

NEWLY PUBLISHED MUSIC BY BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Benjamin Britten. Three Songs for *Les Illuminations*. Orchestration for high voice & strings by Colin Matthews. Words by Arthur Rimbaud. Full score. London: Boosey & Hawkes, 2012. [Pref. in Eng., Fre., and Ger.; texts in Fre., Eng., and Ger.; score, p. 1–22. ISMN 979-0-060-12030-5; ISBN 978-0-85162-767-0. \$26.95.]

Benjamin Britten. Six Early Songs (1929–31) for medium voice and piano. London: Faber Music, 2013. [Texts in Eng.; pref. in Eng.; score, p. 2–14. EAN13 978-0-571-51190-7. £10.99.]

Benjamin Britten. Two Pieces for violin, viola and piano (1929). London: Faber Music, 2013. [Introd. in Eng.; editorial notes in Eng.; score, p. 1–25 and 2 parts (violin and viola). EAN13 978-0-571-52361-0. £24.99.]

Benjamin Britten. Two Psalms: Out of the deep, Praise ye the Lord. London: Chester Music, 2012. [Score, p. 1–67. CH79750. £21.95.]

Benjamin Britten. Variations for piano (1965). London: Faber Music, 2013. [Introd., editorial note, and performance note in Eng.; facsimile; score, p. 1–7; appendices. EAN13 978-0-571-52057-2. £9.99]

Since Britten's death in 1976, and in particular since the opening to researchers a few years later of the extraordinarily comprehensive archival collections of the Britten–Pears Library at his home in the Suffolk town of Aldeburgh, keen interest has constantly been aroused by the steady stream of posthumous publications of unknown works which, for various reasons, he had kept firmly under wraps during his lifetime. While all such publications, no matter how slight, will inevitably be of considerable interest to scholars and die-hard Britten enthusiasts—and it might be argued that this alone is a compelling reason for their public dissemination—it is rather less certain whether every morsel of this rediscovered

music deserves a strong foothold in the concert hall; and, at times, some listeners have feared that the composer's reputation might become a shade tarnished by the realization that he did not always attain his customary level of genius. Nevertheless, the level-headed can always find consolation in the equally important realization that he himself, unlike some other prodigiously prolific writers, well knew which of his pieces warranted a place in his official canon, and which didn't. Whatever one's personal view, Britten enthusiasts owe an enormous and ongoing debt of gratitude to Colin Matthews, Chair of The Britten Estate, who has for several decades overseen the preparation and publication of projects of this kind in a skilful and sensitive way.

Britten's posthumous publications fall into three broad categories, each well represented by the batch of five new scores reviewed here (all of which appeared in the run-up to, and during, the composer's centenary year in 2013). Arguably the most important category, and one in which indisputably impressive compositional standards are virtually assured, is the small but fascinating body of mature songs which Britten wrote for his well-known song cycles but chose not to include in their definitive formats. Just how brilliant some of this discarded music could be was first demonstrated in 1983 by the performance of two songs jettisoned from *Winter Words* (1953), and even more spectacularly in 1987 by the discovery of the haunting Tennyson setting "Now sleeps the crimson petal," which had been composed for inclusion in the *Serenade* for tenor, horn and strings (1943). Self-evidently, then, Britten sometimes consigned pieces to his bottom draw not because they were sub-standard, but simply because he had too many of them for his specific needs. The second, and largest, category is the huge body of juvenilia composed by Britten when he was a precociously gifted schoolboy, which is inevitably of variable quality, though the best of it is truly astonishing in its technical assurance. Finally, and seductive by their very rarity, a few reasonably self-contained fragments from mature compositions which Britten never

completed have also been released, and here in particular the technical skills of Matthews—and his innate understanding of Britten’s style and compositional mentality, which dates back to the period during which he was the ailing composer’s assistant (1975–76)—have been indispensable assets when a little fresh composing or re-arranging of material has had to be carried out in order to round off the torsos to make them suitable for a satisfying performance.

