

# *The Knot Garden: A Mirror of “Love” And “Relationships” in the Swinging 60's Britain*

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**Abstract**—The article intends to elaborate the idea that Michael Tippett's *The Knot Garden* (1970) encapsulates the spirit of the “swinging ‘60’s”. War, violence, sex, homoeroticism and social and interpersonal alienation are tightly packed within this two-hour opera. By unpacking each character's psychological interactions and its association with the social trend of the period, the article will highlight several key historical movements throughout the ‘60’s Britain, such as feminism, gay liberation, the rising importance of youth subculture and sexual liberation. The article will argue that by depicting the characters' personal anxieties, sexual frustrations and longing, Tippett hints the side effects of the optimistic social revolutions, which swiped across the western society during the 1960's.

**Index Terms**—British history, Carl Jung, English libretto, Michael Tippett.

## I. INTRODUCTION

*The Knot Garden*, which is written and composed by the English composer Michael Tippett, received its premiere at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden on 2nd December 1970 at the height of the “swinging ‘60’s” [1]. The opera was inspired by the composer's intention to capture a wider range of human experiences and to present the characteristics of a changing world of the period. War, violence, sex, homoeroticism and social and interpersonal alienation are tightly packed within this two hours theatrical presentation [2]. Although the backdrop of the opera is set in an affluent bourgeois household of the 60's, the audience will soon encounter each character's emotional isolation and sexual longing. Set in a metaphorical garden, Tippett's third opera sets up to encompass a wider examination of interpersonal relationships.

Through a series of psychological interactions between characters, the audience is brought to the attention of love and marital union of the period [3]. *The Knot Garden* is structured around the main characters Faber and Thea, a married couple on the brink of marital breakdown [4]. Around these two characters, the story line gradually spreads out to include their relatives, friends and passing acquaintances. These characters include: their adolescent ward, Flora who has begun experiencing emotional and sexual maturity [5]; Denise, “the turbulent girl grown to a woman” (as described by her sister Thea), who is a tortured freedom campaigner; and Mel and Dov, who are a same-sex couple facing the terminal stage of their relationship [6].

Like Don Alfonso in W. A. Mozart and L. da Ponte's *Così fan tutte* (1790), Tippett's third opera also includes a

voyeuristic character namely, Mangus to assess and to analyze the psychological interactions between the six individuals in the opera. Eric Walter White's study recalls the genesis of *The Knot Garden*, “[Tippett's] starting point was he wish to present a number of different contemporary characters, all of whom were to be of more or less equal operatic importance. There would be no leading man or women, and no chorus. The action would explore the characters' relationship with each other, particularly as set off by the presence of psychoanalyst [7].” With such degree of psychological interactions and voyeurism, *The Knot Garden* has inadvertently revealed the social trend of the period.

These six characters represent different stages of falling in love. Flora, a teenage girl is at the brink of her emotional and sexual awaking. The character is searching for her first experience of falling in love. The married couple Faber and Thea, on the other hand, is at the crossroad of their relationship. Their marriage has clearly suffered from the tedious routines and their sexual frustrations with each other. The other couple, Mel and Dov is unfortunately at the twilight zone of their relationship and looking for a way out. And as for Denise, she is hoping someone would ignore her physical defects and provide her with warmth and adoration for her harsh existence.

## II. THE OPERA

*The Knot Garden* heavily employs Jungian psychoanalysis to portray each character's emotional state. Set in an enclosed garden, Tippett's work is designed to present a theatrical version of psychological connections between an artificial landscape and the characters in the opera [8]. The first act is subtitled “confrontation”; and in this act, the audience is presented with a situation in which they witness the emotional clashes among the characters. On making his entrance, Faber, the civil engineer, immediately reveals his marital problem and his sexual frustration that both he and his wife, Thea are experiencing:

How did we fall today

Out of the mutual bed

Apart?

Today! Each day.

The usual! Habitual!

Till Thea withdraws into her garden [9].

Faber's lines include the words; “usual” and “habitual” which strongly indicate that both characters are seriously dissatisfied with their habitual marriage. Their dysfunctional marriage is directly associated with their sexual and psychical imbalance, and that also leads Thea to retreat into the garden and gives rise to Faber's inexplicable (and unexamined) behavior towards Flora.

