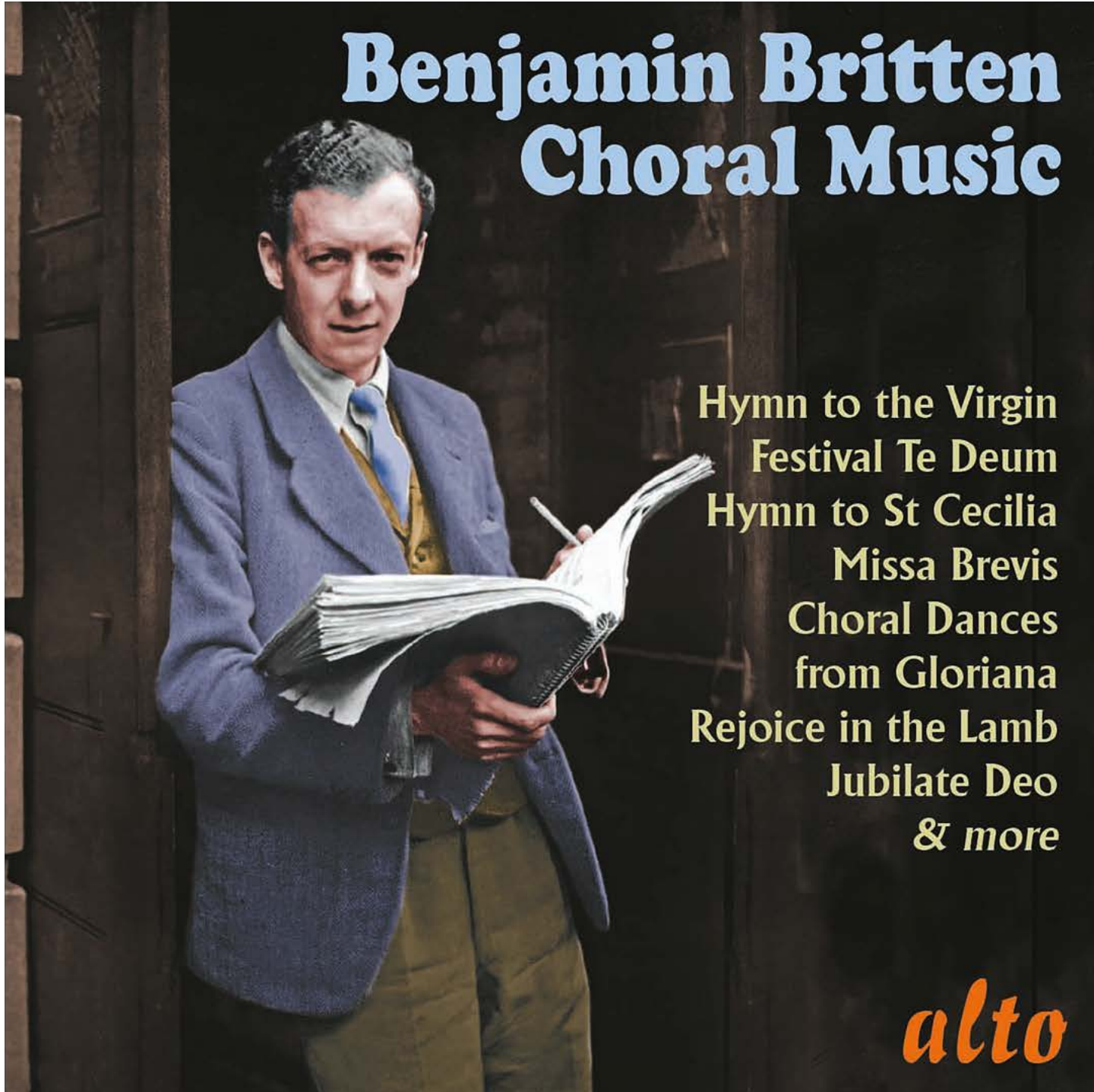


Benjamin Britten Choral Music

Hymn to the Virgin
Festival Te Deum
Hymn to St Cecilia
Missa Brevis
Choral Dances
from Gloriana
Rejoice in the Lamb
Jubilate Deo
& more

