

Sir Michael Tippett

Some recollections of rehearsals and performances

From 1965 to the 1980s, Sir Michael Tippett had a close relationship with the Leicestershire Schools Symphony Orchestra, regularly conducting them in the UK and on tour in Europe and generally supporting the state-funded musical education programme which had produced an orchestra of such high standards. He conducted the LSSO almost exclusively in twentieth-century music - from Holst's *The Planets* to Charles Ives's *Three Places in New England*, Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, Hindemith's *Symphonic Metamorphoses* and many new works by English composers. Under Tippett, the LSSO, an orchestra of ordinary secondary school children aged 14 to 18, regularly performed on BBC radio and TV, made commercial gramophone records and established new standards for music-making in an educational context. Many leading British performers had their first experience of orchestral music in the LSSO under Tippett.

Sir Michael first became involved with the Leicestershire County School of Music in 1965 when he became patron of the Schools Music Festival and conducted two concerts at the De Montfort Hall, Leicester. The logistical problems in actually rehearsing for this festival were overcome by the orchestra travelling down to Corsham, close to Sir Michael's home, and taking up residence in a local school for a full week during the Easter holidays. This enabled Michael to work with the orchestra after his usual day's schedule. In this way, his composing routine was not disrupted but perhaps more importantly, from an LSSO perspective, there was substantial rehearsal time for the players and Michael to get to know each other. In the mid 1960's ABC Television ran an Arts programme called *Tempo* and the week's events at Corsham were filmed for an edition entitled *Overture with Beginners*. Sir Michael proved to be great fun to work with - a true inspiration - and a rapport was immediately established.

The TV film can be seen here:

[Overture with Beginners part 1](#)

[Overture with Beginners part 2](#)

[Overture with Beginners part 3](#)

The 1965 Schools Music Festival concerts included the specially commissioned *Symphony No.2* by Alan Ridout, Elgar's *Cockaigne*, Holst's *Planets*, Michael's own *Concerto for Double String Orchestra* and *A Child of Our Time*. He also composed two new pieces for the occasion: *Prologue* and *Epilogue* for chorus and orchestra.

The *Prologue* is a setting of *Soomer is i-coomen in*:

[Soomer is i-coomen in,](#)

[Loode sing cuckoo](#)

[Groweth sayd and bloweth mayd and springth the wood-e new.](#)

[Sing cuc-koo](#)

[A-we blay-teth after lamb.](#)

[Lowth after calve coo](#)

[Bullock stair-teth book-e-vair-teth.](#)

[Mirry sing cuckoo,](#)

[Cuc-koo, cuc-koo,](#)

[Well sing-es thoo, cuckoo,](#)

[Nay sweek thoo nay-ver noo.](#)

The *Epilogue* has real significance for the LSSO because it is a setting of *Non Nobis Domine* by William Byrd. This used to be sung as a Grace whenever the orchestra sat down for a meal together. Sir Michael heard this performed *a capella* by the orchestra during the visit to Corsham.

[Non nobis, Domine, non nobis,
Sed nomini tuo, da gloriam.](#)

The *Prologue* and *Epilogue* would eventually become the opening and closing movements of a new suite that was written for the LSSO between 1965 and 1970. On its completion, this became known as *The Shires Suite*.

The 1965 staging of *A Child of Our Time* at the Schools Music Festival was a huge undertaking, featuring as it did the Leicestershire Schools Symphony Orchestra and massed children's choirs. It's also to Tippett's huge credit that he was prepared to attempt a piece such as this with a group of young musicians. In August 1976, the *Europa Cantat* festival was hosted in Leicester. This is a major choral festival attracting choirs from all over Europe. The culmination of the 1976 event, *Europa Cantat 6*, was a performance of *A Child of Our Time* with Willi Gohl conducting the Leicestershire Schools Symphony Orchestra in the presence of the composer. The very make-up of the 200 strong chorus at Leicester's De Montfort Hall that night was in a sense a fulfillment both of the compassionate nature of the oratorio and of the ideals of *Europa Cantat*. For here, side by side, were members of German choirs and of the Israel kibbutz choir to join in the singing of music whose composition was triggered off by a young Jewish refugee's killing of a German diplomat (it happened in 1938) and by the Nazi programme of revenge which followed.

