

---

# Pre-emptive Hermeneutics: Tippett's Early Influence on *A Child of Our Time's* Reception

*Anne Marshman*

---

In 1944, an interpretation by Michael Tippett of his new oratorio *A Child of Our Time* was printed on a promotional flier and circulated in the lead-up to the 19 March premiere (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> The leaflet, which is not mentioned in the scholarly reception of *A Child of Our Time*, first came to my attention through passing references in two 1944 issues of *Musical Opinion*.<sup>2</sup> I subsequently traced copies to the Britten-Pears Library, Aldeburgh, and the Lambeth Archives in London's Minet Library. While the small (approximately 15cm by 21cm) document with purplish-pink ink on white semi-gloss paper appears innocuous enough, it was crucial to the dissemination of Tippett's pre-concert interpretation of *A Child of Our Time* and, as such, played a key role in shaping critical appraisals of the work. Besides the leaflet, which was 'widely distributed,'<sup>3</sup> Tippett's explanation was also presented in pre-concert talks and in programme notes.<sup>4</sup> The effect of such energetic promotion was overwhelming: all of the premiere's pre-

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Tippett, '*A Child of Our Time*,' pre-concert leaflet, 1944. Tippett's interpretation appears on one side of the flier, concert details on the other. The quotation of passages from the leaflet in February and March pre-concert articles (discussed below) suggests an early circulation. See John Amis, 'New Choral Work by Michael Tippett,' *Musical Times* 85/1212 (February 1944): 41–42; Robin Hull, '*A Child of Our Time*,' *Musical Opinion* 67/798 (March 1944): 186–87. Both journals enjoyed a wide circulation.

<sup>2</sup> Hull, '*A Child of Our Time*,' 186; C. G.-F., 'London Concerts,' *Musical Opinion* 67/799 (April 1944): 232. A copy of one side of the leaflet is included, and mistakenly identified as the concert programme for the 1944 premiere, in *A Man of Our Time, Michael Tippett*, catalogue of an exhibition held at Covent Garden Gallery, July 1977 (London: Schott, 1977) 60.

<sup>3</sup> C. G.-F., 'London Concerts,' 232.

<sup>4</sup> Tippett gave lectures for the London Philharmonic Arts Club on 14 and 16 March (advertised in the *New Statesman and Nation*, 11 March 1944: 180). Antony Hopkins, '*A Child of Our Time*,' programme notes, London Philharmonic Orchestra concert, Adelphi Theatre, 19 March 1944. My thanks go to the Royal College of Music, London, for providing a copy of the programme.

and post-concert critical reception (by thirteen writers) shows evidence of Tippett's influence.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the composer's explanation, which reached public and critics well before trumpets first sounded the oratorio's opening chords, still echoes to this day throughout more recent scholarly reception.<sup>6</sup> What makes the impact and longevity of the pre-concert interpretation remarkable is the fact that it cannot be construed from the score alone, that is, without the composer's hermeneutic intervention. The purpose of this article is to examine Tippett's leaflet account and its influence on initial critical responses to *A Child of Our Time*. I will also briefly consider possible reasons for, and consequences of its early power and tenacious persistence.

Much of the leaflet's explanation revolves around the 'actual event' on which, according to Tippett, the oratorio 'is based.'<sup>7</sup> The anonymous 'child of our time' of the oratorio's title, otherwise referred to in the libretto as 'the boy,' becomes in the leaflet Herschel Grynspan, the Jewish teenager at the centre of a very public incident in 1938. The oratorio's narrative section (Part II of three parts) is expressly linked by Tippett to the Grynspan affair, described in the leaflet as:

the shooting of a German diplomat in Paris, by a young Jewish refugee in November, 1938. The Jewish boy was being sheltered illegally by his uncle and aunt; failing to obtain proper papers from the German officials and being troubled for his mother under persecution, he shot and killed von [sic] Rath. There followed the most severe and terrible of the official pogroms in Germany. The boy was tried and was imprisoned by the French authorities. Later, after the fall of France ... he was handed over to the Nazis and disappeared.<sup>8</sup>

