

# Darkly Spiritual Challenge to Injustice

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## Into The Music



"THE world turns on its dark side — it is winter," the chorus sings near the start of "A Child of Our Time" (1939-41), an oratorio by the English composer [Michael Tippett](#). Unlike Handel's "Messiah" and Bach's great Passions, the formal and spiritual models Tippett emulated, his oratorio fills no particular slot in the ecclesiastical calendar.

Still, this extraordinary piece, which the [Collegiate Chorale will present](#) at Carnegie Hall on Friday evening, seems particularly suited to the chill of winter. True, I feel that way partly because I first heard it performed live on a bleak, gray, slushy evening in Boston, where Colin Davis, a venerated champion of Tippett's music, was conducting the Boston Symphony

Orchestra. It was October, but unseasonable snow evoked winter all the same.

The historical event that served as the catalyst for "A Child of Our Time" actually occurred in autumn. Herschel Grynszpan, a 17-year-old Polish Jew, alarmed by news that his family had been deported to Poland from Germany, shot and fatally wounded Ernst vom Rath, a German diplomat, in Paris on Nov. 7, 1938.

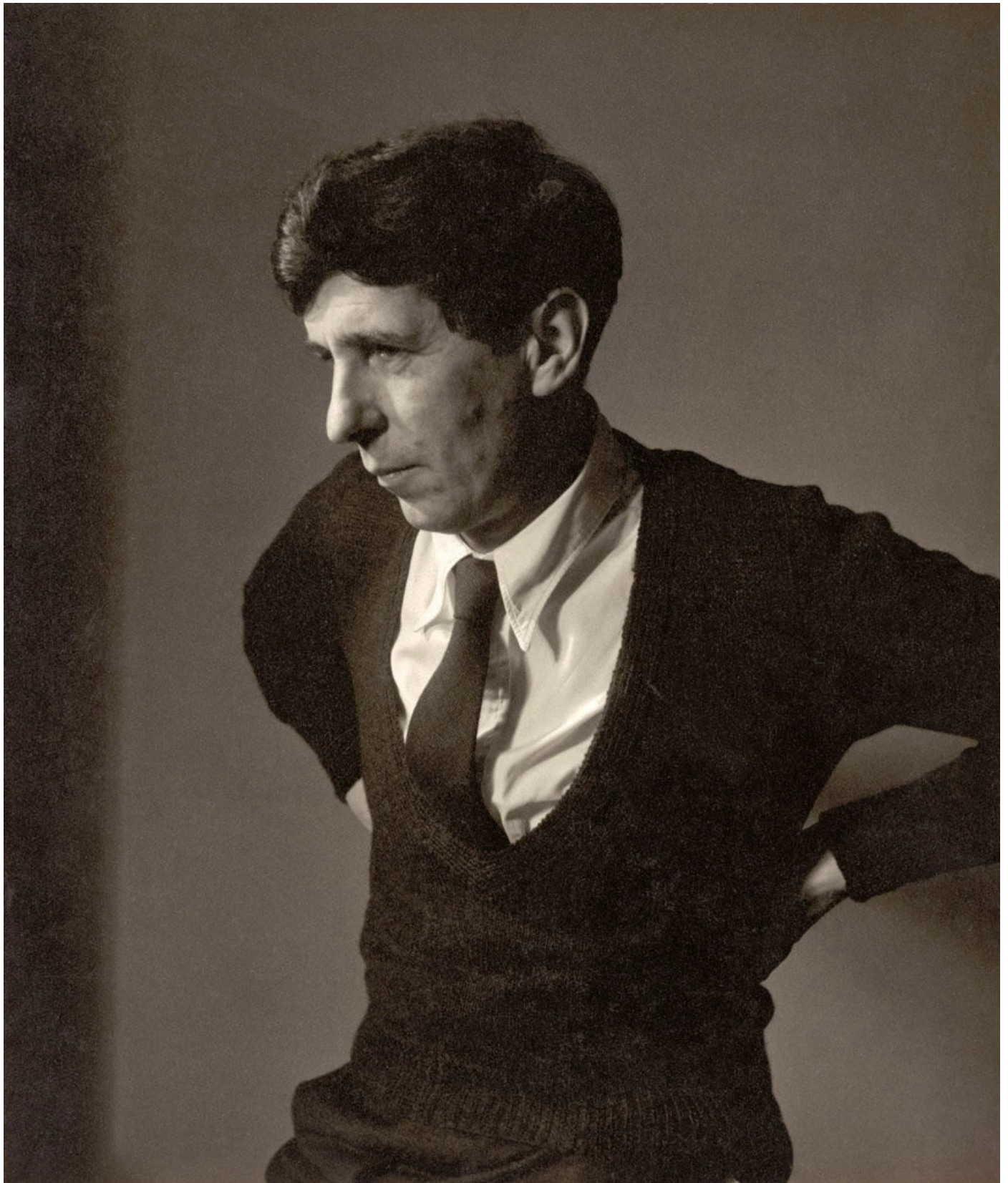
Vom Rath died two days later, on the 15th anniversary of Hitler's [Beer Hall Putsch](#) in Munich. Outraged by a Jewish assassin — and incited by a Joseph Goebbels speech at the site of the putsch — the Nazis retaliated with Kristallnacht, the "night of broken glass."

