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COR16034
In December 1977, as a member of the choir of Westminster Abbey, I sang at Britten's memorial service; at that time, I was also a member of English Music Theatre, successor to English Opera Group and the brainchild of conductor Steuart Bedford and producer Colin Graham but with the blessing and support of Britten. Unfortunately, I never had the privilege of meeting Benjamin Britten but I felt I knew him through his music and working closely with not only Steuart and Colin but also Peter Pears. It had taken England many centuries to produce such a distinctive musical personality. Indeed there would be many that would agree with me that he was the first of such stature since Henry Purcell.

Having sung most of the works on this disc as a boy chorister and as a rather indifferent tenor, I found it most refreshing to look over these scores from a conductor's viewpoint. I am always astounded how years of misguided interpretation lead to the composer's intentions being flagrantly ignored and then termed “tradition” but I didn't really expect it in performances of more recent composers' works. And so it was doubly refreshing to attempt to be faithful to Britten's requests. His music is never easy but it is always challenging for performers, be they singers or instrumentalists. However, and take note all budding composers, he never sets impossible tasks!

After three years in the United States, Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears returned to England in spring 1942, in the Swedish merchant ship M.S. Axel Johnson. On the way the ship stopped at Halifax, Nova Scotia, where they came across The English Galaxy of Shorter Poems in a bookshop. With this small book (he also had with him two harp manuals to study for an eventually unfulfilled concerto commission), working in a cabin Pears described as “miserable… the smell & heat were intolerable”, Britten was able to create a musical language for the narrative of Christmas and the rebirth of spring, that would become A Ceremony of Carols; one which seems at once strange and far-off, and familiar and personal, archaic and precisely modern, with the verve and immediacy of response of youth.

The settings of five poems from the anthology, There is no Rose, As Dew in Aprille (both to 14th century anonymous poems), This little Babe and In Freezing Winter Night (Robert Southwell, 1561?-1595), and Deo Gracias (15th C anon.), as well as Balulalow (James, John and Robert Wedderburn, 16th C) and the music of Wolcum Yole! (14th C anon.), at first with the Latin words Hodie Christus natus est, were composed on board ship. After their arrival in England, Britten added the Spring Carol (William Cornish, 14?-1523), and most significantly decided to frame the whole sequence with the plainsong antiphon from the Vespers of the Nativity, which has that Latin text. This version of the Ceremony of Carols was first performed, by women's voices, in the Library of Norwich Castle on 5th December 1942; shortly before publication the next year Britten added That yongë Child (14th C anon.), as a complement to Balulalow, and the solo harp interlude, marked andante pastorale - where the plainsong melody is heard again - and thus it received its first London performance in December 1943, and was recorded by the Morriston Boys’ Choir.

Britten had with him also on the Axel Johnson some poems by W. H. Auden, with whom they had stayed for a time in the US, and whom Britten had met when composing for the GPO Film Unit in 1935. These included parts of a Christmas Oratorio, of which in the end Britten set only two short sections, a Chorale (later withdrawn) and A Shepherd's Carol, included in the BBC programme A Poet's Christmas, in 1944. Auden's work was published, with the title For the Time Being, the same year, but without the carol, whose refrain the poet apparently feared might be misconstrued, and thus a mysterious, atmospheric poem, setting the transcendent sad calm of a shepherd's vision against the dramatic imagination and less glamorous reality of a poet's life, was saved from oblivion by Britten's lovely music.
Once back in England, Britten and Pears settled in Aldeburgh in Suffolk, The Borough of George Crabbe’s poem which Britten had read in the US in 1941 and which had made him realise "where I belonged and what I lacked"; the poem would lead to the opera Peter Grimes. Britten reworked his music for the traditional text The Sycamore Tree, which had begun life as I saw three ships in 1931 at a Lowestoft Musical Society concert, for the 1968 Aldeburgh Festival. Also dating from 1931, and rewritten for the 1966 festival, Sweet was the song, to words from William Ballet’s 16th century Lute Book, was extracted from a Christmas suite Thy King’s Birthday.

