

Generative Process and Circularity in Michael Tippett's *Byzantium*

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Dualities, symmetries and oppositions permeate the whole work of Michael Tippett. His fascination for Karl Jung and its binary constructions is perceptible in the elaboration of his opera librettos (Heberlé 2006). Next to Jung, his admiration of W. B. Yeats presents the same taste for symbolic oppositions and complex sets of dualities. In *Byzantium*, for soprano and orchestra, composed in 1989-1990 on an eponymous poem by Yeats, both text and music dialogue in a web of symmetries. After a detailed analysis of the poem and of the complex network of dualities it expresses, I will present how the music of Tippett reinforces the semiotic game of Yeats. Two elements will be put forward in the discussion. The first considers the formal circularity of Tippett's setting and how it creates a parallel semiotic chain to Yeats'. The second is the description of a generative process in the logical succession of the musical material, which emphasises the paradoxical fluidity between elements which relation seems nonsensical in appearance.

For it is only through images that the inner world communicates at all. Images of the past, shapes of the future. Images of vigour for a decadent period, images of calm for one too violent. Images of reconciliation for worlds torn by division. And in an age of mediocrity and shattered dreams, images of abounding, generous, exuberant beauty." (Tippett, "Poet in a Barren Age" in *Moving into Aquarius*, pp.155-6, quoted by Schuttenhelm 2013; 111).

These words from Tippett exemplify a crucial step in his compositional process, described by Thomas Schuttenhelm as "image accretion", i.e. a collection and accumulation of the necessary symbolic material (Schuttenhelm 2014; 13):

As images combine they lose their singularity but contribute to the overall force of the creative cycle. Regardless of their particular resolution, they are used obliquely and provide grist for the archetypes that are projected. These archetypes then suggest the particular metaphors which populate his scores. To complete the process, the metaphors are then translated into music, notes and timbres, which retain their associations, and when applied to the compositional process exert a direct influence on the creation and development of the musical material. (Schuttenhelm 2013; 114).

A process quite similar to Yeats's, to which our focus must now turn on.

1. Yeats' semiotic game

"The unpurged images of day recede;
The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;
Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song

After great cathedral gong;
 A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
 All that man is,
 All mere complexities,
 The fury and the mire of human veins.”

The image-accretion process described by Schuttenhelm in Michael Tippett’s compositions, recalls the strategies which are observable in Yeats’ poem. The verses present a succession of images which does not follow a discursive sense (i.e. a connected series of utterances oriented towards discourse). Here, the images are juxtaposed without apparent link, and the sense is created by the reader themselves: by association of these images. The kaleidoscopic succession constructs little by little a web of possible interpretations in which the reader must find their way.

“The unpurged images of day recede;”

This first sentence has a mysterious meaning. But some words stand out: “images”, “recede”. They are seeds which will germinate through the following verses.

“The Emperor’s drunken soldiery are abed;”

This time, the meaning is explicit. It is an easy scene to picture. Yet, juxtaposed to the first verse, it opens to possible clarifications of what this first one meant. The “images” evoked might be the remembrances of the soldier’s days, the dreams they are now they are asleep. We observe here how two verses in appearance unrelated and which link is inexplicit can create sense by association of ideas, of words, of images.

*“Night resonance recedes, night-walkers’ song
 After great cathedral gong;”*

More connections are created by these new images. The “resonance” of the “gong” “recedes” as the “unpurged images”. The “gong” and the “songs” made by the strollers are perceived as one entity, the latter being a resonance of the first. The strollers’ songs echo the activities made by the soldiers when awake; activities possibly loud and sung, as implies the mention of their drunkenness. Little by little, the network of possible interpretations deepens.

