

Orlando Philharmonic 2005-06 “Focus Series I” – Benjamin Britten:

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Benjamin Britten (1913-1976):

If wind and water could write music, it would sound like Ben's.
- Yehudi Menuhin

Widely considered to be one of most outstanding of modern English composers, Benjamin Britten was born in Lowestoft, Suffolk on November 22nd in 1913 and died following chronic and severe heart problems in Aldeburgh, Suffolk on December 4th in 1976. Having been appropriately brought into the world on St. Cecilia's Day, young Benjamin was surrounded from day one with music. There was always live music making in the Britten home. His mother, an amateur singer and pianist, gave the child his first music lessons. And Benjamin's father, a dentist, saw to it that music stayed alive and fresh in the household by refusing to allow a radio or phonograph for fear it would interfere with the family's singing and playing. From early on, Britten demonstrated his passion and talent for music by writing pieces when he was only five years-of-age. He described them as “hundreds of dots all over the page connected by long lines all joined together in beautiful curves.”

With such precocious gifts, at eleven Britten began several years of study with the esteemed British composer, Frank Bridge. Teacher had such a meaningful and profound influence on pupil, that Britten's subsequent years in the 1930's at the Royal College of Music proved to be a frustrating let-down. He was not pleased at all that his plans to study in Vienna with Alban Berg were quashed on the grounds that Berg would be a bad influence. Following graduation from the RCM in 1933, Britten collaborated with the poet W.H. Auden to produce several documentary films. Although cinematic music is sometimes looked down upon, Britten's democratic spirit had him holding his head high: “I want my music to be of use to people, to please them, to ‘enhance their lives’....As an artist I want to serve the community.” The film industry served Britten well too, enabling him to develop the economy of means and directness of expression that became the hallmarks of his style.

During these years Britten began to develop the strong humanitarian and pacifist views that would stay with him for life. Christopher Palmer described the composer's high ideals in these words: “Britten was a democrat, a champion of the individual as opposed to the mass collective, an emancipator...Players and audience alike feel that they are being provided for or addressed as individuals rather than as a faceless herd.” Feeling at odds with the way events in Europe were unfolding at the time – from the depression in England to the antidemocratic revolution in Spain to the dictatorships in Germany and Italy – Britten decided that his career would be better served by a move to the United States. But homesick after a few years spent in the village of Amityville on Long Island, N.Y., he returned to England and remained there for the duration of his life.

Over the ensuing three decades, Britten composed several outstanding works that earned him a place as one of the twentieth century's leading composers. His best known orchestral work, without question, is the ever-popular *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. Also greatly admired are the *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* (discussed below), *Sinfonia da Requiem*, the *Four Sea Interludes*, and the *Cello Symphony*. But Britten was essentially a composer for voice and many of his greatest compositions were song-cycles, choral works, or operas. In 1939 he met the tenor Peter Pears, who became his lifelong artistic and domestic partner. Pears became the driving force and inspiration for much of Britten's considerable vocal output. Many of Britten's greatest opera roles were created for Pears, including the lead in *Peter Grimes*. Based on George Crabbe's poem about the fisher folk of Aldeburgh, *Grimes* was produced in London in 1945 and was instantly pronounced the first indisputably great English opera since Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. Important commissions were to follow from Covent Garden – *Billy Bud* and *Gloriana*; BBC television – *Owen Wingrave*; and, most impressive of all, the Anglican Church – the *War Requiem*. Worthy of note too are the exquisite choral work *Hymn to St. Cecilia* and the *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings* (also discussed below).

The moral force and subject matter for many of Britten's works was his preoccupation with turned-upon innocence and cruelty and his empathy for society's “outsiders.” Doubtless, much of this stemmed from his personal experience as a conscientious objector and homosexual. Britten was undoubtedly a genius

who through an astounding technical mastery was able translate compassion, humanity, and vision into enduring masterpieces of the rarest kind.

