



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.

Sinfonietta, Op. 1 is a work composed in 1932, while he was a student at the Royal College of Music, and first performed in 1933. A *sinfonietta* is a symphony that is smaller in scale or lighter in approach than a standard symphony. It was originally written for five winds and five strings: flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, two violins, viola, cello and double bass, and was dedicated to his teacher Frank Bridge. In 1936, Britten revised the score for the larger forces of a chamber orchestra. The music writer Erwin Stein has suggested that the whole work is modelled on the *Chamber Symphony No. 1* of 1906 by Arnold Schoenberg, although this has yet to be definitively proven. In 1937, before Britten departed for America, his friend W. H. Auden inscribed his poem "It's Farewell to the Drawing-room's Civilised Cry" on the fly-leaf of a miniature score of the *Sinfonietta*. Britten was touched by the gesture.