As with the songs rejected from other song cycles, the *Three songs for Les Illuminations* (Boosey & Hawkes, 2012) immediately take us into the distinctive sound world of the relevant cycle, in this case the settings of Rimbaud which Britten composed for Sophie Wyss in 1939. This is particularly the case in the first rediscovered song, “Phrase,” a virtuosic recitative which explores the same tonal territory as the opening “Fanfare” in the definitive cycle, and which was originally intended to segue into the effervescent number “Marine” in the published set (a link which would have worked well). Britten later redeployed the title “Phrase” to a markedly different song in the established cycle. Exactly where Britten may have intended to place the other two discarded songs is unknown, but since he was toying with the idea of composing up to fourteen different Rimbaud settings and eventually retained only ten, there were presumably several possible sequences in his mind. The substantial ternary-form “Aube” is the only song to carry a date and place of composition in the manuscript (“Woodstock, July 5 1939”) and is a good example of Britten’s characteristic and lifelong use of the key of A major for images of beauty and innocence (compare the contemporaneous work for piano and strings, *Young Apollo*, which was withdrawn from circulation at around the same time): in this instance, the image is of a summer dawn illuminated by “splinters of fresh pale light.” The third song, “À une raison,” is intensely lyrical and evolves its sinuous melody by presenting it in appealing heterophonic interplay between voice and strings. For this project, Matthews had a fairly straightforward task in

orchestrating Britten's detailed short-score drafts for string orchestra, and in the process he supplied a piano score at the bottom of each system in order to match the layout of the original publication. He also offered a more realistic *ossia* line as an alternative to the soprano's forbiddingly difficult ascent to a top C in "Aube," simply transposing Britten's semiquaver melisma down a third so that it still fits with the prevailing triad-based harmonies. As with the published scores of other songs rejected from Britten's cycles, the edition carries a rather stern instruction: "If performed in the same concert as *Les Illuminations* op18 these three songs must be separated from op 18 by another work or an interval" (unnumbered page opposite the beginning of "Phrase").

Two publications from the centenary year rank as juvenilia: *Six Early Songs* for medium voice and piano, and *Two Pieces* for violin, viola, and piano (both Faber Music, 2013). The *Six Early Songs* date from between 1929 and 1931, when Britten was in his late teens, and are settings of texts by Johnson, Tennyson, Constable, de la Mare, Davies and Joyce. While certain of these poets—notably Tennyson and de la Mare—had long been recognized as established favorites of the young composer, the Joyce item ("Chamber Music V") is unique in being the only surviving setting of this poet in Britten's entire output. This handsomely produced volume, with an appealing full-color cover image by Pamela Bianco taken from a 1919 de la Mare publication, contains a substantial preface by Joseph Phibbs, who had assisted Matthews with the earlier *Illuminations* project. Phibbs points out that the songs already reveal two contrasting facets of Britten's character, a playfully childlike nature juxtaposed with moments of thoughtful introspection, and are markedly varied stylistically; they form what he terms a "series of musical snapshots" from the period represented by the previously published *Tit for Tat* (five early settings of de la Mare issued by Faber Music in 1969). In this connection, Phibbs provides us with a timely reminder that Britten had himself been contemplating publishing more of his early music towards the end of his life.

The *Two Pieces* for piano trio were written in December 1929 when Britten was sixteen and still at school, and were intended for him to play (as violist) alongside two friends: Charles Coleman (violin) and Basil Reeve (piano). The music is another fascinating snapshot, this time of the modernist tendencies which were beginning to overtake the young composer, and of which the music teacher at his school sternly disapproved. The score's editor, David Matthews (brother of Colin), quotes in his introduction an amusing diary entry Britten wrote in the following January when, asked by his teacher if he had any music that could be performed in a school concert, he reported: "I thrust the nicer modern one into his hands— but he nearly choked & so I had to show him the silly small one, and he even calls that one *modern!!!*" As Matthews notes, the overriding influence on the style of this music is the example provided by Britten's private composition tutor Frank Bridge, whose own modernist leanings had ostracized him somewhat from the British musical establishment at this time. The rhapsodic, rubato-inflected chromaticism of the first piece, in particular, is strongly reminiscent of Bridge, as is the reworking of Skryabin-like quartal harmonies. The second piece, a one-in-the-bar scherzo, unexpectedly reveals in one of its markings Britten's early interest in Beethoven ('*ritmo di 5 battute*'), a composer from whom he was later to distance himself. Unlike the other editions considered here, Matthews provides a page of detailed notes itemizing his editorial amendments.

