

*Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten*.....Arvo Pärt

*Born in Paide, Estonia, 11 September 1935*

Arvo Pärt has had training as a percussionist, fulfilling his required military service as a drummer in the Estonian Army. When that obligation was complete, he studied composition with Heino Eller at the Tallin conservatory from 1958-1963. Pärt also worked as a recording engineer for the state radio station and gained significant experience as a film composer. His early works were heavily influenced at first by Prokofiev and Shostakovich, but by 1960 he had begun composing with the serial, or twelve-tone, technique developed by Arnold Schoenberg. This music was met with great resistance by the Soviet authorities and Pärt went into a period of self-imposed silence as a composer. It was during this time that he made an extensive study of Renaissance music and the liturgical music of the Slavic Orthodox Church. The works for which Pärt has become world-renowned all date from after this period of study and reflect a calm serenity derived from it. While employing a minimum of materials, he is not a Minimalist of the same ilk as John Adams or Steve Reich.

Pärt employed a simple orchestration for his *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten*—string orchestra and a single bell. The thematic material reflects a similar simplicity, being derived from a variant of the A minor scale. Pärt creates a

fascinating texture by simultaneously juxtaposing this material on itself at three different tempos. This is essentially a prolation canon, a compositional technique associated with the early Renaissance composer Johannes Ockeghem (ca. 1415-1497).

Pärt explained the stimulus for this work: "Why did the date of Benjamin Britten's death—December 4, 1976—touch such a chord in me? During this time I was obviously at the point where I could recognize the magnitude of such a loss. Inexplicable feelings of guilt, more than that even, arose in me. I had just discovered Britten for myself. Just before his death I began to appreciate the unusual purity of his music—I had had the impression of the same kind of purity in the ballads of Guillaume de Machaut. And besides, for a long time I had wanted to meet Britten personally—and now it would not come to that."

In addition to the funereal tolling of the bell in groups of three, Pärt also utilizes silence to great effect.

Eri Klas conducted the first performance of *Cantus* with the Estonian Radio Symphony Orchestra in 1977.

*Ancient Airs and Dances*, Suite No. 3.....Ottorino Respighi

*Born in Bologna, 9 July 1879; Died in Rome, 18 April 1936*

Many people today remember Ottorino Respighi only as the composer of the famous trilogy of Roman tone poems dealing with pine trees, fountains, and festivals. Few realize that he received wide recognition as a violin virtuoso and a teacher of both piano and composition, as well as performing as the violist of the famed Mugellini Quartet. In a country dominated by a musical preoccupation with opera, he was the first Italian composer since Vivaldi to produce orchestral music of lasting value.

Respighi studied violin at the *Liceo*, or music school, in his native Bologna. After completing his training he moved to Saint Petersburg where he was appointed principal violist with the Imperial Opera. He remained in the Russian capital for two years, during which time he studied composition and orchestration with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. He left Russia and relocated to Berlin where he taught piano and received further instruction in composition from Max Bruch. Respighi spent several years touring as a violin soloist and composing, finally settling in Rome in 1913, when he became a professor of composition at the Academy of St. Cecilia.

Audiences familiar with Respighi only through the Roman tone poems miss an important and fascinating aspect of his creative life . . . his interest in early instrumental and church music. His orchestral works include a "Mixolydian" piano concerto, a "Gregorian" violin concerto, and *The Birds*, a collection of harpsichord works that he brilliantly adapted for orchestra.

Respighi also produced three sets of *Ancient Airs and Dances* adapted from lute pieces.

The Suite No. 3 of *Ancient Airs and Dances* was completed in 1932 and contains four movements. The Italiano is based on an anonymous galliard tune in triple meter from the early seventeenth century. Respighi combines this with another galliard, *La Cesarina (The Empress)*, by Santino Garsi da Parma (1542-1604). Jean-Baptiste Besard (1567-1625) a French jurist and musician wrote the *Arie di corte*, a ballet based on vocal pieces popular at the French court. Respighi utilized six different songs—"It is sad to be in love with you," "Farewell forever, shepherdess," "Lovely eyes that see clearly," "The Skiff of love," "What divinity touches my soul," and "If it is for my innocence that you love me"—reprising the first one to conclude the movement. The third movement is a lilting Siciliana based on a tune known as *Spagnoletta* by an anonymous seventeenth-century composer. The final movement is a Passacaglia, a form based on a Spanish dance. Respighi borrowed the material from the final selection in the *Capricci armonici (Harmonic Caprices)*, a collection of pieces for the Baroque guitar by Count Lodovico Roncalli (1654-1713) published in 1692.

