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**The Operas of Michael Tippett:  
The Inner Values of Tippett as Portrayed by Selected  
Female Characters**

**A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of**

**Master of Philosophy  
in  
Music**

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*for my dear husband Dimitri  
who has whole-heartedly encouraged me  
to pursue a lifelong dream*

## Abstract

Sir Michael Kemp Tippett (1905-1998) was a British composer who wrote five operas. This dissertation explores the dramatic and musical presentation of five selected female characters, one from each of Tippett's operas: Sosostriis (alto) *The Midsummer Marriage* (1955); Helen (mezzo-soprano) *King Priam* (1962); Denise (dramatic soprano) *The Knot Garden* (1970); Hannah (rich mezzo) *The Ice Break* (1977); Jo Ann (lyric soprano) *New Year* (1989). It is argued that each of the five selected characters portrays Tippett's inner values of humanitarianism, compassion, integrity and optimism. The dissertation focuses on certain key moments in each opera with an analysis of a central aria. Due to the writer's interest in the performance aspect of these operas, discussion centres on melody, the timbre of voice-types linked with instrumentation, rhythm, word-setting and the vexed question of Tippett's libretti.

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- The memory of my late father, Dr Harry Jackson.

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## Explanatory Notes

- This dissertation has been formatted in accordance with the Chicago Manual of Style, 15<sup>th</sup> edition.
- Note pitches are described using the Helmholtz System where middle C = c<sup>1</sup> and the octave below middle C = c.
- For uniformity, vocal score rehearsal numbers have been used when referring to musical examples from the operas. For example, 165<sup>+1</sup> indicates one bar after the rehearsal number 165.
- All citations from the texts of the operas of Sir Michael Tippett refer to the vocal scores. In those sources there are various textual and typographical inconsistencies, some of which have been amended to aid clarity.
- The tables listing the characters in each opera which appear at the start of each of Chapters One to Five have inconsistent headings. These have been copied verbatim from the vocal scores.
- Appendices Six to Ten contain a copy of the music and text for each of the five arias analysed. The arias were reproduced by permission of Hal Leonard Australia Pty Ltd on behalf of Schott Music International.
- Appendix 11 contains selected musical examples from the operas continuously numbered for ease of reference. These examples were reproduced by permission of Hal Leonard Australia Pty Ltd on behalf of Schott Music International.
- The text of the arias in the body of this dissertation was reproduced by kind permission of Schott and Co. Limited, London.
- In the Bibliography the Internet sources have been listed alphabetically according to the first word used in the heading rather than by author.
- The Bibliography includes only the material which has been specifically cited. It does not reflect the wide range of material which has been studied in the course of research.
- Dates of birth (and death) have been included as a matter of historical interest, where relevant.

## Abbreviations

Bowen, Meirion, ed. <i>Tippett on Music</i> . Avon: Bookcraft Ltd, 1995.	TOM
Bowen, Meirion. <i>Michael Tippett</i> . 2 <sup>nd</sup> ed. Ebbw Vale: Creative Print & Design Ltd, 1997.	MB
Clarke, David. <i>The Music and Thought of Michael Tippett: Modern Times and Metaphysics</i> . Cambridge: University Press, 2001.	DC
John, Nicholas, ed. <i>The Operas of Michael Tippett</i> . ENO 29. Southampton: Camelot Press Ltd., 1985.	NJ
Jones, Richard E. <i>The Early Operas of Michael Tippett: A Study of The Midsummer Marriage, King Priam and The Knot Garden</i> . Wiltshire: Antony Rowe Ltd, 1996.	RJ
Kemp, Ian, ed. <i>Michael Tippett: Symposium on his Sixtieth Birthday</i> . Worcester and London: Ebenezer Baylis and Son Limited, The Trinity Press, 1965.	SSB
Kemp, Ian. <i>Tippett the composer and his music</i> . Guildford and King's Lynn: Biddles Ltd, 1984.	IK
Schuttenhelm, Thomas, ed. <i>The Selected Letters of Sir Michael Tippett</i> . London: Faber & Faber, 2005.	TS
Tippett, Michael. <i>Moving into Aquarius</i> . Plymouth: Latimer, Trend & Co., Ltd, 1959.	MIA
Tippett, Michael. <i>Those Twentieth Century Blues</i> . St Ives: Clays Ltd, 1991.	MT
Tippett, Michael. <i>The Midsummer Marriage</i> . An opera in three acts. Transcription for Piano by Michael Tillett. Vocal Score. Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1954.	MM VS
Tippett, Michael. <i>King Priam</i> . An opera in three acts. Vocal Score by Michael Tillett. Norfolk: Caligraving Limited, 1962.	KP VS
Tippett, Michael. <i>The Knot Garden</i> . An opera in three acts. Vocal Score by Michael Tillett. Norfolk: Caligraving Limited, 1970.	KG VS



Tippett, Michael. *The Ice Break*. An opera in three acts. Vocal Score by Michael Tillett. German Translation by Ken W. Bartlett. Norfolk: Caligraving Limited, 1977. IB VS

Tippett, Michael. *New Year*. An opera in three acts. Vocal Score by Michael Tillett. Norfolk: Caligraving Limited, 1989. NY VS

White, Eric W. *Tippett and his Operas*. Beccles: William Clowes (Beccles) Limited, 1979. EW

## Preface

As 2005 marked the centenary of the birth of Sir Michael Kemp Tippett (1905-1998), it is fitting to take a fresh look at the five operas written by this British composer who was a significant figure in twentieth-century instrumental music, opera and musical theatre. During his lifetime Tippett's contribution to music was recognised with several prestigious awards, some of which include: Commander of the British Empire in 1959, a Knighthood in 1966, Companion of Honour in 1979, Order of Merit in 1983, and an honorary Doctorate of Music awarded by the University of Lancaster in 1977 and the University of Melbourne in 1984.

