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MICHAEL TIPPETT: STRING QUARTETS Nos. 1, 2 and 3 Lindsay String Quartet  
L'Oiseau Lyre DSLO 10 (£3.25)

MALCOLM BARRY

This is not the only recording available of Tippett's string quartets (Nos. 1 and 3 are available on GSGC 14079, No. 2 on GSGC 14130), but this issue has the advantage of collecting them together on one disc, which contains 71 minutes of music. Value for money is assured in at least one respect; another is the recording itself, which is excellent, the levels being consistent throughout and the overall rich acoustic allowing the sonorities of the instruments full play without obscuring the detail in the fast passages, of which there are many.

Tippett is also fortunate in his performers, for the Lindsay Quartet bring a commitment and understanding to the works which is salutary considering the comparatively contemporary nature of the works and the comparative youth of the ensemble. There are one or two moments in the violinistic stratosphere that are uneasy, but the ensemble is excellent, while the leader's emphatic style of playing is audible on the disc, which adds verisimilitude to the recording as a performance. A great deal of care seems to have been taken with the whole record.

The quartets are recognisably consistent in style, but their chronology, as outlined by Tippett in the notes, is not very straight-forward. The present first movement of the First Quartet was written after the premiere of the Second Quartet, and replaced the original first two movements, thus substituting a three-movement work for the four-movement original (of which more anon): "I often needed to rewrite what had seemed to be a finished work. . . . I have never had to be as extreme as that since." The completion of the First Quartet (original version, 1935), however, did mark the emergence of Tippett's 'first style'.

Hallmarks of the more familiar Concerto for Double String Orchestra are to be found in all three quartets, but particularly in the Second and in the opening movement of the First (revised version). In these Tippett shows himself to understand string instruments very well and to write very difficult, but idiomatic, music for them and, at times, against them. His structures seem melodically based rather than harmonically functional, and there are rhythmic elements familiar from other works. This melodic construction poses problems, however, because it does not easily accommodate the sonata pattern, and the transition in the first movement of the Second Quartet (between figs. 11 and 12) weakens the whole impression of that movement: neither in its presentation nor in its repetitions does there seem much point to this section. The development of the movement, too, is unsatisfactory, almost transparent. There are one or two other examples of such major inconsistency, some justified by their context, some not.

The First Quartet, as might be expected both from the nature of its gestation and its relative position, is, in some ways, the weakest of the three. After the taut and powerful first movement, in which Tippett demonstrates himself to be the British composer of his generation (and succeeding ones?) most adept at handling 'the dots' within his own consistent style (which is not to say that

style is easily definable), the slow second movement seems to strain towards a larger ensemble (Tippett's writing against the medium that, nevertheless, the Lindsay cope with more than adequately). This movement includes the occasional half bar of ascending lines that sound almost Elgarian, an odd memory for Tippett to conjure. The finale of the work seems neither to follow logically from the slow movement nor to consolidate the work as a whole; would it have rounded off the original version more easily? It is an early example of Tippett's use of additive and cross rhythms.

The strength of Tippett as note manipulator is present in both the later quartets, but so is the unevenness of the individual works themselves. The less convincing parts of the Second Quartet, mentioned above, have to be balanced both within the first movement itself and also by the second movement, a short piece in imitation in which all the Beethovenian concepts of growth are translated into the 20th century: a very fine piece.

The finale of the Second Quartet is a sonata allegro, and Tippett moves to harmonic construction with a somewhat predictable effect. (The opening march-like section sounds as if designed to be a shock; if this is the case it should, perhaps, follow on more swiftly from the close of the third movement.)

If harmonic structuration is not the most congenial medium for this composer, as the finale of the Second Quartet suggests, the problem of the organisation of a quartet, tradition and all, becomes paramount. In the Third Quartet, as if sensing this (and it was written soon after the Second), Tippett throws over tradition and reverts to melodic organisation with three fast fugues contrasted by two slow movements ('lyrics'). It is the longest of the three works, the most assured but still containing some unevenness. After the astonishing fourth movement, in which texture replaces pitch (Tippett believes he may have been influenced by the Bartok quartets) anything might be an anti-climax, and a lyrical alternation of simple and compound triple time in imitative texture most certainly is.

The works are uneven and not one of them seems to be an undeniable masterpiece, but this is what makes them, and thus the record, so desirable. The problems of writing music in the 20th century are here encapsulated: the search for structural arbiters, the abyss of freedom, the balance between pitch and texture and

methods of infusing life into music. It is significant that Tippett "felt them [the quartets] to be in a consciously evolving sequence" and "intended to pursue the sequence with certainly a fourth, at not too long a distance. Since the fourth never got written the sequence was closed — by the prolonged composition of *The Midsummer Marriage* and everything that happened after."

The juxtaposition of the last two movements of the Third Quartet gives a clear indication in the music itself of the reasons for the closure of the sequence. This juxtaposition raises the whole question of drama in music and the balance between melodic and harmonic construction. Tippett knew when to move on to other interests.

# MICHAEL TIPPETT AT 70

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