---

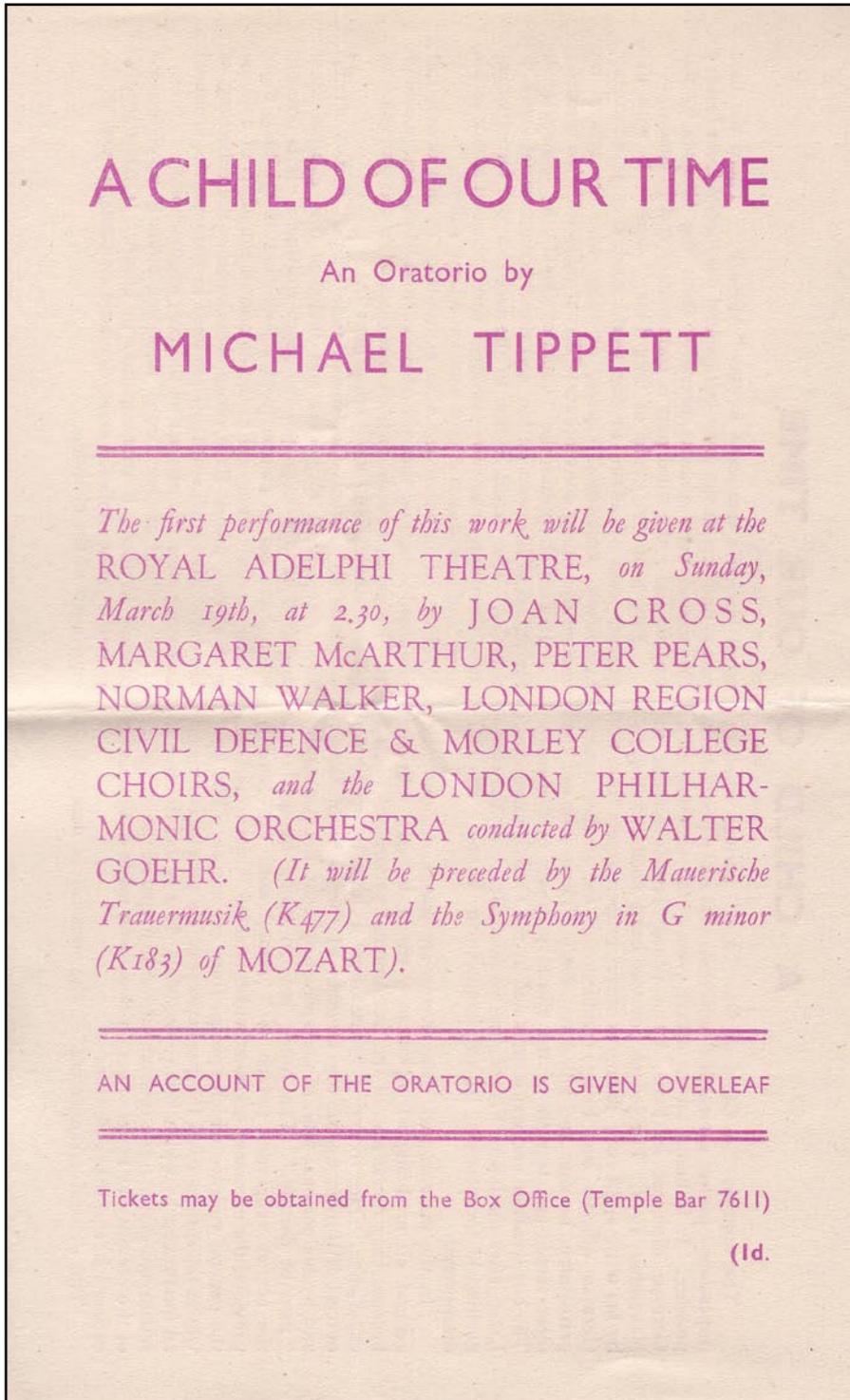
<sup>5</sup> Critical pre-reception sources of which I am aware are Amis, 'New Choral Work,' 41–42, and Hull, 'A Child of Our Time,' 186–87. There are eleven authors of twelve concert reviews (Scott Goddard writes for both the *Monthly Musical Record* and *News Chronicle*): C.E.M., 'A Child of Our Time,' *Peace News*, 24 March 1944: 4; Edwin Evans, 'A Child of Our Time,' *Musical Times* 85/1214 (April 1944): 124; C. G.-F., 'London Concerts,' 232; William Glock, 'Music,' *Observer*, 26 March 1944: 2; Scott Goddard, 'Michael Tippett's A Child of Our Time,' *Monthly Musical Record* (May 1944): 88; Scott Goddard, 'Oratorio with Modern Theme,' *News Chronicle*, 20 March 1944: 3; Ralph Hill, 'New Oratorio,' *Sunday Times*, 26 March 1944: 2; Dynely Hussey, 'A Child of Our Time,' *Spectator*, 24 March 1944: 267; [no author], 'Philosophy and Music,' *Times*, 24 March 1944: 6; Edward Sackville West, 'The Scapegoat,' *New Statesman and Nation*, 25 March 1944: 204–5; [no author], 'Tippett's New Oratorio,' *Times* 20 March 1944: 6; and [no author], 'A Worldly Oratorio,' *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*, 20 March 1944: 5.

<sup>6</sup> While the pre-concert flier cannot be directly credited decades after its 1944 distribution, with the enduring impact of Tippett's interpretation, a variety of other primary sources repeating the same information have served for many years as more accessible references. See Michael Tippett, 'A Child of Our Time,' *Music of the Angels*, ed. Meirion Bowen (London: Eulenburg, 1980) 117–97. Included there is the revised version of an essay by Tippett first published in 1963, a sketch of the libretto with notes by Tippett, the transcript from a 1950 BBC radio broadcast, and programme notes for the 1963 York Festival. The material in *Music of the Angels* (now out of print) is reproduced in Michael Tippett, *Tippett on Music*, ed. Meirion Bowen (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 109–84. See also references to *A Child of Our Time* in Tippett's autobiography, *Those Twentieth-Century Blues* (London: Hutchinson, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Tippett, leaflet.

