



# BRITTEN'S ORCHESTRA

MICHAEL STERN  
KANSAS CITY  
SYMPHONY



A PROF. JOHNSON 24-BIT  RECORDING



Benjamin Britten  
was recognized as  
the dominant British  
musical figure  
of his time.

The works represented  
in this recording were  
prominent in establishing  
his reputation in the  
early years of his creative life;  
they remain among his most  
directly appealing and most  
enduringly popular works,  
their places in the international  
repertory more secure than ever  
as the years pass.

The *Sinfonia da requiem*, Britten's first major work for full orchestra without a soloist, was composed at a tense time in world history, and it set off an uncomfortable diplomatic exchange before it was performed anywhere. Early in 1940, when Japan was at war with China but had not yet entered the global conflict as a member of the Axis powers, its government invited some respected foreign composers as well as several in Japan to create new works in observance of the 2,600th anniversary of its ruling dynasty, which is traced back to the accession of the Emperor Jimmu Tenno in 660 B.C. By far the most illustrious of the composers commissioned for the project was the 76-year-old Richard Strauss, who contributed a *Festmusik zur Feier des 2600-jährigen Bestehens des Kaiserreichs Japan*. As it turned out, however, the Strauss piece is almost forgotten by now, while the most lasting consequence of that celebratory project is the one that was found offensive and rejected by the people who had commissioned it, but which has come to be regarded by many as the finest of all of Britten's orchestral works.

The approach of the Japanese in offering this commission was cautious and indirect at first. Britten was only 26 at the time, and hardly the international luminary he was to become. His own government, as go-between, sounded him out on the idea of composing a symphony for an important celebration of another country's ruling house—but without identifying the country. Only after he had stated his own terms and they had been accepted was he told that his symphony was to be for the Emperor of Japan.

Like his senior compatriot Michael Tippett, Britten was a dedicated pacifist and a conscientious objector during World War II; during the first half of it he based himself in the United States. He undertook to register his personal feelings about war in general by calling his symphony a requiem and giving each of its three movements a heading taken from the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead (looking ahead, in a



sense, to the *War Requiem* he would compose several years after the end of the war). His title and movement headings were submitted to the Japanese, who gave their approval, but when the score was completed it was rejected, in an angry communiqué from the Japanese Foreign Ministry to its British counterpart, protesting the “insult” inherent in the Christian liturgical references.

The poet W.H. Auden, who was Britten’s friend and his librettist for his first opera, *Paul Bunyan*, helped the composer write a conciliatory reply, but it went unacknowledged, and on September 27, 1940, Japan formally entered into the Tripartite Pact with the Axis nations already at war with England. The *Sinfonia da requiem* was given its premiere by the New York Philharmonic under John Barbirolli (not yet Sir John) on March 31, 1941, a year after the same conductor and orchestra had taken part in the premiere of Britten’s Violin Concerto. The score, bearing no reference to the Japanese anniversary, was inscribed simply, “In memory of my parents.” By the end of the year in which this musical “plea for peace” was first heard, the U.S. and Britain were allied in the war against Japan and its Axis partners Germany and Italy.

The *Sinfonia da requiem*, in D major, is in three interlinked movements. Stark drumbeats over a low

orchestral growl introduce the first, LACRYMOSA (*Andante ben misurato*), whose burden of lamentation and protest is unmistakable in its eruptive outbursts, treadlike rhythm and searing wind harmonies. With cutting emphasis from the brass, the music comes to a boil, subsiding only momentarily before the onset of the DIES IRAE (*Allegro con fuoco*), the symphony's scherzo, a frenzied "dance of death"—and, by no means incidentally, as stunning a feat of orchestral writing as Britten ever brought off. The concluding movement, REQUIEM AETERNAM (*Andante molto tranquillo*), balances the outrage and grief of the opening slow movement with a gesture of consolation and peace. There is even a treadlike figure of affirmative character here, a sort of mirror image of the one in the LACRYMOSA.

The influence of Stravinsky in the symphony's closing section, and of Mahler in both of the outer movements, may be plain enough, and some of the orchestral flourishes in the DIES IRAE may recall characteristic touches of Vaughan Williams. That such influences may have been felt by Britten in 1940 is hardly surprising; what is remarkable is the degree to which he absorbed them into his own language. We notice them only in the way of musical footnotes to a work as striking for its individuality as in the immediacy and urgency of its impact.





The success of the *Sinfonia da requiem* led directly to *Peter Grimes*. Less than a year after its New York Premiere, the *Sinfonia* was performed by Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, in New York as well as Boston, and at that time Koussevitzky presented Britten with the commission for the opera. Britten had found his inspiration for the work during a visit to California, when a magazine article by E.M. Forster on the English poet George Crabbe moved him to acquaint himself with the works of that little-known writer. In the first one he read, *The Borough*, was the tragic tale of Peter Grimes, set in the composer's own Suffolk. Within a few months Britten discussed the story with Koussevitzky, who through his newly created foundation commissioned the opera in memory of his late wife, Natalie.

