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TIPPETT'S FOURTH PIANO SONATA

Philip Mead

Abstract: On 10 May 1989 pianist Philip Mead was engaged to play Tippett's Fourth Piano Sonata at Birmingham University on the occasion of the composer receiving his honorary doctorate there. This was preceded by an afternoon workshop on the piece with lively discussion between composer and pianist. Two days previously, on 8 May 1989, in preparation for the concert, Mead played the work privately to the composer. The information in this article, which is almost entirely drawn from those two meetings, begins with a brief description of working with Tippett. Then, after an overview of all four sonatas it makes general points about the structure and style of the Fourth Sonata. Finally, each movement is discussed in turn using ideas, many of which were initiated by the composer, developed by the pianist.

Working with Tippett could be an unnerving experience for those of us not in his immediate circle. The mercurial changes of mood were difficult to follow and you could inadvertently find yourself wrong-footed. In the two encounters I had with the composer on this occasion I saw two very different sides to him. (I had already encountered the composer when I played the second and third sonatas at his seventy-fifth birthday concert at the Bath Festival some years before.) In private he was the gracious host, welcoming me cordially into his beautiful home just outside Chippenham. He was conversationally generous, wanting to know about my own career and piano playing, willing to spend a great length of time trying to explain his compositional thoughts relating to his Fourth Sonata, and encouraging in my interpretation. Publicly, in the workshop, there was another side: quixotic; by turns informative, argumentative, defensive, aggressive, humorous; perhaps even a touch of the prima donna.

But in the performance later the same day he reverted to being very supportive and encouraging and gave me a standing ovation for my performance. It came as a relief some time after the event to discover that others had had similar experiences.[1] Having spoken to him briefly at the earlier birthday concert in 1982 I had been somewhat mystified by the Jungian thoughts being bandied around in a

[1] Richard Steinitz describes a public discussion at the Huddersfield Festival in 1991 chaired by Harrison Birtwistle: 'Tippett was curiously on edge; alternatively defensive, pugnacious and flippant. Despite Birtwistle's best efforts, there was no real engagement and I wished I had chaired the discussion'. Richard Steinitz, *Explosions in November – The first 33 Years of the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival* (Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press, 2011), pp. 42.

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quicksilver way over coffee at a short reception after the event, usually an occasion for small talk, not in-depth psychological discussion. I certainly had no idea what he was talking about! So I was surprised and delighted to find him at the later rehearsal only too careful to make his compositional aims crystal clear, not only to me as performer, but also to the listener.

Tippett wrote four piano sonatas – the first in 1938, the second in 1962, the third in 1973 and the fourth in 1984. Each of these four sonatas stands as an independent achievement, growing out of a particular stage of artistic development at a particular time, rather than having any overt intrinsic relationship one to another. There is, in fact, far more in common between the sonatas and their surrounding instrumental and vocal works than between the four sonatas themselves. Indeed the sonatas and other works of the same time all have material in common. The First Sonata and the Concerto for Double String Orchestra share a rhythmic and harmonic world as well as a folk song – 'Ca' the Yowes'. The Second Sonata, quite different to the first being composed in a mosaic form, shares language and some material with the opera *King Priam*, in which there is a prominent piano part. In the workshop I inadvertently called it a 'spin off' from the opera and the composer immediately interjected, objecting to the phrase; he felt, I suspect, that this belittled his piano piece which has its own logic and *raison d'étre* apart from the opera.

The Third Sonata is not so closely related but, one may say, 'bounces off' its surrounding works, the Third Symphony and the opera *The Ice Break*. So, too, the Fourth Sonata shares material with the Fourth Symphony and the oratorio *The Mask of Time*. This is the most spacious of the four sonatas – the composer allows the music time to unfold over its 37-minute span, yet at the same time there is never any sense that the structure is not completely solid. For me this product of his late maturity is his crowning pianistic achievement. His language seems in this piece to have attained a clarity and sureness of purpose which is remarkable, together with a consistency of musical thought. For me also it is the most 'pianistic' of the four sonatas.

On his own admission, Tippett always composed at the piano, but he acknowledged that

> the tradition at the RCM was that one never used the piano for such work. I quickly realised that this was impossible for me . . . I have worked with the piano ever since, keeping in direct contact with the actual sounds all the time . . . I acquired just enough technique to play in a peculiar way for myself.[2]

He told me that he had to have live sounds to create. Tippett's own piano playing, when he demonstrated short extracts to me, seemed angular and idiosyncratic. The English composer Raymond Warren, who had composition lessons with Tippett in the 1960s, has given interesting insights into his pianism and teaching style then.

