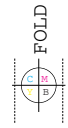






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**CD 1 64'51**

**Folk Songs with Harp**  
(arranged by Benjamin Britten)

- 1 The Ash Grove 2'48
- 2 Little Sir William 2'50
- 3 Come ye not from Newcastle? 1'13
- 4 I will give my love an apple 1'52
- 5 The Last Rose of Summer 3'54
- 6 Early one morning 2'57
- 7 There's none to soothe 1'45
- 8 How sweet the answer 1'56
- 9 The Minstrel Boy 2'03
- 10 Oft in the stilly night 2'35
- 11 The Sally Gardens 2'33
- 12 Sweet Polly Oliver 2'38
- 13 O Waly, Waly (Somerset Folk song) 3'41
- 14 The Plough Boy 2'06
- 15 The Foggy, Foggy Dew 2'44
- 16 The Sailor-boy 1'44
- 17 Master Kilby 1'52
- 18 The Soldier and the Sailor 2'08
- 19 Il est quelqu'un sur terre 4'03
- 20 La Belle est au jardin d'amour 2'40
- 21 Le roi s'en va-t'en chasse 2'09
- 22 Fileuse 1'35

**Two Scottish Folk songs**  
(arranged by Benjamin Britten)

- 23 O can ye sew cushions? 2'08
- 24 Ca the yowes 3'40

**BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913-1976)**

- 25 **Gloriana** 4'44

**Sir Peter Pears**, tenor  
**Osian Ellis**, harp

**Recording producers:** Michael Woolcock (Scottish Folk Songs, Gloriana, Birthday Hansel, Canticle V, Suite for Harp); Ray Minshull (Folk Songs); James Mallinson (Sacred and Profane, A Wealdon Trio, Sweet was the Song, The Sycamore Tree, A Shepherd's Carol)

**Recording engineers:** Kenneth Wilkinson, John Dunkerley (Scottish Folk Songs, Gloriana, Birthday Hansel, Canticle V, Suite for Harp); Kenneth Wilkinson, James Lock (Folk Songs); Kenneth Wilkinson, Simon Eadon (Sacred and Profane, A Wealdon Trio, Sweet was the Song, The Sycamore Tree, A Shepherd's Carol)

**Recording location:** 'The Maltings' Concert Hall, Snape, UK, February 1976 (Scottish Folk Songs, Gloriana, Birthday Hansel, Canticle V, Suite for Harp), March 1976 (Folk Songs); All Saints Church, Petersham, UK, October 1976 (Sacred and Profane, A Wealdon Trio, Sweet was the Song, The Sycamore Tree, A Shepherd's Carol)

**Eloquence series manager:** Cyrus Meher-Homji

**Art direction:** Chilu Tong · www.chilu.com

**Booklet editor:** Bruce Raggatt



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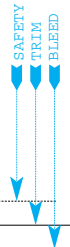
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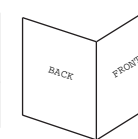
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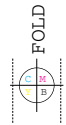


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as a way of 'returning to composition' after his illness.

*The Early Pieces*

Of the works on this recording, three may decently be counted as juvenilia. These are the unaccompanied carols: *A Wealden Trio* (composed in 1929 while Britten was still a schoolboy), *Sweet was the song* (1931) – both for female voices – and *The Sycamore Tree* (1930) for SATB. But though their style is straightforward and unpretentious, and though their personality is unformed, they completely lack the gaucheness one might normally expect of so young a composer. Admittedly the extent of the revisions (if any) is not clear. But after all they belong to the same time as the well-known *Hymn to the Virgin* (1930), a flawless piece whose last revision was in 1934, and they share with that work an impressive avoidance of the clichés of the contemporary Folk Song-carol arrangement. Indeed the *Wealden Trio*, like Ford Madox Ford's poem, handles the wassail tradition with a certain conscious roughness, if not altogether unsentimentally. In the other carols the tonal idiom uses added dissonance of a kind Britten might have heard in the music of contemporary French composers (Ravel, Milhaud, Honegger).

*A Shepherd's Carol* is of later date. It was written for a BBC program called 'Poet's Christmas' in 1944 and appears to be the last setting Britten made of a poem by Auden apart from 'Out on the Lawn' in the *Spring Symphony* and some brief additional settings in the revised *Paul Bunyan*.

