



BRITTEN

Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge

The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra

English Chamber
Orchestra

London Symphony
Orchestra

Steuart Bedford

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra • Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge

Benjamin Britten occupies an unrivalled position in English music of the twentieth century and a place of the greatest importance in the wider musical world. While Elgar was in some ways part of late nineteenth-century German romantic tradition, Britten avoided the trap offered by musical nationalism and the insular debt to folk-music of his older compatriots, while profiting from that tradition in a much wider European context. He may be seen as following in part a path mapped out by Mahler. He possessed a special gift for word-setting and vocal writing, a facility that Purcell had shown and that was the foundation of a remarkable series of operas that brought English opera for the first time into international repertoire. Tonal in his musical language, he knew well how to use inventively, imaginatively, and, above all, musically, techniques that in other hands often seemed arid. His work owed much to the friendship and constant companionship of the singer Peter Pears, for whom Britten wrote many of his principal operatic roles and whose qualities of voice and intelligence clearly had a marked effect on his vocal writing.

Born in the East Anglian seaside town of Lowestoft in 1913, Britten showed early gifts as a composer, studying with Frank Bridge before a less fruitful time at the Royal College of Music in London. His association with the poet W.H.Auden, with whom he undertook various collaborations, was in part behind his departure with Pears in 1939 for the United States, where opportunities seemed plentiful, away from the petty jealousies and inhibitions of his own country, where musical facility and genius often seemed the objects of suspicion. The outbreak of war brought its own difficulties. Britten and Pears were firmly pacifist in their views, but were equally horrified at the excesses of National Socialism and sufferings that the war brought. Britten's nostalgia for his native country and region led to their return to England in 1942, when they rejected the easy option of nominal military service as musicians in uniform in favour of overt pacifism, but were able to give concerts and recitals, often in difficult

circumstances, offering encouragement to those who heard them. The re-opening of Sadler's Wells and the staging of Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* started a new era in English opera. The English Opera Group was founded and a series of chamber operas followed, with larger scale works that established Britten as a composer of the highest stature, a position recognised shortly before his early death by his elevation to the peerage, the first English composer ever to be so honoured.

The works included here come from the period between 1937 and 1946. The earlier date is that of Britten's tribute to his teacher, his *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge, Op. 10*, which was written for and performed by the Boyd Neel Orchestra at the Salzburg Festival in the same year. The theme itself is taken from Bridge's *Idyll, Op. 6, No. 2*, for string quartet, and is first heard after the brief dramatic introduction. Britten had planned to relate each movement to an aspect of Bridge's character. With this in mind he suggested the *Adagio* as 'his integrity', later changed to 'his depth', followed by the *March* as 'his energy', the *Romance* as 'his charm', the *Aria Italiana* as 'his wit', later changed to 'his humour', the *Bourrée* as 'his tradition', the *Viennese Waltz* as 'his enthusiasm', the *Moto Perpetuo* reflected as 'his vitality', 'his sympathy or understanding' reflected in the *Funeral March*, 'his reverence' in the *Chant*, 'his skill' in the *Fugue*, and 'our affection' in the *Finale*. The work is, whatever the relevance of these personal analogies, a *tour de force*, a highly skilful exploration of the possibilities in writing for a small string orchestra. The poignant theme leads to a moving *Adagio*, followed by the first satirical movement, a *March*, a *Romance* in the spirit of France, and an *Aria Italiana* that parodies Rossini. The *Bourrée Classique* suggests Stravinsky at his most neo-classical and the *Wiener Walzer*, not completely acceptable at the time to some Salzburg critics, is Vienna seen through the eyes of Ravel. The virtuoso *Moto Perpetuo* provides a transition to the seriousness of the *Funeral March* and the dark-hued

Chant. The *Fugue*, as has been pointed out, contains a number of references to other works by Bridge, whose theme returns in modified form in the *Finale*.

Britten wrote his *Prelude and Fugue for 18-part String Orchestra, Op. 29*, in 1943 for the Boyd Neel Orchestra, to mark the tenth anniversary of the ensemble. The eighteen-part fugue provided a separate part for each member of the orchestra. It is framed by textures of some severity, the outer frame, on its return, reversing and transforming the opening version. Here the composer makes full use of the sonorities inherent in the instrumental forces available to him, displaying his remarkable technical and musical abilities in the fugue itself.

