

English Folk Songs

arranged by BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Born November 22, 1913, Lowestoft

Died December 4, 1976, Aldeburgh

Like Brahms, Bartók, Vaughan Williams, and so many other composers, Britten was drawn to folk music, and he arranged five volumes of folk songs—drawn primarily from England, Ireland, and France—for voice and piano (or guitar). Britten felt no need for historical authenticity and made his own settings, essentially transforming these folk songs into art songs. Again like Brahms, he made these arrangements out of love for the music and did not include them in his official catalog of works—these arrangements have no opus numbers. The earliest of the songs on this recital date from Britten's first collection of English folksong arrangements, made in the United States in 1941-42. Britten had emigrated to this country in 1939, intending to make his career in this country. During the summer of 1941, which Britten spent in Escondido, California, he discovered the poetry of George Crabbe and—suddenly fired by a new sense of his English identity—decided to return to England. It may well be that these folk song arrangements reflect Britten's new interest in his English heritage.

These songs require little detailed comment, and listeners will probably discover that they already know several of them. Those interested in these arrangements should be aware that three of the eleven songs heard on this recital (*Come you not from Newcastle?*, *Sally in Our Alley*, and *The Plough Boy*) are available on compact disc with Peter Pears as the tenor and the composer at the piano.

Canticle V: The Death of Saint Narcissus, Opus 89

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

A *canticle* was originally a hymn on a scriptural text that would be sung or chanted by the congregation as part of the Christian liturgy. Benjamin Britten adapted and amended that conception in his five *Canticles*, composed between 1947 and 1974. In his *Canticles*, Britten did not set scriptural texts, but all five of the texts he chose are profoundly concerned with the human condition, and three of them were written as memorial pieces for his friends. All five were written with the voice of Britten's life-companion, the tenor Peter Pears, in mind, and it was Pears who premiered all five of the *Canticles*. But Britten also conceived them for unusual instruments and combinations of voices.

Britten composed his final canticle in July 1974, only two years before his death. This was not a good time for the composer. An operation the year before to replace a faulty heart valve had not gone well, Britten had suffered a slight stroke in the process, and he never fully regained his strength. The operation also left him partially paralyzed on the right side, so that he was never able to play the piano again. He was very weak during his final two years, he could walk only with assistance, and composing was difficult.

In September 1973, while Britten was trying to recover, his friend William Plomer died. Born 1903 in South Africa, Plomer was an editor and writer who had written the libretti for Britten's

opera *Gloriana* (1953) and for his church parables *Curlew River*, *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, and *The Prodigal Son* (not so well known is the fact that Plomer edited a number of the early James Bond novels, and out of gratitude Ian Fleming dedicated *Goldfinger* “To my gentle reader William Plomer”).

In memory of Plomer, Britten composed *The Death of Saint Narcissus*, but—because he could not play the piano—he scored the setting for tenor and for harp, intending the latter part for the Welsh harpist Osian Ellis. For his text, Britten turned to an early poem by T.S. Eliot, “The Death of St. Narcissus,” which had been published in 1967, twelve years after Eliot’s death. Eliot’s vivid poem fuses the figure of Narcissus, doomed in Greek mythology to admire his own image, with Saint Sebastian, tied to a tree and shot full of arrows. The poem touches on some of Britten’s perennial themes—experience, the loss of innocence, and death—and comes to a violent end as Saint Sebastian eagerly embraces the arrows that free him from life.

Peter Pears and Osian Ellis gave the first performance of *Canticle V* in London on January 15, 1975.

Auf dem Strom, D.943

FRANZ SCHUBERT

Born January 31, 1797, Vienna

Died November 19, 1828, Vienna

Almost all of Schubert’s 600 songs are for voice and piano, but in the final year of his brief life he began to experiment with new instrumental combinations. In October 1828 he wrote *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen* for soprano, clarinet, and piano, and seven months earlier he wrote *Auf dem Strom* for soprano, French horn, and piano. Schubert wrote this song specifically for the famous “Schubertiad” on March 26, 1828: a program of his songs and chamber music given before a packed and enthusiastic audience in Vienna (briefly wealthy from this successful concert, Schubert used part of his profits to go hear Paganini, then all the rage in that city).

