

Sinfonia da Requiem, op. 20.....Lord Benjamin Britten

Born in Lowestoft, 22 November 1913; Died at Aldeburgh, 4 December 1976

Benjamin Britten began his early musical training as a violist and pianist but was drawn to composition during his pre-teen years. He began his formal study of composition with Frank Bridge, after meeting that gentleman in 1927. Britten was later accepted to the Royal College of Music with a composition scholarship. During his time at the RCM he studied with John Ireland. Britten went on to become one of the leading figures in twentieth-century British music, world-renowned as a composer, conductor, and pianist. Despite well-intentioned efforts by Holst, Vaughan Williams, and many others, Britten's *Peter Grimes*, op. 33, was the first opera of truly international quality to be composed by an Englishman in the almost two hundred and fifty years since Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* was produced in 1685. Queen Elizabeth II named Britten a Life Peer in 1976 in recognition of his services to British music, the first composer to be so honored.

The *Sinfonia da Requiem* was composed in 1940 in the United States where he and his life partner, the tenor Peter Pears, lived from 1939 to 1942 as conscientious objectors to Britain's participation in World War II. The piece was the result of a commission from the Japanese government. Japan approached several Western composers to write pieces to celebrate the 2,600th anniversary of the Japanese Empire, and Britten was their chosen English participant. While

negotiating the commission fee through Britain's Foreign Office, the Japanese government was given the title of the new work and the titles of the movements. It was not until after the fee was paid and the score delivered that someone in Tokyo decided that the Christian connotations of the new work were insulting to the Imperial Family, and the piece was rejected for performance. Sir John Barbirolli conducted the premiere of the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, op. 20, in Carnegie Hall with the New York Philharmonic on 29 March 1941. Britten removed any references to the original commission and simply dedicated the work "To the memory of my parents."

The loss of both his parents was the inspiration for the music Britten produced. The very title of the piece and the movement titles deal with the Christian liturgy dealing with death and the grief of those who are left behind. Britten chose to utilize a three-movement format, but one in a non-standard slow-fast-slow structure. He characterized the three movements as "a slow, marching lament," a "Dance of Death," and "the final resolution." All of the movements are emotionally powerful but the second, serving as a scherzo, is one of the finest pieces of orchestral writing Britten was to ever achieve, all the more remarkable considering he was only twenty-six at the time. An interesting aspect of the *Sinfonia da Requiem* is that the entire piece is built around the tonal center of "D," and does not employ a closely-related key for the inner movement.

A performance of the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, op. 20 by Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra resulted in a commission for a new opera from the Koussevitzky Foundation—*Peter Grimes*—and the rest is history.

Rainbow Body.....Christopher Theofanidis

Born in Dallas, Texas, 18 December 1967

Although Christopher Theofanidis is Texas born and educated, he did spend several early childhood years living in Greece. Both his father and paternal grandfather were professional musicians and Christopher inherited the “composing gene” from them. Theofanidis studied at the University of Houston, the Eastman School of Music, and Yale University. His major composition teachers have been David Ashley White, Samuel Adler, and Jacob Druckman. Theofanidis has taught at The Peabody Institute of Music in Baltimore, Maryland and the Juilliard School in New York City. He currently teaches composition at Yale University. He has been the recipient of numerous awards, commissions, and fellowships, including the American Prix de Rome. Theofanidis also received the 2003 Master Prize in Composition, with an award of £25,000, for his popular orchestra piece *Rainbow Body*.

Theofanidis composed this piece in 1999-2000 and it was premiered by Robert Spano and the Houston Symphony Orchestra on 8 April 2000. *Rainbow*

Body also has the distinction of being the most frequently programmed work by a living American composer for the 2004-05 concert season. The composer has provided the following comments about *Rainbow Body*:

In the past few years I have been listening to the music of medieval mystic Hildegard von Bingen a great deal, and as simple and direct as this music is, I am constantly amazed by its staying power. Hildegard's melodies have very memorable contours which set them apart from the other chants of the period. They are very sensual and intimate; a kind of communication with the divine. This work is based on one of her chants, "Ave Maria, O auctrix vite" (Hail Mary, source of life).

Rainbow Body begins in an understated, mysterious manner, calling attention to some of the key intervals and motives of the piece. When the primary melody enters for the first time about a minute into the work, I present it very directly in the strings without accompaniment. In the orchestration, I try to capture a halo around this melody, creating a wet acoustic by emphasizing the lingering reverberations one might hear in an old cathedral.

