

BRITTEN

Piano Concerto Johnson Over Jordan (Suite)

Joanna MacGregor, Piano
English Chamber Orchestra • Stuart Bedford



Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Paul Bunyan Overture • Piano Concerto • Johnson Over Jordan (Suite)

Of the large number of works that Britten composed during his three-year stay in America from 1939-42, undoubtedly the most ambitious and substantial was *Paul Bunyan*, the 'choral operetta' based on the giant lumberjack of American myth that he wrote in collaboration with the poet W.H. Auden. Troubled by dramatic flaws and the negative reviews of several critics, Britten withdrew the work after the first run of performances in New York in 1941 and it was only revived (with a few modifications) in 1976. For the original production, Britten had composed an overture to the work, but this was dropped before the show even opened. It remained in piano score only and it would appear that Britten never got round to orchestrating it. In 1977, the composer Colin Matthews, who had worked as Britten's amanuensis during the composer's final years, orchestrated the *Overture* from the existing two-piano draft, in which form it now stands as an independent concert item. The *Overture's* majestic opening music is taken from the opening of the second act of the operetta where it accompanies Bunyan's 'Good Morning' to his loggemen (Matthews has here used Britten's own orchestration), while the birdsong that begins the first act provides much of the basic material for the fast section that follows, the busily contrapuntal textures anticipating the famous fugue in the *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* composed some four years later.

The *Piano Concerto, Op. 13*, was written during the spring of 1938 and was originally designated 'No. 1'. It was, however, to be Britten's only example of the form (though mention should be made of the *Diversions, Op. 21*, for piano (left-hand) and orchestra, written for Paul Wittgenstein in 1940). The concerto, dedicated to the composer Lennox Berkeley, was written as a vehicle for Britten's own skills as a pianist and was first performed with him as soloist at a Henry Wood Promenade Concert at the Queen's Hall, London, in August 1938. In the programme note for that occasion Britten stated that the work was 'conceived with the idea

of exploiting various important characteristics of the pianoforte, such as its enormous compass, its percussive quality, and its suitability for figuration; so that it is not by any means a Symphony with pianoforte, but rather a bravura Concerto with orchestral accompaniment'. The four movements have titles which may suggest a work of suite or divertimento-like character: *Toccata, Waltz, Impromptu* and *March*. The work is tightly constructed, however, with various cross-relationships between the movements helping to bind it together. The opening *Toccata* is a conventional sonata-form structure with two clearly defined subjects, the first played by the soloist in *martellato* octaves over pulsating chords in the wind while the second subject is a more sustained, lyrical theme first heard on the strings and subsequently passed to the woodwind. Dividing these is an arresting fanfare-like motif on the brass based on two alternating chords, an idea which will recur in various altered guises throughout the work. After the cadenza Britten provides formal resolution by superimposing the second subject, played *tranquillo* on the piano, over a version of the first played on pizzicato lower strings and harp in augmentation, a characteristic recapitulatory device that he also employed in the first movements of the *Sinfonietta*, the *Violin Concerto* and the *Second String Quartet*. The *Waltz* is clearly an exercise in the ironic, satirical vein that Britten had already exploited in works such as the *Frank Bridge Variations*. After a quiet fourth on two muted horns, a solo viola proposes the elegant waltz theme, subsequently extended by the clarinet. The piano enters with a quiet version of the fanfare before taking over the waltz tune amid much bizarre accompanimental detail from the orchestra. A contrasting trio section includes an extraordinary *staccato* tutti passage played *pianissimo* with prominent glockenspiel and *col legno* strings before the waltz returns *fortissimo*, followed by a quiet coda in which the horn's fourth is shown to be directly related to the fanfare. The theme of the *Impromptu*, composed in 1945 to replace the original

Recitative and Aria, is actually taken from the incidental music that Britten had composed for the radio play *King Arthur* in April 1937. First stated simply on the piano, it then forms the basis for a series of variations in the orchestra, to which the soloist adds suitable embellishments. The final *March* has a brash swagger that, in all likelihood, is another of Britten's musical responses to the approaching threat of the Second World War, the deliberately banal main theme carrying more than a suggestion of Shostakovich (as well as some of the more militaristic of Mahler's *Wunderhorn* songs such as *Revelge*). A more relaxed central episode helps ease the tension, but the piano uses the fanfare idea to build a slow crescendo – bass drum with attached cymbals providing rhythmic support – before the main theme reappears triumphantly in a grandiose D major peroration. Reminiscences of the first movement provide a final unifying gesture before the work comes to its curt and grimly determined conclusion.

The version of the *Piano Concerto* that is commonly performed today is the revised one that Britten prepared in 1945, substituting the *Recitative and Aria* with the newly composed *Impromptu*. This disc, however, includes a rare recording of the original third movement, thus offering the option of hearing the work as Britten first envisioned it.