Two Psalms (Chester Music, 2012) is another substantial release. Settings for chorus and orchestra of "Out of the Deep" (Psalm 130) and "Praise Ye the Lord" (Psalm 150), these ambitious and assured pieces date from Britten's time as a student at the Royal College of Music: composed in the second half of 1931, they were revised over the Christmas vacation and completed in January 1932 when the composer was nineteen. Scored for a conventional orchestra with double woodwind and modest percussion, the pieces formed part of a portfolio—which also included a Phantasy in F minor for string quintet—he submitted by

way of application for the prestigious Mendelssohn Scholarship. (Britten was not awarded the scholarship, and his diary entries attest to a degree of pique at the outcome.) The Phantasy Quintet was performed at the RCM in July 1932 and broadcast by the BBC the following year, but it was not published at the time and eventually became one of the first of Britten's posthumous publications when issued by Faber Music in 1983. In contrast, the *Two Psalms* were never performed, and subsequently long overlooked until they received their premiere under the baton of Nicholas Cleobury in Oxford as recently as December 2012. Unlike the piano-trio pieces, the musical language here is more orthodox, using a relatively simple modal idiom in places, which suggests that the practicality of a potential amateur performance may have been in the composer's mind. At one point, Britten provides a caveat in the shape of a practical footnote: "This passage is only to be played *saltando* if there are enough strings to give sufficient tone: otherwise the ordinary staccato is to be used" (pp. 55–56). The conducting score reviewed here contains no editorial or historical notes. (A preface by Lucy Walker is included in the vocal score [London: Chester Music, 2013])

Britten returned to the text of Psalm 150 in 1962 when he wrote a jolly, unpretentious new setting for children's choir and orchestra in order to mark the centenary of his old preparatory school, South Lodge. Three years later he almost managed to add a new work to a genre in his mature catalogue in which he was very far from prolific: solo piano music. His only mature work for piano solo, in fact, was the *Night Piece (Notturmo)* he composed as a test piece for the Leeds International Piano Competition in 1963, and in the autumn of 1965 he embarked on a follow-up piece for the same purpose, the completed portions of which have now been published as *Variations (1965)* for piano (Faber Music, 2013). The undated manuscript of this work comprises a diatonic, quasi-improvisatory theme and five variations, the last of which had to be completed editorially by Colin Matthews with the addition of eight concluding bars. As with the other Faber publications reviewed here, the edition is handsome:

it includes a high-quality facsimile of the opening page of the manuscript, from which it is evident that Britten had started to include suggested fingerings; but these were not reproduced in the transcribed score, on the grounds that they disappear after the first twelve bars. Appendices provide transcriptions of several unused sketches and incipits for further variations, along with a rejected opening for the fourth variation (i.e. Variation V in Britten's numbering, since he labels the opening theme as "I"). In his introductory notes, Matthews suggests that the piece may have been abandoned by Britten owing to the need to prioritize the composition of the second church parable, *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, which he completed in 1966. This explanation is entirely plausible; but it is also possible that Britten was simply dissatisfied with what he had written of the piano work up to that point. The variations are unusual in embodying two distinctive devices which he had explored in the first church parable, *Curlew River* (1964), under the direct influence of music from Indonesia and Japan: an accelerating tremolo effect, and the non-alignment of independent or heterophonically related melodic strands. Britten may have felt, on reflection, that neither device transferred to the keyboard particularly well. The accelerating tremolandi, executed on single pitches, are exceptionally difficult to perform convincingly—though that may, of course, have been in Britten's mind, given that this was intended to be a test piece. And, although intriguing as a creative experiment and as a deliberate challenge to a performer's natural instincts to co-ordinate treble and bass rhythms neatly, the attempt to keep the right and left hands fluidly independent of one another can easily come across (in a context of fairly bland musical material) as rather uncertain in its aim.

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