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THE BALLAD OF LITTLE MUSGRAVE AND LADY BARNARD

TBB AND PIANO

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

THE BALLAD OF LITTLE MUSGRAVE AND LADY BARNARD



BOOSEY & HAWKES

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THE BALLAD OF LITTLE MUSGRAVE AND LADY BARNARD

For male voices and piano (or piano duet). Completed 13 December 1943. The author of the text is anonymous, from the *Oxford Book of Ballads*. Published by Boosey & Hawkes, 1952.

Dedication: "For Richard Wood and the musicians of Oflag VIIb – Germany, 1943"

First performance: 20 February 1944, Oflag VIIb, Eichstätt, Germany. Chorus of Prisoners of War, Barry Grayson and Fred Henson (pianos), Richard Wood (conductor).

First public performance: 19 June 1951, Wigmore Hall, London. Singers in Consort, Richard Wood (conductor).

First broadcast: 19 June 1958, BBC Third Programme. Singers in Consort, Richard Wood (conductor).

Duration: 8.5 minutes

Other Britten compositions from this period: Serenade, Op. 31, Tenor, Horn and Strings, March–April 1943; Prelude and Fugue, Op. 29, 18-part string orchestra, May 1943; *Rejoice in the Lamb*, Op. 30, Treble, Alto, Tenor, and Bass solos, SATB chorus, and organ, May–17 July 1943; *The Rescue*, incidental music to the radio drama, September–November 1943; *Festival Te Deum*, Op. 32, Treble solo, SATB chorus, and organ, 8–9 November 1944; *A Shepherd's Carol*, SATB chorus, 8–11 November 1944; *Chorale after an Old French Carol*, SSAATTBB chorus, 15 November 1944; *Peter Grimes*, Op. 33, January 1944–February 1945.¹

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The Ballad of Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard was written for Britten's friend Richard Wood, a prisoner of war. Years later, for an Aldeburgh Festival Programme Book, Britten wrote:

During the 1939–45 war Richard Wood, the singer and an old friend of mine, was a prisoner-of-war for several years in Oflag VIIb, in Eichstätt, Germany. In this camp he started choirs and orchestras among the prisoners; hearing of it, I wrote this piece for him and his friends and somehow, through devious means, his sister Anne Wood managed to get a copy to him (page by page in microfilm). This arrived in time to be performed in a festival which the prisoners had organised for February 1944—and it was given four times.²

The festival was a series of six concerts of various vocal, choral, and orchestral pieces performed by a twenty-nine piece orchestra and choir. On 2 March 1945, *The Times* carried a review of the "festival behind barbed wire" quoting Lieutenant Wood saying, "The choir (35 to 40 voices) started by cordially disliking the work but finally they all thoroughly enjoyed it. It grew on us all the time and the audience took to it immediately or were at least brought up short by it. [. . .] It was performed four times."³

The story comes from an English folk ballad dating from around the seventeenth century. It exists in several versions with slight alterations sympathizing with different characters, but the basic plot tells of a nobleman who is warned by a servant of his wife's adulterous affair with a retainer of the house. The nobleman discovers the lovers together and murders them.

— Joshua Parman

¹ *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, compiled and edited by Paul Banks (Aldeburgh: published by The Britten-Pears Library for the Britten Estate Limited, 1999), 69

² *Britten on Music* edited by Paul Kildea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 371

³ *Letters from a Life: Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten Volume Two 1939–45* edited by Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1991), 1177

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