Assessing Britten's musical style has led to some interesting comments and observations. Composer/conductor Oliver Knussen said: "What I find the most rewarding feature of Britten's music...is that there's a very apprehensible surface which works because he was a terrific craftsman, but underneath it there's something else very strong....For me, Britten is one of those composers who, rather than trying to do something new and different for its own sake, says something important with means that can communicate very directly. He deals with imponderables in a very commonsensical way." And then there is Leonard Bernstein's take: "It's strange because on the surface Britten's music would seem to be decorative, positive, charming, but it's so much more than that. When you hear Britten's music, if you really *hear* it, not just listen to it superficially, you become aware of something very dark. There are gears that are grinding and not quite meshing, and they make a great pain." Britten himself concluded:

It is cruel, you know, that music should be so beautiful. It has the beauty of loneliness and pain...The beauty of disappointment and never-satisfied love.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) – Soirees musicales:

Following the tremendous success of the premiere of his masterpiece *William Tell* at the Paris Opera in 1829, Rossini – established as the greatest opera composer of the second and third decades of the 19th century - scaled back the scale and scope of his works significantly. For the last four decades of his life, with some important exceptions including the *Messa di Gloria* and the *Petite Messe solennelle* and the *Stabat Mater*, Rossini mainly contented himself with a few occasional pieces and a large number of songs, duets and instrumental pieces. These later delicacies were written with Rossini's characteristic wit, humor, and irrepressible good spirits for the musical evenings held regularly at his house. The name Rossini used for these late pieces was *Sins of Old Age*. No shortage of composers has made arrangements of these small pieces, mining from the salon songs and duets of *Les soirees musicales* (c. 1830-5) or from the *Sins*. Among the most recognizable of these arrangers were Liszt, Wagner, Respighi, and Britten.

Coming early in his career, Britten fashioned two suites based on Rossini's geriatric little gems. *Soirees musicales* was composed first in 1936 and two years later found its way into a ballet. Later, the American Ballet Company commissioned the *Matinees musicales*, and together they formed the ballet *Divertimento*, choreographed by Balanchine, and first performed in 1941. Both of the suites are made up of five movements drawn mainly from *Les soirees musicales*, but each beginning with snippets from the ballet music of *William Tell*.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) – Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge:

One of the most satisfying British works for string orchestra from the 20th century has to be Britten's *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*. Boasting some of the very finest music ever written for the genre, you can safely put it right up there with Ralph Vaughan Williams' luminous *Tallis Fantasia*, Sir Edward Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro*, and Sir Michael Tippett's masterly *Concerto for Double String Orchestra*. It is music on the highest plane, a composition superbly crafted and combining intimate depth with impressive power.

Composed as a loving tribute to long-time mentor Frank Bridge, the *Bridge Variations* was composed on commission from Boyd Neel for his orchestra's visit to the 1937 Salzburg Festival. Britten was then a young man in his early twenties with fond memories fresh in mind and with a still deep sense of gratitude for his teacher. It was Bridge who pushed him forward and it was the older composer who was the first to fully appreciate and recognize his budding young genius. Indeed, it was the music of Bridge that ignited a pre-teen Britten. Attending a concert at the 1924 Norwich Triennial Festival at which Bridge conducted his own orchestral suite *The Sea*, Britten recollected that he "was knocked sideways." When Bridge was invited back to Norwich in 1927 to direct another of his works, a family friend hooked the two up as student and teacher. Britten relates, "We got on splendidly. I spent the next morning with him going over some of my music...From that moment; I used to go to him regularly. Even though I was barely in my teens, this was immensely serious and professional study; and the lessons were mammoth...Bridge insisted on the absolutely clear relationship of what was in my mind to what was on the paper. I used to get sent to the other side of the room; Bridge would play what I'd written and demand if it was really what I meant.

He taught me to think and feel through the instrument I was writing for...I badly needed this kind of strictness. It was just the right treatment for me.” Would that all students demonstrate this sort of emotional maturity! Even after Britten went off to the Royal College of Music in London to study composition with John Ireland, Bridge remained Britten’s principal mentor and the one to whom Britten would return for advice and criticism.

The theme on which Britten based his *Variations* comes from the second of Bridge’s three *Idylls*, Op. 6, written for string quartet in 1906. On one level Britten’s work makes for a tribute to his teacher, each variation reflecting some particular aspect of Bridge’s personality. In the published score, however, the music is laid out as a series of genre pieces, collectively parodying and poking fun at various European compositional styles. Targets include Italian opera, the Viennese waltz, and the French *Bourree*.