> Although he claimed not to be a pianist, I came to the conclusion that sometimes his fingers helped his own composition. Certainly if he didn't know how I moved from one point to another he could improvise a join that solved the immediate problem. I remember this happened in the piano sonata lesson, and his improvisation . . . solved the harmonic problem but of course sounded like pure Tippett![3]

[2] Michael Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues* (London: Hutchinson, 1991), pp. 13–14.
[3] Email to the author 10 March 2016.

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The question of Tippett composing at the piano is an intriguing one for a pianist and warrants a little investigation. If we compare Tippett to Stravinsky – another composer who composed at the piano – we find some notable differences. I think it is reasonable to assume that Stravinsky could play all the piano music he wrote, since he performed his own music in public. 'The Augurs of Spring', from *The Rite of Spring*, is fine orchestral music but it is also pure piano music in its chordal distribution which lies perfectly under the two hands.

With Tippett it is less clear. Though composed at the piano, his music is often not 'piano' music in this sense. The Third Sonata in particular is awkward to play even for those of us who spend hours each day practising. So one can conjecture that although Tippett composed at the piano, his imagination was not bound by his fingers. It was simply an aid, and his imagination could break free from the demands of the keyboard in a way that perhaps Stravinsky's does not. (I hesitate to think how difficult some passages from *The Vision of St Augustine* would be transcribed as piano music!)

The first general aspect of the Fourth Sonata I would like to consider is that of its time span. My performance takes 37 minutes: the first movement is 5′ 30″, the second 4′ 05″, the third, 10′, the fourth, 6′ 40″, and the last 11′ 30″. There are two aspects of this that are interesting. The first is that by the end of the third movement we are only just over half way through the work. This is a chronometric fact. My second idea about the work, more speculative and based on performing the work, is that these relative chronometric times belie their psychological time spans. The fourth movement lasts 6′ 40″ in my performance but because it is a fast and bewildering *tour de force* of invertible counterpoint it seems in experiential time to last as long, if not longer, than the ten minutes of the third movement. Since these two movements are the axis upon which the sonata hinges I would suggest that they have a similar apparent time and effect in performance. On the other hand, the last movement is the longest of all the movements. By the time we reach the last movement the earlier balancing of structures has passed, leaving the composer free to give us spacious variations which, as I will discuss later, seem never to need to end.

We know from the liner notes to the classic recordings of the sonatas by Paul Crossley that:

> my Fourth Piano Sonata was first conceived years ago as probably a set of five bagatelles – like pieces connected together into one musical sequence. The means for procuring the connections that would make the set into a whole were to be tonal relations between the bagatelles and some construct of variety: of speed and style.[4]

However, when Tippett came to the actual composition of the Fourth Sonata I believe that the third movement took on a particular importance. As the composer said, 'In general the five-movement shape tends to force the necessarily central (third) movement into prominence – either of display or intensity'.[5] The opening of the third movement uses the same material as the *Mask of Time* and the opening of the Fourth Symphony, and I suggest that at quite an early stage, if not the earliest, the composer knew that the third movement would open

[4] Michael Tippett, CD liner notes to *Sir Michael Tippett: The Four Piano Sonatas*, CRD Records Ltd (CRD 3430 and 3431) (1985), performed by Paul Crossley.
[5] Tippett, CD liner notes.

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with this motif. It was obviously very significant for the composer; he became very emotional when I played it to him in rehearsal the first time although thankfully he liked the way I played it.

Perhaps movements one and two were added later, composing backwards from the central movement. The fourth movement balances the third movement for reasons that I have already stated, and these two movements become the hinge upon which the sonata revolves, with the last movement acting as a postlude. Indeed, the composer told me that the return of the blues theme at the very end was his farewell to the piano – he knew at that very late stage of his life that he would never write another piano sonata.

How is the solidity of this magnificent and wholly unique five-movement structure achieved? I believe the secret to this lies largely in the use of coherent tonal centres and systematic pedal notes throughout. We know from the liner notes to the complete recording that the composer was alerted to the use of resonance by Paul Crossley, who had played much music by Messiaen; and Tippett emphasised this point again in the workshop. This gives the sonata a very different colour from the other sonatas, with the possible exception of the second movement of the Third Sonata.

