



# William WALTON

## *Concerto for viola and orchestra*

**Sir William Walton** (29 March 1902 – 8 March 1983) was one of Britain's most distinctive and versatile composers of the 20th century, whose works combined rhythmic drive, lyrical warmth, and a striking sense of orchestral color. Born in Oldham, Lancashire, Walton was the second son of a choirmaster and singing teacher, and music surrounded him from an early age. His talent was evident when he entered Christ Church, Oxford, as a chorister at the age of ten. Remaining there as an undergraduate, he received little formal instruction in composition and was largely self-taught, absorbing musical ideas from study, concert-going, and his voracious curiosity.

His orchestral works of the following decade brought him national and international recognition. The Portsmouth Point Overture (1925) displayed his flair for bright, sharply etched musical images, while the monumental choral-orchestral *Belshazzar's Feast* (1931) astonished audiences with its bold sonorities and vivid Biblical drama. His *Symphony No. 1* (1935) established him as a master of large-scale symphonic writing, marked by structural control, emotional intensity, and a distinctive blend of Romantic sweep and modern rhythmic vitality. Walton continued to work across genres, producing concertos, chamber works, ballet scores, and a distinguished body of film music. His ceremonial compositions for British state occasions, such as *Crown Imperial* (1937) and *Orb and Sceptre* (1953), demonstrated his command of grandeur and pageantry.

Composed between 1928 and 1929, **the Concerto for Viola and Orchestra** was commissioned for the celebrated English violist Lionel Tertis. Upon receiving the manuscript, Tertis found the language too modern for his taste and declined to perform it, a decision he later regretted. The premiere was instead given by Paul Hindemith, a distinguished composer and violist, on 3 October 1929 in London, with Walton conducting the Henry Wood Symphony Orchestra. Tertis subsequently embraced the concerto, helping it to gain its now-central place in the viola repertoire.

The concerto is scored for a relatively modest orchestra, ensuring that the viola's warm, velvety tone is never overshadowed. The opening movement (*Andante comodo*) is expansive and rhapsodic, allowing the soloist to spin long, arching phrases of deep expressiveness. The orchestral writing here is rich yet transparent, supporting the viola's lines without intrusion. In the central (*Vivace*) movement, Walton offers a brilliant scherzo, marked by rhythmic bite, syncopated figures, and quicksilver dialogue between soloist and orchestra. This section, with its flashes of sardonic humor, shows Walton's debt to both Stravinsky's crispness and the light-footed energy of dance.

The finale (*Allegro moderato*) begins with a buoyant theme, combining a sense of forward momentum with an undercurrent of introspection. As the movement progresses, the music gradually recalls the opening's reflective mood, closing in a subdued coda of great tenderness. This cyclical return binds the three movements together, giving the concerto a satisfying structural unity. Walton's harmonic language is tonal but infused with piquant dissonances and jazz-inflected chords, giving the work both accessibility and sophistication.

Technically, the concerto demands a wide range from its soloist: lyrical breadth in the upper register, depth and projection in the lower strings, and agility in rapid passagework. Yet it is never merely a vehicle for display. The concerto's emotional journey from introspective lyricism, through energetic wit, to a return to quiet reflection makes it a profoundly human statement. Since its premiere, it has been championed by generations of violists, recorded widely, and hailed as one of the defining concertos for the instrument. Nearly a century on, it remains an eloquent testament to Walton's artistry and to the viola's expressive voice.