

- 21 Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Pan, Picador, 1988.
- 22 Terence McCaughey, *Memory and Redemption*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1993.
- 23 *Ibid.* p. 119.
- 24 Mark Kline Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza: a Cultural and Political Theology for N. American Praxis*, Orbis, Maryknoll 1990.
- 25 "For Memory", in *A Wild Patience has Taken me thus far*. New York, Norton and Norton, 1982

## Spirituality in Post-War British Opera

Michael Fuller

Opera is currently enjoying a great deal of public interest. In its popular understanding, as the most lavish, the most spectacular, the most luxuriant of art forms, it might not seem an obvious form for religious exploration, or the working out of spiritual problems. That, one might think, is rather the preserve of more private and introspective art forms: to be left to writers, poets, and workers in the plastic arts. Yet, in the operatic works produced by British composers in the last fifty or so years, many do take this apparently private subject-matter into this most public of artistic domains. This article is an attempt to draw together some of the more notable examples of this tendency, to compare them in their diversity, and to draw attention to this phenomenon among the non-opera-going public. (In all that follows, dates after opera titles refer to the year of their first production.)

Bishop Richard Harries has recently remarked, 'All works of art, whatever their content, have a spiritual dimension',<sup>1</sup> in that they can be a source of comfort and solace. He goes on to distinguish 'a distinctive tradition of ostensibly spiritual art', which 'seeks to indicate through symbols the eternal reality behind, beyond and within this world'.<sup>2</sup> In this article, the term 'spirituality' is used quite loosely, usually to refer to the use by composers and their librettists of material from sources acknowledged to be of spiritual significance. I have also drawn attention to composers' uses of myths and legends, since these may be said to have a spiritual content in Harries' sense, insofar as they

consciously direct their hearers to levels of understanding beyond the simple level of the story being told. I have sometimes noted a composer's own religious position vis-à-vis their work, if this appears appropriate. As might be expected, some composers appear to use this material consciously to advance a spiritual position or argument, whilst others use it as a framework in which to place their own political, social or other views, being indifferent or possibly even hostile to the spirituality expressed in the material they have selected. However, insofar as both are making use of this sort of material, it seems appropriate to draw attention to both types of composer.

Of the generation of composers working prior to the Second World War and through into the period we are considering here, we should perhaps note Ralph Vaughan Williams' (1872–1958) 'The Pilgrim's Progress' (1951) as an opera which is based on a profoundly spiritual work. Interestingly, Vaughan Williams renames the story's protagonist 'Pilgrim': 'I on purpose did not call the Pilgrim "Christian" because I want the idea to be universal and apply to anybody who aims at the spiritual life', the composer commented.<sup>3</sup> However, it was the outstanding success of Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) with 'Peter Grimes' (1945) that led to British opera's beginning to establish itself firmly internationally as an artistic force to be reckoned with; and in what follows attention will be confined to the work of Britten and his successors, whose operas have all been performed since 1945.

Britten's oeuvre inevitably dominates this period. He wrote some sixteen operatic works, in a variety of different styles: from full-scale grand opera to intimate chamber opera, and from children's operas to his three 'Church Parables', one-act morality tales designed to be performed in the ambience and acoustic of church buildings. (One of his children's operas, 'Noye's Fludde', is also designed for church performance: it is a re-telling of the Genesis story of the Flood, based on the account of this event in the Chester Miracle Plays.) However, any examination of spirituality in Britten's operas must begin with the Church Parables: 'Curlw River' (1964), 'The Burning Fiery Furnace' (1966) and 'The Prodigal Son' (1968), since they are the most obviously 'religious' of his works.