<sup>8</sup> Though Grynspan's name is not mentioned, there is sufficient detail to identify the notorious sequence of events. The pogrom referred to is the infamous 9 November 'Crystal Night' murder, beating, and arrest of thousands of German and Austrian Jews, and the destruction of their property. Tippett's explanation is likely to have had a powerful effect. Most people in 1944 would have been familiar with Grynspan's story, which had received extensive coverage in the British press and was featured as 'front-page news in all of the London dailies.' See Suzanne Robinson, 'From Agitprop to Parable: A Prolegomenon to *A Child of Our Time*,' in Suzanne Robinson (ed.), *Michael Tippett: Music and Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002) 99.

**Figure 1.** Pre-concert leaflet by Tippett (1944). Reproduced with the kind permission of the Britten–Pears Library, Aldeburgh. (Reverse of leaflet is shown on the following page.)



## A CHILD OF OUR TIME

The oratorio "A Child of Our Time" springs from an impassioned protest against the conditions that make persecution possible. It is based on an actual event: the shooting of a German diplomat in Paris, by a young Jewish refugee in November, 1938. The Jewish boy was being sheltered illegally by his uncle and aunt; failing to obtain proper papers from the German officials and being troubled for his mother under persecution, he shot and killed von Rath. There followed the most severe and terrible of the official pogroms in Germany. The boy was tried and was imprisoned by the French authorities. Later, after the fall of France, and, incidentally, after the composition of the oratorio, he was handed over to the Nazis and disappeared.

In the oratorio text these events are transmuted into the general or mythological significance which belongs to them because they repeat one of the fundamental patterns of human experience. The recurring pattern here is that by which an outcast is thrown up for one moment by the forces of history and by his personal fate, as protagonist opposite the tyrant, the "man of destiny." The young Jew, in taking upon himself the act of vengeance (which is "mine," saith the Lord) provided the necessary occasion which enabled Hitler to unleash the general violence which springs from his nature. The boy, whose act springs from the persecution of his people, is himself an instrument by which it is re-doubled. Nor is this the end of retributive drama: the re-doubled terror prepared the emotions of the present war by its effect on those who made it, those who suffered it, and those who saw it.

The general arrangement of the oratorio is designed to

recall Handel's treatment in the "Messiah." There the first part is built up on the great but general prophecies from Isaiah; the second part contains narrative from the Gospels to the world's end; the third part is commentary and judgment.

Part I of "A Child of Our Time" deals only with the general state of affairs in the world to-day as it affects all individuals, minorities, classes, or races who are felt to be outside the ruling conventions—Man at odds with his Shadow.

In Part II appears the "Child of Our Time," enmeshed in the drama of his personal fate and the elemental social forces of our day. The drama is due to the fact that the forces which drive the young man prove stronger than the good advice of his uncle and aunt—as it always was and always will be.

Part III is concerned with significance of this drama and the possible healing that would come from Man's acceptance of his Shadow in relation to his Light (instead of the projection of his shadow side onto the "other man").

It is no accident that in our time a minority race should have given birth to poems and melodies that express these problems in folk-language—the negro spirituals. It is possible for a composer to choose from a collection of spirituals those which exactly correspond to the emotional situations of a drama such as this, just as Bach chose chorales from the collections of his day. Five such spirituals are used in the oratorio, arranged and sung after the manner of the best negro choirs.

"A Child of Our Time," therefore, tends to be eighteenth century in form, if contemporary in idiom. It has narrative recitative, contemplative arias, dramatic choruses, as well as the equivalent of the chorale.

Besides taking up more than one-fifth of the total word-count (124 of the 585 words) with his summary of Grynspan's story, Tippett allocates a further fifty per cent to expounding his own views on its moral implications and its contemporary political and philosophical significance. Despite the fact that there is no detail in *A Child of Our Time* explicitly identifying Grynspan as its protagonist (the only tenuous links being the unnamed boy 'hiding in a great city' who 'goes to authority' and 'shoots the official'; a 'terrible vengeance'; a persecuted race; and a 'mother near to death'), seventy per cent of the total leaflet space revolves around his story.

The leaflet repeatedly refers to the 'present war,' the 'world today,' 'our time,' and 'our day,' though there are no such indicators in the libretto (notwithstanding the 'Our Time' of the title), only broader contemporary resonances suggested by No. 13's colloquialisms, 'No-Man's-Land' and 'dole.' In fact, Part I, which sets the scene for Part II's narrative, is comprised largely of vague descriptions and nameless personages (soloists are identified only as 'soprano,' 'tenor,' etcetera), beginning with the chorus:

The world turns on its dark side.  
It is winter.

