anyone who tried to attack British shores.

Have a look at Paul Nash's painting "Totes Meer", 1940-41

The title means "dead sea" in German. It was inspired by photographs Nash had taken of a dump of wrecked aircraft at Cowley in Oxfordshire. The artist described the sight as "like looking like a great inundating sea, the waves rearing up and crashing on the shore... and then nothing moves... everything is static and dead"

### The Hollywood era

During the time Tippett was writing "A Child of our Time" the United States was reluctant to be drawn into the war. It certainly wasn't all doom and gloom; Hollywood was churning out films with big star casts. Escapism, comedy, romance, nostalgia, national pride – it was all there, although there were directors, including Charlie Chaplin, who dared to confront Nazi ideology.

Why are movies made in depressing times so uplifting? How many films of 1938-41 can you name? Two animations should get you started.

- Surreal Dukas, Bach, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Ponchielli and Mussorgsky in moving colour
- An elephant is reunited with his mother with the help of a mouse
- Errol Flynn is a swashbuckling adventurer with Olivia De Havilland as his maid
- Cary Grant is a mild-mannered palaeontologist with Katherine Hepburn as an eccentric heiress
- Tyrone Power's band plays Irving Berlin with vocals by Ethel Merman
- A priestly Spencer Tracy never gives up on tough kid Mickey Rooney
- A headstrong Bette Davis loses her fiancée Henry Fonda by wearing a scandalous red dress
- Margaret Lockwood and Michael Redgrave search a train for a mysterious elderly woman
- Leslie Howard transforms flower selling Wendy Hiller into a lady of upper class breeding
- Gary Cooper and brothers in the Foreign Legion brave the desert dunes, Arab attacks and their tyrant sergeant
- Headstrong Vivienne Leigh meets the dashing cavalier Clark Gable as the South is defeated in the American Civil War
- Kindly Greer Garson transforms the life of shy schoolmaster Robert Donat
- Outcast Charles Laughton develops a tragic fondness for Maureen O'Hara, a beautiful gypsy dancer

- Farm girl Vivienne Leigh makes new friends but discovers that things are n't always better somewhere else
- Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon are star-crossed lovers on the isolated moors
- Joan Fontaine is haunted by her brooding husband Laurence Olivier's first wife in a coastal setting
- Orson Welles builds a newspaper publisher empire but is undone by his own excesses
- Private eye Humphrey Bogart becomes a murder suspect when hired by Mary Astor

### After the war

How quickly Britain moved on to more joyous things when war ended; the Butler Act created free secondary education for all!, the FA Cup was reinstated, the National Health Service was established, the Summer Olympics were held in London, and the Festival of Britain opened.

Michael Tippett's music was for *the* time and for *all* time; as relevant a message today as it was an urgent plea then. He was so much more than a composer; his fascination with other cultures and his endless quest to understand the workings of the mind enriched his music. In a summing up of his work he wrote:

"Images of the past, shapes of the future, images of vigour for a decadent period, images of calm for one too violent, images of reconciliation for worlds torn

by division.

And in an age of mediocrity and shattered dreams, images of abounding, generous, exuberant beauty."

In 1994 David Temple was attending a rehearsal where his choir was preparing for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of "A Child of our Time". Michael Tippett arrived and listened for a while. The conductor asked Tippett for some insight and he simply replied, "Just tell the story".



Bette Davis



Cary Grant



Michael Tippett (centre) with David Temple - Hertfordshire Chorus's Musical Director (right)