All the Church Parables are written to libretti by William Plomer, *and all are composed within the confines* of a restricted form: they all employ the fiction of a troupe of monks and their Abbot processing through the Church to a plainchant melody, robing and performing their 'mystery' or parable, and then, its conclusion having been drawn, disrobing and processing out again. The style is consciously based on

Japanese Noh drama, the austerity and concentration of which had greatly impressed Britten; and the first of the Parables, 'Curlew River', is in fact an adaptation of the Noh play 'Sumidagawa', with its geographical framework transferred from Japan to East Anglia and its spiritual framework transformed from Buddhist to Christian. A madwoman's search for her lost son, and her restoration to health and tranquillity at the boy's grave through the prompting of his spirit bringing her comfort, is presented in the opera as a miraculous sign of God's grace. For his subsequent Parables Britten turned to the well-known Old Testament and New Testament stories of their titles, from Daniel 3 and Luke 15 respectively, retaining the ritualistic framework of 'Curlew River' in their presentation.

It is widely recognised that 'Curlew River' is the best of Britten's Church Parables, and that little was gained by his repeating this initially daring musico-dramatic experiment in his subsequent Church operas. Robin Holloway, himself a composer, has made comments which, though harsh, are not untypical:

Everything fresh and inevitable in 'Curlew River' . . . is [in 'The Burning Fiery Furnace'] here by formula, because the genre requires it . . . with 'The Prodigal Son' the sense of genre has become distinctly dutiful, and the musical impulse tired.<sup>4</sup>

'Curlew River' in fact represents a fascinating bringing together of Eastern and Western spirituality. As far as the spiritual content of the later works is concerned, they simply reiterate the message of their Biblical sources without much comment, although 'The Prodigal Son' introduces a Tempter figure not found in Jesus' parable, in order to explain the motivation of the Prodigal. The Church Opera as a genre has had a few exponents since Britten's works: for example, Jonathan Harvey and Peter Maxwell Davies have both produced works designed for church performance.

Most of Britten's works for the opera house are not greatly concerned with spiritual issues, though there are two notable exceptions: 'The Rape of Lucretia' (1946) and 'Billy Budd' (1951). (I discount 'The Turn of the Screw' (1954) and 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' (1960), for, although their characters include ghosts and fairies, they remain very much human rather than spiritual stories.) 'The Rape of Lucretia' tells the classical story of its title, to a libretto by Ronald Duncan from a play by André Obey. It unfolds within a framework of comment provided by two singers called the Male and Female Choruses. The story progresses to its stark conclusion, with Lucretia's suicide in front of her husband after her violation by

Tarquinius. Following a bleak ensemble, in which the characters comment on the pointlessness of life in the wake of this tragedy and conclude with the words 'Is this it all? It is all! It is all!', the choruses add a finale in which the way out of the circle of misery and suffering is found in the redemptive and salvific death of Christ: 'In his passion is our hope/Jesus Christ, Saviour. He is all! He is all!'. This finale, sounding a somewhat incongruous note after the classical (and, of course, historically pre-Christian) tragedy that has just been enacted, has been criticised from the opera's première onwards.<sup>5</sup> Britten, who was always extremely sensitive to criticism, allowed his librettist to take the blame. However, Ronald Duncan maintains that he added this ending at Britten's behest, and that the composer professed himself very contented with it;<sup>6</sup> there appear to be few grounds for doubting the veracity of Duncan's account. Certainly the music provided by Britten for this 'Christianising' epilogue is of great beauty, and one is tempted to conclude that it is accompanying an expression of a spiritual position to which he felt close.

The spirituality implicit in 'Billy Budd' is rather more complex. Written to a libretto by E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier after Herman Melville's novella, salvation is a major preoccupation of the opera, though the form in which that salvation finally reaches the opera's main character (who is not the humble seaman of its title, but rather his captain, Captain Vere) is somewhat heterodox. To summarise a very well-worked libretto very briefly, the handsome sailor Billy Budd is maliciously accused of mutiny, by a superior officer, before the Captain: Billy lashes out at his accuser in frustration, and kills him. Vere summons a drumhead court, which sentences Billy to death; and Vere, although he is aware of Billy's blamelessness and of his accuser's malice, concurs with their verdict and sanctions Billy's hanging. This is duly carried out, Billy's last words being to pronounce a blessing on the captain who, as both of them are aware, could have prevented Billy's death. The opera is presented as the recollection of the aged Captain Vere, who appears as an old man at its beginning and end, and who explains that he has come to see this self-sacrificial act on the part of Billy as in some sense giving his life purpose, and bringing to him a 'peace which passes understanding'.