Thea's labyrinthine garden metaphorically indicates her marital dissatisfaction and emotional bewilderment. The garden also provides Thea with her personal space where she believes she belongs and where she feels at ease. To quote Meirion Bowen's observation, "the title of the opera provides it with a presiding metaphor: the knot-garden is an allusion to the formalized garden of French origin, popular in Elizabethan times, normally made of tiny box-hedges and low shrubs, and intended to relate the layout of the garden to the architecture it adjoined; on the other hand, it could be thought of as a maze, or as a rose-garden which 'changes with the inner situations'; in the central act, it is primarily a maze [10]."

The failure of her marriage with Faber, has ultimately led Thea to find refuge within her garden, where she exhibits obvious obsessive behaviour:

Only I may prune this garden.

[...]

Pruning is the crown.

[...]

Where I touch the tap-root

To my inward sap [11].

Thea's predisposition for gardening can be read as the character's emotional and psychological compensation for her stressful and unsatisfactory marital and sexual life. The physical sensation and emotional fulfilment, which Thea achieves through working in her garden, is the character's method to regenerate her libido. According to Carl Gustav Jung's study on psychic energy, "the progression of libido might therefore be said to consist in a continual satisfaction of the demands of environment conditions. This is possible only by means of an attitude, which as such is necessarily directed and therefore characterized by a certain one-sidedness [12]." Therefore, Thea's garden can be read as her disordered subconscious self; by constant "gardening" her psychological shadow can still be suppressed and kept under control, as a means of compensating for the sacrifice of her emotional needs.

Just as in the case of Thea, whose weakened ego has literally been channelled into her over attentive care of her garden, Faber finds solace through diverting his physical drive into the exploration of other forms of sexuality.

I'm curious.

I had to know

You – Dov, what if I

Want you: have power

To tempt, to force? Come,

I never kissed a man before [13].

Faber's curiosity concerning homosexuality implies the character's long restrained sexual desire to experience these delights, which surface when he meets a hitherto unknown male guest and within seconds is inviting for a kiss [14].

It would seem that when his own marriage is in jeopardy, Faber's ego can no longer bar the deluging homosexual drive, which has gradually emerged from the character's unconscious instinct and thus has made its way into his conscious actions. To quote Carl Jung's words, "closer examination of the dark characteristics—that is, the inferiorities constituting the shadow— reveals that they have an emotional nature, a kind of autonomy, and accordingly an

obsessive or, better, possessive quality. Emotion, incidentally is not an activity of the individual but something that happens to him. Affects occur usually where adaptation is weakest, and at the same time they reveal the reason for its weakness, namely a certain degree of inferiority and the existence of a lower level of personality [15]." Jung's observation reflects the reason behind the character's scandalous behaviour. Faber's suppressed homosexual drives has resurfaced from the shadow of his consciousness and takes centre stage as his marriage with Thea is facing difficulty.

Like Faber and Thea, the other couple in the opera, namely, Mel and Dov are also confronting a crisis in their relationship [16]. Their estranged partnership can be highlighted by their reactions, which can be seen during the rehearsals for a performance of *The Tempest*, and the struggles between Ariel/Dov and Caliban/Mel have finally intertwined both theatrically and personally. To quote David Matthews' study: "Mel's and Dov's relationship is [...] at breaking point, and their insecurity is evident from their appearance in fancy dress disguise as Caliban and Ariel, and their inability at first to speak except in caricature[17]." When the cast steps into role-playing *The Tempest*, this is clearly meant to signal that they are accessing the deeper tides of emotion evoked by mythic structure.

Two of the characters, Denise and Thea, unfortunately have no corresponding roles in *The Tempest* and so have to stand about like spare parts – whether or not that means they get to participate in the mythic-Jungian healing is not made clear – if they do, it is not clear why the laborious role-playing is at all necessary. Because of her possible role as a victim of male sexual aggression Flora should be sympathetic figure – but the uncertainty of touch means that she is not so much an innocent Miranda as a retarded wild-child.

