

PROGRAM NOTES

For many people, the passing of Benjamin Britten on 4 December 1976 marked a turning point in twentieth century music. Composers come and go, but the times in which Britten had worked, and the heights to which he had ascended as one of the greatest English composers of his century, marked him out as someone who had a direct influence on the generation of composers that came after him. Arvo Pärt has spoken widely about the influences that Britten and his music had on him at a young age. At the time of Britten's death, Pärt had only just discovered what he describes as 'the unusual purity of [Britten's] music', and the *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten (1980)* reflects that, alongside Pärt's 'inexplicable guilt' that he felt, and his regret at never having met Britten before his death. Scored for string orchestra and a single pitched bell, the *Cantus* epitomizes Pärt's 'tintinnabuli' style of composition; beginning and ending in silence, the piece uses only the notes of a descending A minor scale, weaving a tangled web of long and short note values in a layered texture throughout the orchestra. These simple motivic details marry together to form a complex texture which reflects the emotional turmoil and magnitude felt by Pärt following Britten's death. Such feelings of kindred spirits on the part of Pärt are made all the more poignant when one considers that Pärt did not set eyes on any scores of Britten until 1980, a full four years after the elder's death; it was only having emigrated from Soviet Estonia to Austria that Pärt was able to understand fully what it was about Britten's music that he had felt for so long most closely resembled his own.

The music of Benjamin Britten was known to John Rutter from an early age. As a chorister at Highgate School, John Rutter sang on the famous 1963 recording of Britten's *War Requiem*, conducted by the composer. Considered by Sir David Willcocks as 'the most gifted composer of his generation', John Rutter is known internationally as the leading composer of carols and arrangements; as an ambassador for choral music and music education he has travelled the world. *Visions* was written for the 2016 Menuhin Competition, combining solo violin, strings, harp and boy choristers. Taking four Biblical texts concerned with the ideas and differing visions of 'Jerusalem', the piece melds the Gregorian melody of 'Blessed City, heavenly Salem' in the opening movement; following that we hear Isaiah's prophetic vision of the coming of the Messiah; after which a lament for the desolation of Sion brings together fragments of William Byrd's motet *Civitas Sancti tui* in the third movement; and finally, a transfigured vision of the Holy City as seen by St John in the Book of Revelation caps the fourth. Stylistic similari-

ties to the works of other composers abound. Vaughan Williams's *Sancta Civitas* and *The Lark Ascending* are both immediately apparent, and it is no surprise that the music of perhaps the greatest English choral composer of all time, William Byrd, should appear. In the skillful hands of John Rutter, such nods to those who have gone before mark a respect for, and an assimilation of, traditions which live on to this day.

A respect for tradition, and a wish to develop and nurture the best of what he inherited, can be heard *par excellence* in the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams. Following study at the Royal College of Music and Cambridge University, where his tutors included Parry and Stanford, Vaughan Williams went to Paris in 1908 'in search of a little French polish'. Three months of study with Ravel saw Vaughan Williams acquire an ear for orchestral color and shading which set him apart from his English contemporaries. In a desire to break away from predominantly European, and heavily Teutonic, traditions, Vaughan Williams turned to the genre of the folk-song and the music of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. These tunes of regular English people at work, church and play became the defining characteristics of most of his compositional output. The *Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis* (1910) marked the beginning of a fully-fledged musical maturity, and it was to the large string orchestra that he returned again in 1939 with *Five Variants of Dives and Lazarus*. Premiered at Carnegie Hall on 10 June 1939, the work begins with a simple version of the well-known tune, followed by five variants (not variations). As the composer describes in the preface to the score, 'these variants are not exact *replicas* of traditional tunes, but rather reminiscences of various versions in my own collection and those of others.' In essence, what we have here is a snapshot of the composer's scrapbook of over 800 tunes collected and compiled during his lifetime. *The New Yorker* review of the premiere commented that 'the variations were soundly charming', and it is fitting to note that following Vaughan Williams's death, in 1959, his ashes were interred in the north choir aisle of Westminster Abbey alongside those of Henry Purcell, and the music played was *Five Variants on Dives and Lazarus*.

Not all of Vaughan Williams's works can be described as 'charming', nor do they all assimilate and quote the English folk-songs which had become the composer's vernacular. *Dona Nobis Pacem* is an admonitory work, and when understood within the political and increasingly unstable landscape of the 1930s it presents a supplication in earnest that man will finally do away with the strife and horror of war in all its forms. Composed in 1936 to a commission from the Huddersfield Choral Society, the work depicts from the outset the uncertainty

and fear of a European decline towards what became World War II. Whilst there are no allusions to specific contemporary events, the choice of such ecumenical texts makes the message startlingly clear. Three contrasting poems by Walt Whitman are framed by scraps from the Ordinary of the Latin Mass, words of the Old Testament Prophets and the famous speech made in the House of Commons by John Bright during the Crimean War. Modern war poetry interleaved with liturgical texts anticipated something that Benjamin Britten was to do nearly thirty years later in his *War Requiem*, although Whitman's texts reflect the American Civil War, unlike the First World War poetry of Wilfred Owen used by Britten.

Musically, there are similarities too with Verdi's *Requiem*, which is known to have been a favorite of Vaughan Williams. Musical echoes abound, such as the similar treatment of the word 'Dona' in the opening, and elsewhere in 'Beat! Beat! drums!', which shows clear influences of Verdi's 'Dies irae'. The music stomps with hellish noise; one hears the beating artillery that Vaughan Williams would have known only too well from his own service in the First World War. However, in his choice of texts, Vaughan Williams also reminds us that there is a future. John Bright's words, 'The Angel of death has been abroad throughout the land; you may almost hear the beatings of his wings', provide the clearest reference to what was developing in Europe in the 1930s, and the final soprano supplication 'Dona nobis pacem' provides the hope which was all too necessary at the time Vaughan Williams was writing. It was not for him to know quite how lambasted such a prophetic vision was to be only a few years later. Although, perhaps this prayer is just as relevant in our world today.

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