Critics, many of whom maintain that 'Billy Budd' is Britten's masterpiece, have found a range of significance in it. Carpenter has suggested that the opera presents its creators' unhappy experiences at public schools, which the all-male environment of a warship echoes.<sup>7</sup> He plays down the spiritual aspect of the work, maintaining that whilst the libretto presents 'the Forsterian belief in personal salvation through

although the introduction of extra-terrestrial characters gives to that process a cosmic element. Only 'King Priam' (1962), with a libretto based on a pre-existent myth rather than one of Tippett's own devising, has rather different concerns, namely those surrounding (in Tippett's words) 'the mysterious nature of human choice'.<sup>16</sup> In general, then, insofar as Tippett's operas may be said to possess a spiritual dimension, that dimension is perhaps best described as that of a spiritually-aware Jungian humanist. A character in 'The Ice Break', described as a 'psychedelic messenger', tells his hearers: 'Dear friends, take care for the Earth. God will take care for himself'.<sup>17</sup> This quotation from Jung appears to be an accurate summary of Tippett's own spiritual position.

One of the most prolific of recent opera composers, in terms of the numbers of his works which have had their premières in this last decade, is Sir Harrison Birtwistle (b. 1934). He has on several occasions turned to myth and legend as source of material. His first opera, 'Punch and Judy' (1968) uses the familiar children's characters: later works, 'The Mask of Orpheus' (1986) and 'Gawain' (1991), turn to familiar mythic material for their bases. A chamber opera, 'Yan Tan Tethera' (1986) is based on a British folk tale about shepherds and their flocks: the composer has ascribed its genesis to his desire to write an opera about sheep.<sup>18</sup> Birtwistle's use of 'ritualistic' effects - repetition, non-linear rather than linear narrative, slow tempi and so on - in his operas has been remarked upon.<sup>19</sup> He, like Tippett, has been influenced by Jung: the 'central dramatic issue' in Birtwistle's work has been described in Jungian terms as 'the conflict between the ego and the collective unconscious'.<sup>20</sup> However, his treatment of his material is not so as to put forward or to develop explicitly any particular spiritual position or outlook. It might perhaps be said that music and drama tend to be treated in his work more as ends in themselves rather than as pointers to something beyond themselves.

Birtwistle's colleagues in the 'Manchester School' of composers (a group who studied in that town in the 1950s) include Alexander Goehr (b. 1932) and Sir Peter Maxwell Davies (b. 1934), both of whom have composed operas in which spiritual themes are present. Maxwell Davies's first opera, 'Taverner' (1972) is concerned with the life of the Tudor composer of that name, and in particular with his trial by an ecclesiastical court for his Lutheran inclinations, and his subsequent renouncing of his musical gifts in favour of protestant zealotry. The principal concern of 'Taverner' has been described as that of

. . . anyone who presumes to question venerated authority and so finds himself with no sure moral precepts, no secure means of distinguishing the noble promptings of conscience from the base impulses of self-interest and inhumanity.<sup>21</sup>

A later Maxwell Davies opera, 'The Martyrdom of St Magnus' (1977) treats of a matter rooted in religious tradition: the life of a twelfth century saint from the Orkneys. This opera is reminiscent in scale of Britten's Church Parables: it received its première in the cathedral dedicated to St Magnus in Kirkwall. Though based on the life of this saint, the composer introduces a contemporary twist at the opera's climax, to point a particular moral.

I decided to bring the martyrdom forward to the present, and set it in the place where the opera is performed - an attempt to make audiences aware of the possibilities with us for such a murder of a political or religious figure, whatever his convictions. It is no longer possible to persuade ourselves that 'such things couldn't happen here'.<sup>22</sup>

Other Maxwell Davies compositions, for example his various works setting liturgical texts, testify to a continuing influence of religious material upon him, however radical his reinterpretation of it might sometimes be.