The text (written by Tippett) proceeds from this point in a disorienting mix of poetic, day-to-day, and biblical language, not to mention the elusive philosophical probing of No. 3: 'Is evil then good? Is reason untrue?'; the psychological jargon of 'I am torn between my desires and their frustration' (No. 6); and the folk idiom of 'Green trees a-bending ... I han't got long to stay here' in the spiritual 'Steal Away' (No. 8). Textual incongruity is mirrored by the music's tonal ambiguity, melodic fragmentation, irregular rhythms, abrupt textural and timbral changes, and stylistic intertextuality including a tango (No. 6), a lullaby (No. 7), Baroque conventions, jazz-like harmonies and syncopations, and an African-American spiritual (No. 8; Nos. 16, 21, 25, and 30 in Parts II and III are also spirituals).

In distinct contrast to the score, the leaflet grounds the oratorio via the Grynspan story in contemporary events, infusing it not only with relevance, but also with continuity and coherence. In the leaflet, for example, the libretto's obscure 'man of destiny' is identified as Hitler, 'the tyrant' against whom the oratorio's protagonist is pitted. According to Tippett's moral commentary, in killing vom Rath, Grynspan

provided the necessary occasion which enabled Hitler to unleash the general violence which springs from his nature. The boy, whose act springs from the persecution of his people, is himself an instrument by which it is re-doubled. Nor is this the end of retributive drama: the re-doubled terror prepared the emotions of the present war.

In the oratorio, this 'man of destiny' appears only once (in No. 28), near the end, where the reference is so belated and oblique that it almost defies explanation in the leaflet's explicit terms:

**Chorus:** How shall we have patience for the consummation of the mystery?  
Who will comfort us in the going through?

**Bass:** Patience is born in the tension of loneliness.  
The garden lies behind the desert.

**Chorus:** Is the man of destiny master of us all?  
Shall those cast out be unavenged?

**Bass:** The man of destiny is cut off from fellowship.  
Healing springs from the womb of time.  
The simple-hearted shall exult in the end.

This excerpt is typical of Part III's philosophising, which in the leaflet is brought down to earth via the Grynspan saga. Once again emphasizing the contemporary situation, Tippett's leaflet accounts for 'the general state of affairs in the world to-day as it affects all individuals, minorities, classes, or races who are felt to be outside the ruling conventions' in terms of 'Man at odds with his Shadow.' Grynspan is used to illustrate the individual's inability to completely repress the psyche's undesirable elements (the 'Shadow') and the inevitability that the unconscious 'forces which drive the young man' will eventually culminate in violence. According to the leaflet, the solution to this psychological dilemma is propounded in Part III of *A Child of Our Time*, which 'is concerned with the healing that would come from Man's acceptance of his Shadow in relation to his Light (instead of the projection of his shadow side onto the "other man").' While this cursory foray into Jungian psychology might itself seem in need of further elucidation,<sup>9</sup> it can be seen to go some way towards ameliorating Part III's often-prohibitive esotericism and justifying the penultimate chorus's otherwise-elusive text:

**Tenor:** I would know my shadow and my light,  
So shall I at last be whole.  
**Bass:** Then courage, brother, dare the grave passage.  
**Soprano:** Here is no final grieving, but an abiding hope.  
**Alto:** The moving waters renew the earth.  
It is spring.

The remaining thirty per cent of the leaflet revolves around *A Child of Our Time's* formal and ideological generic heritage. With the first sentence, the work is oriented towards its genre's long-standing concern with themes of morality: 'The oratorio, "A Child of Our Time" springs from an impassioned protest against the conditions that make persecution possible.' Tippett situates his work within the oratorio's sacred lineage extending back to Handel and Bach. *Messiah*, that archetypal of English oratorios, is itself summonsed:

The general arrangement of the oratorio is designed to recall Handel's treatment in the 'Messiah'. There the first part is built up on the great but general prophecies from Isaiah; the second part contains narrative from the Gospels to the world's end; the third part is commentary and judgment.

*A Child of Our Time's* oratorian credentials are further underscored by Tippett's comparison of his African-American spirituals with the chorales of Bach's Oratorio-Passions:

---

<sup>9</sup> In Carl Jung's analytical psychology, the 'shadow' denotes the unconscious sphere of the human psyche. According to Jung, in order to achieve psychological wholeness ('individuation' in Jungian terminology), one must confront and assimilate unconscious elements into consciousness. See C.G. Jung, 'Conscious, Unconscious, and Individuation,' *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, transl. R.F.C. Hull, vol. 9i, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969) 273–89. Jung's influence on Tippett's libretto is indicated by the composer in the published sketch. See Tippett, *Tippett on Music*, 121, 168 and 170. For a more detailed Jungian explanation of *A Child of Our Time's* libretto, see Ian Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music* (London: Eulenburg, 1984) 155–57.