This use of colour and resonance is based on the simple fact that the lower the note on the piano the longer the decay time (half a second for the top C to over one minute for the lowest A), an aspect of pianism masterfully exploited by Debussy and other colourists. In the first three sonatas this seems to me almost completely missing. The First Sonata could almost be harpsichord music in its lithe athleticism. The second is Stravinskian in its mosaic structure and bell-like sounds (though surprisingly English in some of its episodes, – tempo 4 could almost be a snippet of E.J. Moeran). The Third Sonata is sinewy and contrapuntal in its outer movements. The Fourth Sonata, by contrast, has a ravishing opulence of sound that is created, I believe, by two aspects which will be discussed in turn: those aforementioned pedal notes and tonal centres, and the 'stride' style of chord formation.

In the Fourth Sonata these tonal centres and pedals themselves are highly organised. The basic tonal centres for the five movements in order are B♭, C, A, C♯, and D/B♭. As we progress through the sonata we find these tonal centres are used as pedal notes and are omnipresent in various ways in each movement. The first movement uses these pedal notes right at the beginning of the sonata. (Example 1). The

Example 1:
Michael Tippett, Sonata No. 4 for piano, Mvt 1, bars 1–9. Reproduction of all music examples is by kind permission of Schott & Co. Ltd. London

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third movement uses them very clearly in an almost palindromic way, but in the middle section of the third movement (Example 4) they occur as stark double octaves held in the third pedal. Since this comes at the very centre of the sonata it is obvious that Tippett wanted to make very clear the relationship of the tonal centres of the work; this is another instance of the composer deploying his musical language with great clarity. These pedal points will be discussed in more detail later.

The last general comments I would like to make about the sonata concern the jazz/blues element which is more strongly marked in this sonata than in any of the others. Many composers flirted with jazz in the twenties and thirties, Ravel, Stravinsky, Milhaud and Constant Lambert among others, but it seems to me that the essence of Tippettian thought in his later years was so interwoven with jazz/ blues that it is impossible to tell where one ends and the next begins. In *Those Twentieth Century Blues* he writes,

> The Blues is the fundamental musical form of our time . . . when you sing the blues you do so not just because you are 'blue', but to relieve the blue emotions . . . The blues for me was a metaphor; an archetype even.[6]

We can see examples of this from the very start. The two most characteristic chordal formations and sounds in the Fourth Sonata are the chord of the fundamental plus a tenth, with or without the fifth, and the 'blue' note which gives rise to major/minor chords. At the very beginning we have both the B♭–D tenth and the flattened 'blue' seventh. I suggested to the composer in the workshop that this might come from the 'stride' style of jazz pianists and played a bit of *Honeysuckle Rose* in the Fats Waller version. He did not disagree (see Example 1).

The stride style of chord formation in the left hand is found throughout the sonata: at the very opening (see Example 1), at the opening of movement three, and in the opening of the left hand subject in movement four. It is the last chord of the variation theme in movement five and thus also ends the sonata. It is the prevailing sound of the sonata. The unlikely bedfellow of Messiaen (pedal notes) plus Fats Waller (stride) gives the Tippettian magic, the synthesis of disparate elements so typical of the composer.

When it comes to the 'blue' note (the flattened third or seventh), we must remember that it cannot really be sounded on the piano. If we try to pitch the inflections of a blues singer like Bessie Smith exactly we find ourselves trying to play in the cracks. In order to give some credence to the 'blue' note ambiguity the nearest a piano can do with its fixed pitch limitation is to play major and minor together, as in bar 6 of Example 1. Thus in the third section of the first movement, the opening chord of the third movement and the theme of the fifth movement all have this chord or variants of it. Moreover, in other places it is turned into melody, the most striking illustration of this being the second movement's fugue.

Before embarking on a more detailed look at each movement I would like to make an additional comment on the basic structure of the first four movements. In the workshop I suggested the word 'concentric' to the composer and, although he did not disagree, he said that more in his mind was the baroque aria da capo form. With hindsight the only movement that could truly be said to be

[6] Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues*, pp. 274–5.

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concentric in my sense of the word is the third movement, but on the other hand these movements are not quite in aria form either. If aria form is A–B–A embellished, then none of the other movements fulfil this, since the repetition of A is often direct rather than decorated. Thus the first movement comprises sections A–B–C–D–A–B–C, the second A–B–A expanded (if we omit the fugal augmentation), the third A–B–C–B–A and the fourth A–B–C–D–E–A–B–C–A. The fifth movement is the odd one out with its theme and variations and a reprise of the theme at the end. We have another example of Tippett using an older form but giving it a wholly personal twist.