Alexander Goehr has also treated religious themes directly in his operatic works 'Triptych' (1968-1970) and 'Behold the Sun' (1985). 'Triptych' comprises three short pieces of 'music-theatre': 'Naboth's Vineyard', 'Shadowplay', and 'Sonata about Jerusalem'. The first of these retells the familiar Biblical story from 1 Kings 21, and the second retells the metaphor of the cave from Book 7 of Plato's 'Republic'. The third tells the story of an oppressed Jewish group in the middle ages, who are led by a visionary to expect the imminent advent of the Messiah, but who are subsequently disappointed in their expectation. It treats of Messianic religious fervour, though in a somewhat detached way. Clearly, religio-philosophical themes predominate in these works. The same is true also of 'Behold the Sun', which treats of the Anabaptist takeover of the city of Münster in 1533-4. Here, Goehr is concerned to work out socio-political as well as religious themes: he has said that the opera was conceived with reference to his own beliefs, 'notions derived from Marxism, [which] had a moral and spiritual content which seemed to determine attitudes towards living - and towards composing music'.<sup>23</sup> The spirituality informing Goehr's work, then, might be said to be conventionally

religious only insofar as religion is concerned with socio-political issues.

Jonathan Harvey (b. 1939) has composed two operas: the Church Opera 'Passion and Resurrection' (1981) and 'Inquest of Love' (1993). In both of these, spiritual issues are very much to the fore. 'Inquest of Love', in particular, combines its composer's preoccupations with Christian, Eastern and Jungian psycho-analytical spiritualities to produce a thought-provoking and moving work of art. It is concerned with forgiveness, with the healing of relationships, and with life after death, issues which converge in a story centred around the wedding of a young couple, at which tragedy intervenes in the shape of a woman who has been ill-treated by the two individuals concerned. The plot, which tells of a couple who need to embark upon journeys of self-discovery and healing before their marriage may be brought about, recalls Tippett's 'The Midsummer Marriage', although Harvey brings to his work a wider frame of reference, musically and spiritually, than Tippett brings to his. From both musical and dramatic points of view, this is a work with profound spiritual implications.<sup>24</sup>

One composer who has composed operas exclusively on religious and moral topics is John Tavener (b. 1944). His first two operas, 'Thérèse' (1979), based on the life of St Thérèse of Lisieux, and 'A Gentle Spirit' (1977), based on a short story by Dostoyevsky, were both written prior to his well-known conversion to the Orthodox Church. Since that conversion, virtually everything he has written has been an explicit expression of his faith and this has led to his describing many of his works as ikons. For example, his well-known work 'The Protecting Veil', for cello and strings, has been described by its composer as 'an attempt to make a lyrical ikon in sound, rather than wood',<sup>25</sup> and his third opera, 'Mary of Egypt' (1992), is sub-titled 'A moving ikon'. For Tavener, his art is an attempt explicitly to give voice to his faith, and the spirituality which underpins it. He has written, 'This is my work . . . to try and refind something of the immeasurable magnificence, simplicity and magisterial beauty and power that emanates from God, who is the Source of Everything'.<sup>26</sup> Tavener's popularity, together with that of other contemporary 'minimalist' composers, such as Arvo Pärt, who also draw on traditional Christian imagery as source material (in Pärt's case, frequently on liturgical texts), would appear to be a remarkable testimony to the continued resonance of such imagery and such texts in the minds of many people who seldom choose to express themselves through church-going.