It is possible for a composer to choose from a collection of spirituals those which exactly correspond to emotional situations of a drama such as this, just as Bach chose chorales from the collections of his day.

By the leaflet's end, the reader is left with a good sense of the generic ritual to which premiere audience members will be a party:

*A Child of Our Time*, therefore, tends to be eighteenth century in form, if contemporary in idiom. It has narrative recitative, contemplative arias, dramatic choruses, as well as the equivalent of the chorale.

The contextualisation of *A Child of Our Time* within the religious tradition of oratorio, and Tippett's mention of the chorale, Isaiah, and the Gospels, promotes an ideological alignment with Christianity. This allegiance is furthered by the composer's biblical commentary on the actions of 'the boy' who, 'in taking upon himself the act of vengeance (which is "'mine", saith the Lord') kills 'the official.' It is also possible that mention of *Messiah*, the most prized example of one of England's best-loved genres, might have borne certain patriotic resonances for readers, given *A Child of Our Time*'s war-time debut. By invoking the authority of tradition, Church, and State, the already considerable clout conventionally vested in the composer's voice in all matters hermeneutic (I return to this point below) is endowed with even greater powers of persuasion.

The promotional flier was not the only means by which Tippett's interpretation was disseminated. The 19 March concert was also preceded by the two substantial articles by Robin Hull in the *Musical Opinion* and John Amis in the *Musical Times*. While Hull quotes and paraphrases the leaflet at length (mentioning Grynspan's story, its relevance for each of the oratorio's three parts, and the work's chorale substitutes and generic heritage), Amis simply inserts its contents almost verbatim into his article, as if in his own words. It is unlikely, however, that the composer would have objected to this 'borrowing.' He was, according to Amis, present during the writing of the article, dictating its content or at least that part that had not already been taken from the leaflet.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that by 19 March there was no audience member who had not been acquainted with Tippett's account of his new work. Those who had missed out had no need to despair, for information was at hand. Antony Hopkins's programme note for the premiere opens in a similar fashion to Tippett's leaflet (and Hull's and Amis's articles) with an explanation of the oratorio as 'a dramatization of and a commentary on' the Grynspan affair. Hopkins also heralds *A Child of Our Time*'s allegiance to 'the great classic tradition of Bach and Handel,' echoing Tippett's account of the spirituals, and explains Part III's philosophical solution to 'our contemporary dilemma.'

And so the audience prepares to listen, equipped with a coherent narrative in the form of Grynspan's story, and an understanding of the work's contemporary relevance, its philosophical significance, and generic ancestry. Nine of the eleven reviewing critics clearly draw on pre-reception material. Seven explain *A Child of Our Time* in terms of Grynspan's story, describing it variously as the 'theme' (Evans), the 'tale behind' the oratorio (Goddard), the 'subject' (*Daily*

---

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to John Amis for this information. Amis sang in Tippett's Morley College choir that performed for *A Child of Our Time*'s premiere. He writes of his friendship with Tippett in *Amiscellany: My Life, My Music* (London: Faber, 1986) 68–78.

*Telegraph*), the 'plot' (Sackville West), 'the model' (Hussey), and the event on which the work is 'based' (C. G.-F.), while a further two (Glock and Hill) mention actual pre-reception sources that contain Tippett's interpretation.<sup>11</sup> The remaining two, unnamed, critics, both from the *Times*, explain the oratorio in terms of current events, and the spirituals according to the composer's account, with similar vocabulary to Tippett and Hopkins, strongly suggesting the influence of pre-performance literature.<sup>12</sup> With such comprehensive preparation it is impossible to know how critics might have responded had they not been privy to the composer's own thoughts. It is likely that the Grynspan narrative would have bestowed a real-life relevance on the oratorio whose relationship to contemporary events is otherwise by no means self-evident. It is also probable that Tippett's philosophical explanation managed to impose internal links between the oratorio's three parts, and to mitigate Part III's weighty intellectualising. In fact, six reviewers draw on the composer's philosophical commentary in their own accounts of the work.<sup>13</sup>

The only topic that is more consistently mentioned in reception material than events and philosophical ruminations associated with the Grynspan tragedy is the African-American spiritual. Eight critics repeat Tippett's hermeneutic prescription for these songs, with only two posing any substantial challenge. According to Hill,

to quote in the programme note the precedent of Bach and that master's use of the German chorale is not a good parallel, for Bach was steeped in the chorale tradition, whereas Mr. Tippett's style bears no relation to the tradition of the negro spiritual.<sup>14</sup>

Evans is also critical of Tippett's attempted synthesis, believing that the spirituals' 'peculiar poignancy ... tends to evaporate in their new environment.'<sup>15</sup> Though Sackville West and Hussey similarly note disparities between the spirituals and Tippett's own idiom, they conclude that these are ultimately assuaged. Sackville West writes that the spirituals initially 'look like a miscalculation, because of the inappropriateness of their origins and the manner of the harmonization,' but concedes that they are 'so discreetly, and withal so imaginatively, set that in performance they do not sound out of style.'<sup>16</sup> Hussey also recognises 'the association of these hymns with another world from that of a Nazified Europe.' He is, nevertheless, persuaded that 'their words and musical sentiment are so apt that they might have been composed *ad hoc*.'<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it is descriptors such as 'perfectly suited' (Glock), 'integral ... profoundly moving' (C.E.M.), 'particularly successful' (Hussey), and 'spontaneous' (Hull) that dominate the critical reception.