Although the piece is built essentially around fragments of the melody, I also return to the tune in its entirety several times throughout the work, as a kind of plateau of stability within an otherwise turbulent environment. *Rainbow Body*

has a very different sensibility from the Hildegard chant, with a structure that is dramatic and developmental, but I hope that it conveys at least a little of my love for the beauty and grace of her work.

Rainbow Body is dedicated to Glen Rosenbaum, without whose support and encouragement I would not be composing.

Symphony No. 5 in C minor, op. 67.....Ludwig van Beethoven

Born in Bonn, 16 December 1770; Died in Vienna, 26 March 1827

If Beethoven's infamous "Fifth" is not the world's most popular symphony it is undoubtedly the most well known. The opening four-note motive has been used and abused in a variety of ways, from promoting pain-killing over-the-counter medications to use in fraternal rituals. The fact that the symphony has endured the indignities heaped upon it and survived the gross commercialization of the last eighty years is a greater tribute to Beethoven's creative genius than any number of marble statues could ever be.

The composer's sketchbooks show that some of the ideas for this symphony date from as early as 1800. Serious composition on the piece was not begun until 1806, and was then interrupted while he wrote the Symphony No. 4

in B-flat major, op. 60, for Count Franz von Oppersdorf. Beethoven returned to the C minor symphony with renewed vigor and completed it in 1807. The first performance took place at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna on 22 December 1808, along with the premier of the Symphony No. 6 in F major, op. 68 "*Pastoral*." Both symphonies bear joint dedications to two of Beethoven's aristocratic friends, Prince von Lobkowitz and Count Rasumovsky.

Much ink has been used for written discussions of this symphony's power and drama, the "meaning" of the opening theme and the significance given it during the horrors of World War II. A more important aspect of the piece is Beethoven's expansion of the symphonic form and the innovations utilized to achieve this. The motivic development in the first movement is easily heard, but it is the composer's use of silence, the "grand pauses" that heighten the effect of the music actually sounded, which set the stamp of genius on this movement. The short cadenza for the principal oboe during this movement's recapitulation is totally unexpected and must have caused an abundance of raised eyebrows and whispered comments among the audience at the premiere. The second movement is a theme and set of variations which explore a variety of moods, from the somewhat flippant to the deeply emotional.

In the Scherzo, Beethoven evokes an air of mystery, calling forth the main theme from the depths of the string section. The opening eight pitches are intervallically identical to the beginning of the last movement of Mozart's great Symphony No. 40 in G minor, but the difference in tempo, meter, and

orchestration strip them of the "Mannheim Rocket" character of the earlier work. The trio portion features a fugal treatment of a theme introduced by the double basses. Beethoven's most radical innovation is found in the structure of the Scherzo and the Finale. The two movements are played without pause, linked by a transitional passage that emphasizes the mysterious elements of the Scherzo. A short reference to the Scherzo theme and a repetition of the transition occur during the development portion of the Finale as a musical "flash-back." The last movement is also notable for its orchestration. The Symphony No. 5 in C minor, op. 67, marks the first time that piccolo, contrabassoon, or trombones were used in a symphony. Beethoven reserved them for the Finale, giving it a power and tonal brilliance that had never before been achieved.

We now regard the transition from the Scherzo to the Finale as an example of Beethoven's innovative genius, but it was not always so. The Russian music critic Aleksandr Dimitriyevich Oulibichev (1794-1858) had this to say about that passage: "There are 24 parts participating in the explosion which marks the transition from the Scherzo to the Finale in the C minor Symphony of Beethoven. I speak of the 50 measures of the Scherzo that precede the Allegro. There is a strange melody, which, combined with even a stranger harmony of a double pedal point in the bass on G and C, produces a sort of odious meowing, and discords to shatter the least sensitive ear." Like many music critics of the past, this gentleman is primarily remembered for the stupid opinions expressed about works which have withstood the test of time to become masterpieces of

our musical culture. Beethoven's reputation is only enhanced by our amusement at such statements. Your average person might not know who won the Heisman Trophy ten years ago, the Super Bowl twenty years ago, or the World Series thirty years ago, but *everybody* knows Beethoven and the first movement of the Fifth Symphony!