

A LIMITLESS TALENT

Although Benjamin Britten's string works make up a small part of his oeuvre, musicians rate them among the greatest – and most testing – of the 20th century. On the occasion of the composer's centenary, DAVID KETTLE finds out why

FOR A COMPOSER WHOSE FORMATIVE MUSICAL experiences were based around the viola, which he studied from the age of ten, you couldn't argue that Benjamin Britten was exactly prolific in his output for strings. But what his string music lacks in quantity, it more than makes up for in fresh, often surprising and challenging ideas, and sheer intensity of expression. Each of his string works is a deeply considered utterance that

explores its own themes and values, and each pushes its string soloist or group in unexpected directions, while maintaining the famously ringing clarity of the composer's musical style.

We asked five prominent string performers to give us their perspectives on some of the key solo and chamber works in Britten's string output. Their responses reveal a composer entirely at one with writing for strings, but also unafraid to nudge the playing of stringed instruments in new directions.

VIOLIN CONCERTO

Janine Jansen violin

I'VE BEEN PLAYING the Britten Violin Concerto for about 15 years. Back when I started it was played far less than it is now. From the first moment I got to know it, I was strongly drawn to its extreme intensity. There's such emotion in the piece, such struggle and pain. You need to tell a story with every note, but when you know the background to the piece – it was written just before the Second World War – that immediately creates the right moods inside you.

It's very well written for the instrument, but it's still extremely challenging. I'm thinking especially of the scherzo, where you have double-stops to be played really quickly, as well as harmonic double-stops. Of course that can be frustrating – you can spend hours practising the work every time you're due to perform it, but I think this sense of struggle, of the music not coming easily to you, is actually very important for the music. It feels like it's on the borders of what's possible for the instrument, and there's almost a sense of finding new ways of writing for the violin.



DECCA/SARA WILSON

For me, there are two exceptional moments in the concerto. The first comes right after the cadenza – there's such a build-up to this spot, and then the trombones enter with the last movement's passacaglia theme, and you're right at the very top of your range, basically screaming. You feel lost, completely alone, and it's as if there's something very threatening underneath you. And the end of the piece is very intimate, almost like a prayer – it's as if you empty your soul

into the concerto at this point.

One of the first times I played the concerto was with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, around 2000. I remember players thanking me after the performance, and saying they hadn't played it for 25 years. I thought: even British orchestras aren't playing their own country's music, and they should. Thankfully, now many violinists are playing the piece. I've always been so confused that it's not played more often – in my view it belongs with all the great violin concertos, and it should be played as often as they are.

CELLO SUITES

Steven Doane cellist

FOR ME, Britten's cello suites are extraordinarily special pieces, and their significance can't be overrated. For whatever reason, his musical language really speaks to me – it's very beguiling and it draws me in. His economy of writing is just amazing and the music is comprehensible in tonal terms while still stretching the boundaries of the cello.

I've recently recorded the suites. I got to a point where I'd played the First Suite quite a lot, but I hadn't played the other two very much, and I started to have pupils who were playing them – I had one student in particular who played the Second Suite superbly, so I finally thought it was time I learnt them properly. Life is short, and these are pieces that you need to spend time with.

They were written for Rostropovich, and Britten clearly knew Slava's playing very well. He was exploring what's possible on the cello – the suites have a huge range of expression. You feel like you're channelling Rostropovich when you play these pieces – or at least trying to! The instrumental devices used by Britten clearly played to Slava's strengths – left-hand pizzicatos, for example, with a drone on another string and

a normal arco melody elsewhere. It's sometimes complex, but it's all very thoroughly thought through.

The Third Suite uses a technique that Britten called 'hidden variations', with the variations first and the tunes they're based on at the end. When I perform it, I usually talk to the audience at the start and say it's like a whodunnit, and without wanting to spoil things, I play a few of the tunes at the beginning – the Russian folk songs that are embedded within the material. I was in Aldeburgh a couple of years ago

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STEVEN DOANE

and I was lucky enough to go through Britten's library. They let me see the manuscripts of the suites, and I saw the book of Tchaikovsky's arrangements of Russian folk songs from which Britten got the themes for his Third Suite. It still had Britten's own bookmarks inside it.



COURTESY EASTMAN SCHOOL OF MUSIC

All three suites have serious technical challenges – sometimes hidden, sometimes right in your face. But there's a certain momentum about them – once you've mastered them, they carry you along on their own. I think Britten was one of the most successful composers at understanding the potential of the cello. There are some extraordinarily difficult sections, but there's a playfulness to it as well, as though Britten is saying, 'Come on – see if you can do this!'

Of course, the Bach suites cast a big shadow over these pieces, but it's amazing to hear someone from a completely different era approach the cello in a completely different way, yet as thoroughly and with as big a sense of adventure as Bach. ▶

BRITTEN'S STRING WORKS

CELLO SYMPHONY

Truls Mørk cello

I STARTED LISTENING to the Cello Symphony when I was about 13 – I got the Rostropovich recording, as well as his disc of the first two cello suites, and I listened to them a lot. I studied the Cello Symphony when I was around 19 or 20, but I didn't perform it until I was about 26. What struck me, though, was how well Britten wrote for the cello – to me it seems incredible that he didn't play the instrument. He has such insight into what it's possible to do, and what's not possible, while still pushing the boundaries.

There are moments when he's showing off what the cello is capable of – the big gestures in the very opening of the Cello Symphony, for example, or his double-stopping and other techniques that explore the sonorities and chordal possibilities of the instrument. In the first movement, there's a set of quite different characters, and Britten takes his time going through them all – it can be quite

a challenge as a performer to keep it all together, to keep a flow to the piece so that you don't get lost in the details. I think that's about getting the tempo right and keeping a kind of underlying rhythmic tension to the music.

