

PARALLEL LIVES

There is always a certain poignancy - and often a degree of irony - in the future course of old friendships. In the case of composers Michael Tippett and Alan Bush, friends and sometime associates since the 1930s, the years have been less than even-handed. Tippett whose *Mask of Time* will be performed this month at the Royal Festival Hall, is widely regarded as the most important living English composer; Bush is only now, in his 86th year, receiving his full due of attention.

In many particulars, they seem an unlikely pair, and it would be forgivably easy to see Tippett as the apolitical opposite to Bush's staunchly ideological line. Yet as Brian Morton and Kenny Mathieson describe below, their careers and their work show a surprisingly consistent outline.



Alan Bush

Alan Bush has had to wait long for recognition by the musical establishment. The flurry of attention which marked his 85th birthday last December - a prestigious Queen Elizabeth Hall concert, a Channel 4 film, two record albums - only served to underline the years of relative neglect.

Even so, it would be misleading and condescending to paint Bush as merely another alienated outsider, out of temper with his times and with musical fashion. His relative obscurity - relative certainly to his old friend Michael Tippett - has been in part willed, a direct product of his long-standing political intransigence. However, for 53 years, Bush was professor of composition at the Royal Academy of Music and thus, by many standards, stood closer to the musical establishment than might seem consistent with his political convictions: he has been a lifelong member of the CP.

One probable cause of Bush's relative isolation has been the lack of any clear context for performance of his music. It fits no obvious category or tradition but

draws on several at once. His insistence on a democratic standard, a music that could be played by amateur groups, has tended to put off (far more than political convictions would) the professionals who make the concert bills.

In his early years Bush produced work in the style of the fashionable *avant garde*, influenced by the complex a-tonal experiments of European composers like Arnold

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Schoenberg, who had dispensed with the old, familiar harmonic scale in favour of rigorous mathematical structures. This was a problem for Bush since it was necessarily an elitist, academic style and had to square with his political convictions. The *Dialectic for String Quartet* shows that he was able in exceptional circumstances to overcome these problems but by and large he was obliged to look elsewhere, nearer to home, for a music that would express both his desire for complexity and his political ideals. Where the 20th century *avant garde* had wiped the slate clean and started afresh with a new palate of sounds Bush turned to the popular songs of work and protest that were the staple of working mens and womens' choirs.

Tippett's *A Child of Our Time* about a Nazi atrocity is widely - and rightly - seen as a masterpiece. It draws on a particular moment and elevates it into something universal (or at least shareable). Bush, in writing his *Lidice* for unaccompanied chorus three years later, was no less concerned to register his horror at a modern atrocity, this time the expunging of a Bohemian village by the Nazis in reprisal for the assassination of Heydrich. Bush, though, consciously renounces any attempt to aestheticise the event. He tries to become part

of its own historical logic. This was most sharply reflected when in 1949, he travelled to Bohemia with a small vocal group and performed the work on the empty village site, restoring it to history.

It was a very immediate and particular gesture of remembrance that underlined more than one point about Bush's background and method. He had grown up, much like Tippett, in a less than orthodox middle-class setting. Along with the then conventional piano lessons, his parents had provided a less expected background in spiritualism, which the young Bush quickly turned on its head: 'In 1934 I became convinced that the facts about life, including human life and about the inorganic world from stellar galaxies to atoms. . . were convincingly explained or brilliantly foretold between the years 1844 and 1896 by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels'. He joined the Communist party in 1935, by way of the ILP and the Labour party. In the following year, he founded the Workers' Music Association with whom - and with Tippett's help - he staged both the *Pageant of Labour* and, later, the *Popular Frontish Pageant of Co-Operation*.

Tippett has gently accused his friend of a measure of naivety. Certainly some of Bush's positions are in present terms startlingly uncomplicated by ideological qualifications: 'I owe much, very much, probably my life to the glorious Red Army', 'I personally rejoice in the foundation of the German Democratic Republic'. These, though, are not airy abstractions, nor armchair preferences. Bush (and Tippett, for all his qualms) saw Stalin's armies as the only reliable bulwark against National Socialism; as for the GDR, it was only there that Bush was to be able to stage fully his operas, *Wat Tyler* (1951), *Men of Blackmoor* (1956), *The Sugar Reapers* (1966) and *Joe Hill* (1970). As always, reality and practicality are his measures.

Since he began to compose in 1915, Bush has put opus numbers to over 100 works, most of them seldom heard in Britain. The 1949 'Nottingham' sym-



phony, his second, is a major work that belongs in the repertoire alongside better known symphonic cities, Paris, Linz, Leningrad. And his *Dialectic* for string quartet of 1929 is unquestionably one of the foremost chamber works of the century, perfectly illustrating his conviction that even non-vocal music can carry its message thematically as well as harmonically and rhythmically.