During the 1930s and early 1940s, in addition to writing those more substantial works by which he would be judged by posterity, Britten supplemented his income by writing a copious amount of incidental music for radio, stage and film. His technical prowess and phenomenal facility, combined with a strongly ingrained work ethic, meant that he was able to produce high-quality music at great speed. Although he could be rather dismissive of this music in later life, no doubt regarding it as little more than hack-work, since his death in 1976 a number of these scores have been

published and performed shedding valuable light on a hitherto unknown area of his output. His score for the J.B. Priestley play *Johnson over Jordan* was composed during February 1939. In three acts and featuring some 35 minutes worth of music, this was one of the longest commercial theatre scores that Britten ever produced. The story revolves around the character of Robert Johnson who, as the play opens, has recently died. We then see scenes from his life in reverse, culminating in the moment when he must be released from the purgatory-like state known as 'Bardo' and say farewell to everything he knows. The first performance was given on 22nd February, 1939, at the New Theatre, London, directed by Basil Dean with Ralph Richardson in the title rôle. After a short time it transferred to the Saville Theatre where it enjoyed a relatively successful run, to which Britten's music made a significant contribution. The suite heard on the present recording was compiled by Paul Hindmarsh in 1990 and first performed in a BBC Radio 3 broadcast with the Northern Sinfonia conducted by Odaline de la Martinez. The *Overture* is framed by the sinister 'death' motif which plays a crucial rôle throughout the score. The *Incinerator's Ballet* originally accompanied a scene in which bags of banknotes, symbols of greed and avarice, were ceremoniously burned (listeners familiar with the aforementioned *Diversions* will note that Britten re-deployed some of the thematic material in the *March* from that work). This is followed by *The Spider and the Fly*, an irresistible 1930s dance-band number written to accompany a night-club scene. Finally, the *End Music* develops the 'death' motif, culminating in a radiant D major apotheosis in which Johnson is finally liberated from earthly life and set free into an all-embracing cosmos of sky and stars.

Lloyd Moore

Joanna MacGregor

Joanna MacGregor is widely thought of as one of the most innovative and wide-ranging of today's pianists and divides her time between playing classical, jazz and contemporary music. She has performed in over forty countries, and last year gave recitals and concerto performances in Scandinavia, Western and Eastern Europe, Australia, the United States and the Far East. She has given first performances of many landmark compositions in contemporary music working with, among others, Sir Harrison Birtwistle, Pierre Boulez, John Adams and Lou Harrison. She collaborates regularly with jazz artists Django Bates and Andy Sheppard, and in late 2002 gave an acclaimed tour of China with Jin Xing's Contemporary Dance Theatre performing her own score written for Chinese traditional instruments and computer technology. Joanna MacGregor's worldwide performances have included appearances with the Rotterdam, Oslo and Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestras, and the Sydney, Berlin and London Symphony Orchestras. In America she has performed with the New York Philharmonic and Chicago Symphony Orchestras. The many eminent conductors with whom she has collaborated include Pierre Boulez, Sir Colin Davis, Sir Simon Rattle and Michael Tilson Thomas. She made her conducting debut in 2002 on an acclaimed tour of the United Kingdom with the Britten Sinfonia. Her own record label, SoundCircus, embraces music from Byrd to Birtwistle, and her recent album 'Play' was nominated for a Mercury Music Award, while her orchestral release 'Neural Circuits', which includes the music of Nitin Sawhney and Arvo Pärt, has received universal critical acclaim. Joanna MacGregor was appointed Professor of Music at Gresham College in the City of London from 1998-2000, and she has Honorary Fellowships from the Royal Academy of Music, Trinity College of Music and the Royal Society of Arts.

English Chamber Orchestra

The English Chamber Orchestra, formed in 1960, enjoys an international reputation as one of the world's most celebrated ensembles. The orchestra undertakes a busy annual schedule of concert appearances, which include its prestigious London series. Overseas touring fills approximately three months of the schedule each year and since its first foreign tour the orchestra has performed in almost four hundred cities across the globe. Its world-wide reputation is enhanced by its recordings of over a thousand works and includes numerous award-winning discs as well as those of historic interest. Over the years the English Chamber Orchestra has formed lasting and fruitful relationships with a multitude of great performers, with guest soloists including Maxim Vengerov, Mstislav Rostropovich, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Joshua Bell, Pinchas Zukerman and Mitsuko Uchida amongst many others. In 2000 the widely acclaimed and highly individual Finnish musician Ralf Gothóni was appointed Principal Conductor, and in 2004 Roy Goodman accepted the post of Principal Guest Conductor.