In the course of research for this dissertation I was fortunate enough to interview three people who were personally acquainted with Tippett over many years: Michael Tillett, a notable musician in his own right, who prepared the vocal scores for Tippett's five operas at the composer's special request; Dame Josephine Barstow, who created the roles of Denise in *The Knot Garden* and Gayle in *The Ice Break* to great acclaim; and Sally Groves, Director, Head of Contemporary Music at Schott & Co. Limited. All three remembered Tippett with affection. Both Tillett and Barstow mentioned the warmth and complexity of Tippett's personality. Groves remarked on Tippett's empathy with "warm, strong women and everyone with a sense of humour." Pleasingly, the observations accorded with my own perception of Tippett. All three interviews are attached in Appendices 12, 13 and 14, respectively.

Throughout his lifetime Tippett's inner values were often incompatible with general societal values and at times he felt very isolated. For instance, his refusal to fight in World War II because of his pacifist convictions resulted in a three-month prison term during 1943. Tippett, nevertheless, retained his values of humanitarianism, compassion, integrity and optimism. He believed that these values formed the basis for reconciliation and forgiveness which could lead to universal concord. These heartening values illuminate Tippett's operas and offer hope in an era which has been scarred by warfare, terrorism, religious conflict and political unrest.

This dissertation will explore the dramatic and musical presentation of five selected female characters, one from each of Tippett's operas: Sosostriis (alto), *The Midsummer Marriage* (1955); Helen (mezzo-soprano), *King Priam* (1962); Denise (dramatic soprano), *The Knot Garden* (1970); Hannah (rich mezzo), *The Ice Break* (1977); Jo Ann (lyric soprano), *New Year* (1989). Each character seems to be at the heart of the

opera in which she appears because she embodies Tippett's inner values as delineated above.

This dissertation will focus on certain key moments in each opera with an analysis of a central aria. In Tippett's operas the central aria sung by the five selected female characters tends to be a vocal and emotional zenith which significantly enhances our understanding of the character. The essence of character as revealed in these arias is occasionally modified, or evolves, in dramatic engagement with the other characters in the operas during the course of duets, trios and ensembles. As Leslie East stated, "Hannah's aria [*The Ice Break*] is in the Tippett tradition of crucial, introspective solo scenes for female voices: Sosostriis in *The Midsummer Marriage*, Helen in *King Priam* and Denise in *The Knot Garden* are the obvious precursors."<sup>1</sup> To this list must be added Jo Ann who appears in Tippett's last opera, *New Year*, which was composed after East's article was published.

Like Tippett, the five selected female characters question the values of their society which results in a sense of isolation. During the course of these five operas each character successfully balances the need to uphold her own principles with the need to respond with sensitivity to other people. And, like Tippett, these five characters not only find the strength and courage to live by their convictions in the face of adversity but also retain their humaneness and warmth of spirit. Consequently, each one has the power to effect positive changes for those around her.

In view of Tippett's homosexuality one could ask why the female, rather than the male, characters are at the heart of Tippett's operas. Undoubtedly, there are various reasons but two possibilities come to mind. First, it may have been Tippett's means of subconsciously resolving the difficulties in his relationship with his mother. Second, there was Tippett's genuine liking and respect for women.

Tippett's efforts to resolve his stormy relationship with his mother, who died when Tippett was 64 years old, proved a lifelong challenge. Endowing Sosostriis, Helen, Denise, Hannah and Jo Ann with the emotional warmth he felt was lacking in his own mother may have been Tippett's way of working through his own feelings. Was he, in fact, creating the image of his ideal woman or mother-figure? After all, as librettist and composer, Tippett was responsible for moulding the characters.

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<sup>1</sup> John, ed., *Tippett*, 122. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text as [NJ].

According to Tippett, his mother was a woman with great strength of character who supported various humanitarian causes. For instance, she became a suffragette and worked unstintingly to support the rights of women. Tippett, however, felt that she lacked the motherly warmth and love for which he yearned. Consequently, it was to his loving father that he turned for affection.<sup>2</sup> Robert Donington (1907-1990) makes a very interesting observation, “The less good mothering we experienced in childhood, the more we tend to cherish retrogressive fantasies of it in later life. The fantasies are not seen as such, but they may show, for example, as an excessive dependence on women, a restless search which is at bottom for the mothering largely missed at the proper time.”<sup>3</sup> This was, perhaps, an issue in Tippett’s life.

Tippett’s empathy with women filters through his autobiography and is reflected in his strong, warm and intelligent operatic female characters. It is well-documented that women found him attractive and that Tippett had many women friends with whom he had a close relationship.<sup>4</sup> Three women, in particular, featured in Tippett’s life: Phyllis Kemp, Tippett’s cousin, who not only shared his political ideals but also loved him; Francesca Allinson (1902-1945), a young musician of German-Jewish heritage; and Evelyn Maude, the wife of the Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Health [MT, 185]. Throughout his autobiography, Tippett described Kemp, Maude and Allinson as women of great emotional warmth with whom he shared a loving, if not a sexual, relationship.