The sense of superimposition of symbolism in the opera also finds an example in the role of Mangus. As we finally discover, the role is designed to parallel the character of Prospero in *The Tempest*, but Tippett simply transposes Prospero's thematic function to Mangus without making any connection with the already sketchy plot. The function of Mangus is to observe the behaviour of the other characters; however his actual motivation is not at all clear and the audience is left wondering whether he has some sexual interest in Flora, Dove or Thea.

### III. 1960'S BRITIAN

The dysfunctional marriage between Faber and Thea also signals the decline of the conventional Christian morality for the period[9]. Furthermore, with the reform of censorship during 1960's, British writers were encouraged to openly discuss and dramatize social taboos and minorities [18]. Faber and Dove's kiss therefore touches a prolonged social taboo about homosexuality. Echoing Thea's obsessively attentive behavior towards her garden, Faber's homosexual kiss is the character's outcry for change. Perhaps, by attempting such social taboo as the composer has clearly suggested, Faber could break off from his jaded marriage.

The homosexual relationship in Tippett's *The Knot*

*Garden*, interestingly discusses one of the unique social movements which emerged in the late 1960's and early 1970's, namely, gay liberation. To quote Arthur Marwick's study, "gay liberation shares one of the most salient characteristics of all the protest movements of the sixties: an insistence that it was genuinely revolutionary; and like other movements it encountered both violent repression from the police and a certain tolerance from those liberal upholders of humanist values and measured judgement whom I [Marwick] have identified as also being important actors in sixties developments [19]."

Inspired by women's liberation, gay liberation not only embraces the full recognition of homosexuality but also emphasises the civil rights of this social minority. Furthermore, the homosexual union in the opera arguably mirrors the librettist/composer's own "turbulent" relationship with Karl Hawker which finally came to an end in 1974 [20]. In *The Knot Garden*, Tippett has presented the unavoidable social trend for the general acceptance of homosexuality, by the placing of a homosexual couple as almost mirror images of a heterosexual pair.

Denise, like Mel and Dove, also characterises a new breed of a social movement, namely, feminist liberation [21]. Her imposing entrance highlights Tippett's intention to portray her as a stronger believer in women's liberation movement, which flourished during the 1960's. The character's radical conduct is vividly captured in her "half majestic, half sinister" entrance.

I want no pity.  
This distortion is my pride.  
I want no medal.  
The lust of violence has bred  
Contamination in my blood.  
I cannot forget... [22].

The stanza reveals the character's ultimate reaction to women's repression in society. Although Denise's campaign for women's civil rights has resulted in her having a "twisted" and "disfigured" appearance; her sole aspiration is to win equal respect in the predominately patriarchal society. The fact that she detests others' sympathy for her can be regarded as her first step towards her ideal of "sexual equality", a motto of the 60's feminist movement.

The youngest character in the opera, Flora represents one the major cultural phenomena of the 1960's, the steadily increasing impact of the "youth subculture [23]". Her offstage hysterical screams at the beginning of the first act could be a signal of her sexual awaking and yearning, a characteristic phenomenon of the 1960's. Flora's short and abrupt phrases and stage noises throughout the first act further emphasises the character's anxiety.

With the depictions of a homosexual couple, sexually frustrated middle-class husband and wife, a dedicated feminist freedom fighter, and an adolescent girl, *The Knot Garden* reflects the social and cultural liberalism of the period. The opera goes one step further by not only revealing the social affluence within the Faber and Thea household, but also exploring each character's hidden problems, the anxieties of being abandoned and yearning for affections, which form the core theme of the piece. Tippett's third opera therefore provides a glimpse of the unseen problems of the

60's, people suffered from psychological imbalance and emotional emptiness.

#### IV. STRUCTURAL DEFECTS

In *The Knot Garden*, the composer faithfully engages with the revolutionary social themes of its epoch [24]. Each character in the opera is a symbolic representative of a fashionable social trend of the 1960's. However, the piece is not properly motivated or structured – we are in a wispy, inconsequential world loaded with "issues" with lots of "right-on" connotations, such as gay liberation, freedom-fighting and sexual liberation but because it is all so remote from reality, the issues remain abstract without there being any sense of actual engagement.

The literary references, for example *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alls Well that Ends Well*, seem merely adventitious and promiscuous, – even a bit of *King Lear* is thrown in for no discernible purpose. It is sometimes remarked of Tippett that he seemed to think almost exclusively in symbolic terms and that his corresponding connection with everyday reality was somewhat attenuated - although his perception of real people tended to be much shrewder and more concrete than this would imply.