The exact circumstances of the incident grew murky in later years, and evidence shows that the Nazis would have found another pretext to escalate the violence against the Jews in any case. But for Tippett, a devoted pacifist and a lifelong believer in art in the service of social justice, Grynszpan served as a symbol of an individual marginalized by society and pushed by tyranny to commit an unthinkable act.

Tippett, openly gay at a time when homosexuality had not yet been decriminalized in England, understood what it was to stand apart from conventional society. He was so passionate a conscientious objector that he would serve a three-month sentence in 1943.

That Grynszpan quickly saw and regretted the cost of his rash act suited Tippett's humanitarian inclinations as well as his Jungian belief in the necessity of reconciling opposites into a harmonious whole. As Paul Griffiths noted in a [1999 essay](#) for The New York Times, "Individuals and nations, as Tippett saw it, create enemies by finding other people to be trash cans for their own unacceptable qualities; if that truth could be acknowledged, then the dialogue of warfare could be turned into a dialogue of acceptance and even love."

That Tippett could have thought that the Nazis might recognize and accept their scapegoats is probably overstating his desires. But it is easy to imagine that he believed the German people could rise above the Nazis' predatory aims.



According to [Meirion Bowen](#), Tippett's biographer, manager and companion in later life, work on "A Child of Our Time" began a few days after the outbreak of war in 1939. Tippett adopted his title from an antiwar novel by Odon von Horvath, an Austro-Hungarian playwright. He wanted T. S. Eliot to provide a text, but Eliot, on seeing Tippett's sketches, urged him to set his own words.

Tippett modeled the tripartite form of the piece after Handel's "Messiah," which he had conducted with amateur forces early in his career. "Part I deals with the general state of oppression in our time," Tippett wrote about the work. "Part II presents the particular story of a young man's attempt to seek justice by violence and the catastrophic consequences; Part III considers the moral to be drawn, if any." Sophisticated allusions to specific selections from "Messiah" are made.

From both Handel and Bach, Tippett adopted a template of narrative recitative, contemplative arias, descriptive choruses and — specific to Bach's Passions — familiar chorales. Seeking an analog to Bach's Lutheran hymns, Tippett adopted five American spirituals, a style he first heard during a 1938 radio broadcast, Mr. Bowen wrote. The settings specifically emulated the style of the Hall Johnson Choir, which Tippett had subsequently heard in "The Green Pastures," a 1936 film.

In those spirituals — "Steal Away," "Nobody Knows," "Go Down, Moses," "By and By" and "Deep River" — black Americans had made the plight of biblical Jews familiar and universal, Tippett reckoned. In using them he meant to evoke not only the torments of contemporary Jews in wartime Europe but also those of anyone "rejected, cast out from the center of our society onto the fringes: into slums, into concentration camps, into ghettos," he wrote.

That "A Child of Our Time" was a rousing success at its premiere in 1944, three years after its completion, and that it has traveled better and endured longer than anything else in Tippett's extensive canon, surely owe something to the potency of those spirituals. Still, Tippett's musical achievement should

not be understated. Before the first word is sung, he establishes a feeling of unease and plaint with [stark, acidic brass chords](#), caressed and dragged down simultaneously by dusky descending strings. The choral line, when it begins, wanders slowly and indecisively, with timpani rumbling ominously underneath.

Throughout the work vocal and instrumental lines flow and curl with madrigalesque clarity. At times Tippett makes ironic reference to popular styles, most notably the swaying tango in the tenor aria, "I Have No Money for My Bread."

Those appropriations serve as grounds for dismissal for some critics. "Tippett's music is a collection of found objects bound together with a consonant language fading in and out of polytonality," Bernard Holland wrote in a New York Times [review](#) of the work's New York Philharmonic premiere in 1999.

The occasionally stilted text can provide further cause for concern: "He shoots the official — but he shoots only his dark brother — and see: he is dead" is an oft-cited example. Yet whatever shortcomings Tippett shows, the sweeping breadth of his sympathy and the regal tone he ascribes to the downtrodden transcend them.

"I would know my shadow and my light, so shall I at last be whole," the tenor soloist sings at the climax of the third part, delivering the work's Jungian prescription for healing man and society alike. "Then courage, brother, dare the grave passage," the bass responds. "Here is no final grieving but an abiding hope," the soprano adds.

And inevitably, the icy chill of winter thaws. "The moving waters renew the earth," the alto sings. "It is spring." In that line, and in the conciliatory promise of the final spiritual, "Deep River," comes a promise of deliverance that can surely warm any heart.