

THE SONATA FOR FOUR HORNS BY SIR MICHAEL TIPPET

Presented by Kerry Turner and The American Horn Quartet

The Sonata for Four Horns by Sir Michael Tippett was composed for the Dennis Brain Horn Quartet. It was premiered in Wigmore Hall on the 20th of December, 1955. The horn players were Dennis Brain, Neill Sanders, Edmund Chapman and Alfred Cursue.

This will not be an academic lecture about the Tippett. The members of the American Horn Quartet are first and foremost performers. We make musical decisions based on trial and error, experience and tradition.

Therefore I would like to call this introduction to the Tippett, "Observations on the Preparation, Rehearsing, Understanding and Performance of the Sonata for Four Horns by Tippett."

A- THE REPERTOIRE FOR HORN QUARTET (1985)

When I joined the AHQ in 1985, the repertoire we had may look rather familiar to you:

Tscherepnin, Bozza, Mitushin, Homilius, Koetsier, Bernard Heiden

Or, if you were feeling ambitious:

Hindemith, Tippett and Schumann

There were scores of other, lighter pieces as well. Also quite good arrangements of already existing compositions.

CONCERTS FEATURING HINDEMITH AND TIPPETT

We unfortunately discovered that these two masterpieces- Hindemith and Tippett- were not going over as well with the "normal" horn quartet audiences. They did however fit nicely onto programs where 20th century music was being featured, as well as at universities and music schools.

THE TIPPETT MUSIC FESTIVAL IN STOCKHOLM 1998

In 1998, the AHQ was invited to fly up and over from Hong Kong, where we were in residence for a week, to perform the Sonata for Four Horns as part of the Stockholm Tippett Festival. This was, of course, the perfect opportunity for us to learn, and attempt to master this great work. We were supposed to perform it in

the presence of Sir Michael himself. But he took ill while we were there and was hospitalized. He flew back to London, where he passed away shortly afterwards.

On a lighter note:

After this occasion, the AHQ wished to continue to play and promote the work. We discovered that if we present a clear demonstration of the main themes and their different versions throughout the piece, the audience seemed to better follow it and appreciate it much more. At least, this was the feedback we received during these years.

THE MAIN PROBLEM IS WITH ENDURANCE

The Sonata for Four Horns is very taxing. It is especially in the third movement where one begins to notice his strength is waning. We have divided among the three high horn players, the more tiring, lyrical melody line which floats above the obligato. It is nevertheless a challenge to arrive at the end of the work with the vigor and panache one desires (for me personally, it is the last 8 lines of the 4th movement!). The inclusion therefore, of the Sonata on a full 1 ½ to 2-hour concert becomes very risky. This is unfortunately one of the major considerations in programming horn quartet concerts.

Thus the Tippet began to fade from our regular repertoire.

B- PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS IN PUTTING TOGETHER THE TIPPET

It is simply not recommended that four horn players, no matter how good they are, come together on an afternoon, sit down and sight-read the Tippet. You must practice your assigned (or chosen) part in advance and have the fingerings down, at least to a degree where you can "fake" through most of it. It is also highly recommended that you listen to a recording of the work.

SECOND MOVEMENT- The movement opens with a very exciting dotted-8th- 16th figure. And this accompaniment rhythm powers the entire movement. But on top on this rhythm, and below it actually as well, are complicated running triplets. The effect of the triplets against the dotted-8th- 16th accompaniment is one sloppiness and imprecision. It sounds like we are not together and not rhythmically accurate. However, if the accompaniment plays the rhythm as extremely precisely as possible, and properly bows down to second priority, giving the triplets the lead, the effect can be quite pugnacious.

THIRD MOVEMENT- it over complicated in its notation. 21/16 and 15/16 17/16 is really unnecessary. We have restructured the time signature to this configuration:

We have also included cues and small notes under the main line to better understand what the other players are doing and “see” how the movement fits together.

And as I said, we have divided the top line up among three players to help with endurance.

There is a small issue with the muted section at the very end. It is a good effect and should be executed. It does however require the players to hold their mutes on a string throughout the movement.

TEMPI IN ALL OF THE MOVEMENTS

Sir Michael Tippett indicated really rather quick tempos throughout, with the exception of the slow movement. While the quick tempi give the work its spectacular flare and excitement (as well as exploit the virtuosity of Dennis Brain, for whom the work was written), they can be a hindrance in the performing the piece with the proper precision and attention to interpretive detail.

Tonguing problems: In order to successfully play movements 1, 2 and 4, the players need to all be able to double and triple tongue and move smoothly back and forth between these two and the single tongue. For the 4th horn, this becomes a very big issue indeed, as it is more difficult to do multiple tonguing in the low register. There are quite a few world-class horn players who have never acquired a double or triple tongue. It is interesting to note that Dennis Brain himself, very often changed slurred passages to a smooth legato. With that in mind, I don't personally see a problem with altering the articulations, as long as the music effect is not lost. We however, only do this a couple of times. But in the 2nd movement, especially, there are times when legato triple tonguing could easily replace the slurred indication. As a composer myself, I always welcome suggestions from performers who are struggling with a particular articulation I have indicated. If the passage can be effectively brought off with a small change of articulation, I'm all for it. I prefer that the players achieve the notes, dynamics and style above all. Small alterations in articulation don't really bother me.

In the slow movement (movement 3), the music reaches a point where the polyphonic, contrapuntal treatment of the themes comes to a halt and, after a short and very needed rest, continues with a chorale of sorts (32). It is indicated two 16ths = 80. In our version it is an 8th note = 80. This is fairly close to our own tempo. The second part does, however, bog down slightly. And if we are desirous of keeping the music more accessible to audiences, it may be advised to move the tempo up slightly, say 8th note (or two 16ths) = 96. The hypnotic feel of the movement is essential, I think, and should be maintained, even in the faster tempo.

MOVEMENT 4- THE FUGUE

There are two main issues to address in the finale.

Problem 1: Tippett uses 3 main themes in the fugue. And in proper fugal treatment, he states right at the beginning, the Subject, the Answer and the Secondary Answer. There are 2 or 3 other smaller motives, which tie the movement together, but other than this, there is not a lot of "free counterpoint" going on. The 3 main fugue themes are passed around rather manically, and are juxtaposed upon each other throughout the fugue. It is imperative that the performers decide which motives receive priority and which ones are truly secondary at which point in the piece. Otherwise the effect is one of cacophony. Despite the 4 players enthusiasm and virtuosity, the effect on the audience is lost. As a matter of fact, after the premier in 1955, critics described the work as being "as thick as porridge."

It was interesting to listen to the various recordings in existence because each group chose different places to put the priority line at different times. That's the wonderful thing about being a free interpretive artist! But you MUST make the decisions and convincingly execute them.

Problem 2: There are several technical passages, which are challenging. The patterns change ever so slightly, mostly on the 3rd time. These are passages, which are sequential in structure. Analytically this is interesting and can be doubtless attributed to a similar pattern in one of the other movements. But in the final performance effect, it goes right over the audience's heads and frustrates the players' fingers and ears. But we do it anyway.