Even though, the composer enthusiastically embraces the social issues of the era and transports them into his work, the characterization of each role shows a tendency towards a cardboard symbol representing a specific issue rather than full human realization. The music in the last scenes is clearly meant to be a summation and expression of the theme of reconciliation and emerging transformation. While this music is indeed splendid and likely to impress the audience in its own expressive terms, it also lacks argument and fails to correspond with the libretto at the narrative level. Although Mangus/Prospero insists that the play within the play is the effective agency of change, the spectators in fact do not really witness "the transformation" unfold before them. We only see various confrontations and interactions between assorted pairs of characters but Denise and Thea have to remain spectators because there is no proper role for them in the re-enactment of *The Tempest*. The cast-list of *The Tempest* is being used too literally and the pattern remains externally imposed; similarly Flora cannot properly fill the role of Miranda because she has no Ferdinand.

Yet it was this parallelism with *The Tempest* that formed the crucial structural and thematic inspirations which led to the creation of *The Knot Garden*. Tippett's opera, like the Shakespearean play, begins with a quasi-illusionary storm which leads the audience into a chaotic dramatic situation [25]. Furthermore, by actually mirroring *The Tempest*'s dramatic actions in the final act of the opera, Tippett pinpoints the solution for the relational anarchy in *The Knot Garden*, namely, the theme of forgiveness. In the essay, "A Tempest of Our Time", Bowen points out, "the characters behave consistently throughout the opera as though caught up in a maze. Tippett reinforces this point by introducing associated metaphors. The most important of these comes at the climax of act three where the characters reach a state of tentative self-understanding and reconciliation [26]." Faber and Thea's marital crisis eventually results in harmonious

re-union as they synchronically chant their re-gained passion for each other, “our enmity’s transcended in desire.” The dramatic climax is that their marriage has finally been resuscitated as the curtain falls [27].

The opera had a long and painful gestation: the material was constantly re-worked and re-written with large elements added and subtracted as the process went on – even involving the final elimination of a central character, Claire, almost at the last minute [28]. One can see why – the character was there from the beginning only to provide a symmetrical cast-list in which pairings all round would provide an image of general forgiveness and reconciliation. However, the symmetry and the generality of scheme turned out to be symptomatic of the problem that haunts the libretto throughout – that it is built upon an abstract thesis and not from the complexities of human events. Of course the characters do interact in a certain fashion, but the lack of a genuine plot is indicative. Ominously, during the writing of the libretto, Tippett often speaks in his letters of Dadaism and surrealism as if sometimes they were governing principles and at others just technical fixes. The second feature that flows from this long period of writing is the over-loading of meaning evident throughout; indeed, so overloaded is it that it has become a kind of private echo-chamber of literary references and allusions - with a corresponding loss of external coherence and clarity. It is as if the composer has forgotten that his audience also has a part to play.

Comparing with Mark-Anthony Turnage’s *Greek* (1988) in which the opera demonstrates the dangers of a thoughtless attempt at transplanting myth out of its vital context, *The Knot Garden* gives us the perils of using a do-it-yourself kit. Generalised symbols, images and motifs abound but the human element in the form of recognisable people never arrives. In the event the names are fatally indicative: Faber, Thea, Flora. It is like an early medieval *psychomachia* with characters named, Lust, Avarice and Patience looming out of the mist. Alas for patience, the result is not so much a bold piece of mythic invention as an incoherent bundle of random images and fashionable concerns. Doubtless there is a kind of courage involved in tackling these issues, such as racism, homophobia, and patriarchy. However, courage is not the same class of thing as artistic achievement, and the reader starts nervously looking for oppressed Bushmen, threatened whales and suffering Vietnamese to further fill out the list of indicative figures. *The Knot Garden* has firmly presents its credentials as a Jungian psycho-drama. The characters’ names rather give the clue – like the action, they too are flat-footed symbols, walking types without any real inner dimension or life. The Jungian dimension is reductive rather than enriching.