“A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains”

The shining dome echoes the gong. It embodies the image of its sound. A parallel between sound and image was already created by the reiteration of the word “recedes”. “Night resonance recedes” associated it with sound, “the unpurged images of day recede”, associated it with images. Sound and image; gong and dome; the silence of the sleeping soldiers and the sounds of strollers. The poem establishes many mirrored connections in a semiotic web which becomes more and more complex. A complexity made possible by the inexplicit relation between the verses. Darkness is another element present between the lines (through the images of the abed soldiers, the nightly atmosphere). Darkness is the opposite of image, as silence was to sound. But sound was also connected to image. It appears that a web of oppositions and correlations starts to be developed gradually with the enunciation of the verses. All these connections are not perceived holistically by the reader or the listener, but they are pathways of

interpretations, lanes into the semiotic network, which is made possible by the clever disposition of the apparent by nonsensical relation of the verses. We could go further: “starlit” and “moonlit” evoke light, in contrast with the caserns’ darkness. A picture starts to appear: the night, a cathedral, a dome, stars and moon in a dark sky. And dualities: sound and silence / darkness and light; connected together by another duality between image and sound. Image and sound which are both leaning towards a disappearance into darkness and silence.

“... *disdains*
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins.”

Here, another duality emerges. The non-human (the gong, the dome) is opposed to the human (the drunken soldiers asleep, the night-walkers singing). Yet, the dome “disdains”; which paradoxically implies that the dome expresses the mere complexities of human psychology.

Later in the poem, appears a central object which seems to encapsulate many of the semiotic paradoxical set of oppositions of the poem: the golden bird.

“*Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,*
More miracle than bird or handiwork,”

The golden bird is a central figure mediating between the non-human (the dome, the gong) and the living creature (men), as was the mummy of the previous stanza. But, it also symbolises the artefact: the paradoxical non-human product of man, of its “handiwork”. For, after all, the gong, the dome, are only human products. Image and sound find their echo in the golden bird. Image first: the golden-aspect of the bird makes it similar to the gong, the shining dome, the stars, the moon. Then sound: it is either a silent bird (encapsulating the opposition sound/silence), or a mechanical music machine, which makes its bird call artificial and develops further the issues of the concept of artefact. The latter seems to refer to Yeats triggering idea: “I have read somewhere that in the Emperor’s palace at Byzantium as a tree made of gold and silver, and artificial birds that sang” (Yeats, quoted in Hill 1975; 525).

As it appears, it is difficult to make an exhaustive analysis of the poem, as “Byzantium” acts like a game: the mosaic-like succession of images creates *possible* associations for the reader to make. Each stanza extends the web of interpretation in which the interpreter can wander, and even loose themselves. To understand this aesthetical process, structural analysis and its fixed overview of the poem’s organisation is only of poor help. An analysis of the poem must imply a vision of the construction of meaning *in-the-making*, and this is this very approach which is crucial to develop in the analysis of the musical setting of this poem by Michael Tippett.

2. Tippett’s Circularities

How does Tippett’s setting of *Byzantium* plays with Yeats’s semiotic network? How does it react to the interpretational game? For, music setting finds a place in the array of forms of interpretation. I would advocate hereafter that Tippett’s music

amplifies Yeats's web of references. It adds more images to the ones of the text; more nonsensical connections; more mirrored dualities and mere complexity to Yeats's poem.

According to Meirion Bowen, "the composer has controlled a proliferating diversity of thematic ideas [...]. Such ideas are most often presented initially as pairs of motifs, which mirror the dualities in the poetic imagery and offer scope for splitting components apart and marrying them with others." (Bowen 1991; 440). This recalls the "mosaic-like sectional construction" evoked by Edward Venn, in his analysis of *The Vision of Saint Augustine* (Venn 2013; 277), for whom "the repetitions and mosaic structures in the music consequently make little sense without the words. In fact, to evoke another metaphor, the work is closer to a hypertext than a text as such: each idea is specifically linked to others in a never-ending chain of signification." (Venn 2013; 281). Tippett reinforces the poem's 'chains of signification' by another one of his own which complements, reinforces it, as in *The Vision of Saint Augustine* and many other of his works.