Now let us consider in more detail each movement in turn. The first movement opens immediately with a blues chord (Example 1). The whole of the first section (bars 1–20) is based on fundamentals B♭, C, A, In the second section (bars 21–29) the fundamental moves from A to C♯ and the fundamental of the third section (bars 30–41) is D. These pedal notes are important, and they recur unambiguously in the exact middle of the whole work, the central section of the third movement discussed below (see Example 3). We notice the stark simplicity of the octaves of the second section and the third section is based on the blues chord D–A–E–F♯–D–F♮. The first movement's middle section (bars 42–74), at first with right hand high up with its fourth chords, seems to inhabit the world of *The Midsummer Marriage*. The pedal points G, A♭, F share an affinity with the opening B♭, C, A. The return of the first three sections is with reversed dynamics and octave doublings but otherwise is a direct repetition of the opening except that there is octave displacement (bars 93–94).

The second movement, described to me by the composer as a fugue, is in some ways the most difficult to grasp. He said it was the one which pianists found the most difficult to understand; I was no exception. It is certainly the least pianistic, but I think he was referring less to technique and more to meaning. I think it is reasonable to call this a duplex form and it is this that perhaps creates the problem of understanding. On the one hand we have the da capo form with a still central section in two-part mirror writing, on the other hand the fugue subject – a melodic version of the blues chord of the opening grows by augmentation throughout the three sections so that its two-note cell begins in length one beat two beats; then two beats, three beats; then three beats, six beats; then four beats, eight beats in length which cuts across the three-part structure.

There is an overlap between the central section and the continuation of the fugue – bars 55 and following. This is a characteristic example of Tippett taking a traditional procedure (fugue with augmentation) and giving it a wholly personal and unusual (though completely logical when understood) twist. In few examples of fugal augmentation that I can think of does the augmentation simply get longer and longer! While this process is working through, however, the da capo idea is also working alongside it. The fact that the fugue subject itself has a countersubject of prancing Tippettian high spirits is also an indication that the composer's natural ebullience is not going to be hidebound by intellectual processes (see Example 2).

The opening of the third movement uses the widest spaced and most sonorous chord in the piece, one also used in both the Fourth Symphony and *The Mask of Time*, and sits on pedals A, C, B♭, B, D – the reverse of the opening of the work. The sonority of the piano sounds is orchestral in conception – one could imagine horns at the opening, followed by woodwind rising fourths. (Some pianists, like me, find this leap of the imagination helpful, other more literal

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Example 2:
Tippett, Sonata No. 4 for piano, Mvt 2, bars 1–7

ones dismiss the approach as nonsense.) This movement is the only one that can be truly called concentric: A–B–C–B–A. The second section (bars 27–45) is a three voice blues the left hand giving the stride inspired tenth chord while the right hand adds ambiguity by giving us rhythmic counterpoint.

The middle section (bars 46–82) juxtaposes 'hammered' (Tippett's own indication in the score), B♭s with a trumpet call over changing pedal notes B♭, C, A, C♯, D, thus strictly following the opening of the work and the tonal centres of the five movements. The mix of C and D chords in the right hand has a distinct feel of Vaughan Williams about it, a composer whom, according to Raymond Warren, Tippett 'venerated'.[7] The held pedal notes are the only instance of the composer's use of the third pedal and in the workshop he said that it was suggested to him by Paul Crossley, who pointed out its use in the piano music of Messiaen. When I suggested to Tippett that Messiaen hardly ever uses the third pedal, because French pianos do not generally have it, he became defensive, pleading ignorance (see Example 3).

The fourth movement has both a micro and a macro da capo form. If we take all the fast sections together to form A we get a simple A–B–A form. But the A section itself is made up of micro sections a–b–c–a. The a section has invertible counterpoint between the two hands. This movement has always struck me as joyous and exhilarating. The invention of the counterpoint is at white heat. If we analyse the makeup of the micro a sections we can see the invention involved. There is no time signature – quite rightly as the groupings are irregular to a high degree. There are bar lines but they are used to delineate phrase lengths and not rhythmic units. Thus we find the following number of semiquavers between the bar lines – 14/22/13/10/24/14. This seems fairly straightforward. But if we break this down to the groupings we find the following make up of each number: 545/424242/544/2224/33333333/44222. In other words all different! In addition to this we find the invertible counterpoint as follows: subject

[7] Email to the author, 10 March 2016.

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Example 3:
Tippett, Sonata No. 4 for piano, Mvt 3, bars 53–59

in the left hand (bars 1–6), subject in the right hand (bars 7–12), subject in the right hand inverted (bars 13–18).