The way had, however, been amply paved for such responses. Besides his Bachian interpretation, Tippett depicts the spirituals as 'universal songs' belonging not exclusively

<sup>11</sup> Glock refers to the leaflet and Hill to the programme.

<sup>12</sup> Tippett (quoted in Amis, 'New Choral Work,' 42) and Hopkins describe the spirituals as 'universal.' The term is repeated in both the *Times* articles.

<sup>13</sup> [no author], 'Tippett's New Oratorio,' 6; [no author], 'Philosophy and Music,' 6; Evans, 'A Child of Our Time,' 124; Hussey, 'A Child of Our Time,' 267; Sackville West, 'The Scapegoat,' 204; C.E.M., 'A Child of Our Time,' 4.

<sup>14</sup> Hill, 'New Oratorio,' 2.

<sup>15</sup> Evans, 'A Child of Our Time,' 124.

<sup>16</sup> Sackville West, 'The Scapegoat,' 205.

<sup>17</sup> Hussey, 'A Child of Our Time,' 267.

to the race of their creators but to all humankind.<sup>18</sup> He also informs prospective listeners of how his spirituals 'exactly correspond to the [oratorio's] emotional situations.' Writing before the concert, Amis declares the spirituals a 'master stroke,' and Hopkins once again lends hermeneutic support.<sup>19</sup> For him there is no question of whether the spirituals belong in their new generic context. Insisting that their employment 'need not be defended,' he goes on (defensively) to 'remind dissenters that the chorales of Bach universally accepted as the supreme example of this form were, after all, only popular hymns of his time.' It is unclear whether Hopkins intends here to elevate the spirituals' vernacular to the 'supreme' heights of Bach's chorales, or to demote the chorale to the level of the 'only popular.' Either way, with his and Tippett's pre-concert remarks, the spirituals are effectively appropriated; removed from the lips of the African American well before a note is sung—as far as Hull (also writing before the concert) is concerned—their new ownership is already indubitably confirmed:

The spirituals, five in number, are not grafted upon the main body of the work but arise so spontaneously during the course of the invention as to establish their integral place in the oratorio.<sup>20</sup>

If the idiosyncratic voice of the African American had not been prematurely muted through the agencies of pre-concert discourse, the spirituals might have been received differently. In August 1944, for example, Wilfred Mellers observes (not in relation to the March concert, but in a review of recent English music and, therefore, possibly less-influenced by pre-reception rhetoric) that Tippett's use of spirituals 'is not completely convincing; philosophically because the persecuted negro is too topical and local a symbol to serve adequately for persecuted humanity.'<sup>21</sup> In fact, the oppression of African Americans in the United States was regularly reported in the British press during the period, and might well have been as semantically significant for some listeners as the Grynspan story.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, racism was not unheard of in Britain where blacks, including Paul Robeson whose name was synonymous with the African-American spiritual, were often victims of discrimination.<sup>23</sup> A further hermeneutic alternative available to 1944 listeners is suggested in Suzanne Robinson's 'From Agitprop to Parable: A Prolegomenon to *A Child of Our Time*,' which discusses the folk genre's political resonances arising from its use (by Robeson and others) in the leftist cause 'to rouse workers

---

<sup>18</sup> Amis, 'New Choral Work,' 42; Tippett, leaflet.

<sup>19</sup> Amis, 'New Choral Work,' 42.

<sup>20</sup> Hull, 'A Child of Our Time,' 186.

<sup>21</sup> Wilfred H. Mellers, 'Two Generations of English Music,' *Scrutiny* 12 (Autumn 1944): 268–69.

<sup>22</sup> In a major feature on the subject in June 1939, for example, the *Times* notes a total of 134 lynchings in the South in the period from 1927 to 1936. See Clark Foreman and Thomas Jesse Jones, 'The Negro in American Life: A Serious Minority Problem,' *Times*, 8 June 1939: 40.

<sup>23</sup> In 1929, Robeson and his wife were refused entry to London's Savoy hotel because of their colour. There were similar reports of racial discrimination in other hotels and many occasions when blacks were ejected from dance halls. See Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Knopf, 1988) 123–24. A major case study of *A Child of Our Time* in my PhD thesis explores the social implications of *A Child of Our Time*'s spirituals settings (and other intertextual references) within the generic context of the oratorio. See Anne Marshman, *Music as Dialogue: Bakhtin's Model Applied to Tippett's A Child of Our Time*, PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2005, 68–198.

in their struggle against the capitalist state.<sup>24</sup> But these and other potential interpretive paths would have been obscured at least to some extent for those who had been exposed to Tippett's pre-emptive hermeneutics.