The 1965 and 1976 performances were not recorded for posterity. Fortunately the performance given by the LSSO as part of the 1982 Leicestershire Schools Choral Festival in De Montfort Hall, Leicester was recorded by BBC Radio Leicester. The chorus was made up of choirs drawn from various schools in the county of Leicestershire and the adult singers of the Leicestershire Chorale conducted by Peter Fletcher.

This performance can be downloaded from the Klassic Haus label here:

[A Child of Our Time download](#)

Following the 1965 festival, Sir Michael's appearances with the orchestra included a wonderful *Enigma Variations* televised live in Brussels (1966), a second Schools Festival (1967) and a gramophone recording of his *Suite in D* for the now obsolete Pye Golden Guinea Collectors Series label. This was the first commercial recording of the suite and the fully restored LP (including works by Ridout, Mathias and Arnold) can be downloaded from the Klassic Haus label here:

[Suite in D download](#)

In 1969 the second phase of the *Shires Suite* was unveiled at the LSSO Easter residential course in Cirencester. Orchestral parts, in manuscript, for *Interlude II* turned up at sectional rehearsals one morning. The first full orchestral rehearsals for *Interlude II* were directed by Norman Del Mar. Sir Michael joined us later in the week and a BBC television crew also arrived to film him conducting *Interlude II* and Ives' *Putnam's Camp* for a BBC-2 programme called *Music Now*. The television recording was somewhat

disrupted by the Red Arrows flying above the school but a personal telephone call from Michael to the Red Arrows H.Q. soon put a stop to the noise. I am reliably informed that this was the first time in history that the Red Arrows had been 'grounded' in such a manner. Looking back, the rehearsals for *Interlude II* were absolutely riotous mainly due to the scruffy hand written orchestral parts and the novel inclusion of an electric guitar. The purely orchestral *Interlude II* is based on the music which introduces the characters Dov and Mel at their entry in Act I of Tippett's opera, *The Knot Garden*, which was written at the same time (1966-69) as this Suite. *Interlude II* also incorporates the canon '*Great Tom is Cast*' which appears three times, scored first for 3 trumpets and finally trumpets and trombones in octaves.

The new trilogy of *Prologue, Interlude II and Epilogue* received its first public performance at the Bath Festival on June 21st 1969 where the LSSO was conducted by Sir Michael. In a press review of the concert, one eminent critic '*...failed to detect the promised part for electric guitar...*' The guitar part, played by David Abbott, was nigh on deafening from where I was sitting in the 2nd fiddles. Overall, 1969 was a great year for the orchestra. Michael and the LSSO played a memorable concert in the Philharmonie, Berlin which included *Prologue, Interlude II and Epilogue, Ives' Putnam's Camp, Copland's Quiet City and Brigg Fair* by Delius. Richard Rodney Bennett was the soloist in *Rhapsody in Blue*. We also spent some time with Sir John Barbirolli who attended the afternoon rehearsals of *Brigg Fair*. The night after our concert he was performing Tchaikovsky's 4th with the Berlin Philharmonic. The orchestra was hailed as Britain's best cultural export but our programme must have been rather unusual for the German public weaned on Brahms and Beethoven. The sounds of Charles Ives must have been a shock, let alone *Interlude II*.

The 1970 Easter course was held at Oxford. Yet another week of sleeping on camp beds in a school and being rehearsed by Sir Arthur Bliss, Bryan Kelly, Herbert Chappell and Sir Michael. The preparations this time were focused on rehearsing for an appearance at the Cheltenham Festival in July and a new gramophone record for Argo, which would include the *Introduction and Allegro* by Bliss, conducted by the composer and Tippett conducting his own *Interlude II and Epilogue*. During this week at Oxford, Michael introduced and rehearsed the final two movements of *The Shires Suite*. These movements were *Interlude I* and *Cantata*.

The slow, purely orchestral *Interlude I* is a kind of chorale prelude, based on the canon '*The Silver Swan*'. The three melodic lines of the canon are presented at different speeds: Trumpet and trombone (normal speed), strings (decorated and much transformed, twice as slow) and bells and woodwind (clusters, one-a-half times as slow).