This move seems at first sight paradoxical, as Tippett's setting gives the impression to destroy the text by techniques of extension and fragmentation; stripping out any remaining discursive attempt of the poem. As stated by Oliver Soden, "the soprano part is acrobatic, aeronautic. Each line, each word, is broken down into its constituent parts or even syllables, which are then held up to the light and endlessly examined or repeated." (Soden 2019; 582). Attitude that the composer himself evokes:

the advantage, it seemed to me, of this particular poem [...] was its sheer compression and condensation, allowing me, the composer, to apply techniques of musical extension. 'Byzantium' was, in sum, an artefact: an artistic object in which all the emotion of the artist had disappeared inside. One might compare it with a Brancusi sculpture, where the artist's subjective emotions have disappeared in the work, and nothing is left but the polished metal. The extension processes I had in mind here implied, moreover, a virtuosity of performance that became the prime intention—virtuosity above all for the singer. (*Tippett on Music*, p. 106-107).

Hence Tippett referring to the notion of artefact. His composition itself is presented as much: a handiwork, a humanly created object which becomes a human-less work-of-art, a 'polished metal'. Tippett's *Byzantium* is a golden bird. The composer made of his own work a reflection of the content of Yeats's poem. This *mise en abyme* has been discussed in great length by Arnold Whittall (1993) David Clarke (2001).

What does a formal analysis of the piece tell us? [chart 1] Few aspects are noticeable. Firstly, the fragmented nature of the music sections. Secondly, the game of reiterations: some sections reappear late into the piece and are interlocked with the newest sections. See, for example the last poem, which articulates the sections P, K, J, E', Q, B, etc. Thirdly, the sections can comprise a whole verse, but a lot of them are setting only one word. Besides, the recurring sections illustrate texts which are different, operating therefore a parallel between words that seemed disconnected which reinforce one step further Yeats's web of connexions.

1. *The Unpurged images of day...*

Rehearsal nb. (score)	1	9	13	18	23	24	26	27	31	33
Images	A	B	= A	B	A	C	D	B	E	F
Text		The unpurged images of day recede; The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;		Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song After great cathedral gong;	A starlit or a moonlit	dome	disdains	All that man is, All mere complexities,	The fury and the mire of human veins.	

2. *Before me floats an image...*

37	47	50	54	55	61
G	H	D & E	to B	B	A & I
[Ah] — Before me floats an image, man or shade, Shade more than man, more image than shade;	For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth	May unwind the winding path;	A mouth that has no moisture and no breath	Breathless mouths may summon; I hail the superhuman; I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.	

3. *Miracle, bird or golden handiwork...*

66	74	77	78	79	79+3	80	82	84	86	90	92	94
J	K	E	L	E	L	A	A, D & I	K & J in alternation	B	E	F	to G2
Miracle, bird or golden handiwork, More miracle than bird or handiwork,	Planted on the star-lit golden bough, Can like the cocks of Hades	crow	["Cocorico"]	crow	["Cocorico"]	Or by the moon embittered,	scorn aloud	In glory of changeless metal	Common bird or petal	And all complexities of mire and blood		

4. *At Midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit...*

96	98	99	101	102	103	103+2	104	108	110	111	112	113	115	116	118	119	121	125	127	131
G2	M	G2	M	B & I	M	G2	B & I	C	C A, B & D	E	C'	N	E'	N	E'	B	O	B	O	I
At midnight on the Emperor's pavement	flit	midnight on the Emperor's pavement	flit	Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has	lit	Nor storm disturbs	flames begotten of flames, Where blood-begotten spirits	come, [ah]	And all complexities	of fury	leave	Dying into	dance	Dying into	dance	an agony of	trance	an agony of	trance	An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

5. *Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood...*

138	143	145	147	149	153	155	156	158	160	162	163	165	166	169	177
P	K	J	E'	Q	B	Q	B	Q	B	Q	B	Q	B	A	A + I
Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood, Spirit after spirit!	The smithies break the flood	The golden smithies of the Emperor!	Marbles of the dancing floor	Break bitter furies of complexity, Those images	[ah]	Those images	[ah] That yet	Fresh images yet	[ah] That yet	fresh images	[ah] beget	fresh images	[ah] beget that	That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.	