The second-movement scherzo is quite ghostly, and for me the ending of the piece is very special. It's very warm, especially after the serious music that has gone before it, and it's almost as if Britten is accepting the facts of life, overcoming the struggles he's been through.

Many of the things I love about the Cello Symphony are also the aspects that cause me problems! The main thing is simply its huge ambition and its large scale – the way that Britten uses fairly sparse material but puts it in quite a large form. The audience can sometimes get a bit lost in the smaller elements and the detail, but when you can take them with you on the journey of the piece, it's a fantastic experience.



For Truls Mørk, communicating the journey of the Cello Symphony is key

MORTEN KRØGGVOLD

LACHRYMAE

Rivka Golani violist

I FIRST PERFORMED BRITTEN'S *LACHRYMAE* with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in the early 1980s, and I've played it regularly since then. But I can't say that I play it differently depending on whether it's in the orchestral or piano version. My expression stays the same, but you need a superb pianist to be able to bring out what the strings can do in terms of coloration. Britten's music is so well orchestrated, so richly scored.

I'm not sure I'd say I 'enjoy' playing the piece, as it's very serious. But for me, *Lachrymae* is one of the viola's landmark pieces – I'd put it on the same level as the late Shostakovich Sonata.



'You have to approach *Lachrymae* with a rich palette of colour and sounds': Rivka Golani

Britten takes you on a journey in the piece, and when you're performing, you have to take your audience with you on that journey. It begins almost in the unknown, very mysteriously, and you don't know where you're going – the introduction uses fragments of the main melody, but of course if you don't already know that melody, you won't recognise them.

Then the piece goes through ten variations, each with its own character. But in a way, the whole piece is a preparation for the ending, when the Dowland melody and chorale fully emerge. It's like a release – like moving from semi-chaos into clarity. The final section is marked *semplice*, and I've always played it almost non-vibrato – I've always tried to make it sound a little unclear what instrument is playing. It's only in the last four bars that I introduce some vibrato.

I remember William Primrose complaining that some players didn't understand the piece – it's not enough simply to play the notes. You have to approach it with a rich palette of colours and sounds. And the viola writing is phenomenal – I've worked with many composers in my time, but few have had such a natural feeling for the instrument.

Technique and musicality always go together in *Lachrymae*. That's a challenge when it comes to teaching the piece – of course you work with students on the technical aspects, but then they have to understand the musical challenges, otherwise it will mean nothing. It's a wonderful lesson for students – to go beyond what's written. You don't have to invent anything, but you can't just play the notes either. >

► **Right:** Britten was a frequent conductor of his own string works
 Far right: In Kenneth Sillito's words, the First Quartet reveals a young man revelling in his imagination

'I'm amazed at how much Britten understood about string technique, even early on'

KENNETH SILLITO



DECCA

STRING QUARTETS

Kenneth Sillito violin

I joined the English Chamber Orchestra (ECO) in 1960 when I was 21, and I left it in 1973, so I played at all the Aldeburgh Festivals during that period. I also performed there in 1959 when I was still a student. I thought it was just a normal way of working in the music profession – to be playing with the likes of Mstislav Rostropovich, Janet Baker, Sviatoslav Richter, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. It was great but it never happened again, of course.

Because I was in the ECO, the Gabrieli Quartet, which I led, effectively became the Aldeburgh in-house quartet – on summons when a quartet was needed. We didn't premiere any of Britten's three numbered quartets, but we played them all many times.

On one occasion, in the early 1970s, Britten summoned us to the Red House to play his early 1931 D major Quartet through for him – Faber was considering publishing it, and he wanted to hear it again first. It had been played back

in the 1930s but hadn't had good reviews, so Ben put it in his bottom drawer, as he was apt to do. We drove down there at a rate of knots, and went straight into the music room, where they had arranged music stands with the manuscript parts on them. We had an hour and a half to put it into some sort of shape. Then at 11.30am, he came in and recorded us on a reel-to-reel tape recorder. Afterwards I asked him how he felt about it. He said, 'Well, it sounds like someone else's music.' I told him we thought it sounded like his music. Eventually he allowed it to be published, and we made the first recording. I also remember our violist, Ian Jewel, asking whether Ben had any viola pieces that hadn't been published, and Ben rather mischievously replying that he had four or five pieces in the drawer – but they haven't appeared.

The three numbered quartets are all very different from each other. The First is like a young man revelling in his imagination and his technique. And I'm amazed at how much he understood about string technique, even early on. What I enjoy most about his quartet writing is the clarity – there's nothing that's muddy or difficult to balance. Everything he writes is possible, but some of it is on the borderline. The tuning of the opening bars of the First Quartet is particularly challenging, and it's very difficult to get the bowings right in the scherzo of the Second Quartet. One of the hardest things, though, is the solo violin movement in the Third Quartet, which was written for Norbert Brainin. But the fiddle solo is a doddle compared with the accompaniment – the other three instruments have to crawl up to their highest reaches on natural harmonics, which is incredibly difficult to control properly.

The quartets are being played a fair bit in Britten's centenary year, but I think he suffers slightly from the perception that there's little good British music, especially from the time he was working. You might assume that he'd be an atonal or serial composer – which he almost was, had he gone to study with Alban Berg – but in fact he found a voice all of his own. He could write diatonic music and still make it sound entirely new. ■

HARVEY DESOUZA



With the Gabrieli Quartet, Sillito played Britten's quartets many times