Kemp, Tippett’s first cousin, was part of his life from early childhood. Her sister eventually married Tippett’s older brother and it was assumed by their families that Tippett and Kemp would marry. Tippett described Kemp as “clever and lively” but although she declared her love for Tippett in her late teens, he was not able to reciprocate those feelings [MT, 16]. Kemp found this difficult to accept and was ever-hopeful that the situation might change. Consequently, she was extremely jealous of Tippett’s friendships with other women [MT, 17]. Kemp did marry eventually and move to an Eastern European communist country which satisfied her political ideals. There was a period of 20 years during which Tippett and Kemp did not communicate due to a political disagreement. However, they were in touch again shortly before her death.

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<sup>2</sup> Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues*, 2. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text as [MT].

<sup>3</sup> Kemp, ed., *Michael Tippett: A Symposium on his Sixtieth Birthday*, 110. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text as [SSB].

<sup>4</sup> Reminiscing on Tippett’s stint as Director of Music and choir conductor at Morley College from 1940-1951, John Amis observed, “A concert at Morley College during the war . . . the twenty-strong choir whose distaff side seemed, to a woman, to be in love with the conductor [Tippett]” [SSB, 73].

Paradoxically, it was through Kemp that Tippett met Allinson, one of two women who would be a fundamental part of his life for the next twenty years. In 1925, as a university student, Kemp rented a room in Allinson's London family home [MT, 17]. Tippett visited Kemp one day and, consequently, met Allinson. At that time Allinson, known affectionately as "Fresca", was traumatised by her father's recent death. In addition, she had "a large goitre on her neck, from which she suffered so badly and for so long" but there seems to have been an instant attraction between her and Tippett [MT, 17].<sup>5</sup> Allinson was an extremely complicated person which may have been part of her appeal for Tippett. Both Tillett and Barstow commented in their interviews that Tippett liked complicated people as he, himself, was complicated. [See Appendices 12 and 13.]

Tippett explained that during the early days of his relationship with Allinson they "discussed marriage and children" which both he and she wanted. However, it appears that both Tippett and Allinson had their "turbulent homosexual sides" although their "relationship was one of great serenity" [MT, 56]. According to Tippett, he and Allinson discussed artificial insemination but that did not eventuate because his "problems ran deeper" [MT, 56]. It is unclear what those "problems" were but he did acknowledge that he and Allinson were not able to live together as he was unable to support her financially. Perhaps the critical issue, however, was his composing. As he stated, "when she came to stay, she managed a fortnight and then left again – for my obsession with musical composition kept getting in the way" [MT, 184]. Nevertheless, in 1945, when Allinson drowned herself in the River Stour because she was depressed by her continuing ill-health and the horrors of World War II, Tippett was devastated. Her death left a permanent emotional void in Tippett's life. In a letter to David Ayerst, immediately following Allinson's death, Tippett wrote: "I can't adjust to it easily. Her gaiety & gentleness & even her waywardness & her love of pretty things all seem irreplaceable values. I loved her more deeply than I knew when she was there" [MT, 186]. Five years later, Tippett wrote a commemorative work for Allinson.<sup>6</sup>

Tippett met Maude when he was conducting a small choir in Oxted, Surrey. Her husband was an amateur cellist in the Oxted Players and would later become Sir John Maude [MT, 21]. Maude was ten years older than Tippett and it seems she loved him,

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<sup>5</sup> Allinson did have the goitre removed shortly afterwards at a clinic in Switzerland. She was wealthy in her own right and Tippett acknowledged that at times she assisted him financially.

<sup>6</sup> Tippett dedicated the song cycle, *The Heart's Assurance*, and the *Fantasy-Sonata* (later renamed *Piano Sonata No. 1*) to Allinson's memory. Interestingly enough, in his interview, Tillett commented that he first encountered the name "Michael Tippett" in a review of a recording of the *Fantasy-Sonata*. He instantly purchased the work as he was much taken by it. It was a few years later that he met the composer.

despite the fact that she was married. However, it appears that her relationship with Tippet remained platonic as she was a person of great integrity. Tippet observed that he learned a great deal from Maude because of her “profoundly considered attitudes” [MT, 56]. Tippet described her as a very mature individual with whom he could discuss his problems, as was also the case with Allinson. It was Maude who introduced Tippet to the works of the Swiss Psychiatrist, Carl Jung (1875-1961), who was to have such a profound influence on his life. When Tippet was imprisoned for his pacifist convictions in 1943, he was permitted to write letters to only one person and Maude was his choice.<sup>7</sup> He may, therefore, have perceived her as a sympathetic mother-figure.

It is tempting to suggest that the five selected female characters of this dissertation are based on Tippet’s mother, Kemp, Allinson and Maude. However that would, perhaps, exceed the bounds of credibility. Nevertheless, there are some links. The characterisation of Denise as a freedom-fighter, in particular, may owe something to the persona of Tippet’s mother who died while he was in the final stages of creating *The Knot Garden*. Moreover, there may be some connection between his characterisation of Helen and Maude’s personality. An interesting point is that the characters of Hannah and Jo Ann, who were created many years after the death of Tippet’s mother, are not quite as complex as Sosostriis, Helen and Denise.

However, Tippet did convey his sense of isolation, as well as his inner values, through these five selected characters. A sense of isolation remained with him throughout his lifetime for several reasons. From an early age, he had been an independent thinker. For instance, as a nine-year old at preparatory school he wrote an essay in which he claimed that God did not exist [MT, 7]. When he was 14 years old his parents moved to Europe, due to financial difficulties, while Tippet and his older brother remained at Fettes boarding school near Edinburgh. Tippet confessed that henceforth he felt like an orphan as he lacked the warmth and security of a family home in England. Subsequently, during the school holidays Tippet travelled with his brother by train across Europe to join his parents in countries as distant as France, Italy and Corsica [MT, 8].