Chart 1. Formal circularities in Tippet's *Byzantium*

This panoramic view on the formal aspects of *Buzantium* recalls what David Clarke hints at:

The temporality of *Byzantium* is, then, another index of limited affinity with Yeats's poem. As the latter progresses it continually recapitulates earlier images, but reworks them in the process by subjecting them to an altered syntactic function or changed

semantic context. This process finds its climax in the final stanza, which is saturated with references of preceding images (Clarke 2001; 264).

The formal circularity of Tippett's music buttresses Yeats's aesthetic. However, there is another aspect of his setting, still unexplored, which supports the fluidity of the disconnected juxtaposition of images.

3. Tippett's Generative Process

Edward Venn evoked a "chain of signification" (Venn 2013; 281), comment echoed by David Clarke: "In *Byzantium* [...] temporal succession is characterized more as *concatenation* than directed accumulation." (Clarke 2001; 264, my emphasis). The concept of "concatenation" (etymologically: 'with chains') points at a crucial aspect of Tippett's music in *Byzantium*. On Tippett's own account: "The musical ingredients are almost naïve: but it is their fusion that counts." (*Tippett on Music*, p. 106-107). This fusion, or chain, is what can be described as a *generative process*. Each new section, is triggered, subliminally by the former, which gives to the listener a sensation of continuity while being confronted with greatly contrasted material.

The first sections of the piece offer a convincing example of it [chart 2]. Sections A concerns the orchestral introduction (made itself of four successive images: a1 to a4), reiterated three times with developments (see comments on chart 3 thereafter). Section B relates to the setting of the first verse of the poem (a combination of two other images: b1 and b2).

The image displays musical score analysis for Tippet's *Byzantium*. It consists of two main parts: a generative process on the left (a1-a4) and a structural analysis on the right (b1-b2).

Generative Process (Left):

- a1:** Shows a polytonal assemblage with triads of C major and F# minor, plus a major third interval (e-g#). Annotations include 'E', 'F#m', and 'C'.
- a2:** A lyrical violin line with an appoggiatura. Annotations include 'The baroque-like flourish generates the Balinese-like rhythm' and 'Sva'.
- a3:** A gamelan-like section with quick and fleeting rhythms. Annotations include 'Rhythmical generation!' and 'etc.'.
- a4:** Develops the false relation and rhythmic agility of a3. Annotations include 'etc.' and 'aug. 8'.

Structural Analysis (Right):

- b1:** "The unpurged images of day recede". Annotations include 'F/F#', '2nd Maj. triamp', 'Now focus on 3rds', and 'D'.
- b2:** "The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed". Annotations include 'a3 colour', 'a1 colour', and 'a2 colour'.

Chart 2:

* According to the score: the demisemi-quaver = the new 'scotlet' semi-quaver

A				A'				A''				B	
a1	a2	a3	a4	a'1	a'2	a3	a4	a''1	a''2	a3	a4	b1	b2

Chart 2. Generative process in the first sections of Tippet's *Byzantium*

'a1' is a polytonal assemblage. Triads are superposed: C major and F# minor, plus a major third interval (e-g#). This interval (which is based on the trumpet duet motive) is unexpected: it should in logically be a triad too. An implicit b (the completion of e-g# into a E major triad) provokes the following section. 'a2', the lyrical violin line, is a long appoggiatura which resolves this b to a. But, during this burst of appoggiatura, many notes are heard. The a, compounded with e and g# (remnants of a1), will trigger the gamelan-like section 'a3'. The rhythm of the baroque-like flourish of 'a2', provokes also the quick and fleeting rhythms of the following section. The f/f# relation heard in 'a2', sounds like a natural resolution of the descending pentatonic scale of 'a3'. Hence 'a4', which develops this false relation, and the rhythmic agility of 'a3'. In few bars, Tippet presented us with very different styles: polytonal harmony with fanfare; lyric baroque-ornamented line at the violins; gamelan interlocking; Schoenbergian atonality. But, all seems fluid because of these tiny relations, hidden in plain sight.