*Sacred and Profane, Op. 91*

Starting in 1954 with the chamber opera, *The Turn of the Screw*, Britten took an increasing interest in certain aspects of twelve-note technique. Not only do twelve-note rows occur quite often in the works of the next twenty years, but more and more in this music we find meticulous and elaborate fabrics of short motives taking control of both melody and harmony. The technique owes something to Schoenberg. But Britten never abandoned tonality, and if the works of his last three years share a single stylistic feature, it is their insistence on diatonic harmony, with definite chords, bold harmonic movement, and firm cadences.

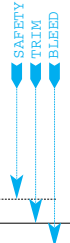
In this respect the eight unaccompanied choral lyrics of *Sacred and Profane*, written for the Wilbye Consort in 1975, might seem to hark back to such a work as the *Ceremony of Carols*. But, while it neither achieves nor attempts the exquisite tracteries of the

16	<b>A Wealden Trio – Christmas Song of the Women</b>	2'25
17	<b>Sweet was the Song</b>	3'05
18	<b>The Sycamore Tree</b>	1'30
19	<b>A Shepherd's Carol</b>	4'02

**The Wilbye Consort**  
**Sir Peter Pears**

Total timing: 127'13

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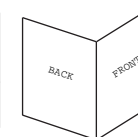


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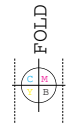


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**Britten and the Folk Song**

Benjamin Britten first started arranging folk songs for the concerts which he and I gave together in America during the War, and, when we returned to England, for CEMA and Friends War Relief. They made a very good end to a program which started with Purcell, went on with Schubert and included one of Britten's Cycles. He made something like forty arrangements for voice with either piano, guitar or harp.

The folk song revival, which started around the turn of the century, was already more or less a thing of the past when Britten was composing in the early 1930s, and it had very little effect on his music. He himself found the manifestations of the Movement rather tiresome and certainly could not see himself using folk song as part of the structure of his music.

His teacher, Frank Bridge, was not sympathetic to the ideals of the composers taking part and Britten was not encouraged in that direction. It was not therefore to the volumes of the English Folk Song Society that Britten went for his tunes and texts in the first years. He found a little, old, charmingly-printed book of National Melodies collected by the Victorian composer and teacher, John Hullah. In this little book there were some so-called folk

songs which Cecil Sharp would have thrown out. But Britten took up many of them and *The Ash Grove* comes from this, so does *There's none to soothe* and several others.

His way with a folk song is very different from that of Cecil Sharp who arranged so many for schools in the first part of the century: one of Sharp's cherished ideas was to bring back to English children those tunes that had been sung to and by their ancestors and he used to arrange these songs for voice and piano with very simple and regularly barred accompaniment.

This would not do for Britten. He wanted to recreate these melodies with their texts for concert performances, to make them art-songs, in the tradition of Schubert and even Brahms. He therefore takes the tune as if he had written it himself and thinks himself back as to how he would turn it into a song. The result is sometimes artfully simple and almost folk song-like (*Salley Gardens, O Waly, Waly, The Foggy, Foggy Dew*), sometimes the more elaborate and sophisticated (*The Ash Grove, Early One Morning*) and still others have an accompaniment of a strong pattern which could reasonably be called Schubertian (many of the French and Irish songs). Most of the original piano accompaniments and some of

worldly', assuming, with every doubtful justification, that Beethoven consciously related these qualities to his own 'impending' death. In the case of Britten (1913-76) the temptation to judge in this way is almost irresistible. Are not several of his final works concerned with death? Was not his [apparently] sudden willingness to revise and publish juvenilia and other hitherto 'withdrawn' works the activity, not of a failing body, but of a mind which had begun apocalyptically to take stock of its life's work? Did we not all feel, in the last years, that Britten's days were 'numbered', his time 'borrowed'? Surely Britten must have felt these things too.

While there may be some truth in all this, it obviously arises, to some extent, from a specifically modern tendency to treat the best contemporary art in the same way as the established art which we most admire. Britten was already being parcelled up for his historical cataloguing long before he had finished adding some of the most important items to the catalogue. But in truth, notwithstanding his chronic illness, few of us thought of his mid-1970s music as 'valedictory' or 'other-worldly' at the time. On the contrary, *Phaedra* impressed many who

heard its first performance in June 1976 as a work of startling vigour and youthfulness which would surely lead ahead to fresh conquests. The sardonic humour of *Sacred and Profane* (with its notably cold-blooded finale: 'All too late! All too late! When the bier is at the gate') hardly supports the idea of a pre-occupation with death, though doubtless it lends itself to the convenient alternative view that disrespect for and resignation to death are practically the same thing. As for his rescensions of youthful scores, these had – as usual with Britten's occasional works – a fundamentally practical aim.