Tippet’s misery was further exacerbated by the rigid discipline, spartan life and bullying at Fettes.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, homosexuality was rampant and the naïve Tippet, at the age of 14, lost his virginity to a fellow male pupil [MT, 9]. After learning of Tippet’s

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<sup>7</sup> Tippet once wrote to Maude, “You of course are something almost eternal: the closeness is more to be expected. Everyone else is nowhere” [MT, 151].

<sup>8</sup> Tippet once confessed that “For decades afterwards I had such amnesia about the whole experience that I hardly acknowledged the existence of Fettes in any account of my early life” [MT, 9].



homosexual encounter his shocked parents immediately transferred him to Stamford Grammar School which heralded the beginning of a happier era. However, in Tippet's final year, the principal of Stamford Grammar arranged for him to be billeted in the local village rather than domiciled at the school [MT, 10]. This was due to Tippet's promotion of atheism and his refusal to attend house prayers. Tippet admitted that his atheist convictions, which were contrary to the Christian beliefs held by society generally at that time, produced a sense of isolation.

By the time Tippet left school he had recognised his homosexuality.<sup>9</sup> Although he felt his homosexuality was "instinctive" and "natural" he had difficulty in accepting that he would be isolated from ordinary family life [MT, 52]. Tippet was troubled by his inability to form a "biological relationship" with a woman in order to procreate. Hence, although he did not quite come to terms with this aspect of his life, Jungian self-analysis from 1938-1939 did make this 'burden' easier to bear.<sup>10</sup> The self-analysis taught him to search for meanings below the surface by analysing his dreams. This was extremely important for Tippet who had been shattered in 1938 by the failure of his love affair with Wilfred Franks (1908- ), his first serious homosexual lover [MT, 62]. Tippet was a professed atheist but believed in the transformative power of the spiritual world, albeit in a quasi-religious context based on modern psychology [MT, 63]. Consequently, Jung's theories complemented Tippet's beliefs.

Predominately, although he may not have realised it, Tippet's superior intelligence may have contributed to his feeling of isolation. As Barstow observed in her interview:

He expected other people to know more than they did. Because he was so well-read himself, these things were familiar to him. It wasn't that he was showing off. It was coming out of his head and his experience – but his experience was different from most other people's. That was his dilemma. I don't think he ever really understood that – that was a dividing line between him and others. That's what I felt, that he didn't quite understand that it distanced him slightly from other people. [See Appendix 13]<sup>11</sup>

This point of view is corroborated by Meirion Bowen who commented on the vitality of Tippet's intelligence and the importance of the intellectual content of his works [MB,

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<sup>9</sup> Tippet admitted: "Then, in my youth, my homosexual side revealed itself. . . . I was never a misogynist, I simply had to go my own way" [MT, 52].

<sup>10</sup> Jung and his theory of archetypal psychology proved an important influence on Tippet's life and works. Tippet was comforted by the knowledge that Jung considered "homosexual relations between men were valuable because they produced a tenderness between them that might not otherwise get expressed" [MT, 63]. Jung developed the theory of archetypes as universal patterns of human behaviour which we all recognise consciously or subconsciously. He used the archetypes chiefly as a method of uncovering meaning within the dreams and visions of the mentally ill.

<sup>11</sup> All subsequent references to Barstow will be to her interview which is documented fully in Appendix 13.

245]. Tippett confirmed this aspect: “Looking back, the drive to make musical and theatrical artefacts was always strong, but absorbed into it was an intellectuality which I could never refuse” [MT, 15-16]. Nevertheless, all those elements which may have created Tippett’s sense of isolation added to the uniqueness of his talents and persona.

Over the past four decades, several eminent scholars have examined and evaluated Tippett’s operas. They have constructed a firm foundation on which to base further research. Many of the scholars approach Tippett’s operas from a compositional point of view, analysing his musical syntax. In some instances, the analyses are linked with a study of the social and historical context of his operas, Tippett’s biographical profile and musical characterisation. The main contributors are Suzanne Robinson, Eric Walter White, David Matthews, Arnold Whittall, Richard Elfyn Jones, David Clarke, Ian Kemp, Bowen and Thomas Schuttenhelm.

Robinson is the editor of a book of essays which includes a useful analysis of *King Priam*, including the character of Helen.<sup>12</sup> White offers an interesting chronological study of Tippett’s first four operas, *The Midsummer Marriage*, *King Priam*, *The Knot Garden* and *The Ice Break*.<sup>13</sup> His book is liberally interspersed with personal letters from Tippett to White and serves as a valuable history of the composer’s *modus operandi*. Matthews, on the other hand, provides an introductory study which includes limited critical and musical analysis of *The Midsummer Marriage*, *King Priam* and *The Knot Garden*.<sup>14</sup> Whittall compares the musical themes and techniques used by Tippett and Benjamin Britten (1913-1976).<sup>15</sup> He offers some technical analysis of *The Midsummer Marriage*, *King Priam*, *The Knot Garden* and *The Ice Break*, in the context of Tippett’s many other works. Conversely, Jones provides a detailed musical analysis of selected characters in *The Midsummer Marriage*, *King Priam* and *The Knot Garden*.<sup>16</sup>

Clarke is a leading commentator on the music of Tippett.<sup>17</sup> His multifarious, sophisticated methodology integrates musical and dramatic analysis with a literary and

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<sup>12</sup> Harrison in Robinson, ed., “Homeric resonance: *King Priam* and the *Iliad*.” *Michael Tippett: Music and Literature*, 215-234.