There are other instances in the oratorio where alternative interpretations are invited by music and text, but stifled by the effect of pre-concert literature. One prominent example comes at the opening of Part II's narrative, explicitly linked by Tippett to Grynspan:

A star rises in mid-winter  
Behold the man! The scapegoat!  
The child of our time.

Here is a striking resemblance to another well-known story. The dramatic parallel to the birth of Jesus is supported through reference to exactly the same point (in narrative and structure), the opening of Part II, in Handel's *Messiah* (a work familiar to 1944 audiences). The key text 'Behold the man' is accompanied in *A Child of Our Time* by an identical rhythm (the semi-quaver anacrusis imitating the notated quaver upbeat of Handel's French overture style, typically halved in performance), and similar melodic shape (*Messiah's* ascending octave leap is replaced by *A Child of Our Time's* more subdued major 6th), vividly underlining the correlation (see Figures 2 and 3).

**Figure 2.** G.F. Handel, *Messiah*, No. 19: Chorus, 'Behold the Lamb of God,' opening bars.

The image shows the opening bars of the Chorus 'Behold the Lamb of God' from Handel's *Messiah*, No. 19. The score is in G major, 3/4 time, and marked 'Largo'. It features staves for Oboe I & II, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Sopranos, Altos, Tenors, Basses, and Bassoon. The vocal parts have lyrics: Sopranos: 'Be - hold the Lamb of God'; Altos: 'Be - hold the Lamb of God, be - hold the Lamb of'; Tenors: 'Be -'; Basses: 'Be - hold the Lamb of'. The instrumental parts include trills and specific rhythmic patterns.

<sup>24</sup> Robeson sang spirituals in support of a number of left-wing causes, including the International Peace Campaign, the British Youth Peace Assembly, the Basque Children's Committee, the Food for Republican Spain Campaign, the Unemployed Workers' Movement, and the League for the Boycott of Aggressor Nations. In early 1938, Robeson toured Spain and spoke out in support of the Republican cause, and in June of the same year he sang the Soviet anthem at a rally for the Emergency Youth Peace Campaign. See Robinson, 'From Agitprop to Parable,' 84; Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 222.

**Figure 3.** Michel Tippett, *A Child of Our Time*. No. 9: Chorus, 'Behold the man' motive (beginning in sopranos and altos; continued in tenors), bars 22–23 (chorus only given).

Largo (♩ = c.76)

Be - hold the man!

Be - hold the man!

Be - hold the man!

Be -

If the oratorio had been heard on its own terms, would not Jesus instead of Herschel Grynspan, have been a more likely protagonist? And what of the ironic twisting of Handel's 'Lamb of God,' replaced by *A Child of Our Time's* hapless 'scapegoat' who later meets his demise not according to Gospel accounts, but at the hands of God himself?: 'God overpowered him—the child of our time' (No. 28). With this transgression, both oratorian tradition and Christian faith, so painstakingly flagged in pre-concert literature, seem to be ruthlessly undermined. But, of this, there is no mention in the critical reception. Perhaps, after Tippett's thorough pre-concert priming, critics simply assumed that with the 'narrative recitative, contemplative aria, dramatic choruses, as well as the equivalent of the chorale,'<sup>25</sup> the oratorio's formal *and ideological* requirements had been met, precluding any irreverent treatment of Christianity's founding epic.

Like the spirituals, *A Child of Our Time's* tone of religious scepticism can be heard to resonate with socio-historical significance, suggesting a semantic alternative to the composer's pre-concert interpretation. During World War II, the Christian Church had alienated many of its congregation (not to mention members of the pacifist movement at large) through its official pro-war stance.<sup>26</sup> In this context, *A Child of Our Time's* ideological generic heritage (explicitly emphasised in Tippett's leaflet) seems ironically at odds with the libretto's underlying message of non-violence (the boy's killing of 'the official' leads ultimately only to further violence and despair), which registers only twice in the critical reception. While *Peace News* responds to *A Child of Our Time's* pacifist theme with predictable approval, Hussey is condemnatory, insisting that without Britain's participation in the war, 'this oratorio would have remained, if completed, unperformed.'<sup>27</sup> Other 1944 critiques are aglow with patriotic pride. Amis writes approvingly, for example, that 'once more a new English oratorio is brought before the public;'<sup>28</sup> Glock declares *A Child of Our Time* to be 'the most moving and important work

<sup>25</sup> Tippett, leaflet.

<sup>26</sup> Here 'Christian Church' refers to the Roman Catholic Church as well as the Church of England and the Free Churches (Methodist, Baptist, Congregationalist, and Quaker). For a detailed discussion of *A Child of Our Time* in relation to the Church's position on the war see Marshman, *Music as Dialogue*, Chapter 4, 'Voices of Piety, Destruction, and Doubt,' 104–35.