Organist and master of the choristers of Westminster Cathedral, George Malcolm had deliberately created in the boys of his choir a raw, ‘continental’ sound far removed from the soft roundness of Anglican tradition. Britten heard the choir in January 1959; they sang, he wrote, “with a brilliance & authority which was staggering.” A commission for a Mass was discussed, and a little later, Malcolm related, he met Britten by chance and told him he would be leaving the Cathedral in the summer to go freelance. “He didn’t say, as some of my friends kindly had, ‘What a loss for English church music’ He just said, ‘What about my Mass?’ & 3 weeks later he delivered it…” The result is a work of fierce concision, with bright, sometimes even harsh, sounds from voices and organ, and yet enormous poignancy.

A Boy was Born is also notable for Britten’s precocious selection and understanding of poetic texts, which would be among his most consistent and valuable qualities. As well as anonymous 15th century sources, and the translation of the 16th century German title chorale, he gives fresh life to Christina Rossetti’s hymn In the bleak mid-winter, not least by the breathtaking imaginative leap of bringing in the boys’ voices above the slow-falling snow to sing the Corpus Christi carol. The sixth variation, Finale, incorporates poems by Thomas Tusser (1558) and Francis Quarles (1592-1644) in a rondo, with a moment of bell-like stasis on the word ‘Glory’, before the final peroration.

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A CEREMONY OF CAROLS

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MISSA BREVIS IN D

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A BOY WAS BORN

with the Choristers of St. Paul’s Cathedral
(Director: John Scott) solo: Jamie Hopkins

| Theme                                             | 2.21 |
| Variation I: Lullay, Jesu                         | 4.23 |
| Variation II: Herod                              | 2.12 |
| Variation III: Jesu, as Thou art                  | 2.50 |
| Variation IV: The Three Kings                     | 3.29 |
| Variation V: In the Bleak Mid-Winter              | 5.07 |
| Variation VI: Noel!                               | 9.10 |

Total playing time 69.37
THE SIXTEEN

SOPRANO
Fiona Clarke, Libby Crabtree, Ruth Dean,
Micaela Haslam, Carys Lane, Rebecca Outram

ALTO
Deborah Miles-Johnson, Philip Newton
Christopher Royall, Nigel Short

TENOR
Simon Berridge, Philip Daggett,
Neil MacKenzie, Matthew Vine

BASS
Simon Birchall, Robert Evans
Timothy Jones, Jeremy White

PIANO
Stephen Westrop

HARP
Sioned Williams

ORGAN
Margaret Phillips

A Ceremony of Carols

Procession
Hodie Christus natus est:
hodie Salvator apparuit:
hodie in terra canunt angeli:
laetantur archangeli:
hodie exultant justi dicentes:
gloria in excelsis Deo. Alleluia!

Wolcum Yole!
Wolcum, Wolcum,
Wolcum be thou hevenè king,
Wolcum Yole!
Wolcum, born in one morning,
Wolcum for whom we sail sing!
Wolcum be ye, Stevevene and Jon,
Wolcum Innocentes every one,
Wolcum Thomas marter one,
Wolcum be ye, good Newe Yere,
Wolcum Twelfthe Day both in fere,
Wolcum, seintes lefe and dere,
Wolcum Yole, Wolcum Yole, Wolcum!
Candelmesse, Quene of bliss,
Wolcum bothe to more and lesse.

There is no Rose
There is no rose of such vertu
As is the rose that bare Jesu.
Alleluia.
For in this rose contained was
Heaven and eart in litel space,
Res miranda.
By that rose we may well see
There be one God in persons three,
Pares forma.
The aungels sungen the shepherds to:
Gloria in excelsis Deo!
Gaudeamus.
Leave we all this werldly mirth,
and follow we this joyful birth.
Transeamus.
That yongë child
That yongë child when it gan weep
With song she lulled him asleep:
That was so sweet a melody
It passèd alle minstrelsy.
The nightingalë sang also:
Her song is hoarse and nought thereto:
Whoso attendeth to her song
And leaveth the first then doth he wrong.

Balulalow
O my deare hert, young Jesus sweit,
Prepare thy creddil in my spreit,
And I sall rock thee to my hert,
And never mair from thee depart.
But I sall praise thee evermoir
With sangës sweit unto thy gloir;
The knees of my hert sall I bow,
And sing that richt Balulalow!

As dew in Aprille
I sing of a maiden That is makëles:
King of all kings To her son she ches.
He came al so stille There his moder lay,
As dew in Aprille That falleth on the spray.
Moder and mayden was never none but she:
Well may such a lady Goddes moder be.