In any case, the idea of the revisions was not so new as all that. The early pieces on the present recording were all published in the 1960s, long before Britten's illness. As early as 1933 (the starting date of the *Simple Symphony*) Britten was carefully and creatively preserving material from his even more extreme youth. No doubt those who urged him to restore such works as *Paul Bunyan* and the D major String Quartet were prompted partly by curiosity. But, Britten was primarily interested in composition with a view to performance, and Colin Matthews, an assistant of the composer for a time, records that Britten regarded the later revisions



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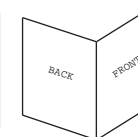


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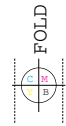


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oneself that this was an original melody, one might well take the song for one of Britten's Folk Song settings (and this recording, for those who may want to make the comparison, conveniently includes a couple of those, Scots ones appropriately, from Vols. I and III respectively of Britten's Folk Song arrangements).

*A Birthday Hansel* – i.e., a birthday gift – was written at the special wish of H.M. the Queen for her mother's 75th birthday in August 1975. The first public performance of the work was given by Peter Pears and Osian Ellis at the Cardiff Festival on 19 March 1976.

The famous second Lute Song from Britten's opera *Gloriana* was first performed at Covent Garden in honour of the Queen's Coronation on 8 June 1953 (the libretto was by William Plomer, to whose memory *Canticle V* is dedicated, and Peter Pears created the role of Essex). In this famous number from Act I (Scene 2), the impetuous and ambitious, dashing and doomed Earl of Essex addresses a solitary, melancholy song to the great Queen he loves, a song which certainly represents one side of his contradictory nature – the most poetic side (it is the real Essex's own words that Britten sets here), the most private and the most passionate. It is this scene and this song

indeed which represent the most private moment in an opera which is about the conflict between Private and Public, between private passion and public responsibility, between desire and duty. The opening phrase of the song, by the way, is a quotation from a madrigal, *Happy, O happy he*, by John Wilbye (1574-1638), another East Anglican composer. Once again we find Britten's harp – this time evoking a lute accompaniment, and one notes how authentic is the figuration! – collaborating in the communication of private rather than public thoughts, in a work composed in 1953. Clearly, another precedent for the list!

**Donald Mitchell**

*The above note is reprinted from the original LP and was written in 1976 for the publication of this record when Britten and Pears were still alive.*

\* \* \*

A composer's death, particularly when in some accepted sense premature, at once places his work in a new focus. Looking back, for instance, on Beethoven from a distance of a century-and-a-half we tend to exaggerate the consummatory status of his last works; we find the A minor Quartet 'valedictory' or the F major Quartet 'detached, fatalistic, and other-

the ones for guitar go perfectly on to the harp. The last arrangements (1976) were written specifically for Osian Ellis, and the tunes and words were suggested by Imogen Holst.

**Peter Pears**

\* \* \*

**Britten and the Harp**

Britten has continued to be stimulated, as he has been all his life, by the virtuoso performer who is also a consummate musician. The present recording brings fresh testimony to the enduring fascination that the art of Peter Pears has for him, and fresh evidence of the skill with which he exploits the new range of vocal colours that has become available to our most eminent tenor during recent years. This unerring instinct for uncovering new potentialities, even in a voice he knows so well, was especially evident in Britten's conception of the role of Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*, the most extended and taxing part that he has ever written for Pears. This was the work, incidentally, that immediately preceded *Canticle V*, though between the completion of the opera and the composition of the new *Canticle* Britten's serious illness had intervened, which led to a long period when he had to concentrate on convalescing rather

than composing. But it is not only Peter Pears who is, as it were, creatively saluted on this disc, but also our most celebrated harpist, Osian Ellis, whose personal art has provided just one of those encounters which Britten has always found musically so fruitful.

If we look at the growing list of his works written since *Death in Venice*, we see that the harp occupies an increasingly prominent role; and doubtless this trend will continue, the more so in view of the duo into which these two artists have formed themselves – a combination that Britten cannot but respond to most positively. While it is true that it is only in recent years that the harp has received quite such intense consideration from the composer, it must also be said that the instrument is one for which he has always written with marked originality and with special sympathy.

No list of precedents could be exclusive, and everyone will have his own favourites, but I think of such things as the nocturnal first scene of Act I in *Lucretia*, where the repeated downward trickles of harp sound seem to articulate the very stillness of the night (another similar meditative effect is created by much the same figuration for the harp, but downwards and upwards this time, in the second scene of Act I of *Owen Wingrave*), or



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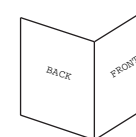
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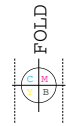


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the famous harp interlude in the *Ceremony of Carols* or the no less famous harp variation in the *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. The latest candidate for my list would certainly be what is virtually a harp song in its own right, Aschenbach's meditation – 'Mysterious gondola' – in Act I of *Death in Venice*, after his journey to Lido.