alto



BENJAMIN BRITTEN CHORAL WORKS

1	<i>Festival Te Deum</i>	5:59
2	<i>A Hymn to the Virgin</i>	3:17
St. John's College Choir Cambridge · George Guest, conductor		
<i>Missa Brevis</i>		
3	Kyrie	1:35
4	Gloria	3:02
5	Sanctus & Benedictus	3:18
6	Agnus Dei	2:17
Worcester Cathedral Choir · Donald Hunt, conductor		
7	<i>Hymn to St Cecilia</i>	11:02
New College Choir, Oxford · David Lumsden, conductor		
8	<i>Rejoice in the Lamb</i>	15:38
Purcell Singers with Michael Hartnett, treble · Jonathan Steele, alto · Philip Todd, tenor · Donald Francke, bass · George Malcolm, organ Benjamin Britten, conductor		

<i>Choral Dances from "Gloriana"</i>		
9	Time	1:20
10	Concord	2:30
11	Time and Concord	1:09
12	Country Girls	0:57
13	Rustics & Fishermen	0:48
14	Final Dance of Homage	2:00
LSO Chorus · George Malcolm, conductor		
15	<i>Jubilate Deo</i>	2:26
16	<i>Carry Her over the Water</i>	2:27
17	<i>Deus in Adjutorium Meum</i>	4:53
18	<i>Venite Exultemus Domino</i>	5:35
19	<i>Jubilate Deo</i> (1934)	2:32
Trinity College Choir, Cambridge · Richard Marlow, conductor		

Recorded 1961-78 for Argo, Oiseau Lyre, Decca, Alpha, Pearl, and Abbey.

Re-mastered for Alto by **Paul Arden-Taylor**

Benjamin Britten wrote in all genres, but vocal music formed the core of his output. His vocal writing was particularly innovative in his song cycles and large-scale operas. He also wrote choral music throughout his career, but here the focus was different. Where his solo vocal writing broke new ground, his choral works drew on, and extended, the English choral traditions in which he had been brought up. As a result, Britten's choral works give a 20th-century perspective on Anglican choral traditions, but with influences from Catholic liturgy, and from the Modernist contemporary composers whose techniques Britten often explored.

Festival Te Deum was composed in 1944 for the centenary celebrations for St Mark's in Swindon, an Anglo-Catholic church with a strong choral tradition. A Catholic element is felt in the constantly changing time signatures, which give the choral part the rhythmic freedom of Gregorian Chant. The organ part, in contrast, maintains a steady rhythm throughout, although its Baroque-sounding ornaments also add to the archaic atmosphere.

Hymn to the Virgin is an earlier work, written in 1930 when Britten was just 16. Britten divides the choir into two groups, with one singing in Mediaeval English and the other responding in Latin. The Hymn was premiered in Britten's hometown of Lowestoft in 1931, and was published in 1934 with minor revisions. The work has remained popular with audiences, and was a particular favourite of the composer himself. It was one of only two works by the composer to be performed at his funeral in 1976.

Missa Brevis is another foray into Catholic liturgy, written in 1959 for the Boys' Choir at Westminster Cathedral. The Mass was written to mark the retirement of the Cathedral's choirmaster and organist, George Malcolm. (Malcolm appears on the present programme as organist in *Rejoice the Lamb* and conductor of the *Choral Dances*.) Britten draws on the bright, continental tone that Malcolm had fostered with the Westminster Cathedral choristers, writing music with robust and clearly defined textures. Much of the setting is derived from a plainchant intonation, heard at the start of the Gloria. And although the style looks back to Catholic choral traditions, innovative techniques are also employed. The Gloria is set with seven beats in a bar. The Sanctus employs a 12-note melody, with prominent open fourth intervals—both of which sit uneasily with traditional harmonic practice. And the Benedictus is a bitonal duet, for two voices simultaneously in different keys. But the overall effect is dramatic and expressive. As such, it looks forward to the choral writing of the *War Requiem*, completed three years later.

Hymn to St Cecilia was completed in 1942, but was the culmination of a long-held ambition to write a work dedicated to the Patron Saint of Music, whose feast day coincided with Britten's birthday. A first mention of the idea appears in Britten's diary in 1935. Britten complains of difficulties in finding appropriate Latin texts. Eventually, he asked W. H. Auden to provide the words. By the time of this collaboration, Britten was living in America, and Auden sent his poem across the Atlantic in sections as each was finished. Britten's work on

the project began in the States and was completed on the long sea journey back to the UK in 1942. American customs confiscated the first section of the work as he left, suspecting it to be sensitive information rendered in musical code. Britten was then forced to rewrite the section from memory while onboard ship. The *Hymn* received its premiere later that year, given by the BBC Singers on 22 November, Britten's 29th birthday and Cecilia's feast.

