

A Perfectly English Homage to Bach — and a Slap in the Face of the Nazis

MICHAEL TIPPETT'S 'A CHILD OF OUR TIME' GIVES NOD TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN SPIRITUALS

Somehow the world didn't quite understand the Nazis in mid-1938. Then Herschel Grynszpan, a teenage German-born Polish Jew living in Paris, found out his family had been among 12,000 German/Polish Jews arrested, stripped of their property and citizenship, then deported from Hanover for locations unknown in Poland. Grynszpan was young; he was angry and he wanted revenge.

After buying a revolver, Grynszpan shot a German ambassador, who eventually died from his wounds. The Nazi Party used this act as an excuse for the infamous *Kristallnacht*, when Nazis and their supporters smashed Jewish businesses to pieces, burned synagogues, attacked and killed more than 90 Jews in Germany and arrested tens of thousands of German Jews for deportation to the camps.

Out of this agony — and this early revelation of the Nazis' depravity — came a career-defining inspiration for English composer Michael Tippett and a powerful, moving oratorio that Eugene and Portland audiences can hear during this year's Bach Festival.

That oratorio is "A Child of Our Time," and an homage to Tippett's desire for peace, to his beliefs in the theories of Karl Jung — and to Johann Sebastian Bach.

John Evans, the Bach Fest's executive director, says that this year is a perfect time for the festival to perform "Child." For one thing, new artistic director designate Matthew Halls — an Englishman who takes over from German founder Helmuth Rilling after the 2013 fest — needed to cement last year's impressive audition performance with another example of his conducting powers. What better way than by presenting a British composer? And as Evans says, "Child" firmly and directly shows the influence of Bach, especially Bach's massive *St. Matthew Passion*, which is on this year's program as the concluding piece for the 17-day festival.

Tippett "found in Bach's Passion a perfect structure by which to breathe new life into the contemplative form of the oratorio," Halls says. The composer, who was not religious but who found inspiration in the pacifism of Gandhi, wanted to update the style of Bach's Lutheran mass while paying tribute to the form.

"Several of the virtuoso fugal choruses are instantly recognizable," Hall says, because they are "directly related to the powerful choral outbursts at crucial points during the Bach Passions."

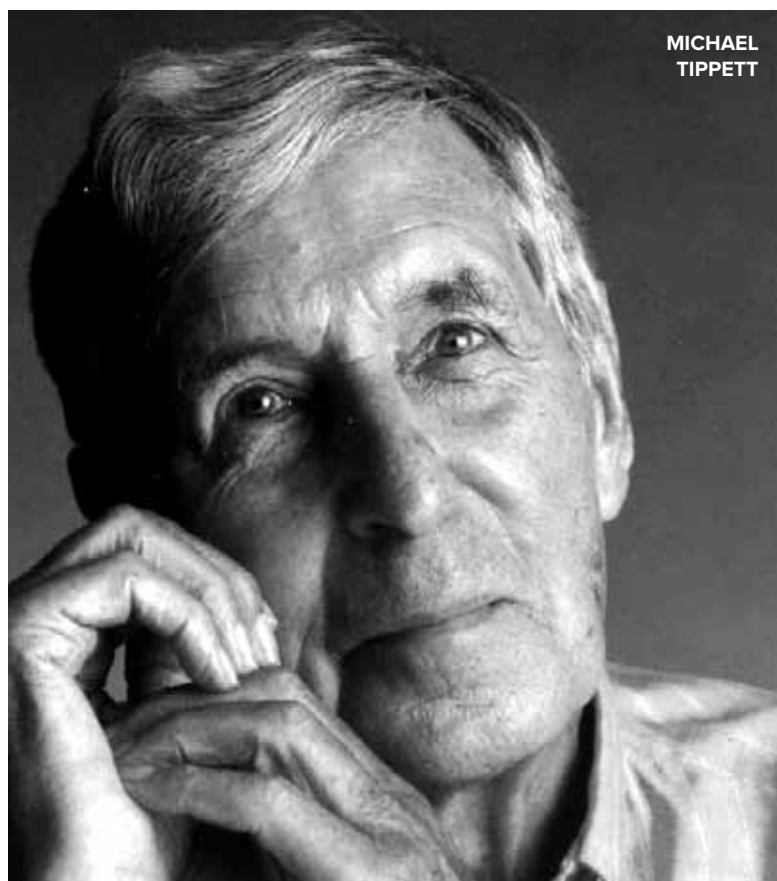
But there's an American aspect to "A Child of Our Time," written from 1939-1941 and first performed in the middle of WWII, as well. Tippett wanted some way to move listeners like himself who weren't particularly religious but who could recognize powerful, emotionally rich music. He found his solution while listening to the radio when he heard a performance of the African-American spiritual "Steal Away" (or "Steal Away to Jesus").

Tippett used five different spirituals in the oratorio, and both Halls and Evans think American audiences will particularly appreciate them. "These hauntingly beautiful pieces, involving practically everybody on stage, resonate powerfully," Halls says. "They seem to reach out to the collective subconscious in such a way as to unite us all."

Evans, who's Welsh, believes that "American audiences are much more used to a greater range of arrangements of the spirituals" and that a variety of arrangements — through choral performances, sometimes by high school choirs, are "much more part of the American culture. It is imported to a degree in the U.K., so you probably get many more reference points."

That makes "A Child of Our Time" less intimidating in some ways than the large Bach works, and it's certainly shorter — "half a program," Evans notes, with Bach's short and lovely Mass in G Major making up the first half, at 7:30 pm Friday, July 6, in Portland, and at the same time Saturday, July 7, in Eugene.

"People find it a very beautiful work, very thought-provoking, very satisfying; thrilling in places, touching in others, and it's almost always met with an awed silence at the end," Evans says. "I would encourage people who don't know it to try it on for size, and I think they'll be very happily surprised. I think it's going to be one of the great revelations of the festival." — *Suzi Steffen*



MICHAEL TIPPETT

OBF2012 OREGON BACH FESTIVAL SCHEDULE & HIGHLIGHTS!

WEDNESDAY 6/27

"Light the Torch" opening gala fundraiser, 6pm, Valley River Inn;

Live broadcast: Tango Harmonica, 6:30pm, 89.7 FM, KLCC

FRIDAY 6/29

Linda Hathaway Bunza plays music of Mendelssohn, 6:30pm, Hult Center

Opening ceremonies: PICCFEST Choirs, 6:45pm, Hult Center

Joshua Bell plays Mendelssohn, 7:30pm, Hult Center, \$15-\$62

SATURDAY 6/30

On the House: PICCFEST Choirs, 1pm, Hult Center

OBF Cinema: *We Grew Wings*, 9pm, McDonald Theatre, \$12/\$17

SUNDAY 7/1

PICCFEST Gala, 7:30pm, First Baptist Church of Eugene

Pink Martini w/Storm Large, 8pm, Cuthbert Amphitheater, \$48/\$67

MONDAY 7/2

Organ Interludes: EIRay Stewart-Cook, noon, Central Lutheran Church

Stangeland Family Youth Choral Academy, 4:30pm, Sacred Heart at RiverBend

The Goldbergs on Strings, 7:30pm, Beall Hall, UO, \$15-\$45

TUESDAY 7/3

Let's Talk: Matthew Halls, noon, The Studio, FREE

Discovery Series: Bach *St. Matthew Passion* Part 1, 4:30pm, Hult Center; \$10/\$15

THE 5 BROWNS RETURN WITH ALL 5 OF THEIR PIANOS JULY 12



PHOTO BY ANDREW SOUTHAM