

# PROGRAM NOTES

**Edward Benjamin Britten**, Baron Britten, OM, CH (22 November 1913 – 4 December 1976) was an English composer, conductor and pianist. He was a central figure of 20th-century British classical music, with a range of works including opera, other vocal music, orchestral and chamber pieces. His best-known works include the opera *Peter Grimes* (1945), the *War Requiem* (1962) and the orchestral showpiece *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1945).

Born in Suffolk, the son of a dentist, Britten showed musical talent from an early age. He studied at the Royal College of Music in London and privately with the composer Frank Bridge. Britten first came to public attention with the a cappella choral work *A Boy Was Born* in 1934. With the premiere of *Peter Grimes* in 1945, he leapt to international fame. Over the next 28 years, he wrote 14 more operas, establishing himself as one of the leading 20th-century composers in the genre. Recurring themes in the operas are the struggle of an outsider against a hostile society, and the corruption of innocence.

Britten's other works range from orchestral to choral, solo vocal, chamber and instrumental as well as film music. He took a great interest in writing music for children and amateur performers, including the opera *Noye's Fludde*, a *Missa Brevis*, and the song collection *Friday Afternoons*. He often composed with particular performers in mind. His most frequent and important muse was his personal and professional partner, the tenor Peter Pears; others included Janet Baker, Dennis Brain, Julian Bream, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Mstislav Rostropovich. Britten was a celebrated pianist and conductor, performing many of his own works in concert and on record. He also performed and recorded works by others, such as Mozart symphonies, song cycles by Schubert and Schumann, and Bach's Brandenburg concertos.

Together with Pears and the librettist and producer Eric Crozier, Britten founded the annual Aldeburgh Festival in 1948, and he was responsible for the creation of Snape Maltings concert hall in 1967. In his last year, he was the first composer to be given a life peerage.

*Hymn to St. Cecilia* is conceived in the great tradition of the Odes of the poet John Dryden.

It is set to a text by W.H. Auden about the legend of St. Cecilia (Britten was born on St. Cecilia's Day, November 22nd) and composed in 1942. Although originally begun in 1940, the manuscript was confiscated as Britten and Pears were travelling back from their time in the United States and the authorities suspected that the music was some sort of enemy spy code! Thus, he re-wrote it out from memory on the ship journey back to England.

*The Simple Symphony*, Op. 4, is a work for string orchestra or string quartet by Benjamin Britten. It was written between December 1933 and February 1934 in Lowestoft, using bits of score that the composer had written for the piano as a young teenager, between 1923 and 1926. It was composed for string orchestra and received its first performance in 1934 at Stuart Hall in Norwich, with Britten conducting an amateur orchestra.

The piece is dedicated to Britten's viola teacher during his childhood. The piece is based on eight themes which Britten wrote during his childhood (two per movement) and for which he had a particular fondness. He completed his final draft of this piece at age twenty.

The setting of *Psalm 150* is typical of Britten's compositions for schools. It was composed for the centenary of Britten's own prep school – Old Buckenham Hall School (called South Lodge School when he was there) – which he attended between 1923 and '28. As can be seen from the scoring details above it is intended that as many children as possible can be involved in the performance by playing a variety of instruments which are not specifically detailed. So, there are two 'treble instrument' parts which might be anything from a recorder to a violin or flute and a 'bass instrument' which might be a cello or a bassoon – and so on. The voice parts divide into four (a canon at 'let everything that hath breath praise the Lord') but are basically in two parts and there is a great deal of unison singing.

As one might expect, Britten makes full use of the different forms of praise described in the verses of the psalm to color his composition. The delightful, dancing 7/8 rhythm of 'Praise him with the sound of the trumpet' makes an irresistible, light-hearted section before the culminating 'Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord'. A Gloria gives the work a suitably climactic ending.

Benjamin Britten wrote the cantata *Saint Nicolas* in 1948 for the centennial celebrations of Lancing College in Sussex. Writing specifically for the resources available to him on this occasion, Britten scored the piece for mixed choir, tenor soloist, three or four boys, strings, piano duet, organ and percussion.

Within this ensemble, the only professional musicians required were the tenor soloist, a string quartet to lead the other strings, and the percussionists. *Saint Nicolas* marks Britten's first professional work intended primarily for performance by amateur musicians. Now the cantata is frequently performed by youth and amateur ensembles. While the piece was written for Lancing College, the first performance was actually, with the College's permission the opening concert of the first Aldeburgh Festival in June 1948, when it was performed in Aldeburgh Church.

The text of *Saint Nicolas* was written by Eric Crozier after extensive research into the legendary life of Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, Lycia. Crozier's libretto paints a dramatically bold portrait of the saint's character, exaggerating the legends and glory that have accumulated over the centuries around Nicholas's story. Britten's music enhances the drama of Crozier's text using striking contrasts in instrumentation, vocal style, and musical textures.

What do we know about the historical St. Nicolas?

We know that he was born in Patara in Asia Minor to wealthy parents in the latter part of the 3rd century. According to legend, he showed signs of exceptional grace at an early age and refused to feed on fasting days. When his parents died, he sold his possessions and went on Pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Upon his return, he was made Bishop of Myra, the capital city of Lycia. During the reign of Diocletian he was imprisoned during the persecution of the Martyrs. Finally, he was summoned to attend the council of Bishops in Nicaea where he apparently got into a kerfuffle with the heretic, Bishop Arius. Most of the legends about Nicolas are concerned with his care for the poor and oppressed. He is the patron saint of sailors, merchants, archers, thieves, children, pawnbrokers and students, and is "prototype" for Santa Claus, (Sinter Claas in the Dutch).