



BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Simple Symphony

Edward Benjamin Britten, Baron Britten, OM CH (22 November 1913 – 4 December 1976) was an English composer, conductor and pianist. He was a central figure of 20th-century British classical music, with a range of works including opera, other vocal music, orchestral and chamber pieces. His best-known works include the opera *Peter Grimes* (1945), the *War Requiem* (1962) and the orchestral showpiece *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1945). Britten's early musical life was dominated by the classical masters; his mother's ambition was for him to become the "Fourth B" – after Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. He studied at the Royal College of Music in London and privately with the composer Frank Bridge. He first came to international fame with the premiere of *Peter Grimes* in 1945. Over the next 28 years, he wrote 14 more operas, establishing himself as one of the leading 20th-century composers in the genre. In addition to large-scale operas, he wrote "chamber operas" for small forces, suitable for performance in venues of modest size. Recurring themes in the operas are the struggle of an outsider against a hostile society, and the corruption of innocence. Unlike his English predecessors such as Elgar and Vaughan Williams, and composers from mainland Europe whom he admired, including Mahler and Shostakovich, Britten was not a classical symphonist. His youthful *jeux d'esprit* the *Simple Symphony* (1934) is in conventional symphonic structure, observing sonata form and the traditional four-movement pattern, but of his mature works his *Spring Symphony* (1949) is more a song cycle than a true symphony. Nevertheless, became iconic within the English musical sphere, with fellow composers describing Britten as "simply the most musical person I have ever met", with an "incredible" technical mastery.

The ***Simple Symphony, Op. 4***, is a work for string orchestra or string quartet. It was written between December 1933 and February 1934 in Lowestoft, using bits of score that the composer had written for the piano as a young teenager, between 1923 and 1926. It received its first performance in 1934 at Stuart Hall in Norwich, with Britten conducting an amateur orchestra. The piece is dedicated to Audrey Alston (Mrs Lincoln Sutton), Britten's viola teacher during his childhood. The piece is based on eight themes which Britten wrote during his childhood (two per movement) and for which he had a particular fondness. He completed his final draft of this piece at age twenty. The titles of the movements, *Boisterous Bourée*, *Playful Pizzicato*, *Sentimental Sarabande*, and *Frolicsome Finale* aptly describe the whimsical nature of the entire work.