

King Priam

Director's Note

James Conway

I started work on *King Priam*, in a way, many years ago. I could not imagine a context in which I could get a chance actually to work in it, but I knew that it is a British opera that deserved to be performed regularly, in Britain and abroad, because of its ambition, its vision, and its musical and theatrical skill. Quite apart from its deserts, it is quick with conflicting voices and desires, generous and wise in its estimate of humanity, honest, luminous. So it *has* to be done, and not just on the operatic assembly line, but on stages and in edges where it can shine, and be felt.

King Priam is certainly challenging, for performers and for audiences; all that skill and concentration should result in something dazzling, and utterly particular.

Tippett's opera assumes we know the story of the Greeks at Troy, and it finds nothing unusual about the mingling of gods and men; indeed, it is essential to Tippett's story that characters know something of their fate, that they tell each other their past and their future. Thus Priam knows, meeting the bull-taming child called Paris, that the Young Guard disobeyed his words but obeyed his will in preserving Priam's infant son. Poignantly, as he clutches the knees of Achilles pleading to redeem the body of his son Hector, Priam names the hero who will kill Achilles; answering, Achilles names Priam's assassin, Achilles' son Neoptolemus.

The commenting chorus know the future and lament the past as they comment on actions in the present. Tippett's brilliant conceit is that they also act convincingly in the moment. We know the outcome of each myth, but this does nothing to diminish the pity and terror of each fated decision. So in Tippett's opera do we

shrink when we hear Andromache complain that Neoptolemus (unseen) swings her infant child like a club through the streets of Troy, and shudder when she admits that she knows her husband Hector is already dead, even as she orders the maids to draw his bath. Though we know that the infant Paris will survive, Hecuba's steeliness is breathtaking when she urges her ill fated babe should be killed – and there is shock when warmer blooded Priam assents.

Curiously, wonderfully, in this mythic setting Tippett creates a celebration of free will, of choice, even of instinct. That is the clue to 'the big shape' of this opera – as in myth, men and woman step forward like gods and goddesses, then step back as passionate, violent, instinctive creatures. This stepping back and forth is a dance of creation, in beautiful and dreadful patterns.

It has been commented that Priam is not an opera about war, but about choice. I am not so sure that this says what is needful. Certainly it describes several choices which seem thrilling, even though their outcome is assured: the choice to kill or spare the infant Paris in the face of the augury that he will bring about the death of Priam and fall of Troy; the choice of Priam to spare the boy when he is found again; Paris' selection of the goddess to whom he will award the golden apple, winning the honour of one and the undying spite of the others; the same choice of Paris, realised in his elopement with Menelaus' wife Helen, knowing it will bring war; the choice of Achilles to send Patroclus into the battlefield in his armour, and of Hector to dishonour his body. Death on death is chosen, and still '*the force... through the green fuse drives the flower*'.

Choice, it seems to me right now, is not a

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Do not imagine
all the secrets of life
can be known from a story.
Oh, but feel the pity and terror
as Priam dies.
Helen already breathes air
as from another planet;
the world where he is going,
where he has gone,
cannot communicate itself through him
(he will speak only to Helen in the end),
but through the timeless music.

O divine music!
O stream of sound
in which the states of soul flow,
surfacing and drowning -
while we sit watching
from the bank
the mirrored world within,
for "Mirror upon mirror
mirrored is all the show".

O divine music,
melt our hearts,
renew our love.

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Hermes' final song from King Priam

theme, any more than Fate is a theme. War and beauty are themes – they are two realisations in this opera of the dualism that so preoccupied Tippett, and so captivates me. Paris is ineluctably drawn to Helen's bed, to carnality, to the other in whom he sees himself reflected: why make us feel this imperative, he asks, if we should not act? His rapture brings war – and in a way, its image is war. Is there an image more seductive and destructive than Helen's calm, proud description of her own conception, as Zeus in the form of a swan ravished the ready Leda? Are Priam's ethical quandaries not sharpened – and even overcome by – the thrilling, ecstatic, menacing war cries of the Greeks, as much as they are resolved in Hermes rhapsody on the power of music? To endure and to destroy: these are not choices, they are impulses, opposite and ultimately one. They are the component phases that create beauty.

Is this what Tippett is saying? Maybe. It is the sum of my experience of the piece, so far, and that is all I can bring to my colleagues in this presentation. I think the opera is not unrelated to the man who conscientiously objected, and went briefly to prison for it; nor is it unrelated to the man who so admired beautiful, sometimes reckless youth. Among composers, he must stand out as one who struggled very hard, without easy proficiency, for what he felt true. If the opera makes one feel, and it must, it is the feeling of that terrible and quickening tug between ascent and descent, articulation and sensation, history and warm, unmeaning pulse.

JAMES CONWAY