

NEW TRENDS IN BRITAIN

A NOTE ON RUBBRA AND TIPPETT

W. H. MELLERS

THERE is today pretty uniform agreement that the musical situation in England is creatively more sanguine than it's been for some considerable time; and with local and topical conditions on the continent assuming the contours inevitable to war, it's perhaps not mere insular prejudice that makes us regard ourselves as potential preservers of the continuity of European musical culture. English music has once again the opportunity to attain, not of course to the rich vitality of creative culture which characterized the more organic society of Byrd or even the transitional society of Purcell, but at least to a position of dominating influence.

The composers in England today who seem to me likely to matter most to the future are Edmund Rubbra, Michael Tippett, Benjamin Britten, Alan Rawsthorne, and perhaps Lennox Berkeley. I am going to concentrate on the work of the first two, partly because I think they are intrinsically the most significant, but more because they have a representative value; between them they symbolize the two main alternative lines of development possible to our (and Europe's) musical history; and these alternatives are centered in the relation between texture and shape (to use Tovey's terms) as elements of musical composition.

The prime example of the musical texture is the fugue, and all music in the broadest sense is fugally conceived; the prime example of the musical shape is the classical diatonic symphony or sonata. The musical texture is associated, roughly speaking, with melody and the voice, is fluid in tonality and rhythm, is continuous, polyphonic, and self-generative, and has no "form" apart from the organic evolution of its component lines. The shape, on the other hand, with its double-bars and repeats, its exposition, development and recapitulation, its oppositions of "subjects" and key-centers, is homophonic rather than polyphonic, dance-like rather than vocal, and has a clearly defined architectural symmetry which may (if only for convenience) be mentally imaged apart

from the evolution of the lines, as the physical movements of a dance exist apart from the dance's music. The texture attains the utmost emotional intensity within the conventions of melodic language; the contrasts of key-center which are the mainstay of the diatonic sonata imbue it with a quality to which we apply, perhaps clumsily, the adjective "dramatic." While this is inevitably a crude statement of the case and there is of course an habitual give and take between textures and shapes, we may say in general terms that the generative, vocal textural technic is clearly most apposite to societies in which there is a peculiarly organic relation between music and life – societies in which music is fundamentally ritualistic or religious and domestic. The homophonic shapes, on the other hand, are clearly more applicable to those more "conscious" societies which were in various ways offshoots of the humanistic attitudes of the Renaissance – first the "social" man of the eighteenth century (cf. Handel and Haydn) and later the preoccupation with the personal consciousness of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If we see in Perotin, Palestrina and Byrd the supreme example of the former attitude, and in late Beethoven the supreme example of the latter, we shall also realize the immense significance of Bach, both technically and sociologically, as an equator between the poles of texture and shape, of the medieval and modern consciousness.

Now Rubbra is essentially a composer of symphonies – the most central of all the "shapes;" equally essentially, he is a textural composer who thinks (a rare phenomenon nowadays) in terms of the voice and polyphony. He effects this compromise by a technic of continuous melodic generation and dissection whereby each new "subject" is a direct lyrical evolution from what has preceded. He aims to recreate the great symphonic shape by absorbing it into texture (an achievement which perhaps has, as we shall see, latent sociological implications); whereas Tippett tries to absorb texture into shape. With him, what comes first is the formalizing consciousness, the attempt of the personality to establish order out of the multiplicity of experience – or of movements, tonal centers and thematic phrases. The lyrically germinating first movements of Rubbra's *Second*, *Third*, and *Fourth Symphonies* are the clearest possible illustration of what he meant when, in response to the "how-do-you-compose?" query, he said "I usually begin at the beginning and then go straight on;" and it is a corollary of this attitude that there can for Rubbra be no distinction between texture and composition and (cf. Bach) no

interest in tone-color *per se*. On the other hand, the extremely subtle arrangement of key-centers in Tippett's *Fantasia* for piano and orchestra, the placing of the moods of the variations, of the cadenza, fugue and thematic restatement, make clear that the formalization of the work was the first shape the emotional impetus behind the music assumed, that the figurative detail, even perhaps the actual contour of the themes, were only, as it were, precipitated out of the formalization. (We know from Beethoven's sketchbooks that he arrived at the actual themes only at a very advanced stage of the creative process, particularly in his most typical symphonic allegros.) In both Rubbra and Tippett there is an insistence on clarity of line but whereas in Rubbra's work there is no distinction at all between texture and composition, Tippett *uses* texture to define his composition; significantly Tippett's tonal basis is more diatonic, less fluidly vocal and modal than Rubbra's (compare the fugue of the *Fantasia* with the fugue at the end of Rubbra's first or third symphony). Viewed from this angle I think one can understand why Tippett, potentially a composer of great lyrical power, should have learned much about the physical stuff of music – the noises instruments make – from Stravinsky; and why the spacing of parts should in some of his work give an uncanny originality to passages that look on paper undistinguished. Tippett's interest in the "shape" structure of the variation, a technic not really congenial to Rubbra despite the lovely variations in the third symphony, is by no means accidental, particularly when one remembers the enormous importance the variation form had for Beethoven in his final attempts to embrace texture within the formalizing consciousness. The distinction between Rubbra and Tippett will perhaps be clearer to American readers if I add that there seems to me a somewhat similar contrast between Harris' *Third Symphony* with its generative fugal technic, and the lucid articulation of a sound pattern in Copland's *Piano Sonata*, though the composers aren't otherwise comparable since Copland and Harris, outside the "Celtic" tradition, are much more directly in touch with an industrial civilization.