These relations on the surface, are often missed by structural analysis, which perceives the music or poetic entity as fixed, and not *in-the-making*. As in Yeats's interpretational network, the reader/listener does not perceive all these connections in the same time, but is faced with a set of hidden possibilities of surface connections between all the fragments they're hearing. This is why *Byzantium*, as many other works by Yeats and Tippet is never heard or understood the same way. Each new contact to the piece/the poem, gives a different perception of it, and different pathway taken in the interpretational game. Which makes of these works inexhaustible ones.

The right part of the chart [chart 2] presents the generative process of B. 'b1' comes from the f/f# conflict, as much as the ascending final motion of the third iteration

of 'a4' (see score before rehearsal 9). The *f/f#* false relation emphasises the word 'unpurged' in the text. The accompanying chords are all generated by associations of pitches enunciated by the soprano melody. The melody highlights the second major relation hidden in its ascending chromatic scale (see score r. 10+5). This generates the second 'b2': a canon on the major second, in D (resulting note of the 'b1' melodic ascension), which focuses on many thirds (or sixths) interval. It develops the last chord of 'b1', chord which resulted, as said, from the soprano line. In 'b2', many fleeting references are made to previous passages of the piece: colours of 'a1', 'a2' and 'a3' are brushed in the two-voice counterpoint.

More textual figuralisms are at stake: the receding aspect of "recede", the march-like side of the mention of the "Emperor". Even the first orchestral sections resonate with the textual web: the gong-like disposition of chords of 'a1', allied with the timbre organisation (apparition of instruments which attack is more and more acute: gong, then trombones and horns, then trumpets); the lyrical yet artefact-like, bird-like baroque flourish of the violins in 'a2'; the Balinese glittering of 'a3' which echoes the light-reflecting dome or bird; reflection drowned into the watery darkness of 'a4' with its metamorphoses into a marimba-like synthesiser.

Furthermore, the chain-like aspect of these first sections amplifies the receding general perception: after the first gong stroke, the different sections stem from its resonance. There is a music hidden in the gong; element which augments again the interpretational web of Yeats' poem. This is corroborated by the end of the piece which recalls the receding trait of the first gong stroke. Each section sounds like a budding out of the gong. Even more, within the sections, some material is organised as a burgeoning-like development (not teleological or going somewhere new, but extending its iteration with the same closure). The following chart [chart 3] presents the budding development at stake in the section 'a1' and 'a2', through a paradigmatic presentation. The motives are extended in their middle, which gives a form a static development.

a1. [trumpets]

The musical score for trumpets (a1) consists of three staves. The top staff shows a melodic line with several triplet markings. The middle and bottom staves provide a rhythmic accompaniment. The tempo and mood are indicated as *f light, brilliant*.

a2. [violins]

The musical score for violins (a2) consists of three staves. The top staff shows a melodic line with several triplet markings. The middle and bottom staves provide a rhythmic accompaniment. The tempo and mood are indicated as *f passionate*.

Chart 3. Paradigmatic presentation of the budding-like development in Tippett's *Byzantium*

Yeats and Tippett play in their *Byzantium* with the specificities of their arts. Poetry and music are two arts of time which allow these interpretational games in-the-making. These encapsulate here circularities of meaning; revelations through nonsensical relations; static developments; generative processes. It is a game of interpretation in which we are all invited to take part.

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