*Carmen Suite*; after Georges Bizet.....Rodion Konstantinovich Shchedrin

*Born in Moscow, 16 December 1932*

Shchedrin began studying at the Moscow Conservatory as a young child and returned there after World War II to earn a degree in piano and composition. He has enjoyed a unique position in Soviet musical life as one of the few Party-approved composers to expand his musical language beyond the narrow confines of conservative official aesthetics. Although he has composed in a wide variety of media, Shchedrin is best known in the West for his work as a ballet composer. His four-act ballet *Konek-gorbunok (The Little Hump-Backed Horse)* has been a permanent repertoire piece for the Bolshoi Ballet since its premiere in 1956. One of Shchedrin's other ballets is his masterful adaptation of Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen*. He re-orchestrated portions of the original score using only strings and percussion, stripping Bizet's music of much of its romanticism. The ballet *Carmen* was premiered by the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow on 20 April 1967, with Maya Plisetskaya, the composer's wife, in the title role.

Bizet's greatest work is his opera, *Carmen*, based on the novel of the same name by Prosper Mérimée. The libretto enriched Mérimée's original story for use on the stage by creating the sympathetic character of Micaela, expanding the presence and importance of the bullfighter Escamillo, and moving the scene of Carmen's death from a deserted road at midnight to outside the bullring as Escamillo scores another victory. *Carmen* was premiered at the Opéra Comique in Paris on 3 March 1875, with moderate success. Popular legend relates that the premiere was a disaster and the opera considered a failure, but this is not true. Despite a relatively late premiere, *Carmen* received thirty-seven performances

that season and was held over as a repertoire work for the following season. In direct opposition to the obvious audience approval which kept the new work on the stage, the critics of the day were united in their condemnation of the opera. Their greatest objections were to the naturalism of the story and the staging (Carmen actually smoked a cigarette on stage in the first act!), and to the insidious influence of Wagner in Bizet's use of Leitmotifs. Bizet died three months after the premiere of *Carmen*, missing the international acclaim that his final work brought to him.

Shchedrin's *Carmen Ballet* was not the first time Bizet's opera had been adapted for the dance. The Alhambra Theatre Ballet in London staged no fewer than three different productions in 1897, 1903, and 1912. In each case Bizet's music was arranged by the Artistic Director of the Alhambra. This tradition has continued throughout the twentieth century. *Carmen* received another remake in 1943 for the Broadway musical *Carmen Jones*, with book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II; Robert Russell Bennett adapted Bizet's music. Featuring an all African-American cast, the title role was transformed into a young woman working in a parachute factory during World War II. *Carmen Jones* was produced as a motion picture directed by Otto Preminger in 1954. The film earned the Golden Globe Award for Best Motion Picture and brought Dorothy Dandridge, who played the title role, an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress.

Shchedrin returned to Prosper Mèrimée's novella and deleted the character of Micaela for his scenario. In adapting Bizet's music he freely

rearranged the sequence of the musical numbers and at times only gives the bare outline of these familiar tunes. Audiences are often perplexed when the melody of the "Toreador Song" disappears. The original material used in the nine movements of the ballet is as follows:

PRELUDE: Habañera, Act I

DANCE: Entr'acte to Act IV (Aragonaise)

CHANGING OF THE GUARD: Entr'acte to Act II (Les Dragons d'Alcala)

ENTRANCE OF CARMEN AND HABAÑERA: Music from Act I

SECOND INTERMEZZO: Entr'acte to Act III

TOREADOR: Escamillo's aria, Act II

ADAGIO: Don Jose's Flower Song, Act II

FORTUNE-TELLER: The Card Scene, Act III

FINALE: March and Chorus, Act IV; Finale of Act IV; Final Duet, ACT IV; Reprise of Entrance Music; Restatement of the Prelude

The premiere of Shchedrin's *Carmen Ballet* was a popular success but was severely criticized by the government censors, who banned further performances. The Head of the Ministry of Culture (who had obviously never seen Bizet's opera) accused the composer and choreographer of turning a "national heroine of the Spanish people" into a prostitute. It was only through the intervention of composer Dmitri Shostakovich, who was currently enjoying a period of popularity with the government and Party, that further performances of the *Carmen Ballet* were allowed to be staged. The work has since become a repertoire staple of the Bolshoi and ballet companies around the world. The

music for the *Carmen Ballet*, often called the *Carmen Suite*, has emerged as a popular concert selection and a vehicle for percussionists.

Program Notes by Bruce Gbur

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