Following the main theme, there are ten variations and a finale. The titles tell the story: *Adagio*, *March*, *Romance*, *Aria Italiana*, *Bourree Classique*, *Wiener Walz* (“*Viennese Waltz*”), *Moto Perpetuo* (“*Perpetual Motion*”), *Funeral March*, *Chant* and *Finale*. In the *Finale*, extending Bridge’s textural mastery as demonstrated in such string pieces as *Cherry Ripe*, Britten splits the orchestra into fifteen parts, having the four solo parts play successively quotations from Bridge’s *Enter Spring*, *The Sea*, Piano Trio No. 2, *Summer*, and *There is a Willow*. Especially touching is the *Lento e solenne* cantilena that follows. One senses here a deeply felt gratitude that can only be expressed through music. The *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* has remained over the years one of Britten’s most frequently performed works. As Aaron Copland put it, “The piece is what we would call a knock-out.”

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) – Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings:

- I. Prologue – *Andante* (Horn Solo)
- II. Pastoral – *Lento*: “*The Day’s grown old*” (Cotton)
- III. Nocturne – *Maestoso*: “*The splendor falls on castle walls*” (Tennyson)
- IV. Elegy – *Andante appassionato*: “*O Rose, thou art sick*” (Blake)
- V. Dirge – *Alla Marcia grave*: “*This ae nighte* (Anon.)
- VI. Hymne – *Presto e leggiero*: “*Queen and huntress*” (Ben Jonson)
- VII. Sonnet – *Adagio*: “*O soft embalmer of the still midnight*” (Keats)
- VIII. Epilogue – *Andante* (Horn Solo)

Of Britten’s five song cycles for voice and instruments, the *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings* is probably the greatest. It consists of six songs in a predominantly meditative or nocturnal mood, framed by a prologue and epilogue for solo horn. It was composed in 1943 and was premiered in London in October of that year with tenor Peter Pears and horn virtuoso Dennis Brain as soloists, conducted by Walter Goehr.

Following Britten’s two-year hiatus the United States, he returned to England in the spring of 1942 determined to argue for his status as a conscientious objector and to serve his beloved country as best he could in some sort of peaceful capacity. He appeared before a tribunal and the plan assigned him was to give concerts in hospitals, shelters and bombed-out villages, and to carry on with his compositional activities.

During the summer he made the acquaintance of a brilliant young horn player, only 21 years old, who had already established himself as one of the day’s greatest virtuosos – Dennis Brain. Brain requested a concerto from the composer, but in response Britten decided instead to commemorate his homecoming with a piece more overtly rooted in English culture: a setting of texts by great national poets for tenor voice and strings, accompanied by a solo part for horn. The composer wrote the all-important horn part with the virtuosity of Brain in mind, freeing him up to take advantage of the many possibilities of the instrument. Integral in importance to was the tenor part, specifically written for the great tenor Peter Pears, Britten’s best friend, lifelong companion, and the greatest interpreter of his vocal works. Walter Goehr conducted his orchestra in the *Serenade*’s premiere, at London’s Wigmore Hall on October 15, 1943.

The traditional “serenade” was an 18th-century instrumental genre meant to entertain. It was often played on out-of-doors evenings by wind instruments. During Mozart’s era, groups of professional musicians earned income as serenaders for private parties and evening entertainments. It was not uncommon that they would play through the night, performing for a half-an-hour outside one patron’s house before shuffling along to their next engagement, playing a march as they went. Britten’s *Serenade* carries forward the traditions of the genre through the nocturnal evocations of the texts and their settings. And the composer keeps to the prominent use of wind sonority and the Prologue/Epilogue for solo horn,

opening and closing the work. Along with its historical roots, the Postlude leaves the Serenade with a quality of profound nostalgia, leaving in the listeners head a dream-like, *déjà vu* impression of this sublime music.

According to the score's dedicatee, Edward Sackville-West, the subject of the *Serenade* is Night. "The lengthening shadow, the distant bugle at sunset, the Baroque panoply of the starry sky, the heavy angels of sleep; but also the cloak of evil – the worm in the heart of the rose, the sense of sin in the heart of man. The whole sequence forms an Elegy or Nocturnal (as Donne would have called it), invoking the thoughts and images suitable to evening." Given Britten's extraordinarily appropriate and sympathetic treatment of his chosen texts, the work seems to be driven by some sort of ineffable and inevitable creative force. Quoting again from Yehudi Menuhin, "If wind and water could write music, it would sound like Ben's." A masterpiece through and through, Michael Kennedy summed up the *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings* significance perfectly: "English poetry had never before been set to music like this, with such intensity, such musical penetration and saturation of the text, and with such unity of atmosphere."

