

Benjamin Britten

With the arrival of Benjamin Britten on the international music scene, many felt that English music gained its greatest genius since Purcell. A composer of wide-ranging talents, Britten found in the human voice an especial source of inspiration, an affinity that resulted in a remarkable body of work, ranging from operas like *Peter Grimes* (1944–1945) and *Death in Venice* (1973) to song cycles like the *Serenade for tenor, horn, and strings* (1943) to the massive choral work *War Requiem* (1961). He also produced much music for orchestra and chamber ensembles, including symphonies, concerti, and chamber and solo works. Britten's father was a prosperous oral surgeon in the town of Lowestoft, Suffolk; his mother was a leader in the local choral society. When Benjamin's musical aptitude became evident, the family engaged composer Frank Bridge to supervise his musical education. Bridge's tutelage was one of the formative and lasting influences on Britten's compositional development; Britten eventually paid tribute to his teacher in his Op. 10, the *Variations on a Theme by Frank Bridge* (1937). Britten's formal training also included studies at the Royal College of Music (1930–1933).

Upon graduation from the RCM, Britten obtained a position scoring documentaries (on prosaic themes like "Sorting Office") for the Royal Post Office film unit. Working on a tight budget, he learned how to extract the maximum variety of color and musical effectiveness from the smallest combinations of instruments, producing dozens of such scores from 1935 to 1938. He rapidly emerged as the most promising British composer of his generation and entered into collaborative relationships that exerted a profound influence upon his creative life. Among the most important of his professional associates were literary figures like W.H. Auden, and later, E.M. Forster. None, however, played as central a role in Britten's life as the tenor Peter Pears, who was Britten's closest intimate, both personally and professionally, from the late '30s to the composer's death. Pears' voice inspired a number of Britten's vocal cycles and opera roles, and the two often joined forces in song recitals and, from 1948, in the organization and administration of the Aldeburgh Festival.

A steadfast pacifist, Britten left England in 1939 as war loomed over Europe. He spent four years in the United States and Canada, his compositional pace barely slackening, as evidenced by the production of works like the *Sinfonia da Requiem* (1940), the song cycle *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* (1940), and his first effort for the stage, *Paul Bunyan* (1940–1941). Eventually, the poetry of George Crabbe drew Britten back to England. With a Koussevitzky Commission backing him, the composer wrote the enormously successful opera *Peter Grimes* (1944–45), which marked the greatest turning point in his career. His fame secure, Britten over the next several decades wrote a dozen more operas, several of which -- Albert Herring (1947), Billy Budd (1951), *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), *Death in Venice* (1973) -- became instant and permanent fixtures of the repertoire. He also continued to produce much vocal, orchestral, and chamber music, including *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* (1965), the three *Cello Suites* (1961–1964) and the *Cello Symphony* (1963), written for Mstislav Rostropovich, and the *Third String Quartet* (1975).

Britten suffered a stroke during heart surgery in 1971, which resulted in something of a slowdown in his creative activities. Nonetheless, he continued to compose until his death in 1976, by which time he was recognized as one of the principal musical figures of the twentieth century.



Noye's Fludde

Noye's Fludde is the setting of a medieval Miracle play about Noah's ark. Composed in 1957 by Benjamin Britten, it turns this charming play into a funny and dramatic children's opera. The cast includes a chorus of children, an orchestra of children musicians, as well as professional singers and players. It is a short work, but dramatically depicts the events of the Biblical story, through action, hymns, and colorfully expressive music. The Miracle play from which it derives was known as one of the twenty-four Chester Miracle plays. In the city of Chester one year, on the feast of Corpus Christi, twenty-four different plays were given and performed throughout the city as part of the celebrations. Noye's Fludde was one of them. This play was used by Britten as the basis for his libretto.

In the opera, the parts of the animals as well as all of the minor characters, such as the sons of Noah and the friends of Mrs. Noah, are played by children. The latter form a small chorus of "Gossips" which act as comic relief. Mrs. Noah hangs out with her friends the Gossips, drinking and laughing at her husband, until she is dragged kicking and screaming into the ark by her family. Dramatically, the Gossips all drown in the flood, dragged down in their drunken stupor. The music for the entire drinking scene, which builds in dramatic momentum as the storm brews and swells, is lightened by the cackling, comical voices of the Gossips as they revel with Mrs. Noah. The thematic material for the scene contains lopsided, imbalanced rhythms and strange harmonies, as if to suggest their inebriated state. Then the music depicts the growing storm, with powerful surges and thick chromatic grumbings. As the ark begins to move on the swirling waters, the music slowly swirls round and round as well, gradually

lifting the ark afloat.

The scoring of the children's orchestra includes handbells, recorders, strings, and percussion. It is these lighter instruments, particularly the recorders, which Britten uses to depict the going forth of the dove, and its return with an olive branch. Toward the close of the opera, the voice of God comes forth out of the heavens and delivers two solemn speeches, poetically describing his new covenant with the Hebrews and all mankind. Soft, low drums, add to the awesomeness of the moment. As the rainbow unfolds across the sky, the entire spectrum of instrumental colors fills the orchestral palette with iridescent light.

Britten's opera contains two old hymns which he uses both to dramatic effect and for structural emphasis. When the storm is at its height, the raging orchestra depicts the thunder, lightning, and driving rain with tumultuous fury. Superimposed over this storm music is the hymn "Eternal Father, strong to save," which the chorus sings with an inexorable steadiness and grand solemnity. The final verse of the hymn, beginning "O Sacred Spirit," comes to the foreground as the storm abates, and is sung in an almost a cappella style. The storm music is in the far background, and the voices are light and prayerful. The other two hymns are "Lord Jesus, Think on Me," and "The Spacious Firmament." The former opens the opera after an orchestral introduction, and is a prayerful supplication for purification. "The Spacious Firmament" is sung alternatively by cast and congregation, as a response to the unfolding of the rainbow. It is this hymn which closes the opera in scintillating grandeur.

Benjamin Britten Noye's Fludde

Norman Del Mar conducting the English Chamber Orchestra

1. Lord Jesus, think on me (Congregation) 3:09
2. I, God, that all this world hath wroughte (God's Voice, Noye) 2:05
3. Have Done, You Men and Wemen All 2:39
4. Now in the name of God I will begyne (Noye, Noye's Children) 4:18
5. Noye, Noye, take thou thy company (God's Voice, Noye) 6:07
6. Wiffe, come in! why standes thou their? (Noye, Mrs. Noye, Sem, Gossips, Jaffett, Ham) 5:09
7. Ha! Children, Me Thinkes My Botte Removes 8:18
8. Now forty dayes are fullie gone (Noye) 5:10
9. Noye, take thy wife anone (God's Voice, Animals, Noye's Children, Mrs. Noye, Noye) 2:39
10. Noye, heare I behette thee a heste (God's Voice) 1:15
11. The spacious firmament on high (Noye's Children, Noye, Mrs. Noye, Animals, Congregation, God's Voice) 7:17

Producers: Harley Usill & Andrew Raeburn

Engineers: Alan Reeve & Kenneth Wilkinson

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