In *The Knot Garden* Tippett is pre-occupied with featuring every possible symbol into the opera as if complexity has been taken to mean the same as obscurity bordering on chaos. The narrative problem for the opera seems to be the method of top-down writing: begin with the most abstract and generalized thesis imaginable, then see what bits of human nature can be fitted into the scheme. And “nature” here has a very general sense – not much obviously recognizable behavior to be detected in the work, certainly not in the dialogue – which invites the wrong sort of laughter: “Where I

touch the tap-root/ To my inward sap.” The employment of psychoanalytic framework can only further confuse the audience.

The practice of psychoanalysis begins with the real patient and then works back to a governing hypothesis, but in *The Knot Garden*, Tippett begins at the other end: abstractions and literary notions are the start and well-spring of the material and the humans are added later as exemplifications of the previously accepted ideas; they are not there as having value in themselves. Complexity is achieved by the manipulation and over-loading of the psychological concepts, not through the real difficulties of human experience. Denise has an entry aria of severe drama: in the cause of freedom, she has been tortured and crippled by unnamed sinister forces; at the end, without anything in particular having happened, she is skipping off with Mel. The motivation for this pairing has nothing to do with peoples’ emotions or changes and everything to do with the pattern of reconciliation Tippett is determined to foist upon his characters.

The clunking third act is an extended re-enactment of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, which appears to be used as a fleeting reference-point in order to add a richer dimension, but it turns out to be a rather plodding re-enactment whose main purpose is to display some kind of reconciliation or forgiveness. However, the composer does not give a specific grounding or motivation for this final pairing and reconciliation. The point in *The Tempest* is that the characters go through temptations, trials and suffering in the course of which they come to some kind of self-realization. *The Knot Garden* merely gives us a sequence of inconsequential encounters without resonance, subtlety or engagement. In the final scene, Mangus just drifts off stage with the rest while Thea and Denise remain themselves because there is no corresponding role for them in *The Tempest*. Faber and Thea’s “reconciliation” is just a token, having no basis in character or event. It is all done by “magic”. One may make various criticisms of the libretto of Gian Carlo Menotti’s *The Saint of Bleeker Street* (1954), but the whole affair is held together by a consistent and forceful musical expression which imposes, at the very least, a dominant emotional framework. In *The Knot Garden*, on the other hand, the eclecticism that so undermines the coherence of the libretto is extended into the musical expression leaving the audience frequently at a loss as to how it should be reacting. This is not the frequent modernist problem where we lack the traditional assurance of conventional tonal associations; it is more that the nervous leaping from one style to another suggests that the composer is also unsure of his emotional register.

## V. CONCLUSION

*The Knot Garden* not only provides an analytical study of human relationships in a postmodern idiom, it also offers a striking perspective of the union between words and music in an operatic creation. Tippett is the sole creator of the entire piece and therefore words and music are created as a conjoint entity. By studying the librettist/composer’s third opera, a reader should have the opportunity to comprehend the method, which Tippett employs to create a seamless union

between words and music. As the composer/ librettist remarks, “it is probable that opera, whose contrived situations are fully expressed only when the music is played in the theatre, is a most natural medium for such art [29].” The lesson from a close reading of *The Knot Garden* seems to be that although myths may be vehicles for messages from the otherwise inscrutable gods, their point of contact and coherence is in the lives of recognizable human beings and these already tenuous presences are hardly made more concrete or involving by being attached to barely walking symbols.

In Michael Tippett’s third opera, he intentionally draws the audience’s attention towards the nature of marital institution and the opera further reflects the British social and cultural scenes in the 1960’s. The three couples in the piece can be read as the composer’s interpretation of matrimonial union in the second half of the twentieth century. Tippett’s juxtaposition of mythic archetypes in his grand theatrical scheme is clearly intended as description, diagnosis and mystic cure all at once, but rather results in an over-laden narrative crowded with fragments and pastiche, which fails to communicate with any clarity.

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- [22] *The Knot Garden*, Act I, scene xiii.
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- [24] Ibid, pp. 9. Marwick again notes, “Practically all the activities, student protests, hippies, yuppies, Situationists, advocates of Black Power, women’s liberation, and gay liberation believed that engaging in struggles, giving witness, or simply doing their own thing they were contributing to the final collapse of bad bourgeois society.”
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