

## Variations 3 – 8 December 2012

**Britten** *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*

**Suckling** *Mr Jonathan Morton, his Ground*  
(world première performances)

**Bach** *Goldberg Variations (arr. Sitkovetsky)*

**Director/Violin**

**Violin 1**

**Violin 2**

**Viola**

**Cello**

**Double Bass**

**Jonathan Morton**

**Cheryl Crockett, Liza Johnson, Daniel Pioro**

**Xander Van Vliet, Laura Ghiri, Sophie Mather**

**Catherine Marwood, Andrew Berridge**

**Alison Lawrance, Naomi Boole-Masterson**

**Diane Clark**

### Scottish Ensemble

Re-defining the string orchestra, the Scottish Ensemble inspires audiences in the UK and beyond with vibrant performances which are powerful, challenging and rewarding experiences. As the UK's only professional string orchestra, the Ensemble is based in Glasgow and is built around a core of 12 outstanding string players who perform together under Artistic Director Jonathan Morton. The Ensemble has commissioned new works from composers such as John Tavener, James MacMillan, Sally Beamish, and Luke Bedford amongst others in recent years, as well as working with guest artists such as trumpeter Alison Balsom, tenor Toby Spence and cellist Pieter Wispelwey. Alongside performances across Scotland, the Ensemble presents an annual series of concerts at London's Wigmore Hall and has appeared at BBC Proms and the Edinburgh International, City of London, Aldeburgh and St Magnus Festivals. Recent invitations to tour abroad have resulted in engagements in Belgium, Austria, Turkey, China and the USA.

### Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

#### *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge (1937)*

*Introduction and Theme: Adagio; March; Romance; Aria Italiana; Bourée Classique; Wiener Waltzer; Moto Perpetuo; Funeral March; Chant; Fugue and Finale*

It's ironic that the piece that established Britten's international reputation, and which is now considered one of the true masterpieces of the string-orchestra repertoire, was also a bit of a rush job.

It was in May 1937 that the young Britten was approached by conductor Boyd Neel to write a piece for his virtuoso chamber orchestra, for a prestigious performance at the Salzburg Festival the following August – a mere three months later. In the end, though, it took the composer little more than a month to complete his *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*.

Britten had first thought about writing something based on his former teacher's music back in 1932, and he'd known and loved Bridge's music since his childhood – it was the older man's orchestral suite *The Sea* that had first inspired him to become a composer.

The pair first met in 1927, when the 13-year-old Britten approached a reluctant Bridge begging for composition lessons. Seeing the quantity and quality of Britten's childhood output, Bridge quickly agreed, and went on to nurture the prolific, rather over-enthusiastic young composer into a master craftsman. Britten later called him 'my musical father'.

And his set of variations is in many ways a character portrait of his beloved teacher: in the score he gave to Bridge, Britten even indicated that each variation referred to an aspect of the older man's personality.

Britten took his theme from the second of Bridge's wistful *Three Idylls* op.6 for string quartet. He fractures it into its constituent parts and transforms it radically in a set of variations that conjures a remarkable range of sounds and textures from its small-scale forces.

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# Variations

Two dramatic plucked chords kick off the opening **Introduction and Theme**, followed by a double bass drumroll and fanfares heralding Bridge's poignant melody. The **Adagio** (representing Bridge's integrity) has dark, pensive harmonies interspersed with yearning melodies in the violins, and the brusque, military rhythms of the **March** (Bridge's energy) contrast plucked and bowed playing. The **Romance** (Bridge's charm) is a graceful waltz, and the **Aria Italiana** (Bridge's humour) shows the Variations at their most parodic, with violins and violas strummed guitar-style and a soaring, extrovert tune on top. The **Bourée Classique** (Bridge's tradition) seems to look back to the Baroque string music of Bach and Vivaldi, and the over-the-top **Wiener Waltzer** (Bridge's enthusiasm) is a bitonal parody of a Viennese waltz that has something of the barely controlled frenzy of Ravel's *La valse*. Scurrying strings characterise the monodic **Moto perpetuo** (Bridge's vitality), and the achingly tragic **Funeral March** (Bridge's sympathy) sets a wailing violin melody against a remorseless bassline. The otherworldly Chant (Bridge's reverence) precedes the **Fugue and Finale** (Bridge's skill and affection), where the older composer's star pupil shows off his technical abilities before concluding with a glowing return of the opening theme.