Auf dem Strom sets a poem of farewell by Ludwig Rellstab. On the surface, it speaks of the poet’s farewell to his love, but it is also a farewell to the shore and to daylight as the boat proceeds out to sea and into the blackness of night. Many have seen this as a metaphorical passage from life to death, and they point out that in the second verse Schubert subtly quotes the *Funeral March* of Beethoven’s *Eroica*. Schubert, weak and ill throughout 1828, died only eight months after writing this song—did he have a premonition of death even as he conceived this song for what turned out to be his most successful public concert? In any case, *Auf dem Strom* was one of the works performed at the memorial concert given in Vienna on January 30, 1829, the day that would have been Schubert’s 32nd birthday.

Frühlingsglaube, D.686

Im Frühling, D.882

Der Musensohn, D.764

FRANZ SCHUBERT

All three of these songs—composed when Schubert was in his twenties—are about spring, but of course they are about much more than that: in each song spring offers the setting from which poet and composer can reflect on something deeper. Schubert clearly found these poems a fertile starting point—these are among his finest songs.

Frühlingsglaube (“Faith in Spring”), on a text by Ludwig Uhland, went through four different versions in the early 1820s. This favorite song is about spring as the eternal promise of freshness and rebirth, and that message is heard in a vocal line that flows easily above the piano’s triplet accompaniment; the piano’s gentle prelude returns at the end to round the song off.

Im Frühling (“In Springtime,” composed in March 1826 on a text by Ernst Schulze) is one of the finest lieder ever written. The setting is an archetype of romanticism—the indolent poet on the warm hillside, reflecting on life—but Schubert’s song takes us far beyond that basic situation. Somehow every part of this song comes together perfectly: the piano’s graceful opening melody, which then is transformed in each of the three following verses; the floating, arcing vocal line above the evolving piano accompaniment; the quicksilver changes of mood; the move into G minor for the third stanza as the poet reflects on the meaning of time and change; and the warmth of the closing return to G major.

Der Musensohn (“Son of the Muses,” composed in December 1822 on a text by Goethe) finds the singer on horseback, wandering and longing for love. This was another of the songs that became popular during Schubert’s lifetime, both for Goethe’s text and for the vitality and freshness of Schubert’s setting; the joyful sound of pounding hooves makes a powerful conclusion to the song.

Canticle III: Still Falls the Rain, Opus 55

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Britten composed *Canticle III* in November 1954, scoring it for tenor, horn, and piano and intending it for Pears, the distinguished French horn-player Dennis Brain, and himself at the piano. That combination of soloists recalls Britten’s *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings*, composed in 1943 and also written for Pears and Brain. Britten wrote *Canticle III* in memory of the young Australian pianist Noel Mewton-Wood, who had committed suicide two years earlier. But Britten—a pacifist who had been a conscientious objector during World War II—used this occasion to say something about war, saying that he “felt at last that one could get away from the immediate impacts of the war & write about it.” For his text, Britten chose Edith Sitwell’s poem “Still Falls the Rain—the Raids, 1940, Night and Dawn,” about the bombing of London during the Battle of Britain. In that poem, World War II becomes a metaphor for Christ’s suffering and for the cruelty human beings inflict on each other.

Musically, *Canticle III* is structured in an original way: over piano accompaniment, the tenor and the horn essentially take turns. The tenor sings Britten’s setting of Sitwell’s poem, and between verses the horn and the piano offer a series of variations on the somber opening melody. All three performers finally come together for the quiet concluding stanza.

Pear, Brain, and Britten gave the first performance of *Canticle III* on January 28, 1955, in Wigmore Hall in London. Britten was quite enthusiastic about the music, writing to tell Edith Sitwell that he felt that he was “on the threshold of a new musical world.”

Program notes by Eric Bromberger