No doubt it was just because of memorable inspirations like these that Osian Ellis was anxious to persuade a solo work for the instrument from the composer, which, in the shape of the Suite, Op. 83 – inscribed 'For Osian' – was written in 1969 and first performed at the Aldeburgh Festival of that year, on 24 June. For the occasion Britten himself wrote a succinct program note which very clearly sets out the principal technical features which each movement embodies:

'1. A classical *Overture*, with dotted rhythms and trumpet chords. 2. *Toccata*, a rondo busy with quavers and semi-quavers, with much crossing of parts. 3. *Nocturne*, a clear tune with increasing ornamentation over a low chordal ground. 4. *Fugue*, a brief scherzo, in three voices. 5. *Hymn* (St. Denio), a Welsh tune, a compliment to the dedicatee, with five variants.'

The Suite is, above all, a marvellously contrived display piece, though *not* only showing off the instrument's (and the soloist's) virtuosity but also revealing that the harp is not all glitter and cascades of notes, e.g. the *Nocturne*; and it is just that inward, still unsuspected aspect of the harp that Britten often emphasises in the works on this recording where he is not writing for harp solo but for the voice and harp duo. It is not so much a question of subordinating the harp to the voice – a crude relationship in which Britten would never have been interested in the first place – as exploring the array of possible colours offered by the mix of the characteristic velvety timbres of Pears's present-day voice and of the brightness of the harp (a mix which Britten pursues with typical passion and ingenuity, especially in the *Birthday Hansel*) and – no less importantly – uncovering that little suspected potentiality of the harp as a vehicle for true chamber music.

This last point is particularly relevant to *Canticle V*, because, as I have argued on many previous occasions, Britten's Canticles are a highly original form of (vocal) chamber music, a tradition *Canticle V* nobly sustains. Moreover, Eliot's early poem, *The Death of Saint Narcissus*, though rich in imagery, is also rich in metaphysical content, and at first sight

of the text we might be forgiven for wondering how the harp, with its glittering, 'florid' reputation could possibly serve a poem so complex and austere in its thought. But Britten shows here that penetrating gift that has never deserted him – the ability to seize on just that image in a poem which not only contains the heart of the poetic matter but also holds the deepest possibilities for musicalisation. In this case – *Canticle V* – the key, or the clue, seems to me to reside in Eliot's line: 'He could not live men's ways, but became a dancer before God'; and it is the pervasive infiltration of the whole piece by the dance idea – which means that it is above all the *rhythmic* potentialities of the harp that are explored in this piece – which lends it its overall musical coherence and also embodies an image which is absolutely central to the poem's philosophy and its imagery. So there is no distracting glitter from the harp, no washes of impressionist colour, but a precise and ideal part of the Canticle's organisation and *through* which it is easier to receive the composer's (and poet's) communication.

*Canticle V* was first performed by Peter Pears and Osian Ellis at Schloss Elmau, Bavaria, on 15 January 1975, and by composing it Britten proved that the harp was not an instrument to

be restricted to one kind of music: that it could collaborate in a work of decidedly intimate, *interior* character.

The *Birthday Hansel* on the other hand, makes an altogether different set of demands on the instrument, since the Burns poems which make up the continuous cycle of seven songs cover a surprisingly wide *Early Walk* to the brilliant and witty evocation of a breathless Scots reel, *Leezie Lindsay*, which whirls the cycle to its conclusion. Just because the songs are so sharply and variously characterized – e.g. The pungent portrait of Wee Willie Gray 'and his leather wallet' or the vivid sounds of Nature that are contrived for *My Hoggie*, in which two songs two very different conceptions of writing for the harp and voice are juxtaposed – *A Birthday Hansel* offers *in toto* a harp concordance – a dazzling demonstration of what a composer of genius can do with the genius of an instrument, when he applies his mind to it.

It is altogether characteristic that what most of us would think of as 'typical' harp writing only makes a substantial appearance in this new cycle in the fifth song, *Afton Water*, whose long melody is accompanied by flowing arpeggios. The right 'bardic' accompaniment for the tune – indeed if one did not remind



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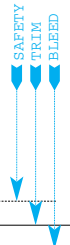
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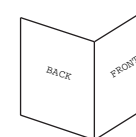
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