David Kettle

Martin Suckling (b. 1981)

Mr Jonathan Morton, His Ground - Postcard #2

At their concert in the Caird Hall in October, the Scottish Ensemble processed on stage playing Pachelbel's canon, gathering players from the local amateur and youth orchestras as they went until the performing area was filled to bursting. Being in the midst of this body of sound as it passed through the hall – first behind, then around, then in front of you – was a powerful and moving experience. And it is where the idea for this postcard began. Where the violin leads, the others follow. Polyphony ensues, eventually arriving at rich, gleaming, microtonal chords covering all registers. Throughout the whole piece a simple melodic phrase loops over and over again.

Martin Suckling

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Goldberg Variations, BWV 988 (1741) (arr. Sitkovetsky 1992)

There's a charming story about the origins of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* in Johann Nikolaus Forkel's 1802 biography of the composer. Count Hermann Karl von Kaiserling, Russian ambassador to Saxony, would take the keyboard player Johann Gottlieb Goldberg with him on his travels as musician-in-service, stopping in Leipzig for Goldberg to study with the great JS Bach. A notorious insomniac, Kaiserling mentioned that he'd like some cheerful pieces for Goldberg to play to ease him through his sleepless nights. Bach promptly wrote what became known as the *Goldberg Variations*, and received the princely reward of a golden goblet filled with 100 coins for his efforts.

Unfortunately, the tale is almost certainly untrue. There's no dedication to Kaiserling (or Goldberg) on Bach's score, and the harpsichordist was only 14 at the time the work was published. It's more likely, if less sensational, that Bach always planned his aria and 30 variations as the grand culmination of his four-volume *Clavier-Übung* ('keyboard exercises'). Indeed, it's now considered one of the most influential keyboard works ever written, and an encyclopaedia of musical styles and techniques of Bach's time.

The opening Aria, a slow sarabande with a heavily ornamented melody, sets the structure that's followed in each of the set's ensuing pieces, with two 16-bar sections, both of which are repeated (AABB). But rather than elaborating on the Aria's melody, Bach instead constructs a remarkable series of contrasting variations on its bass line and harmonic progression. Variation 1 is a kind of wake-up call after the Aria's serenity, and Variation 2 is a gentler evocation of a trio sonata. From that point on, though, Bach employs a recurring three-variation pattern. Every third variation (3, 6, 9 and so on through to 27) is a canon. Next come genre pieces, evoking styles popular during Bach's time: Baroque dances (variations 4, 7 and 19), fughettas (variations 10 and 22), arias (13 and 25), a grand French overture (16) and a toccata (28). Immediately after the genre pieces come what have been termed 'arabesques' – lively, imaginative variations that call for virtuoso playing.

The pieces grow increasingly energetic through to Variation 30, called *Quodlibet* or 'what you will', a glorious summation that combines the Aria theme with two German folksongs. The work ends with a magical return of the opening Aria, now seemingly transfigured after the intense spiritual journey of the preceding 30 variations.

Russian violinist and conductor Dmitry Sitkovetsky made an arrangement of the *Goldberg Variations* for string trio in 1984, and for string orchestra in 1992 – just two of the many arrangements of the work for different instruments and ensembles. Sitkovetsky's string-orchestra arrangement that we hear tonight injects bright, subtle colours into the piece, and allows a superbly clear articulation of the work's ingenious counterpoint.

David Kettle



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