<sup>27</sup> Hussey, 'A Child of Our Time,' 267.

<sup>28</sup> Amis, 'New Choral Work,' 41–42.

written by an English musician for many years;<sup>29</sup> Evans praises it as 'one of the major events of music in war-time'; and Goddard pronounces it 'the choral work for which we have been waiting since the outbreak of this war, written by a British composer.'<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, the *Times* (20 March) critique reads like a roll-call (Vaughan Williams, Parry and Holst are included) of recent British musical talent.

Wartime patriotism might partially account for the overwhelmingly enthusiastic critical reception of this new English oratorio. It could also explain critics' almost-unquestioning acceptance of Tippett's interpretation. Certainly, given Britain's wartime Church-State allegiance, the leaflet's reverent invocation of *A Child of Our Time's* sacred oratorian heritage and *Messiah*, the genre's most celebrated English model, seems to invite a patriotic response. It is likely, however, that the aesthetic climate of 1944, according to which hermeneutic authority was ultimately vested in the composer, was largely responsible for critics' willingness to accept Tippett's account. Given recent musicology's advantage of a postmodern purview, however, this justification becomes less valid for scholarship that continues to perpetuate the composer's 1944 perspective. Yet, all of the main secondary literature repeats information that first appeared in Tippett's leaflet, and all but one of these sources explains *A Child of Our Time* in terms of the Grynspan story.<sup>31</sup> Even Robinson's political reading of the work's spirituals is pursued from the perspective of the composer's intention, biography and beliefs at the time *A Child of Our Time* was composed.

It is easy to miss a fleeting note in Tippett's leaflet describing the Grynspan incident as 'transmuted' in *A Child of Our Time* into 'general or mythological significance.' Indeed, the leaflet's emphasis on contemporary events tends to nullify this cursory disclaimer. It is quite possible that Tippett's focus on Grynspan came from an understandable wish to imbue *A Child of Our Time* with relevance and coherence in order to promote accessibility for the premiere audience of first-time listeners. The desire to come to terms with what is in reality a profoundly complex work might also help to explain subsequent commentators' readiness to embrace the composer's relatively straightforward pre-concert interpretation. There have, however, been negative consequences to Tippett's pre-emptive hermeneutics. As I hope to have indicated here, even before a note had sounded, *A Child of Our Time's* meaning had been signed and sealed, and the work's capacity to be heard on its own terms severely curtailed.

According to Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, once created, 'every literary work *faces outward away from itself*, toward the listener–reader.'<sup>32</sup> During my doctoral research, I considered

<sup>29</sup> Glock, 'Music,' 2.

<sup>30</sup> Goddard, 'Oratorio with Modern Theme,' 3.

<sup>31</sup> I include: N.T. Atkinson, 'A Child of Our Time,' *Musical Opinion* 86/1029 (June 1963): 52–29; Meirion Bowen, *Michael Tippett* (London: Robson, 1997); Kenneth Gloag, *Tippett: A Child of Our Time* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999); Kemp, *Tippett*, 149–79; Philip Lahey, 'Musique Poésie I: A Child of Our Time de Sir Michael Tippett,' *Etudes Anglaises* 43 (1990): 194–202; Jeffrey Poland, 'Michael Tippett's A Child of Our Time: An Oratorio for Our Time,' *Choral Journal* 34 (1994): 9–14; Robinson, 'From Agitprop to Parable,' 78–121; Suzanne Robinson, *Pattern from the Palimpsest*, PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 1990; Thomas Schulz, 'Ein Kind unserer Zeit,' *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 152 (1991): 27–35; Stuart Sillars, 'A Child of Our Time,' *British Romantic Art and the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1991) 124–41; Arnold Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990) 70–75. The only author who does not mention Grynspan is Bowen.

<sup>32</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,' transl. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, in Michael Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 257.

*A Child of Our Time* in terms of its tangible links to historical reality, that is, as the manifestation of cultural, social, and political voices at the time of its premiere. The aim of such an approach is not only to explore the oratorio's possible relevance for the 1944 audience, but by doing so, to reveal multiple layers of hermeneutic potential to modern listeners. It is important to bear in mind, however, that throughout its existence, an artwork accumulates ever more meanings through multiple encounters with various receivers over many years and epochs and in a range of contexts. Consider, for example, the potentially pronounced contrasts between audience responses to *A Child of Our Time* at performances in, say, Tel Aviv (at the Israeli premiere on 2 May 1962) and Atlanta, Georgia in 1981 where the largely black audience joined the (mostly black) choir in singing the spirituals.<sup>33</sup> By restricting *A Child of Our Time*'s interpretation to the intention of the composer and overlooking the hermeneutic roles of social context and the receiver, we risk limiting its potential to speak to new listeners, in what is, after all, not Tippett's 'time' but an ever-expanding 'Our Time' of countless receivers in continually changing circumstances.

---

<sup>33</sup> Meirion Bowen, personal communication with the author, 2003.