<sup>13</sup> White, *Tippett and his Operas*. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text as [EW].

<sup>14</sup> Matthews, *Michael Tippett: An introductory study*.

<sup>15</sup> Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett: Studies in Themes and Techniques*.

<sup>16</sup> Jones, *The Early Operas of Michael Tippett: A Study of The Midsummer Marriage, King Priam, and The Knot Garden*. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text as [RJ].

<sup>17</sup> Clarke, ed., *Tippett Studies*.



psychological investigation of all five operas. Moreover, Clarke provides some penetrating insights into Tippett's visionary world.<sup>18</sup>

Kemp conducts an erudite investigation of the origins of Tippett's distinctive rhythmic language through musical analysis of Tippett's first four operas.<sup>19</sup> He notes the musical change of direction from the lyricism of *The Midsummer Marriage* to the expressionism of *The Knot Garden*. Furthermore, Kemp explores the influence of Shakespeare, Jung and dreams on the persona of Tippett and his operas, particularly in *The Midsummer Marriage*. At the end of his wide-ranging book, he argues persuasively that Tippett deserves "to stand as the composer who has contributed more to the English tradition than any other since Purcell and, alongside three others of his generation, Carter, Messiaen and Shostakovich, as one of the giants of the century" [IK, 482].

Bowen, who was a performer in his own right as well as Tippett's long-time companion, provides much valuable information on the composer's personal life and the genesis of his operas. Bowen maintains that with each succeeding opera Tippett altered his musico-dramatic style with the express purpose of modernising an art form which he felt was in danger of becoming outmoded [MB, 108].

A new book released in August 2005, edited by Schuttenhelm, features selected letters written by Tippett to various friends and acquaintances.<sup>20</sup> The book was timed for Tippett's centenary. It seems, therefore, that there is still interest in Tippett and his work. In his favourable review of this publication in *The Guardian* on 26 August 2005, Michael Berkeley observed that the letters reveal the essence of Tippett's complex and likeable personality.

A quick check via the Internet through the repertoires of opera companies all over the world reveals how very few performances of Tippett's operas have been staged over the years. However in 2005, to celebrate Tippett's centenary, several productions of *The Midsummer Marriage*, *The Knot Garden* and *King Priam* were performed in Europe and The United States of America. Berkeley (*The Guardian*, 26 August 2005) observed, "As the year has worn on . . . high-profile performances of some of Tippett's finest work have been impossible to ignore, and the visceral energy and sheer human warmth of the music

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<sup>18</sup> Clarke, *The Music and Thought of Michael Tippett: Modern Times and Metaphysics*, 10. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text as [DC].

<sup>19</sup> Kemp, *Tippett: the composer and his music*. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text as [IK].

<sup>20</sup> Schuttenhelm, ed., *The Selected Letters of Michael Tippett*. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text as [TS].

have been garnering considerable affection.” Perhaps this renewed interest will lead to further revivals of all Tippett’s operas.

There is one further aspect which should be mentioned, although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation and could form the basis for further study. Tippett admitted that his last two operas, in particular, were influenced in style and content by the American Musicals, *Guys and Dolls* (1950, New York and 1953, London), *West Side Story* (1957, New York) and *Fame* (1980 movie) [MT, 248-257]. Thus the integration of music, drama and dance owes more, perhaps, to the genre of musical theatre than to opera.

## Introduction

Tippett's creative life as a composer seemed to mirror his search for a personal and artistic identity. Those facets of Tippett's creative life which were not dedicated to opera are beyond the scope of this dissertation but perhaps opera was at the core of Tippett's life as a composer. In discussing his personal beliefs and their influence on his music Tippett once observed, "I want to follow my central theme, (the New breaking out of the Old) . . . ." [MIA, 35]. A perusal of his five operas shows that each one may embody that theme, particularly through the five characters selected for this dissertation. Each of his operas seems to express the essence of his philosophy as it related to his own journey through his creative and personal life.

Tippett was a man of many parts: composer, librettist, author, pacifist, humanitarian, and homespun philosopher. He composed the music and wrote his own libretti, shaping the text, dramatic structure and scenic requirements for his operas. As he explained in a 1975 interview with Mike Thorne, a contemporary composer/journalist:

The shape of the opera [*The Ice Break*] has been finalised for about three years. It will be the end of a long period of hard work, dealing with it not only in verbal terms but in musical concepts; this is where you find the advantage of your libretto, for you can work with yourself. If materials are invented by you, and are not just a screenplay of some story, then you have time to play with them and reach a libretto which is so related to the operatic intentions that it fits the music like a glove to a finger.<sup>21</sup>

Thorne was much inspired by the 70-year old Tippett who, by that time, was an important figure in British music. Subsequently, Thorne established an illustrious career in his own right both as a composer and as a producer of recordings for high-profile classical and popular music artists. Nevertheless, he was gratified to remain part of Tippett's artistic milieu, which led to Thorne collaborating with Bowen to create the electronic effects for Tippett's last opera, *New Year*. Thorne was devastated by Tippett's death and, in 1999, dedicated his own first compact disc album of compositions, *Sprawl*, to Tippett (and Buxton Orr (1924-1997)).<sup>22</sup>