Alan Bush's isolation is not that of extreme stylistic subjectivity, nor, to Britain's credit, is it the result of open political censorship. In part, it has been deliberate, a function of his unwillingness to compromise on conditions of performance; in part it has been due to his abiding commitment to real events over artistic generalities. In large part, it has been due to the demanding and complex nature of the music itself.



Michael Tippett

While Michael Tippett is now an established figure in world music, and much honoured in his own country, he came late to his vocation, and that acceptance as a major composer has been a slow process, punctuated by decades of controversy and misunderstanding.

Born in 1905, five years after Alan Bush, he did not begin to study music until he was 18, and only published his first unrevised composition, the *Concerto for Double String Orchestra*, in 1940. The revisions he carried out on two earlier chamber pieces are uncharacteristic; thereafter, all his compositions were meticulously planned and undeniably finished when finally offered up to public scrutiny.

The decade before the war saw Tippett's most directly political involvement in music-making. The only son of a somewhat unconventional middle-class family, Tippett remembers being part of a politicised artistic generation following on the great disillusionment of the 1920s, a commitment first demonstrated in teaching music at a work-camp for the unemployed in Boosbeck, Yorkshire, in 1933, and subsequently at Morley College in South London (he became head in 1940, serving until 1951), and as chorus master of the choirs of the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society. In 1937, he contributed a piece called *Miners*, with text by Judy Wogan, to Bush's pageant of labour at Crystal Palace.

A Trotskyite at this time, Tippett briefly joined the Communist party in 1935, but quickly left, having failed to convert his local group from their Stalinist bent. His growing awareness of the path of both fascism and communism as the decade waned - 'I always knew that both Hitler and Stalin were monsters, though one was the enemy and the other was the ally' - led him to drift away from specific political affiliations, but not from strongly held

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convictions. Tippett joined the Peace Pledge Union in 1940 (and has been its chairperson since 1957); a passionately convinced pacifist. As a conscientious objector he was imprisoned for two months in 1943.

Tippett was developing a distinctive individual style at this time, the essence of which has been his continuous transmutation of traditional sources. His shift toward a more humanist, less didactic world-view became obvious in his first major vocal score, the oratorio *A Child of Our Time* (1944). Although inspired by a specific Nazi atrocity of 1938, Tippett chose to broaden his terms: it became not a condemnation of oppression and violence so much as a plea for recognition of a universal condition, a potential division in all of us: 'I would know my shadow and my light,' the tenor sings, 'so shall I at last be whole.'

The oratorio establishes what was to be

the perennially recurring search for Tippett: all his subsequent works - notably his sequence of four great operas *The Midsummer Marriage* (1955), *King Priam* (1962), *The Knot Garden* (1970), and *The Ice Break* (1977), his *Third Symphony* (1972), and his most recent choral work, *The Mask of Time* (1983) - have in one way or another returned to this quest for reconciliation, for the possibility of resolution and wholeness emerging from the polarities and uncertainties of the world around us. Tippett has spoken of his 'endless agnosticism' in the face of these ambiguities, of his inability 'to find satisfaction in the security of a traditional faith'.

In a fundamental sense, Tippett's beliefs and his musical procedures are identical. A wide and voracious reader, he was particularly influenced by Jung. Tippett's commitment to exploring his great body of images and ideas has given rise to his most profound and original creations, just as his absorption and remaking of the musical heritage of Purcell, Beethoven, or Stravinsky, blues, jazz or spirituals, has characterised his most significant musical explorations.

It would be inaccurate to see Tippett's abandonment of a doctrinaire political stance in the late 1930s as a renunciation of the political realities of the outside world. As a composer and librettist, as well as a discursive writer, Tippett has continued to face up to those realities, seeking a solution within a vaster, more complex philosophical framework than any political or religious commitment could subsume. Where, as in *The Vision of St. Augustine* (1966), he has stood back from that social and political ferment, it has been knowingly and for specific artistic reasons.

His quest has, inevitably, led him into ambiguity and irresolution, further from the possibility of practical solutions. *The Mask of Time* is in many ways a logical consequence of this ever widening search; while he has always interspersed both music and texts with quotations and allusions, the *Mask* is virtually a collage, drawing from a multiplicity of sources and subjects in pursuit of an ever larger understanding, a more all-encompassing reconciliation, a greater and greater 'contracting into abundance'. If Tippett is indeed the establishment counter-image to Bush's isolation, it has been hard-won; moreover, it has never been won by making that establishment feel comfortable.