

By Richard Freed © 2017

Richard Freed, now in his twenty-sixth season as program annotator for the Flint Symphony Orchestra, is a former music critic for *The New York Times* and *Saturday Review*. His credentials include service as assistant to the director of the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music, executive director of the Music Critics Association, record critic for *The Washington Star* and *The Washington Post*, and program annotator for the St. Louis Symphony, Baltimore Symphony, Houston Symphony, National Symphony (Washington, D.C.) and Philadelphia Orchestras. He has received two ASCAP-Deems Taylor Awards for his concert and record annotations, and a Grammy Award for the latter. In 2003, the President of Finland awarded him the medal of Knight First Class in the Order of the Lion of Finland.

Four Sea Interludes, Op. 33a, and Passacaglia, Op. 33b, from the Opera *Peter Grimes*, Op. 33

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Born November 22, 1913, Lowestoft, England
Died November 4, 1976, Aldeburgh, England

Britten's legacy of more than a dozen works for the lyric stage had its beginning in the United States, during his extended stay here in the early 1940s. His first opera, *Paul Bunyan*, with a libretto by W.H. Auden, was produced at Columbia University in 1941, and in the same year, in California, he found his inspiration for *Peter Grimes*. A magazine article by E.M. Forster on the English poet George Crabbe moved Britten to acquaint himself with the works of that little-known writer, and the first one he read, *The Borough*, was the tragic tale of the fisherman Peter Grimes, set in the composer's own native Suffolk. Within a few months Britten discussed the story with Serge Koussevitzky, the longtime conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, who made *Grimes* one of the first major works commissioned by the foundation created in memory of Koussevitzky's first wife, Natalie. Before the opera was introduced at the Tanglewood Festival, in 1945, Leonard Bernstein conducting, the actual premiere took place at London's Sadler's Wells Theatre on June 7 of the same year, under Reginald Goodall. By then Britten had already extracted these two orchestral works from it, and they have held a place in the orchestral repertory ever since.

Crabbe wrote his long narrative poem in 1810. Britten's libretto was written by Montague Slater, for one of whose plays the composer had provided incidental music. The story is simple and thoroughly tragic: An inquest is held into the death at sea of Grimes's young apprentice. Grimes is acquitted, but warned not to take on another apprentice. The schoolmistress Ellen Orford, loyal to Grimes, helps him get another boy despite that warning, but quarrels with him when she learns the boy has been treated roughly. When the villagers learn of this they set out after Grimes, who has taken the boy to his clifftop hut. As Grimes and the boy try to escape, the boy slips and falls down the cliff to his death. Three days pass, and Grimes returns to the village at dawn, physically and emotionally drained; he accepts the advice of the retired captain, Balstrode, who tells him the only way out is to sail out to sea alone and sink his boat, with himself aboard. Grimes's life ends as that of the village resumes for another day like any other.

Few changes were necessary in preparing the Interludes and Passacaglia for concert use. Their function in the opera, like that of the interludes in Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, to which they are frequently likened, is the creation of mood, but in their concert form they constitute a sequence of miniature tone poems in which the essence of the drama is encapsulated against the omnipresent backdrop of the sea.

It was this factor especially, Britten remarked, that drew him to undertake this work: "For most of my life I have lived closely in touch with the sea. My parents' house . . . directly faced the sea, and my life as a child was coloured by the fierce storms that sometimes drove ships to our coast and ate away whole stretches of the neighbouring cliffs. In writing *Peter Grimes* I wanted to express my awareness of the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depends on the sea."

DAWN, the first of the interludes, is the music that links the Prologue (the scene of the inquest into the death of Grimes's young apprentice) to the first act, painting a windswept seascape in the first gray light of the day.

By way of contrast, SUNDAY MORNING, which is the Prelude to Act II, is sunlit and tranquil. The strings introduce the motif of the aria to be sung in that act by Ellen Orford, and church bells call the villagers to worship.

MOONLIGHT is the touchingly beautiful introduction to Act III, depicting the same locale as in DAWN, but now serene and still in the quiet of the night.

STORM, as positioned here, is a "flashback" to Act I, wherein it links Scenes 1 and 2. The storm themes, according to the critic Edward Sackville-West, "were chosen for their susceptibility to symphonic treatment, so that, instead of mere static noise and ado, this is a true movement which follows, not the change of scene but the progress of the storm itself."