London Symphony Orchestra

The London Symphony Orchestra is widely regarded as being among the top five orchestras in the world on the strength of its performances alone, but there is much more to its work than concerts in concert-halls. Its many activities include an energetic and ground-breaking education and community programme, a record company, exciting work in the field of information technology, and, over the years, a very distinguished list of recordings. The orchestra comprises over a hundred players and gives around ninety concerts a year in the Barbican, its London home. In addition to these performances, the orchestra goes on tour about a dozen times a year, giving concerts all over the world, making it one of the busiest orchestras in Europe, and the quality of its performances ensures that it ranks alongside the greatest orchestras in the world. The London Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1904 and was Britain's first self-governing orchestra. Since its earliest days it has attracted the best players, and this in turn attracted the best conductors. The first Principal Conductor was Hans Richter, and he was followed by the great composer Edward Elgar. Since then Principal Conductors have included such luminaries as Sir Thomas Beecham, Pierre Monteux and Claudio Abbado. The current incumbent is Sir Colin Davis, who has had a long association with the orchestra; he was first a guest conductor in the late 1950s, and was appointed Principal Conductor in 1995. The orchestra has been resident at the Barbican since 1982, playing in what is now arguably the finest symphony hall in London.

Steuart Bedford

Steuart Bedford is recognised as one of today's leading experts on the works of Benjamin Britten. As a result of his former collaboration with the composer, he has conducted Britten's operas throughout the world, including the world première of *Death in Venice* in 1973, which was followed by the first recording of the work. From 1974 to 1998 he was one of the Artistic Directors of the Aldeburgh Festival eventually becoming Joint Artistic Director with Oliver Knussen. Steuart Bedford has an extensive operatic repertoire and has worked with many of the world's greatest opera companies including English National Opera, the Royal Opera Covent Garden, Metropolitan Opera, Opera North, Scottish Opera, Opéra de Paris, Brussels Opera, Monte Carlo Opera, Lausanne Opera, San Diego Opera, Santa Fe Opera Festival, Canadian Opera Company, Vancouver Opera, and the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires. He is also highly regarded for his interpretations of the works of Mozart, with acclaimed performances at the Garsington Opera and elsewhere. Although opera commitments dominate much of his time, Steuart Bedford conducts concert engagements, both in Britain and abroad, and has toured Australia, New Zealand, South America and Scandinavia. He has worked with the English Chamber Orchestra (with whom he has toured all over the world), the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, the Philharmonia, Royal Philharmonic, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Northern Sinfonia, City of London Sinfonia, Teatro Colón, Gurzenich Orchestra, Orchestre National de Bordeaux Aquitaine, Orchestre Philharmonique de Montpellier, Dortmund Philharmonic and the BBC Orchestras.

1	Overture to <i>Paul Bunyan</i> (Arr. Colin Matthews)	5:07
	Piano Concerto, Op. 13	42:55
2	Allegro molto e con brio	12:31
3	Waltz: Allegretto	4:54
4	Impromptu: Andante lento	7:16
5	March: Allegro moderato sempre a la marcia	8:30
6	Piano Concerto – original Third Movement: Recitative and Aria	9:43
	Johnson Over Jordan (Suite) (Arr. Paul Hindmarsh)	15:39
7	Overture	3:37
8	Introduction	1:41
9	Incinerators' Ballet	3:01
10	The Spider and the Fly	3:44
11	Approach of Death	1:01
12	End Music	2:35

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Britten's *Piano Concerto* is commonly performed today in the 1945 revision in which the original third movement was replaced by an *Impromptu*. This disc includes the rarely recorded abandoned third movement, offering the option of hearing the work as Britten originally envisaged it. Recent years have brought to light a number of earlier works by Britten which he decided not to publish or re-use. The *Overture to Paul Bunyan* was later orchestrated from the piano score, while the *Suite* from incidental music to J.B. Priestley's play *Johnson Over Jordan*, makes a worthwhile addition to the store of occasional works composed by Britten in the 1930s.

Benjamin
BRITTEN
(1913-1976)

- ① **Overture to *Paul Bunyan*** **5:07**
(Arr. Colin Matthews, 1977)
- ②-⑥ **Piano Concerto, Op. 13** **42:55**
Including both original and revised Third Movement
- ⑦-⑫ **Johnson Over Jordan (Suite)** **15:39**
(Arr. Paul Hindmarsh, 1990)

Joanna MacGregor, Piano (Tracks 2-6)
English Chamber Orchestra (Tracks 2-12)
London Symphony Orchestra (Track 1) • **Steuart Bedford**

Tracks 7-12 recorded at Abbey Road Studios, London, UK in June/July, 1990

Producer: John West • Engineer: Simon Rhodes

Tracks 1-6 recorded at Snape Maltings, Aldeburgh, Suffolk, UK in October, 1989

Producer: John West • Engineer: Sean Lewis • Booklet Notes: Lloyd Moore

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Tracks 6 and 7-12 were World Premiere Recordings on their release by Collins Classics in 1990 and 1991

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