Tippett considered Thorne's talents invaluable as the young musician had a strong background in contemporary popular music, jazz and blues. Tippett was fascinated by the modern technology of popular music, such as amplification and electric guitars, which he incorporated into his later operas. Furthermore, Tippett had a particular interest in the

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<sup>21</sup> Sir Michael Tippett, interview by Mike Thorne, *hi-fi news & record review*, January 1975. [http://www.stereosociety.com/body\\_smtntmt.html](http://www.stereosociety.com/body_smtntmt.html) (accessed 23 March 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Mike Thorne, "Mike Thorne's *Sprawl* CD is dedicated to Michael Tippett and Buxton Orr." [http://www.stereosociety.com/body\\_spdedicat.html](http://www.stereosociety.com/body_spdedicat.html) (accessed 23 March 2005).

blues, his own version of which he first used in *The Knot Garden*. He believed that the highly emotional element of the blues helped to “renew in a limited degree our sense of the flow of life.”<sup>23</sup> Tippett compared the significance of the blues to twentieth-century music with the significance of the fugue to eighteenth-century music [MT, 275].

Tippett preferred to create the storylines and write his own opera texts rather than to adapt existing plays, novels or poems. The only time Tippett used an existing storyline was in *King Priam*, his second opera, which was based on Homer’s *Iliad*. Tippett’s decision to write his own libretti was based on the advice of the distinguished American poet, T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), whom he met in 1935. From that time Tippett considered Eliot to be his “artistic mentor” and “spiritual father” [MT, 51]. In Tippett’s opinion, the English Theatrical Movement was based on the verse-drama of Eliot, W.H. Auden (1907-1973) and Christopher Fry (1907-2005) [MIA, 49]. Tippett claimed that the verse technique of the three authors was, in itself, operatic; consequently, he attempted to emulate their technique by writing his own libretti based on verse-drama.

Equally, Tippett claimed that his word-setting was based on the technique established by the English composer, Henry Purcell (1659-1695), who followed the rhythm of the English language when setting words to music [TOM, 64]. Tippett considered that Purcell’s word-setting was exemplary in that, for example, he never used a weak vowel on a strong musical beat but let “the weak vowel always fall the other side” [TOM, 61]. Tippett commented that Purcell’s music was not in the curriculum of the Royal College of Music during the time Tippett was a student and that it was Allinson who introduced him to the works of this composer [MT, 115]. Due to space constraints, the impact of Eliot and Purcell on Tippett’s operas will be discussed only briefly in subsequent chapters.

On 20 March 1990, Tippett and Bowen visited New Zealand as guest lecturers at The University of Auckland, New Zealand, where they were well received. Tippett’s lively sense of humour reportedly captivated the audience. He and Bowen presented a three-hour seminar to university music students and staff.<sup>24</sup> A recording of that seminar makes for fascinating listening as the topics in Tippett’s session extended well beyond the realm of music. Tippett, who was then 85 years old, discussed Greek and Egyptian

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<sup>23</sup> Bowen, ed., *Tippett on Music*, 13. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text as [TOM].

<sup>24</sup> This lecture was recorded by Nuria Ubéda who was a music student at The University of Auckland in 1990. The writer of this dissertation has listened to the lecture but, due to their length, the tapes have not been transcribed. Nor is all the information necessarily relevant to the subject matter of this dissertation.

Theatre, the Renaissance, the masque, Schiller, Goethe, Monteverdi, Puccini, Mozart, Beethoven, Jung, the blues, new technology, world affairs and astrology, to quote some examples. Throughout the lecture two themes prevailed: Tippett's love of theatre with its intrinsic elements of fantasy and magic, and his veneration of William Shakespeare (1564-1616).

Tippett paid special tribute to Shakespeare and acknowledged that the Bard was the "real teacher" who had taught him the art of introducing psychological and philosophical depth into his works. In Tippett's opinion, Shakespeare's late comedies were the finest examples of the interplay of human relationships because they explored every feasible avenue of forgiveness and reconciliation amongst individuals who were in conflict with one another. After acknowledging Shakespeare's literary skills, Tippett defended his own libretti which had been much criticised over the years: "I never said to myself, 'I am writing literature.'"

It is interesting to note that Tippett had a very high level of coherence and word-power in his essays and autobiography but this is not always reflected in his libretti. It is not unusual to find extracts from his essays quoted in the writings of musicians and scholars. For instance, Lawrence Kramer quotes Tippett's comments in regard to the deleterious effect of music on poetry.<sup>25</sup> Tippett once observed, "The music of a song destroys the verbal music of a poem utterly. I am inclined to think that a composer responds less to a poem's verbal sound, when he chooses that poem as a vehicle for his musical art, than to the poem's situation lyrical or dramatic" [IK, 212]. Despite his endeavours to explain his rationale, however, the critical debate continues as to the relevance of Tippett's operas beyond the era in which they were written, the literary merit of his libretti and the lack of depth in his characterisation.

Although critics may be despised, they cannot be ignored, as they often show remarkable perspicacity in identifying issues which will emerge. One contemporary reviewer recently observed, "Centenaries are times for celebration, but they are also opportunities for reassessment. When *The Knot Garden* came out in 1970, we found it modern and relevant. . . . It all seems dated and dreary nowadays."<sup>26</sup> In reality, the reviewer merely echoed the sentiments of the passing parade of critics who preceded him.

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<sup>25</sup> Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After*, 132.

<sup>26</sup> Raymond Monelle, review of *The Knot Garden* by Michael Tippett. Scottish Opera, Theatre Royal, Glasgow. *Opera*, January 2005.