The PASSACAGLIA, which in some concert performances is inserted between interludes, was itself originally Interlude No. 4 in the opera score, serving to separate the two scenes of Act II. Its theme is stated initially by the solo viola and then subjected to nine variations through which the intensity builds in a manner more or less paralleling the intensification of Grimes's own emotional state as the drama proceeds. (The scene that follows this music in the opera is the one in which the young apprentice falls to his death from the edge of a cliff.) For the concert version of the Passacaglia, Britten provided a new ending, in which the solo viola is heard again, in what might be described as a tragic summing-up of what has gone before. ■

Serenade to Music

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Born October 12, 1872, Down Ampney, England
Died August 26, 1958, London

This work is not a serenade in the Mozartean sense—a multi-movement instrumental offering—but one in the still older and more literal sense: music in a single section, with a text to be sung. Vaughan Williams composed it in 1938 for the concert at the Royal Albert Hall on October 5 of that year in which Sir Henry J. Wood celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of his début as a conductor. This tribute to a beloved musician, with sixteen well known

singers taking part, was the last major work from Vaughan Williams between his solemnly powerful Symphony in F minor (No. 4) of 1935 and the outbreak of the war which many commentators continue to feel that symphony prophesied. The Serenade, however, shares none of the shattering tension, or even a particular awareness of the composer's own time, that informed that symphony. In honoring Henry Wood on the occasion of his golden jubilee, Vaughan Williams made no attempt at personal portraiture nor at reflecting Wood's world, but undertook a celebration of the art of music itself in a timeless setting of sweetness and tranquility.

He did, however, write the vocal parts for the sixteen singers specifically identified by Wood as being appropriate to the occasion, and the text he chose for them is one of the several in which Shakespeare praises music. It comes from the opening scene of the final act of *The Merchant of Venice*, set in Portia's garden at night: as music is heard from her house, Lorenzo speaks of the powers of music, and Jessica, Nerissa and Portia respond in turn. The lines selected by Vaughan Williams form themselves, independent of their original setting, into a lyric poem. Another composer might have designated such a work as a "hymn to music," but in choosing the title Serenade Vaughan Williams indicated a less ceremonial, more intimate intent, a work, we might say, aimed at the heart of the individual listener rather than the ears of a crowd.

While RVW wrote the vocal material for those sixteen singer who had performed so frequently with Henry Wood, he also indicated various options for performing this work. One is a version for twelve voices instead of sixteen; another is for four soloists with a small chorus; and in 1940 he made an arrangement for orchestra alone, without voices. It is the choral version that is performed this evening.

A brief orchestral introduction establishes the serene mood of the work, and also introduces, in the solo violin, a motif that is to be heard throughout the piece. The entire vocal complement sings the first four lines of the text, following which the words pass from one voice to another or again to the ensemble. The color effects with which the words are emphasized or echoed are among the most enchanting Vaughan Williams created in any of his works, and the soft conclusion bespeaks a poignancy and intimacy far more moving than a grand gesture.

It only remains to be noted here that, while this work remains a "novelty" in the repertory of most orchestras, this evening represents its third appearance in concerts of the FSO since Mr. Diemecke first conducted it here, in March 1995. ■

Belshazzar's Feast

WILLIAM WALTON

Born March 29, 1902, Oldham, England

Died March 8, 1983, Ischia

When Walton went to Oxford University he met and became friends with Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell, who took him home with them and introduced him to their sister Edith. He lived with those remarkable literary siblings for about a decade as their "adopted, or elected, brother." In addition to the intellectual stimulation that came directly from that close association, the Sitwells made it possible for him to meet various benefactors, colleagues, film producers (who commissioned scores) and publishers. Walton, for his part, dedicated works to them (his *Sinfonia concertante* for piano and orchestra was dedicated to all three of them in 1928), and produced two of his most important ones in direct collaboration with individual Sitwells. One of these was *Façade*, the extraordinary setting of Edith's extraordinary verses which Walton composed before he was out of his teens; another, which came at the end of his decade with the Sitwells, was one of the great landmark choral works of the twentieth century, the oratorio *Belshazzar's Feast*, whose text was provided by Osbert.

The oratorio, commissioned for the Leeds Festival of 1931, was introduced there on October 8 of that year. Walton accepted the assignment in 1929, at about the same time his Viola Concerto was given its premiere (with Paul Hindemith as soloist). Osbert Sitwell selected and arranged the text from portions of the Old Testament, and Walton worked on the music at his unhurried pace for nearly two full years. The score, dedicated to his colleague Lord Berners, calls for baritone solo, double chorus, and a large orchestra with organ and a very full percussion complement; added to this array are two brass bands which are indicated as optional.

The heart of Sitwell's text is taken from the fifth chapter of the Book of Daniel, the narrative describing the great feast, the handwriting on the wall, the slaying of Belshazzar and the destruction of Babylon. Sitwell abridged and dramatized these Biblical verses, and framed them with others. By way of introduction he drew from the Book of Isaiah the stern assurance that "the day of the Lord is at hand." Then, to set the scene, there are lines from Psalm 137, "By the waters of Babylon," and finally, as the joyous conclusion, lines from Psalm 81, a paean of triumph and thanksgiving.

Belshazzar's Feast was, and for the most part remains, a modern work in every sense, reflecting modern orchestral and choral techniques and utterly free of the treacly elements that had made their way into so many English choral works in the preceding sixty years or so. In no way contravening this up-to-date character is a rather basic factor that does provide a certain link with the very beginnings of the English oratorio tradition: that is Walton's own personal response to the glorious Old Testament vitality that informs the finest such works of Handel. ■