Rejoice the Lamb was composed the following year, in 1943, and went on to become one of Britten's most popular choral works. The setting was written to mark the 50th anniversary of St Matthew's Church, Northampton. It was commissioned by the church's music-loving priest, the Reverend Walter Hussey, who later, as Dean of Chichester Cathedral, would also commission Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*. Britten described the work as a "festival cantata", and the setting is a series of short choral and solo movements. The text is "Jubilate Agno" by the 18th-century poet Christopher Smart, who wrote the poem while in a mental asylum. Britten's setting is both musically diverse and strongly unified. It also draws on the music of Purcell. Britten had been working on realisations of Purcell's keyboard accompaniments for songs which he performed with Peter Pears. The influence of Purcell is most apparent in the Hallelujah sections.

In 1953, Britten completed what would become his most controversial work, the opera ***Gloriana***. It was written to celebrate the coronation that year, and Britten chose as his subject the new Queen's namesake,

Elizabeth I. Britten was happy to include pageantry, but also strove for psychological insights in his portrait, demonstrating the Tudor Elizabeth's humanity and frailty through her complex relationship with the Earl of Essex. The initial reception was poor, but Britten was able to draw some movements from the score that would go on to enjoy greater success. The *Choral Dances* are a set of six movements for unaccompanied chorus. They appear in act II, when Elizabeth makes a state visit to Norwich. She is entertained there by a masque in the form of these choral dances. They begin in allegorical fashion, a solo tenor introducing dancers representing Time, and then Time's spouse, Conchord. A dance by country girls follows, and then one by rustics and fishermen. The set concludes with a "Final Dance of Homage" to the Queen, ending with an unambiguously positive gesture, the final passage in a bright and sparkling C Major.

Like *Hymn to St Cecilia*, ***Carry Her Over the Water*** dates from Britten's time in America and was part of another collaboration with W. H. Auden, the folk operetta *Paul Bunyan*. *Carry Her Over the Water* is a wedding song, which appears in the operetta's final scene. It was later arranged for concert performance by Britten's amanuensis, Colin Matthews. The setting is simple, but with most of the voice groups divided to create rich chord voicings.

Deus in Adjutorium Meum is a setting of Psalm 70, "Haste thee O God to deliver me", composed in 1944–1945, as part of incidental music for a radio play, *This Way to the Tomb* by Ronald Duncan. Britten provided

music in a range of styles for the play, including a *Boogie Woogie* for instrumental ensemble. But the overall tone is sombre, and is set by this motet, heard at the beginning and end to frame the action.

In the Anglican choral tradition, anthems are often paired, with the result that individual settings are often complemented years later by a second setting from the same composer. Such connections link Britten's two *Jubilate Deo* settings (in E flat, 1934; in C, 1961) and the *Venite Exultemus Domino* (1961). In 1934, Britten composed a *Te Deum* in C Major (not included here), and later in the year, completed the traditional pairing with the E flat *Jubilate Deo*. Unconvinced by the first *Jubilate*, Britten decided to only publish the *Te Deum*, and the E flat *Jubilate* only appeared in print after the composer's death, in 1984. But in its absence, the *Te Deum* seeming incomplete, and in 1961, Britten composed the C-Major *Jubilate*, as an alternate companion piece, at the request of the Duke of Edinburgh, for St George's Chapel at Windsor Castle. The C-Major key of the latter setting made it a better fit for the *Te Deum*, as that too is in C. The Duke of Edinburgh encouraged Britten to complete a full set of canticles for morning and evening prayer, and although the request remained unfulfilled, the *Venite Exultemus Domino* also appeared as part of the project. The 1934 *Jubilate* has a bright tone and mixes elements of ancient—gentle divergences between the voices suggest medieval counterpoint—and modern—the disjointed word setting evokes Stravinsky. The 1961 *Jubilate* and *Venite* are in Britten's more austere late style, though again lively and direct in their chant-like declamation. The organ accompaniment raises the mood, with its

ebullient textures in the *Jubilate* and its tendency in the *Venite* to join the choir at the ends of lines and move the music into new and unexpected key areas.

— **Gavin Dixon, 2020**

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