

Tippett

®

A Child of our Time

Faye Robinson *sop* Sarah Walker *mez*

Jon Garrison *ten* John Cheek *bass*

City of Birmingham Symphony Chorus
and Orchestra / Sir Michael Tippett

Naxos ⑤ 8 557570 (70' • DDD)

From Collins Classics 1339-2 (9/92)

Selected comparisons:

Pritchard (3/77R) (BELA) 461 123-2

Hickox (2/93) (CHAN) CHAN9123

C Davis (9/95) (PHIL) 446 331-2PH2

Tippett's lovingly crafted version of his masterpiece deserves its special place

The centenary of Sir Michael Tippett's birth has seen a fair amount of critical agonising about whether he is, any longer, a composer



for our time, or whether the long Indian summer he enjoyed before his death at the age of 93 simply served to conceal the fact that his time had already gone.

It's difficult to find much substance in that viewpoint when confronted with a work, first performed in 1944, which seems to have more in common with John Adams's much-admired *El Niño* of 2000 than with *Belshazzar's Feast*, or even with the *War Requiem*. The starkness of the confrontations in *A Child of our Time* between politics and psychology, between a high-art style rooted in Bach and a more popular, folk-tinged manner (the tango, Negro Spirituals), remains vivid, as does the sense of a composer doggedly carving out a viably personal idiom while not shirking matters of burning social and spiritual relevance. Maybe the focus wavers in places but the accumulated dramatic power, and its double release, first in a magical vision of spring, then in a more anxious, uncertain cry for peace and reconciliation, is not something that a bumbling amateur could have brought off.

Tippett was 87 when this recording was made, and neither its rhythmic momentum nor its textural clarity are ideal. The sound balance seems decorously recessed when it needs to be urgently immediate, and there is a general lack of definition, especially in the orchestra. Like others before him, John Cheek sounds overly neutral in the rather laconic bass recitatives, but the soloists together make a strong team, especially in the final ensemble. Other accounts, under Sir John Pritchard, Sir Colin Davis or Richard Hickox, are all safer overall recommendations. But the composer's own lovingly crafted reading has a special place in the discography of this still-modern masterpiece. **Arnold Whittall**