The *Cantata* is a setting of three canons, before each of which the choir sings, 'Come let us sing you a song in canon.'

First comes a hunting canon by William Byrd:

Hey, ho, to the Greenwood
Now let us go,
Sing heave and ho
And there shall we find
Both buck and doe

Sing heave and ho
The hart and hind
And the little pretty doe
Sing heave and ho

Second, a drinking catch by Purcell to the words:

'Fie, nay prithee, John
Do not quarrel man,
Let us be merry and drink about.'

'You're a rogue, you cheated me,
I'll prove before this company,
I caren't a farthing, Sir, for all you are so stout.'

'Sir, you lie, I scorn your word,
Or any man that wears a sword,
For all your huff, who cares a fig or who cares for you?'

Third, a canon by Alexander Goehr to an epigram of William Blake, presented to the composer as a 60th birthday present. The words are:

The sword sung on the barren heath,
The sickle on the fruitful field:
The sword he sang a song of death,
But could not make the sickle yield.

By 1970, Michael had made some close friendships at the County School of Music and he kept in regular contact by telephone. On one famous occasion he was chatting to the orchestra's PR manager, Jack Richards about the problems he was having with the percussion scoring in the *Cantata* of *The Shires Suite*. Jack's miniscule office was situated next door to the school canteen and as the conversation progressed a careless dinner lady dropped a tray of cutlery. This sparked the composer's imagination and Jack spent the next quarter of an hour or so dropping various combinations of forks and spoons onto the floor from different heights until the correct sound was achieved to the satisfaction of the composer. Who suggested the title given to the completed work? Jack Richards.

The Cheltenham Festival concert took place in the Town Hall on July 8th and the podium was shared by Sir Arthur Bliss, who conducted his own *Piano Concerto* with Frank Wibaut as soloist and Sir Michael, who directed Ives' riotous *Circus Band* a rather scrappy *Rhapsody in Blue* and the first public performance of *The Shires Suite*. It must be mentioned that in the early hours of July 8th, Michael was involved, as a passenger, in a serious road traffic accident whilst he was travelling from the Queen Elizabeth Hall. Despite this he continued his journey to Cheltenham, took a three hour rehearsal in the afternoon and then directed the concert in the evening. Even 30 years after the event I can still vividly recall the electric atmosphere at this concert, which received wide critical acclaim from the national press. Sir Arthur referred to the concert as the best one of the 1970 festival. Later that evening Jack Richards appeared on the orchestra's coach after the concert wearing a huge grin and clutching a reel-to-reel tape recording of *The Shires Suite*.

Interlude II and *Epilogue* were recorded by Sir Michael and the LSSO on August 31st, 1970 for Argo Records. The session took place in Decca Studio No.3, West Hampstead and the disc was released in April 1971. The sound quality and performances, however, were both something of a let down compared to the concert at Cheltenham.

In April 1980, some 10 years after its first complete performance at Cheltenham, the LSSO with the Leicestershire Chorale recorded the suite for Unicorn Records at De Montfort Hall under the direction of Eric Pinkett's successor, Peter Fletcher. The suite is coupled with a performance of *Virages - Region One* by Douglas Young, conducted by the composer with the solo cello part played by Rohan de Saram.

In September 1998, during a project to fully update some personal archives relating to the Leicestershire Schools Symphony Orchestra, the mystery tape from Cheltenham finally resurfaced in an attic 28 years after the event. It had been recorded in stereophonic sound of excellent quality. I simply couldn't believe my luck. The recording is little short of amazing and the performance is also highly accomplished - a world premier beautifully captured as it took place that night in Cheltenham Town Hall and a permanent reminder of the special relationship between the Leicestershire County School of Music and Sir Michael Tippett.

You can download these performances of *The Shires Suite* from Klassic Haus

- 1) KHCD-2012-022 *Interlude II* and *Epilogue* from the 1970 Argo LP
- 2) KHCD-2012-017 The complete suite from the 1980 Unicorn LP
- 3) LSSO-CD1 *Prologue, Interlude and Epilogue* from the Bath Festival (1969) and the complete suite from the Cheltenham Festival (1970)

Here's the link:

[The Shires Suite downloads](#)

John Whitmore