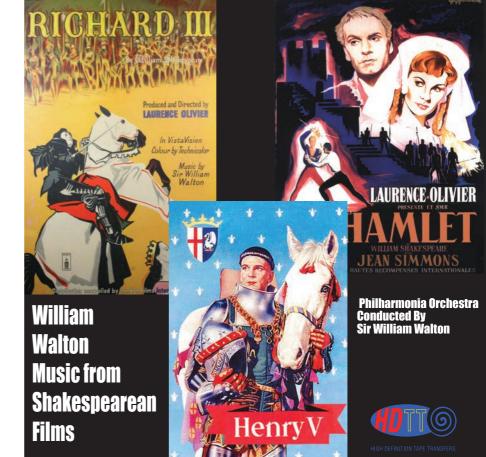Sir William Walton, in full Sir William Turner Walton (born March 29, 1902, Oldham, Lancashire, Eng.—died March 8, 1983, Ischia, Italy), English composer especially known for his orchestral music. His early work made him one of England's most important composers between the time of Vaughan Williams and that of Benjamin Britten.

Walton, the son of a choirmaster father and a vocalist mother, studied violin and piano desultorily as a boy and also sang, with somewhat better results, in his father's choir. He taught himself composition, although he received advice from both Ernest Ansermet and Ferruccio Busoni. In 1912 he entered the University of Oxford, where he sang in the choir of Christ Church. He put in the requisite four years of study but failed by one examination (Responsonions) to win a bachelor of music degree. At Oxford he had met the Sitwell brothers, Osbert and Sacheverell, by whom he was virtually adopted, and he spent most of the next decade traveling with them or living with them at Chelsea. During this period he composed Façade (1923)—a set of pieces for chamber ensemble, to accompany the Sitwells' sister Edith in a recitation of her poetry—as well as Sinfonia Concertante for piano and orchestra (1928; revised 1943) and Portsmouth Point (1926), which established his reputation as an orchestral composer.

Walton was influenced by some of his older contemporaries, notably Edward Elgar, Igor Stravinsky, and Paul Hindemith. Hindemith was soloist in the first performance of one of Walton's finest works, his Viola Concerto (1929). Walton also composed a number of scores for motion pictures, including Major Barbara (1941), Henry V (1944), Hamlet (1947), and Richard III (1954). His vocal music includes the oratorio Belshazzar's Feast (1931) and the operas Troilus and Cressida (1954) and The Bear (one act; 1967). The composer received a knighthood in 1951.

William Walton Music from Shakespearean Films

Philharmonia Orchestra Conducted By Sir William Walton

Nearly 400 years after his death he is still a source of inspiration for countless authors, composers, and artists all over the world. His plays are performed again and again in hundreds of languages, and have been the inspiration for numerous operas, ballets, and films. The most well-known and highly acclaimed Shakespeare films are the trilogy made in the 1940s and 50s, starring Sir Laurence Olivier and featuring music written by a famous William of the twentieth century — William Walton.

Walton and Olivier had met in 1936 on the set of As You Like It (another Shakespearean film featuring music by Walton) and again at a BBC recording of Christopher Columbus. By 1944, when he was approached to write the film score for Henry V, Walton had already made a name for himself with his ceremonial and dramatic music (including Crown Imperial March for the coronation of George IV in 1937), and music to accompany various patriotic films during World War II. Olivier and Walton were to work together on three films: Hamlet (1948), Richard III (1955), and their most successful partnership, Henry V (1944).

All three film scores where highly acclaimed in their day, Henry V and Hamlet attracting Oscar nominations. What made them so very successful was Walton's unerring ability to reflect the nature of each play in his music; he knew exactly how and when to heighten emotions, create tension, and provide moments of light relief. The scores for both Richard III and Henry V rely heavily on pastiches of "Shakespearean-style" music, including folk songs (at the suggestion of another OUP composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams), brass-heavy battle fanfares, and the use of the harpsichord, whilst Hamlet has a darker, motif-led, more brooding score, again reflecting the mood of the play.

William Walton Music from Shakespearean Films

Philharmonia Orchestra Conducted By Sir William Walton

1. Hamlet Funeral March 4:22
Henry V
2. Suite 15:03
Richard III
3. Prelude 7:31
4. Shakespearean Suite 10:21
Total Time: 37:17

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