PROLOGUE (horn solo)

PASTORAL

(Charles Cotton, 1630-1687)

The day's grown old; the fainting sun
Has but a little way to run,
And yet his steeds, with all his skill,
Scarce lug the chariot down the hill.

The shadows now so long do grow,
That brambles like tall cedars show;
Mole hills seem mountains, and the ant
Appears a mighty elephant.

A very little, little flock
Shades thrice the ground that it would stock;
Whilst the small sripling following them
Appears a mighty Polypheme.

And now on benches all are sat,
In the cool air to sit and chat,
Till Phoebus, dipping in the West,
Shall lead the world the way to rest.

NOCTURNE

(Alfred Lord Tennyson, 1809-1892)

The splendor falls of castle walls
And snowy summits old in story:
The long light shakes across the lakes,
And the wild cataract leaps in glory:
Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,
Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, answer, dying, dying, dying.

O hark, O hear, how thin and clear,
And thinner, clearer, farther going!
O sweet and far from cliff and scar
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing:
Blow, let us hear the purple glens replying:
Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying.

O love, they die in yon rich sky,
 They faint on hill or field or river:
Our echoes roll from soul to soul,
 And grow forever and forever.
Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,
And answer, echoes, answer, dying, dying, dying.

ELEGY
(William Blake, 1757-1827)

O Rose, thou art sick;
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy;
And his dark, secret love
Does thy life destroy.

DIRGE
(Anonymous, 15th Century)

This ae nighte, this ae nighte,
 Every nighte and alle,
Fire and fleete and candle-lighte,
 And Christe receive thy saule.

When thou from hence away art past,
 Every nighte and alle,
To Whinnymuir thou com'st at last;
 And Christe receive thy saule.

If ever thou gav'st hos'n and shoon,
 Every nighte and alle,
Sit thee down and put them on;
 And Christe receive thy saule.

If hos'n and shoon thou ne'er gav'st nane,
 Every nighte and alle,
The whinnies shall prick thee to the bare bane;
 And Christe receive thy saule.

From Whinnymuir when thou may'st pass,
 Every nighte and alle,
To Brig o' Dead thou com'st at last;
 And Christe receive thy saule.

From Brig o' Dread when thou may'st pass,
 Every nighte and alle,
The Purgatory fire thou com'st at last,
 And Christie receive thy saule.

If ever thou gav'st meat or drink,

Every nighte and alle,
The fire sall never make thee shrink;
And Christie receive thy saule.

If meat or drink thou ne'er gav'st nane,
Every nighte and alle,
The fire will burn thee to the bare bane;
And Christie receive thy saule.

This ae nighte, this ae nighte,
Every nighte and alle,
Fire and fleet and candle-lighte,
And Christie receive thy saule.

HYMN
(Ben Jonson, 1573-1637)

Queen and huntress, chaste and fair,
Now the sun is laid to sleep,
Seated in thy silver chair,
State in wonted manner keep:
Hesperus entreats thy light
Goddess excellently bright.

Earth, let not thy envious shade
Dare itself to interpose;
Cynthia's shining orb was made
Heav'n to clear when day did close:
Bless us then with wished sight,
Goddess excellently bright.

Lay thy bow of pearl apart,
And thy crystal-shining quiver;
Give unto the flying hart
Space to breathe, how short so-ever:
Thou that mak'st a day of night
Goddess excellently bright.

SONNET
(John Keats, 1795-1821)

O soft embalmer of the still midnight,
Shutting with careful fingers and benign,
Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the light,
Enshaded in forgetfulness divine:
O soothest Sleep! if so it please thee, close,
In midst of this thine hymn my willing eyes,
Or wait the "Amen" ere thy poppy throws
Around my bed its lulling charities;
Then save me, or the passed day will shine
Upon my pillow, breeding many woes,
Save me from curious Conscience, that still lords
Its strength for darkness, burrowing like a mole;
Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards,

And seal the hushed Casket of my Soul.

EPILOGUE (horn solo)