

Michael Tippett: “Ritual Dances” from “The Midsummer Marriage”

By Andrew Glover-Whitley



Michael Tippett circa 1970's

Paganism as subject matter is nothing new. You could almost say that it never died out or left the stage of musical subject matter used by composers since before Christianity. You only have to think of Monteverdi's *“Orfeo”*, Mozart's *“Magic Flute”*, or even on the lighter side Offenbach's *“Orpheus in the Underworld”*. In the 20th Century the Paganist subject matter became ripe hunting ground for composers trying to give a new slant to the more modernist tendencies of their music, or trying to create an otherworldly soundscape that they wished to be devoid of any religious (Christian) overtones; Rutland Boughton's *“The Immortal Hour”*, Arnold Bax's *“The Garden of Fand”*, Joseph Holbrooke's *“The Birds of Rhianon”*, Claude Debussy's *“Syrinx”* and of course the two great masterpieces; Igor Stravinsky's *“The Rite of Spring”* and Maurice Ravel's *“Daphnis and Chloe”*. There are of course many others throughout musical history to be explored. In the post war years many composers dealt with the realities of their world, or if they did go into other aspects of life it was more on the psychological side of things leaving paganist subject matters somewhat alone. That is except for the British composer Michael Tippett who with his first opera *“The Midsummer Marriage”* combined, psychological subject matter alongside paganism, alongside ritual alongside the essence of nature to be found in the British Landscape.

Tippett was born in 1905 and died in 1998. His was a slow to develop talent unlike his precocious friend Benjamin Britten. Tippett's music was unique and solid while being luxuriantly rich with a clarity that few composers have attained in the 20th or 21st centuries. He was gaoled for three months during the Second World War for his pacifist beliefs that

remained with him throughout his life. This affected his eyesight due to the sewing of postal bags while detained for those beliefs in prison. His most famous works are “*Child of Our Time*”, “*Concerto for Double String Orchestra*”, “*The Midsummer Marriage*”, “*The Knot Garden*”, “*Symphony No.2*”, “*Symphony No.4*”, “*Triple Concerto*”, “*Concerto for Orchestra*”, the five string quartets as well as various large and smaller works for various forces.

Like many composers in Britain during the 1950’s to 60’s he extracted music from his operas that could be played separately in the concert hall as sets of Dances or Interludes such as Britten’s “*Four Sea Interludes*” from “*Peter Grimes*” and the Interludes taken from William Alwyn’s opera “*Miss Julie*”. In Tippett’s case he extracted a set of Dances that played an integral part in the opera to break the time of the incidents into separate sections and had connotations that ran along the same lines as the opera dealing with the passing of the months, the seasons, the year in nature, and linked into the pre Christian paganism that is an important overall theme and concept that runs throughout the opera as well as the Psychological ideas of Jung that tap into pre Christian concepts of male and female.

The story of “*The Midsummer Marriage*” was consciously modelled on Mozart’s “*The Magic Flute*” and both trace the pathway to marriage of one "royal" and one "common" couple: Jenifer and Mark correspond to Pamina and Tamino, the royals while the very earthy Jack and Bella correspond to Papageno and Papagena. The character King Fisher stands as the Queen of the Night, and the characters of the Ancients for Sarastro and his priests, and so on throughout the cast. With the Mozart these are all based on Pagan characters found in legend and myth as well as Masonic ideals.



Two images from productions of “*The Midsummer Marriage*”

Tippett’s first inspiration for the work was visual. He recalled imagining a pagan image or site of "a wooded hill-top with a temple, where a warm and soft young man was being rebuffed by a cold and hard young woman to such a degree that the collective, magical archetypes take charge – Jung’s ideas of the *Anima* and *Animus*".

The character of Sososttris is named after "Madame Sososttris, the famous clairvoyant," in T.S.Eliot's poem *"The Waste Land"* itself using pre Christian pagan and ritual imagery to convey its diverse concepts and ideas. King Fisher's name is inspired by the Fisher King character again mentioned in the same poem. The overall concept of the opera deal with Psychology, Philosophy, Paganism, Earthly and Heavenly relationships as well as the cross feeding of times and the way ideas become abrasive to others as they all pass through the characters and action of the opera.

<https://youtu.be/HN6dNSCrArQ>

The four Ritual Dances extracted from the opera although not having any titles can be seen as the following. There are three dances in *Act II* and they each have a male and female component thus tying it into the pagan ideas of masculine and feminine earth deities and their interactions within nature. Here they are represented by the ancient imagery associated with such ideas in their descriptions as animals. Female animals (hound, otter and hawk) are shown hunting male animals (hare, fish and bird), with each respective dance associated with its own element and season (*"The Earth in Autumn"*; *"The Waters in Winter"*; *"The Air in Spring"*). Thus again tying the concepts firmly to the idea of Gaia, or Mother Earth and Nature as a living thing that we pass through. Again a pre-Christian religious belief in the world around us. The climactic fourth dance in *Act III*, *"Fire in Summer"*, symbolises rebirth and human love, and is performed before the characters of Mark and Jenifer, representing the Masculine and Feminine that have become a united whole allowing the world to continue, and the Chorus in a very ritualistic style dance that is somewhat reminiscent of Stravinsky's *"The Rite of Spring"*.

With these strong nature and psychological ideas of masculine and feminine Tippett was not eschewing the modern tendency to belittle and bumpkumise the old beliefs but to accept them and re-present them in a vibrant modern way within his own musical and dramatic language thus giving them new life and reinvigorating them for a new audience in a modern world of multi layered concepts and emotions that all tie in to the older core of belief within each and everyone of us.



The Hawk and Hound from the "Ritual Dances"