This little Babe
This little Baby so few days old,
Is come to rifle Satan’s fold;
All hell doth at his presence quake,
Though he himself for cold do shake;
For in this weak unarmèd wise
The gates of hell he will surprise.
With tears he fights and wins the field,
His naked breast stands for a shield;
His battering shot are babish cries,
His arrows looks of weeping eyes,
His martial ensigns Cold and Need;
And feeble Flesh his warrior’s steed.
His camp is pitchèd in a stall,
His bulwark but a broken wall;
The crib his trench, haystalks his stakes;
Of shepherds he his muster makes;
And thus, as sure his foe to wound,
The angels’ trumps alarum sound.
My soul, with Christ join thou in fight;
Stick to the tents that he hath pight.
Within his crib is surest ward;
This little Babe will be thy guard.
If thou wilt foil thy foes with joy,
then flit not from this heavenly Boy.

Interlude
Sioned Williams - Harp solo

In freezing winter night
Behold, a silly tender babe,
in freezing winter night,
In homely manger trembling lies –
Alas, a piteous sight!
The inns are full; no man will yield
This little pilgrim bed.
But forced he is with silly beasts
In crib to shroud his head.
This stable is a Prince’s court,
This crib his chair of State;
The beasts are parcel of this pomp,
The wooden dish his plate.
The persons in that poor attire
His royal liveries wear;
The Prince himself is come from heav’n;
This pomp is prizèd there.
With joy approach, O Christian wight,
Do homage to the King,
And highly praise his humble pomp,
which he from Heav’n doth bring.

Deo Gracias
Deo gracias! Deo gracias!
Adam lay ibounden, bounden in a bond;
Four thousand winter thought he not to long.
Deo gracias! Deo gracias!
And all was for an appil, an appil that he tok,
As clerkès finden written in their book.
Deo gracias! Deo gracias!
Ne had the appil takè ben, the appil takè ben,
Ne haddè never our lady a ben hevenè quene.
Blessèd be the time that appil takè was.
Therefore we moun singen.
Deo Gracias!

Recession
Hodie... (text as Procession, track 1)
Sweet was the song the Virgin sung,
When she to Bethlem Juda came,
And was delivered of a son,
That blessed Jesus hath to name.

Lulla, lulla, lulla, lullaby,
Lulla, lulla, lulla, lullaby,
Sweet Babe, sang she.

My Son and eke a Saviour born,
Who hast vouchsafed from on high
To visit us that were forlorn.

Lalala, lalala, lalalaby,
Lalala, lalala, lalalaby,
Sweet Babe, sang she,
and rocked Him sweetly on her knee.

Kyrie

Gloria

Gloria in excelsis Deo.
Et in terra pacem hominibus bonae voluntatis.
Laudamus te, benedicimus te,
adoramus te, glorificamus te.
Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam.
Domine Deus, Rex caelestis,
Deus Pater omnipotens.
Domine Fili unigenite, Iesu Christe.
Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris.
Qui tollis peccata mundi,
miserere nobis.
Qui tollis peccata mundi,
suscipe deprecationem nostram.
Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris,
miserere nobis.
Quoniam tu solus Sanctus, tu solus Dominus,
quoniam tu solus Altissimus Jesu Christe,
Cum Sancto Spiritu
in gloria Dei Patris. Amen.

A BOY WAS BORN

A BOY WAS BORN in Bethlehem,
Rejoice for that, Jerusalem! Alleluia.
He let himself a servant be,
That all mankind He might set free: Alleluia.
Then praise the Word of God who came
to dwell within a human frame: Alleluia.

Variation I: Lullay Jesu

Mine own dear mother, sing lullay!
Lullay, Jesu, lullay, lullay!
Mine own dear mother, sing lullay!

The Sycamore Tree

As I sat under a sycamore tree,
A sycamore tree, a sycamore tree,
I looked me out upon the sea
On Christ’s Sunday at morn.

I saw three ships a-sailing there,
A-sailing there, a-sailing there,
Jesu, Mary and Joseph they bear
On Christ’s Sunday at morn.

A Shepherd’s Carol

O lift your little pinkie, and touch the winter sky.
Love’s all over the mountains
where the beautiful go to die.