Despite an attempt to present an objective assessment of Tippett's output in *Opera*, January 2005, Andrew Clements concluded:

Twenty years ago in these pages I wrote an 80<sup>th</sup>-birthday tribute to Michael Tippett . . . it could well be that in the next 20 years Tippett's music might vanish from the repertory altogether. For I have the nagging feeling, which has grown steadily over the last ten years, that posterity may ultimately view Tippett as . . . a composer very much of his time, and one with impeccable . . . social credentials, yet whose music remained so rooted in its era that when taken out of it can only seem hopelessly, squirmingly dated.

Clements' comments may or may not be valid but they reinforce the views of Monelle, quoted above. The statement that the "music remained so rooted in its era" is contentious but Clements has a point. It may be the libretti rather than the music, however, which have remained firmly embedded in their eras as Tippett's last two operas are filled with era-bound allusions or colloquialisms.<sup>27</sup>

Tippett graduated in 1928 with the degree of B.Mus. from the Royal College of Music but his wide range of interests, fuelled by his intellectual independence, went well beyond music. Many literary and philosophical references are included in his operas but many of the allusions are not obvious to the average opera-goer. For instance, unless one is well-read, one would be unaware that the text for the aria of Sosostriis is based on a poem by Paul Valéry (1871-1945), nor would one necessarily be aware that the aria includes quotations from the Bible [NJ, 23]. Thus, to the uninitiated, the text of the aria can seem somewhat disjointed.

Tippett once proudly confided to White that, as time progressed, he was able to write the words and the music almost simultaneously for each scene of an opera [EW, 48]. This may not have necessarily worked to Tippett's advantage as some of his music, with its awkward intervals and unusual rhythms, does exacerbate the difficulties of a complex libretto. As Barstow commented, "There's no question about it that his texts are difficult and sometimes, possibly, more difficult than they need to be." The difficulties are intensified by Tippett's use of a diverse range of styles from blues and jazz to lyricism. This certainly adds to the challenge of learning the music from a singer's point of view.

However, a recurring theme which seems to emerge in the literature on Tippett, and which is mentioned by Barstow, is the beauty of his music. Tippett also had a fervent interest in the dilemmas of human society and the enduring strength of the human spirit. It is this belief that illuminates all his operas and encourages one to look beyond the technical difficulties. In the face of adversity, Tippett's inner strength seemed to be

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<sup>27</sup> For example, the phrase, "Burn, baby, burn," in *The Ice Break* was the catch-cry made infamous by the Blacks during the 1965 Los Angeles riots.



extraordinary. Reporting in *The Guardian*, 18 December 2004, Michael Berkeley provided testimony to the tide of feeling against Tippett's views in 1943:

My father, who was working as an orchestral programmer at the BBC at the time, repeatedly scheduled Tippett's *Fantasia on a Theme of Handel*. Three times the work was thrown out, until finally the conductor, Clarence Raybould, made an official complaint about Tippett's "notorious tenets as a conchie". The director of music, Arthur Bliss, ruled that his compositions were to be banned from the air until his release from prison.

Despite such harsh treatment Tippett never indulged in self-pity or recrimination and one can search in vain for vindictive retaliation. It is true that he was outspoken and rebelled against established ideas but a striking feature of Tippett's autobiography is his gracious acceptance of circumstances over which he had no control.

Tippett, by his own admission, did not write the roles in his operas with particular singers in mind. He considered it was the function of directors to cast the roles because they were aware of which singers might be available but Tippett may have done himself a disservice. For instance, if a composer has a particular singer in mind, this typically affects the musical characteristics (and characterisation) of his/her compositions because a singer's voice type, personality and physical appearance will generally have some bearing. Furthermore, that singer is likely to add the role to his or her repertoire and, perhaps, influence various opera houses to perform that opera. By the same token, Tippett welcomed new interpretations of the characters he created and acknowledged that the contribution of the performer was the most significant factor in developing a character [MB, xvii]. As Barstow observed, "Like a lot of composers, he was so thrilled that what he had been struggling with in his head was suddenly in the mouths of people and on instruments and becoming a sonorous reality. He found that incredibly exciting . . . He gave you enormous leeway because of that."

Tippett chose the names for his characters with great care. He felt the name should reflect certain characteristics which would crystallise during the course of the opera. In this, he was influenced by the teachings of Confucius who believed that the choice of name was extremely important as, ideally, the name should reflect the essence of a person or object.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, if the name was unbecoming, the value placed on that person or object would be inappropriate, which could lead to conflict. Moreover, the names which Tippett chose for his characters are emblematic of the breadth and depth of Tippett's

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<sup>28</sup> Tippett, *Moving into Aquarius*, 15. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text as [MIA].

intellectual frames of reference, from Egyptian mythology (Sosostris) to contemporary America (Jo Ann).

Given the apparent influence of the culture of The United States of America on Tippett's operas, it is interesting to note that Tippett did not visit that country until 1965. By that time Tippett had become somewhat disillusioned because his music had not been wholeheartedly embraced by audiences in Europe. As he stated, "America didn't exert much of an appeal upon me until my mid-sixties. But then it became my dream country" [MT, 248]. Tippett, however, had been introduced to the Broadway musical well before that time. In 1949 he attended the first production in London of *Porgy and Bess* by George Gershwin (1898-1937) "and was deeply moved by it" [MT, 249].<sup>29</sup> Tippett expounded on his fascination with Gershwin's music, stating that "in an age of experimentation with rhythm, percussive and fragmented musical textures, Gershwin kept song alive" [MT, 249]. This comment is, perhaps, significant as Tippett's first opera *The Midsummer Marriage* was written between 1946 and 1952.

