

TIPPETT *A Child of Our Time* • Michael Tippett, cond; Faye Robinson (sop); Sarah Walker (mez); Jon Garrison (ten); John Cheek (bs); City of Birmingham SO & Ch • NAXOS 8.557570 (69:19 📻)

I was a teenager when I discovered *A Child of Our Time*, and it hasn't let go of me since. Tippett's text, while sometimes naive ("the soul of man is impassioned like a woman," for example), gets under one's skin, and its music is instantly approachable and effective, but without pandering. Tippett wrote this score between 1939 and 1941, but it wasn't performed until 1944, after the composer had served a three-month sentence for being a conscientious objector. The oratorio was inspired by an incident in Paris: in 1938, a Jewish refugee, a 17-year-old Pole named Herschel Grynszpan who had been separated from his family, fatally shot a German diplomat after efforts to save them through bureaucratic means failed. (The boy's family had been arrested by the Gestapo). In turn, the boy was arrested and tried by the French, and the Nazi pogroms in the East intensified. After war broke out, the Nazis took Grynszpan from his French jail cell, and he was never heard from again.

Tippett follows this story only obliquely, and there are allusions to other human outrages. Rather than ending with a sugary plea for peace, or a statement that "all men are brothers," Tippett goes deeper. He asserts that, in shooting the diplomat, the young Pole "shoots only his dark brother." Near the end of the work, the tenor sings, "I would know my shadow and my light, so shall I at last be whole." Tippett seems to be saying that only by confronting and knowing our personal evils can we find hope; simply believing in the goodness of Man isn't going to cut it. And how appropriate *A Child* remains. As the chorus sings "Away with them! Curse them! Kill them! They infect the state," I cannot help but think of the government's escalating efforts to vilify and marginalize gay men and women. I don't doubt that Tippett would have made the same association.

The work's tripartite structure echoes Handel's *Messiah*, and its alternating choruses, solos, and narrations hearken back to Bach's passion settings. Tippett replaces the foursquare German chorales, however, with settings of five Negro spirituals. Sometimes these are performed on their own, but they make more sense performed in the context of the entire work.

A Child has been recorded several times, beginning, I think, with a recording from the late 1950s conducted by John Pritchard. The Colin Davis recording on Philips was my first. It features a sterling quartet of soloists (Jessye Norman, Janet Baker, Richard Cassilly, and John Shirley-Quirk). Davis has the work's feel, but it's a rather sloppy performance, and the diction is often poor. (I had to buy a second recording to find out that the tenor is singing, "How can I grow to a man's stature?") André Previn's early digital recording with the Royal Philharmonic is a thriller. I have not heard the Richard Hickox version on Chandos. What a shame that Robert Shaw never recorded this music. (Did he conduct it?)

The present recording dates from 1991, and was originally released on the Collins Classics label. One shouldn't assume that any composer's recording of his own work is definitive. Nevertheless, Tippett's reading is a strong one, and anyone who loves this work should consider adding it to his or her collection, now that it is available at such a low price. The composer's tempos are relatively leisurely, yet the toughness of his vision is never in doubt. Frankly, he is a better disciplinarian than Davis, at least this time around. While Davis's vocal quartet tends to be stoic, Tippett's is emotional—perhaps too emotional for some tastes. Walker, for example, sucks all the bitterness out of her statement that "the living God consumes within and turns the flesh to cancer." Garrison is more than plaintive in his solo, "I have no money for my bread." The chorus and orchestra are excellent, as is the engineering. All in all, this is a deeply moving performance, and it is a well executed one, too. I'd probably put this CD on my Want List, if it weren't a reissue of an only recently defunct release.

Raymond Tuttle