Many other operas which have received their premières in the last

six or seven years have treated of religious or mythical themes. In addition to those already mentioned, one may cite Mark-Antony Turnage's 'Greek' (1988), John Casken's 'Golem' (1989), Robert Saxton's 'Caritas' (1991) and John Buller's 'BAXKAI' (1992). Judith Weir's 'The Vanishing Bridegroom' (1990) and 'Blond Eckbert' (1994) might be said also to fit this trend, being based respectively on three Scottish folk-tales and on what is essentially a fairy-story by the German romantic writer Ludwig Tieck. (Her previous operatic miniature, 'Missa Del Cid' (1988), uses explicitly religious material: in its juxtaposition of texts from the Latin Mass and from the thirteenth century Spanish martial epic 'Poem of the Cid', it is an ironic comment on the sort of religious mentality which, professing a gospel of love, can commit itself wholeheartedly to the slaughter of those opposed to it.)

A number of composers of the past half-century, then, have produced operas treating of religious or spiritual themes, or based on myths. This has happened without prompting, let alone sponsorship, on the part of the church. It would appear that such themes as these continue to provoke responses among contemporary composers, and to excite their audiences. If the examples cited here constitute a trend, then it is surely imperative for the churches to realise the fact and to encourage it, for it is a trend which is doubtless bringing religious and theological issues into the purview of many whom the Churches themselves might be unable to reach.

- 1 R. Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God* (London, 1993), p 101.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p 111.
- 3 Quoted in M. Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (Oxford, 1980), p 313.
- 4 R. Holloway, 'The Church Parables: Limits and Renewals' in C. Palmer (ed), *The Britten Companion* (London, 1984), p 221.
- 5 cf. M. Kennedy, *Britten* (London, 1981), pp 48-9.
- 6 R. Duncan, 'Finishing the Text', quoted in English National Opera programme for 1993 revival of 'The Rape of Lucretia'.
- 7 H. Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London, 1992), pp 288 ff.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p 296.
- 9 M. Cooke, 'Britten's Billy Budd: Melville as Opera Libretto' in M. Cooke and P. Reed (eds), *Billy Budd* (Cambridge, 1993), p 31.
- 10 P. Brett, 'Salvation at Sea: Billy Budd' in C. Palmer (ed), *The Britten Companion* (London, 1984), p 136.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p 142.
- 12 M. Tippett, Essay 'What I Believe', in *Music of the Angels: Essays and Sketchbooks of Michael Tippett* (London, 1980), p 51.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p 53.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp 50ff.
- 15 M. Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues: An Autobiography* (London, 1991), pp 62 f.



- 16 Quoted in I. Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music* (Oxford, 1984), p 326.
- 17 cf E. Walter White, *Tippett and his Operas* (London, 1979), p 116.
- 18 *Opera*, 1986, p 1199.
- 19 cf. *Opera*, 1986, p 495; *Opera*, 1986, p 1199; *Opera*, 1991, p 876.
- 20 M. Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle* (London, 1984), p 125.
- 21 P. Griffiths, *Peter Maxwell Davies* (London, 1982), p 48.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p 163.
- 23 *Opera*, 1985, p 380.
- 24 For further comments on Harvey's 'Inquest of Love', and on Tavener's 'Mary of Egypt' and Saxton's 'Caritas', see M. Fuller, 'Some Expressions of Spirituality in Contemporary Opera', *Modern Believing*, 1994, pp 6 ff.
- 25 J. Tavener, programme note in *1992 Aldeburgh Festival Programme Book*, p 96.
- 26 J. Tavener, 'The Sacred in Art', in *1992 Aldeburgh Festival Programme Book*, p 89.

## Truth and Martyrdom: The Structure of Discipleship in *Veritatis Splendor*

John Berkman

Early in February, I was privileged to participate in a gathering of forty-five predominantly Catholic philosophers and theologians who met to discuss John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. Most of the discussion at the conference focused on the second of the encyclical's three chapters, which deals with "some trends of theological thinking and certain philosophical affirmations [that] are incompatible with revealed truth." (§29) Conspicuously absent was any attention to either the first or especially the third chapters of the encyclical. The first chapter investigates the nature of Christian discipleship through the lens of St Matthew's account of Jesus' meeting with the rich young man. (Matt 19) The third chapter treats