The *Occasional Overture* was written for the opening of the BBC Third Programme in 1946. Its performance by the BBC Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Sir Adrian Boult, about whose work Britten was generally unenthusiastic. The festive composition was only published posthumously in 1984. A more significant work of the same year, and one that has enjoyed continuing success, was *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, commissioned by the Crown Film Unit for an educational film, *Instruments of the Orchestra*, and dedicated, on publication, to the children of John and Jean Redcliffe-Maud, 'for their

edification and entertainment'. The original commentary was provided by Eric Crozier, who wrote libretti for *Albert Herring*, *Saint Nicolas*, *Let's Make an Opera!*, and, with E.M.Forster, *Billy Budd*. The work is, formally, a set of variations on a D minor theme of Purcell, taken from that composer's incidental music to the play *Abdelazar*. This is first heard from the full orchestra, followed by the different sections of the orchestra, woodwind, brass, strings, and finally percussion, to be summed up by the whole orchestra. Variations follow for the members of each section, first piccolo and flutes, then oboes, clarinets, and bassoons. The violins are given a variation *alla polacca*, the viola a more soulful version, succeeded by the cellos with deeper sonorities, and a variation for double basses that increases gradually in speed, ending in an ascending scale and final *glissando*. The harp is heard against tremolo strings, before the French horns introduce the brass, and then two trumpets, one answering the other. The section ends with trombones and bass tuba, *Allegro pomposo*. After this percussion instruments make their individual appearances, and the whole work ends with a splendid fugue in which each instrument or group of instruments enters in order.

Keith Anderson

The 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.

The 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.

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.

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1 Occasional Overture (1946) 7:27

Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge, Op. 10 25:54

2	Introduction and Theme	1:57	8	Wiener Waltzer	2:48
3	Adagio	2:00	9	Moto Perpetuo	1:12
4	March	1:09	10	Funeral March	3:32
5	Romance	1:25	11	Chant	1:35
6	Aria Italiana	1:18	12	Fugue and Finale	7:24
7	Bourrée Classique	1:36			

Prelude and Fugue for 18-part String Orchestra, Op. 29 9:49

13	Prelude: Grave	3:49
14	Fugue: Allegro energico	3:24
15	Coda: Grave come prima	2:37

The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra, Op. 34 16:39
'Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Henry Purcell'

16	Theme	2:03	24	Variation H –	1:02
17	Variation A – The Flutes	0:31		The Double Basses	
18	Variation B – The Oboes	0:59	25	Variation I – The Harp	0:48
19	Variation C – The Clarinets	0:39	26	Variation J – The Horns	0:48
20	Variation D – The Bassoons	0:54	27	Variation K – The Trumpets	0:32
21	Variation E – The Violins	0:39	28	Variation L – The Trombones	0:59
22	Variation F – The Violas	0:54		and Bass Tuba	
23	Variation G – The Cellos	1:11	29	Variation M – Percussion	1:55
			30	Fugue	2:45



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Playing Time
59:50

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 Booklet notes in English
 Made in Canada

Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* started life as music for an educational film, designed to acquaint young people with the character of the various instruments and instrumental choirs that make up the modern orchestra. The work is a series of variations each spotlighting the individual instruments and each with a different character – some tender, some slightly sardonic, some mysterious, some straightforwardly humorous, all charged with great originality and wit. Britten's *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* were written as a homage to his teacher. Based on Bridge's *Three Idylls for String Quartet* (Naxos 8.553718), they proved immediately popular, launching Britten's international career and securing his place in British twentieth-century music.

Benjamin
BRITTEN
 (1913-1976)

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| ① | Occasional Overture (1946) | 7:27 |
| ②-12 | Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge, Op. 10 * | 25:54 |
| ⑬-15 | Prelude and Fugue for 18-part String Orchestra, Op. 29 * | 9:49 |
| ⑰-30 | The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra, Op. 34
'Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Henry Purcell' | 16:39 |

English Chamber Orchestra *
 London Symphony Orchestra
 Steuart Bedford

Recorded in All Saints Church, East Finchley in April 1992 (Tracks 2-15)
 and the Barbican Centre, London on 23rd and 25th of April, 1991 (Tracks 1 and 16-30)
 Producer: John H. West • Engineers: Mark Edwards (Tracks 2-15) & John Timperley (Tracks 1 and 16-30)
 Booklet Notes: Keith Anderson • Originally released by Collins Classics in 1992
 Publishers: Faber Music Ltd. (Track 1) and Boosey and Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd. (Tracks 2-30)
 Please see the booklet for a detailed track list • Cover Picture: *Conductor and Musicians Playing Drums and a Cello* by Jo McChesney (Digital Vision / Getty Images Inc.)

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