Crabbe wrote his narrative poem in 1810. Britten composed his opera in 1944 and '45, by which time he was back at home in England; the libretto was fashioned by Montagu Slater, for one of whose plays the composer had provided incidental music. The story may be summarized as follows:

An inquest is held into the death at sea of the young boy apprenticed to the fisherman Peter Grimes, who is acquitted but warned against taking on another young apprentice. The schoolmistress Ellen Orford, loyal to Grimes, helps him get another

boy despite the warning, but quarrels with him when she learns the new apprentice has been treated roughly. When the villagers learn of this they set out after Grimes, who has taken the boy to his cliff-top hut. As Grimes and the boy try to escape, the boy slips and falls down the cliff to his death. Three days pass, and Grimes returns to the village at dawn, physically and emotionally drained. He accepts the advice of the retired Captain Balstrode, who tells him his only course is to sail out to sea alone and sink his boat. Grimes's life ends as that of the village resumes for a new day like any other.

Koussevitzky, who commissioned the opera, did not conduct it himself. The first performance was given at the Sadler's Wells Theatre in London on June 7, 1945, with Reginald Goodall conducting; the American premiere, given at Koussevitzky's Tanglewood Festival in the summer of 1946, was conducted by his protégé Leonard Bernstein. By then, barely a year after the London premiere, Britten had extracted two concert works from the opera's score: the Four Sea Interludes and the Passacaglia. Very few changes were necessary in preparing these pieces for concert use; their function in the opera, like that of the interludes in Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* to which they are frequently likened, is the creation of mood, but in their concert form they constitute a sequence of





miniature tone poems—or a single one in separate movements—in which the essence of the drama is encapsulated against the omnipresent backdrop of the sea. It was this factor, Britten said, that moved him to compose *Peter Grimes*:

For most of my life I have lived closely in touch with the sea. My parents' house . . . directly faced the sea, and my life as a child was coloured by the fierce storms that sometimes drove ships onto our coast and ate away whole stretches of the neighbouring cliffs. In writing *Peter Grimes* I wanted to express my awareness of the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depends on the sea.

The Four Sea Interludes, published as Op. 33a, are performed far more frequently than the Passacaglia, Op. 33b. When both elements are performed together the Passacaglia is usually presented after the four Interludes, though sometimes placed in the opening position; there have also been performances based on the idea of integrating the Passacaglia, actually the grandest of the opera's interludes, into the concert sequence as the penultimate part of a set of five numbers, as recorded here. This placement of the Passacaglia corresponds roughly to its position in the

stage work itself, in which it separates the two scenes of Act III—though the sequence of the Four Sea Interludes as Op. 33a does not follow strictly the order in which the respective pieces occur in the opera.

DAWN, the first of the interludes, is the music that links the Prologue (the scene of the inquest into the death of Grimes's first apprentice) to the first act, painting a windswept seascape in the first gray light of day. By way of contrast, SUNDAY MORNING, which is the Prelude to Act II, is sunlit and tranquil. The strings introduce the motif of the aria to be sung in that act by Ellen Orford, and church bells call the villagers to worship. MOONLIGHT is the Introduction to Act III, depicting the same locale as in DAWN, but serene and still now in the quiet of the night.

As already noted, the Passacaglia's function in the drama is to separate the two scenes of its final act; the ground bass in the piece may be traced to the point in Act II at which Grimes sings the phrase "May God have mercy on me." Following this, we have the last of the Four Sea Interludes, STORM, a flashback to Act I, wherein it links Scenes 1 and 2. The storm themes, according to Edward Sackville-West, "were chosen for their susceptibility to symphonic treatment, so that, instead of mere static noise and ado, this is a true movement which follows, not





the change of scene, but the progress of the storm itself." The motif heard in the brief respite before the final onslaught is that of "What harbor shelters peace," sung by Grimes as the storm gets under way in Act I, Scene 2.

Britten began writing music for documentary films in 1935, when, at age 21, he accepted his first such assignment from his country's General Post office. Ten years later, just after the premiere of *Peter Grimes*, he was asked by the Ministry of Education to compose the music for a film called *Instruments of the Orchestra*, designed to acquaint young people with the big modern orchestra and its various component parts. His response was *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, whose form is made clear in its subtitle: Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell. The theme, which lent itself splendidly to this kind of treatment, is that of a *Rondeau* which Henry Purcell composed in 1695 as part of his music for a play by Mrs Aphra Behn called *Abdelazer, or The Moor's Revenge*.

For the film version (and optionally for concert use), a spoken text, to introduce the respective instruments, was written by Eric Crozier, who was later to provide Britten with libretti for three operas and the children's cantata *Saint Nicolas*. Sir Malcolm Sargent

conducted the work's concert premiere on October 15, 1946, in Liverpool, and the film was first shown in London some six weeks later. Within a year or two *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, a stunning showpiece for the virtuoso orchestra, was well on its way to becoming one of the most widely known works of its time. Crozier's text was spoken in the Liverpool premiere as well as in the film, but not in the recording which Sargent made right after the premiere, and it has seldom been included in concert performances since then.

