

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 15

Benjamin Britten

Benjamin Britten reached young adulthood without the spectre of war looming, but as he moved into his 20s European politics turned grim. On September 3, 1939, Great Britain declared war on Germany, following the latter's invasion of Poland. Britten had left England for America four months earlier with his artistic and romantic partner, tenor Peter Pears, and he would remain in the States until April 1942. A declared pacifist, Britten fully understood the hostility with which such a philosophical position would be received in wartime Britain, the more so when coming from a creative artist who was gay. When he did return to England a judge eventually ruled that instead of carrying out non-combatant war-related service, the greater national benefit lay in Britten's continuing to work as a musician — which is precisely what he did, soon clinching a reputation as Great Britain's finest composer since Henry Purcell two and a half centuries earlier.

Even before the outbreak of the Second World War Britten's anti-war sentiments had been sharpened through the viciousness of the Spanish Civil War, which some historians have viewed as a sort of dress rehearsal for the greater international conflict. In 1936 Britten had traveled to perform at the ISCM (International Society of Contemporary Music) festival in Barcelona, where he appeared as pianist in his Suite, Op. 6, along with the Spanish violinist Antonio Brosa. At the same gathering he was overwhelmed by the experience of hearing the World Premiere of Alban Berg's Violin Concerto, a "concerto-as-requiem" that seems to have inspired Brit-

ten toward producing his own "big heavy-weight" violin concerto (as he put it) with a similar memorial cast. The third movement of Britten's concerto was accordingly conceived as a tribute to the British volunteer soldiers who had fallen battling the fascist forces in Spain — or so Brosa maintained.

By the time Britten's Violin Concerto was premiered, by the New York Philharmonic in March 1940, the Spanish Civil War had ended and World War II had begun (at least so far as Great Britain was concerned). The road to the Philharmonic's premiere was circuitous. Then Music Director John Barbirolli had booked Brosa to perform Berg's Violin Concerto, believing that the concert would represent that work's New York premiere. He then learned that the Berg work had already

IN SHORT

Born: November 22, 1913, in Lowestoft, Suffolk, England

Died: December 4, 1976, in Aldeburgh, Suffolk

Work composed: from November 1938 through late September 1939, revised in 1950 and 1954, with the final version of the orchestral score (played here) appearing in 1965; dedicated to Henry Boys, one of the composer's associates in the English Opera Group

World premiere: March 28, 1940, by the New York Philharmonic, John Barbirolli, conductor, Antonio Brosa, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: March 1, 2011, Paavo Järvi, conductor, Janine Jansen, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 31 minutes

been played in New York, in March 1937, by violinist Louis Krasner and the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Serge Koussevitzky. Intent on presenting a New York premiere, Barbirolli then turned to Nikolai Myaskovsky's Violin Concerto, which had been unveiled in 1938 in Leningrad; but a sudden escalation of tension between the United States and the USSR rendered that choice impolitic. It was Brosa who then suggested the Britten Concerto, and he played a read-through for Barbirolli in London in August 1939, accompanied at the piano by Henry Boys (to whom the score would be dedicated). Barbirolli responded with enthusiasm and plans moved forward toward the work's premiere.

Critics received the piece warmly. Olin Downes, reviewing in *The New York Times*, noted:

there is modern deployment of percussion — perhaps too persistent employment of these devices, which involve not only effects of percussion, but rhythms that become organic parts of the musical development.

No doubt he was thinking especially of the opening measures, in which the timpani's distant tattoo (in a Spanish rhythm, Brosa claimed) is embellished by soft strokes on the cymbal — a percussive opening to a violin concerto that no music aficionado could fail to connect to the drumbeats that launch Beethoven's Violin Concerto. The critic Louis Biancolli shared a personal observation in the *New York World-Telegram*:

Mr. Britten, a tall, gangling lad of 26, came out after the performance and bowed rather shyly and awkwardly. Frankly, he didn't look like the composer of his D minor concerto. But, then you never can tell in music.

Instrumentation: three flutes (two doubling piccolo), two oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, triangle, side drum, tenor drum, bass drum, whip, cymbals, harp, and strings, in addition to the solo violin.

In the Composer's Words



Britten provided a program note for a performance of his Violin Concerto in 1971 at the Aldeburgh Festival:

The first movement starts with a tiny phrase for timpani, answered by the cymbal. This becomes the accompaniment for the first long tune on the violin solo, reappears many times during the movement, and finally accompanies a melodic cadenza descending slowly from the violin's highest notes, in double- and triple-stopping.

There is a pleading middle section in the acrobatic *Vivace*, after which the previous material appears softly and muted. There is a slow crescendo to a *tutti* which introduces a cadenza. This leads directly to the *Passacaglia*, of which the theme is announced by the trombones.

Benjamin Britten in 1949