If Time were the wicked sheriff in a horse opera,
I’d pay for riding lessons
and take his gun away. O lift . . .

If I were a Valentino, and Fortune were abroad,
I’d hypnotise that iceberg
till she kissed me of her own accord. O lift . . .

But my cuffs are soiled and fraying.
The kitchen clock is slow,
and over the Blue Waters
the grass grew long ago. O lift . . .

Agnus Dei

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi:
miserere nobis.
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi:
dona nobis pacem.
Variation II: Herod

Noel! Herod that was both wild and wode,
Full much he shed of Christian blood,
To slay the Child so meek of mood,
that Mary bare, that clean may¹.

Herod slew with pride and sin,
Thousands of two year and within;
The body of Christ he thought to win
And to destroy the Christian fay².

Mary with Jesu forth yfrought³,
As the angel her taught,
To flee the land till it were sought,
To Egypt she took her way.

Now Jesus that didst die for us on the Rood,
And didst christen innocents in their blood,
By the prayer of Thy mother good,
Bring us to bliss that lasteth ay.

¹Maid ²Faith ³Laden

Variation III: Jesu,
as Thou art our Saviour

Jesu, Jesu, Jesu, Jesu,
Save us all through Thy virtue.

Jesu, as Thou art our Saviour
That Thou save us fro dolour!
Jesu is mine paramour.
Blessed be Thy name, Jesu.

Variation IV: The Three Kings

There came three kings fro Galilee
Into Bethlehem, that fair city,
To seek Him that should ever be by right-a,
Lord and king and knight-a.

They took their leave, both old and ying,
Of Herod, that moody king;
They went forth with their offering by light-a,
By the star that shone so bright-a.

Till they came into the place
Where Jesus and His mother was,
Offered they up with great solace in fere-a¹
Gold, incense, and myrrh-a.

Forth then went these kingës three,
Till they came home to theri country;
Glad and blithe they were all three
Of the sight that they had see bydene-a².

¹Together ²Together

Variation V: In the bleak mid-winter

In the bleak mid-winter
Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow has fallen, snow on snow;

Variation VI: (Finale) Noel!

Noel! Wassail! Good day, good day,
My Lord Sir Christëmas, good day!

Good day, Sir Christëmas our King,
For every man, both old and ying,
Is glad of your coming. Good day.
Godës Son so much of might
From heaven to earth down is light
And born is of a maid so bright. Good day.
Noël! Our King! Hosanna!
This night a Child is born.
'Get ivy and hull', woman, deck up thine house,
And take this same bough to seethe and to souse;
Provide us good cheer, for thou knowest the old guise,
Old customs that good be, let no man despise.
At Christmas be merry and thank God of all,
And feast thy poor neighbours, the great and the small.
Yea, all the year long have an eye to the poor,
And God shall send luck to keep open thy door.
Good fruit and good plenty do well in thy loft,
Then lay for an orchard and cherish it oft.
The profit is mickle, the pleasure is much;
At pleasure with profit few wise men will grutch.
For plants and for stocks lay aforehand to cast,
But set or remove them, while Twelve-tide do last.
The profit is mickle, the pleasure is much;
At pleasure with profit few wise men will grutch.
For plants and for stocks lay aforehand to cast,
But set or remove them, while Twelve-tide do last.
Welcome be Thou, heaven-king,
Welcome born in one morning,
Welcome for whom we shall sing
Welcome Yule.
Welcome be ye that are here,
Welcome all, and make good cheer,
Welcome all another year! Welcome Yule.
Glory to God on high, and jolly mirth,
'Twixt man and man, and peace on earth!
Wassail, Wassail!
Lully, lully, lully, lully...
Noël! Noël!
Hered that was so wild and wode.
Mine own dear mother... Jesu, Jesu!...
This night a Child is born;
This night a Son is given;
This son, this Child
Hath reconciled
Poor man that was forlorn,
And the angry God of Heaven.
Hosanna, sing Hosanna!
Now, now that joyful day,
That blessed hour is come,
That was foretold
In days of old,
Wherein all nations may
Bless, bless the virgin's womb.
Hosanna, sing Hosanna!
Let heaven triumph above,
Let earth rejoice below;
Let heaven and earth
Be filled with mirth,
For peace and lasting love
Atones your God and you.
Hosanna, sing Hosanna!

Holly