The robust theme itself is given a full workout before the sequence of variations begins: it is stated first by the full orchestra, then given to the woodwinds, then to the brass, then (in slightly varied shape) to the strings and harp, and finally declaimed rhythmically by the percussion before being restated by the orchestra at full strength. The various choirs and the entire team having been thus introduced, we proceed to the chain of variations, 13 in number, in which the individual instruments are spotlighted.

Each of the variations reflects a different character—some tender, some slightly sardonic, some mysterious, some humorous, all charged with great originality and wit—in the following sequence: (1) flutes and piccolo, with harp accompaniment;



(2) oboes; (3) clarinets; (4) bassoons; (5) violins; (6) violas; (7) cellos; (8) double basses; (9) harp; (10) horns; (11) trumpets; (12) trombones and tuba; (13) percussion.

The timpani begin the final variation, and provide a ritornello linking the appearances of the other instruments: bass drum with cymbals, tambourine with triangle, snare drum with wood block, xylophone, castanets with gong, and finally the whip. The entire percussion section then celebrates the end of the chain of variations, subsiding to permit the xylophone to lead into the fugue.

In this final section Britten puts his fragmented orchestra back together in the grandest style, beginning with piccolo, moving through the other instruments and choirs, and concluding with a glorious proclamation of the original Purcell theme by the brass as the woodwinds and strings exult in the fugue theme and the percussion link the two in a celebratory frame.

—Richard Freed



## THE KANSAS CITY SYMPHONY

The Kansas City Symphony was founded by R. Crosby Kemper, Jr., in 1982, months after the dissolution of the Kansas City Philharmonic. The founding trustees of the Symphony created a sound structure for the board and established the initial endowment. Today, the Symphony is a major force in the cultural life of Kansas City and the region, reaching more than one million people annually through live concerts, free public performances, educational programs, radio and television broadcasts.

Under the dynamic leadership of music director Michael Stern, now in his fifth season, the Kansas City Symphony has experienced impressive artistic growth and praise for innovative programming. Steven Jarvi, Bruno Walter associate conductor, conducts the Family Series, Symphony Pops and holiday concerts. During its forty-two week season, the Kansas City Symphony's 80-member orchestra performs a wide variety of subscription, educational, touring, and outreach concerts throughout Kansas and Missouri. In addition, Symphony musicians perform for the Lyric Opera of Kansas City and the Kansas City Ballet.

The Kansas City Symphony has taped two nationally broadcast PBS television specials, performed on National Public Radio, and released four compact disc recordings, the latest being critically acclaimed projects with Reference Recordings. Highlights of the Kansas City Symphony's classical performances are broadcast weekly, Thursdays at 9 p.m., on KCUR 89.3 FM, Kansas City's National Public Radio affiliate.



**Michael Stern** is in his fifth season as music director of the Kansas City Symphony, hailed for its remarkable artistic growth and development since his tenure began. The Symphony and Stern concluded their first year together by making a recording for the Naxos label which was released in 2007. Their latest CD, *The Tempest*, with music by Sullivan and Sibelius inspired by Shakespeare's play, was released to critical acclaim in July 2008 on the Grammy Award®-winning Reference Recordings label.

This year also marks Stern's second season as principal guest conductor of Orchestre National de Lille, France. As well, Stern is founding artistic director and principal conductor of the IRIS Orchestra in Germantown, Tennessee. Other positions include a tenure as the chief conductor of Germany's Saarbrücken

Radio Symphony Orchestra (the first American chief conductor in the orchestra's history) and as permanent guest conductor of the Orchestre National de Lyon in France, a position which he held for five years.

Stern has led orchestras throughout Europe and Asia, including the London Symphony, London Philharmonic, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Beethovenhalle Orchestra in Bonn, Budapest Radio Symphony Orchestra, Israel Philharmonic, Moscow Philharmonic, National Symphony of Taiwan, Tokyo's NHK Symphony and the Vienna Radio Symphony's tour of China.

In North America, Stern has conducted the New York Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, Pittsburgh Symphony, St. Louis Symphony, Atlanta Symphony, Houston Symphony, Baltimore Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra, Toronto Symphony, Cincinnati Symphony, Seattle Symphony, Montreal Symphony, Indianapolis Symphony, and the National Symphony in Washington, D.C. He also appears regularly at the Aspen Music Festival and has served on the faculty of the American Academy of Conducting at Aspen.

Stern received his music degree from The Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where his major teacher was the noted conductor and scholar Max Rudolf. Stern coedited the third edition of Rudolf's famous textbook, *The Grammar of Conducting*, and also edited a new volume of Rudolf's collected writings and correspondence. Stern is a 1981 graduate of Harvard University, where he earned a degree in American history.



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David Frost



'Prof.' Johnson

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## BENJAMIN BRITTEN

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MICHAEL STERN

KANSAS CITY  
SYMPHONY

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