

"*King Priam*, Sir Michael Tippett's second opera, was the work that changed his reputation completely. It was first performed in 1962, at a festival organised to celebrate the opening of the newly rebuilt Coventry Cathedral, which had been bombed during the second world war.

Before *King Priam*, Tippett had been regarded as a second-rate figure, often castigated for what was considered muddled intellectualising and technical incompetence. Only one major work, his oratorio *A Child of Our Time*, had been regarded as worthy of esteem: and even then, its use of Negro spirituals (rather than chorales or hymn tunes) at key points in the work was considered a lapse in taste. Ernest Ansermet, conducting the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 1952 in a performance of Tippett's Symphony No 1, wrote to say that the slow movement was just "paper music", with no harmonic relations between its ground bass and variations. Another conductor, Sir Malcolm Sargent, withdrew from conducting the premiere of Tippett's *Fantasia Concertante on a Theme of Corelli*, saying he was determined "to get the intellectuals out of music". Adrian Boult later conducted the premiere of Tippett's Second Symphony, which broke down after two minutes: the fault really lay with the leader of the BBC SO, Paul Beard, who insisted on having the parts recopied without the rhythmic groupings across bar-lines, which Tippett felt necessary to achieve correct articulation of his ideas.

But denigration of the composer had already reached a peak in 1955, with the production of his first opera, *The Midsummer Marriage*. The cast was reportedly baffled and the critics had a field day with the libretto, declared by Cecil Smith in the Daily Express to be "one of the worst in the 350-year history of opera". Intriguingly, the same writer became a devotee of the music, which he thought revealed a composer of first stature.

King Priam changed all that. The brilliance of the production, under the direction of Sam Wanamaker and Sean Kenny, allied to superb singing and orchestral playing, aroused great enthusiasm. This time the plot held no mystery, since the storyline, based on Homer, was crystal-clear. Criticism now focused on its abrasive musical idiom, which entailed breaking up the orchestra into a multiplicity of soloists and ensembles. Not everyone then realised the relevance of this, and its mosaic-like formal structure, to Tippett's Brechtian handling of the presentation. It often takes some time for new music to gain the kind of understanding it deserves, but Tippett was lucky in that a decade later a recording of *King Priam*, with the London Sinfonietta, conducted by David Atherton, became an international bestseller.

The opera subsequently received numerous productions, notably by Kent Opera and, strikingly, by L'Atelier de Recherche de L'Art Lyrique, an enterprising opera company based at the Noisiel Arts Centre, outside Paris, which was toured to a number of French towns. Suddenly, Tippett's reputation in France – which had not paid much attention to him hitherto – escalated, and his music was featured at numerous French festivals. He himself remained unaffected by the neglect and the diatribes, merely saying that one day they would all catch up..."

Meirion Bowen, *The Guardian* (edited), 7 February 2014

This release presents in its entirety the BBC broadcast of that first performance of *King Priam* in Coventry Theatre in 1962. I have opted to include the narration provided by the composer before each of the three acts, though this has meant splitting the second act across two CDs. For the most part the sound quality of the preserved recordings is excellent. However, it should be pointed out that there are one or two places where it is less than optimal – this is the best of what has been preserved and made available for this restoration. *King Priam* has had few commercial outings – the "decade later" Chandos recording with David Atherton conducting was in fact made in 1980, nearly 20 years after the première. This release can, therefore, only add to the understanding of a pivotal work in the career of Tippett, whose reputation would only grow in the years that followed its first performance.

Andrew Rose



tippett king priam

PRISTINE
AUDIO

PACO 203

TIPPETT KING PRIAM - WORLD PREMIERE
ROBINSON, COLLIER, GODFREY, YEASEY, DOBSON, COVENT GARDEN OPERA, PRITCHARD

PACO 203

PRISTINE
AUDIO**disc one**
(65:30)

1. *Introduction* (1:26)
2. *Synopsis 1* (6:04)
3. *National Anthem* (1:20)

act one
scene 1

4. *Prelude* (1:25)
5. *What is it, Nurse?* (3:19)
6. *Old man of Troy, you're welcome* (2:14)
7. *Then am I no longer mother to this child* (1:26)
8. *A father and a king* (1:38)
9. *The queen is right* (1:16)
10. *Thus shall a story begin* (2:49)

scene 2

11. *The bull is away over there* (2:14)
12. *They have taken my bull* (2:13)
13. *Father, he's a shepherd boy* (1:53)
14. *So I'd hoped it might be* (5:11)
15. *Ah, but life, life is a bitter charade* (4:38)

scene 3

16. *Ah, ah* (4:43)
17. *Divine go-between, that's who I am* (2:04)
18. *Lady Athene, if I honour you* (0:50)
19. *Lady Hera, if I honour you* (1:43)
20. *Aphrodite, if I honour you* (2:06)

act two
scene 1

21. *Interval and Synopsis 2* (2:37)
22. *So you've given up fighting!* (3:37)
23. *So Trojans honour Melenaus* (1:25)
24. *Hermes, Hermes, with the winged feet come quick!* (1:41)

scene 2

25. *O rich-soiled land* (5:38)

disc two
(77:25)

scene 3

1. *Why are you weeping, Patroclus?* (4:42)
2. *O, O, what a threat to Troy* (1:38)
3. *A hero in Achilles' armour* (1:16)
4. *All Trojans, all fought bravely* (4:49)

act three
scene 1

5. *Interval and Synopsis 3* (5:18)
6. *Lady Andromache, should we not light the fire?* (4:13)
7. *Daughter Andromache, you must go out* (2:20)
8. *Did you hear?* (1:26)
9. *Let her rave* (4:14)
10. *O that my ears should hear impiety so gross!* (3:38)
11. *Now you shall go* (1:22)
12. *No .. no .. no .. We have it from the runner* (1:43)

scene 2

13. *What is happening?* (3:44)
14. *A crime* (3:40)
15. *The soul will answer from where the pain is quickest* (5:22)

scene 3

16. *Interlude* (2:57)
17. *Priam! Here! What is this?* (1:46)
18. *I clasp your knees., Achilles* (1:36)
19. *Old man, I am touched* (4:25)
20. *Interlude* (4:11)

scene 4

21. *Where is my father, where is Priam?* (1:15)
22. *Ah, ah! Ah, ah!* (2:08)
23. *Ah, ha, ha, ha* (1:23)
24. *Ah ,Ah!* (5:06)

25. *Closing announcement* (3:13)
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N.B. Full cast and other recording details are available online

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