Tippett's operas offer a fascinating exploration of social, psychological, spiritual, political and historical issues. His first three operas seem to have a sexual and psychological bias. *The Midsummer Marriage* explores sexuality and psychology using the mysterious character, Sosostris, as the catalyst.

*King Priam* relays the ancient story of the siege of Troy, but from the perspective of the Trojans, with an emphasis on the illicit love affair between Helen and Paris. In one scene there is an allusion to the homoerotic attachment between Achilles and Patroclus. Although the scene exists in the *Iliad*, Tippett gives it added impetus in his opera.

*The Knot Garden* is an examination of the dynamics of contemporary relationships and the suggestion that, perhaps, everyone has the potential to be bisexual. Denise, the freedom fighter, is the central character. Other characters include Mel and Dov, who are initially presented as a homosexual mixed-race couple. However, it transpires that Mel, who is attracted to Denise, may be bisexual. This opera featured the first homosexual onstage kiss in opera.

The final two operas seem to have a social and political bias. *The Ice Break* focuses on racial prejudice and the plight of émigrés and contains a mélange of psychedelic rock and African music. It is the warm-hearted Hannah who is the most unprejudiced. The opera focuses on the conflict between black and white races, East and

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<sup>29</sup> An in-depth discussion comparing Tippett's music with Gershwin's is beyond the scope of this dissertation but could form the basis for further research.



West and age and youth. The opera was written during the era of the Cold War between The Soviet Union and The United States of America.

Tippett's final opera, *New Year*, was staged when the composer was 84 years old. As Tippett was always young in spirit, with a keen interest in contemporary events, his last offering for the operatic stage included a 'rap' vocal and a spaceship. To an extent *New Year* addresses issues of racial prejudice but, in the main, deals with the hopes and dreams of the main characters, particularly Jo Ann.

This dissertation is divided into five chapters, with each chapter devoted to one opera and the selected character. The operas will be discussed in chronological order. Chapter One will focus on *The Midsummer Marriage* and Sosostriis, Chapter Two on *King Priam* and Helen, Chapter Three on *The Knot Garden* and Denise, Chapter Four on *The Ice Break* and Hannah, and Chapter Five on *New Year* and Jo Ann.

Each chapter will commence with an overview of the opera followed by an analysis of the selected character. Each character will be examined in the context of the opera in which she appears in an attempt to show how she embodies Tippett's inner values of humanitarianism, compassion, integrity and optimism. Due to the writer's interest in the performance aspect of Tippett's operas, discussion will centre on melody, the timbre of voice types linked with instrumentation, rhythm, word-setting, and the vexed question of Tippett's libretti. Although every attempt will be made to adopt a consistent approach in analysing the selected characters this may prove difficult as Tippett explored different approaches at different times and in different contexts.

**Table 1 Overview of the Five Selected Female Characters**

<i>Character</i>	<i>Sosostris</i>	<i>Helen</i>	<i>Denise</i>	<i>Hannah</i>	<i>Jo Ann</i>
<i>Role in opera</i>	a clairvoyante hired by King Fisher	wife to Menelaus of Sparta then wife in adultery to Paris	a dedicated freedom-fighter and sister to Thea	a Black-American hospital nurse, girlfriend of Olympion and friend of Gayle	a trainee children's doctor and foster-sister to Donny
<i>Voice type</i>	alto	mezzo-soprano	dramatic soprano	rich mezzo	lyric soprano
<i>Musical compass required for aria</i>	a to f <sup>2</sup>	b to ab <sup>2</sup>	c <sup>1</sup> to c <sup>3</sup>	b to ab <sup>2</sup>	d <sup>1</sup> to ab <sup>2</sup>
<i>Musical compass required for opera</i>	g to f <sup>2</sup>	b to ab <sup>2</sup>	c <sup>1</sup> to db <sup>3</sup>	a to ab <sup>2</sup>	c <sup>1</sup> to b <sup>2</sup>
<i>Other characters with which subject character interacts</i>	the whole cast	the main protagonists	the whole cast	the whole cast except Astron	the whole cast
<i>Scene/s in which character is introduced and first appears</i>	Act I.7: Sosostris is heard as an offstage voice warning King Fisher not to interfere in his daughter's life  Act III.4: Sosostris appears in person when she is hired by King Fisher to find Jenifer and Mark	Act I.2: Helen is introduced by the Greek Chorus of wedding guests to the offstage sounds of love-making  Act I.3. Helen and Paris appear as he persuades her to abandon her husband and elope to Troy	Act I.7: Flora tells Thea (Denise's sister) that Denise is coming to visit this day after a long absence  Act I.13: Denise enters and shocks everyone with her physical disfigurement	Act I.2: Hannah, accompanied by Gayle, is at the airport to meet her boyfriend, Olympion, a famous Black-American athlete	Prelude to Act I: Jo Ann runs through the back door of the house which leads to her room as she is frightened by the street mob violence
<i>Final outcome for character</i>	Sosostris assists in the spiritual transformation of Jenifer and Mark and then disappears	Helen survives the Trojan War and returns to Greece	Denise suffers emotional distress when she finds she is attracted to the bisexual Mel and begins a relationship which could prove problematic	Hannah nurses the injured Yuri and helps Lev to come to terms with Yuri's injuries and Nadia's death	Jo Ann overcomes agoraphobia and ventures out into the world to help the orphans