The return of the section transposes everything down a fifth, but retains the general organisation. The micro b section (bars 19–33) makes extensive use of mirroring between the two hands. Bars 31–33 are one of the few instances in the sonata of transition. In the micro c section (bars 34–45) the right hand thirds seem to me to come from Chopin (perhaps a piece like the *Berceuse* or the Study in Thirds) while the left hand uses configurations of the blues chord in 'stride' style. Play each hand separately and they sound like blues and Chopin (except that the Chopin has become a bit atonal); put them together and you are immediately drawn into one of the composer's richest inspirations – to the alchemy that is characteristic of the composer's language (see Example 4).

Example 4:
Tippett, Sonata No. 4 for piano, Mvt 4, bars 117–120

The slow middle section (bars 64–83) is a strict canon at a distance of two octaves and a tone. The composer pointed out that the small

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acciaccaturas are there to enable the listener to find their bearings in the canon. The movement then retraces its steps through the first three sections but at the end takes a new twist: it dissolves down to a C♯-D♯-E♯ held chord. Tippett indicated that the silent pause bar at the end after this chord should be treated rather like a comma or a breath, after which we are immediately led into the last movement. When I simply made a gap here in rehearsal he got quite irritated and explained that the thought line must continue through the silence straight into the fifth movement. The reasons for this dogmatic assertion becomes clear immediately before the final reprise of the blues theme as the last movement could revolve around itself eternally.

In my initial comments on the last movement I said that it had a timeless quality and this C♯-D♯-E♯ from the fourth movement may add weight to this idea. The theme of the variations is repeated, exactly, at the end of the sonata and preceded by the same three notes. Thus the movement could be repeated over and over again with no loss of coherence; the *ouroboros* of Greek and other legends, the snake eating its own tail; the eternal return. The composer told me in rehearsal that the reprise of the blues theme at the end was his farewell to the piano. It's almost as if, rather than make some final irrevocable act of finishing, he has given us a movement which revolves on itself and could theoretically keep going on for ever.

The theme is followed by five variations. The theme and variations are all themselves A–B–A2 form but with an elided A2. These travel far and wide except for bars 10 and 11 of the theme and each subsequent variation. At the tenth bar of each succeeding variation we find a recognisable version of these two bars which the composer put in to try to keep the listener on track.

Example 5:
Tippett, Sonata No. 4 for piano, Mvt 5, bars 9–15

Thus, in variation one, which begins at bar 18, bars 27 and 28 have a siciliano-like lilt. In variation two, which begins at bar 37, they are in split tenths at bar 46–47. In variation three, which begins at bar 59, they are in the left hand at bars 68, 69 and 70, and in variation four, beginning at bar 80, they come as triplet semiquavers in bars 89, 90 and 91. In this movement Tippett told me that he had in mind the late sonatas of Beethoven, especially Op. 109 and Op. 111. Op. 109's third movement is a theme and variations, with a reprise of the theme at the end, and the end of the second movement of Op. 111 has the two hands at each end of the keyboard, very much as in Variation 5 of this last movement (see Example 6).

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Example 6:
Tippett, Sonata No. 4 for piano, Mvt 6, bars 80–81

The reprise of the theme brings me to my last conjectural point. Bars 113–114 have a jazz/blues grouping of semiquavers which seems to me to be reminiscent of the ending of the First Sonata (though in inverted form). Of course one is slow and the other fast and it is impossible to say whether this was subliminal or conscious; nor was it a point he made to me, but the apparent connection brings these four piano sonatas full circle.

If there is an underlying theme in this article it is that what has become apparent to me is the extraordinary way in which Tippett can use material in unlikely juxtapositions and transformations and yet produce music that is uniquely his own. I have mentioned Chopin plus Fats Waller, Messiaen plus jazz, Bachian counterpoint, Beethoven, Baroque aria form, Vaughan Williams and the English pastoral tradition. We know that the composer took his own musical education very seriously, and his compositions show a profound awareness of musical history, yet at the same time they create something vibrantly new and unique. In another context, Julian Johnson has eloquently described this aspect of Tippett's contribution to our cultural and imaginative life:

> Not only does music offer the possibility of transcending daily life; it offers, in as many forms as there are musics, a reshaping of those categories. It doesn't obliterate them in some narcotic emptiness but reworks them and thus offers us new models of experience. And this has real power, because as we participate in this process of enactment, we experience new ways for ourselves. When we leave the musical work and return to daily life, we have tasted a different way of being, a different perception of the world. Potentially this leaves us marked by the experience. It subsequently produces an altered perception of the world.[8]

[8] Julian Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music? Cultural Choice and Musical Value* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2002), p. 129.

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