And this provides a transition from our general compositional problems to the more local ones. When at the turn of the century English music began to climb out of the Teutonic mists in which it had so long been muffled, it was bound to look a little bashful and self-conscious. The rediscovery of a glorious past a long way back (both in folksong and Tudor music) provided obvious opportunities for regression and nostalgia, and the Shropshire Lad-ery vein of diluted romanticism, stemming from

early Vaughan Williams, is still extant, ranging from the pretentious incompetence of E. J. Moeran's *Symphony* to the competent academicism of Gordon Jacob, the genuine minor elegiac note of John Ireland, or the consummately written songs of Gerald Finzi which although exquisitely sensitive to English poetry are explicitly regressive in speech-line and which evade the general compositional problems through the deliberate limitations of verse structure.

But gradually English composers, partly through the influence of the later work of Vaughan Williams but more because of the work of that creatively frustrated but highly intelligent and historically important artist, Gustav Holst, came to realize that in order for the English tradition to be reborn, our music had to recover that contact with the spoken language (and therefore life) which had broken down, fundamentally for social and economic reasons, with the failure of our seventeenth century operatic venture. The close association between composers and poets in the great period of our culture was seen to be merely one manifestation of a much deeper relation between music and speech, between the vernacular and life. Thus did Byrd and Dowland achieve an idiom that was fundamentally indigenous while being European in its range and powers of assimilation. Characteristically this realization has manifested itself in Rubbra's work quite unselfconsciously. His idiom is completely unprovincial, unfolky and not ostensibly "Tudor." That his free modality, fluid fugal technic and (for a contemporary composer) enormous length and plasticity of line are similar in method to the Tudor composers is a consequence of his traditional and vocal outlook; and that some of his quicker melodies are slightly reminiscent of Vaughan Williams, though more sinewy and compressed, is more the intuitive result of the molding inflections of English speech than a conscious influence. Equally characteristically, Tippett is *explicitly* concerned with the problem of the vernacular, and significantly the work in which he directly tackles it has explicit social connotations. Americans would find it interesting to compare this work, the oratorio, *A Child of our Time*, with Blitzstein's *No for an Answer*. That its recitative is more complex and less natural may be because the English language is as yet less intimately in tune than the American with life in an industrial society. But it's a fine work, of great importance for an understanding of Tippett's absolute music. Especially interesting is the manner in which, in the *Double String Concerto*, the *Piano Sonata* and *Fantasia* and above all in the second string quartet, the jazz-vernacular influence merges into the Celtic folk element; and that into the broader aspects of the European

tradition – troubadour music, medieval polyphony, madrigal technic, the most rigid dance symmetry, and the Beethovenian “drama” of thematic development. It’s urgently contemporary music which demands a contemporary approach; at the same time it has a flexible relation to the evolution of the whole European tradition. Both lyrical and sophisticated, it holds the scales between the two *pis allers* of modern music – provinciality and cosmopolitanism.

This tendency towards the reconciliation of the local with the European, carrying with it a coherent approach to the great formal problems of contemporary music, dominates not only Rubbra and Tippett, but all our most significant music making. It is what, in some of Britten’s recent very beautiful vocal works, makes one feel that he is on the point of fulfilling the high hopes that have been held of his potentially remarkable talents; it is what gives such original vitality to the superficially rather arid Hindemithian neo-diatonicism of Alan Rawsthorne, particularly in the fine piano *Concerto* and *the Symphonic Variations*; it is what is in the new string quartet of Arthur Bliss and behind the deeper note in the “French” sophistication of the recent works of Lennox Berkeley. Further, it has made possible the emergence of several young composers who ten years ago would have remained parochial both in expression and reputation; whether or no they will come to anything depends not only on individual maturity but on sociological considerations which I suppose lie outside the province of music criticism proper.

I have chosen to dwell on the relationship between Rubbra and Tippett because it seems to me most neatly to sum up the issues involved. No doubt the more conscious approach of Tippett is more readily understandable in a contemporary composer inevitably pre-occupied with the attempt of the human personality to impose order on the contrarities of experience and to build up that coherent scale of values and beliefs which in more organic societies is incarnated in the concept of tradition: but the more “intuitive” welling up of lyrical life, with its own potentialities of growth and decay, which is implied in the “gigantic instrumental motets” which are Rubbra’s symphonies is (however difficult for a contemporary composer) a still more fundamental human impulse, and without an interoperation of the two tendencies I do not think we can hope for the establishment, and continuance, of cultural health. From their different angles, that interoperation is already visible in Rubbra’s and Tippett’s music; and to a lesser degree in the work of Britten, Rawsthorne and Berkeley.