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ELOQUENCE

BRITTEN

Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo

Winter Words

Who are these Children?

Tit for Tat

Let the florid music praise

Purcell realisations

Peter Pears

John Shirley-Quirk

James Bowman

Benjamin Britten

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913-1976)

Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo, Op. 22

1	I Sonetto XVI	2'01
2	II Sonetto XXXI	1'24
3	III Sonetto XXX	3'17
4	IV Sonetto LV	1'50
5	V Sonetto XXXVIII	1'56
6	VI Sonetto XXXII	1'21
7	VII Sonetto XXIV	4'54

Winter Words, Op. 52 [original version]

LYRICS AND BALLADS OF THOMAS HARDY

8	I At day-close in November	1'38
9	II Midnight on the Great Western	4'26
10	III Wagtail and baby	1'57
11	IV The little old table	1'22
12	V The choirmaster's burial	3'43
13	VI Proud songsters	1'08
14	VII At the railway station, Upway	2'40
15	VIII Before life and after	3'18

On this Island, Op. 11 [original version]

16	I Let the florid music praise!	3'43
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Who are these children, Op. 84

LYRICS, RHYMES AND RIDDLES BY WILLIAM SOUTAR

17	I	A Riddle	1'02
18	II	A Laddie's Sang	0'54
19	III	Nightmare	2'41
20	IV	Black Day	0'36
21	V	Bed-time	0'57
22	VI	Slaughter	1'29
23	VII	A Riddle	0'38
24	VIII	The Larky Lad	0'33
25	IX	Who are these children?	1'58
26	X	Supper	1'11
27	XI	The Children	3'58
28	XII	The Auld Aik	1'39

Peter Pears, tenor
Benjamin Britten, piano

Tit for Tat

29	I	A song of enchantment	2'25
30	II	Autumn	1'13
31	III	Silver	1'43
32	IV	Vigil	1'44
33	V	Tit for tat	1'32

John Shirley-Quirk, baritone
Benjamin Britten, piano

HENRY PURCELL (1659-1695)

realised **Benjamin Britten**

34	Sweeter than roses	3'25
35	When the cock begins to crow	2'41

James Bowman, counter-tenor
John Shirley-Quirk, baritone **35**
Benjamin Britten, piano

1-16 MONO RECORDINGS

17-35 STEREO RECORDINGS

Total timing: 74'15

The names of Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears are forever linked by their personal and creative partnership. Composer and interpreter have rarely enjoyed so long-standing or fruitful relationship. They met and became friends in 1937 while going through the papers of a mutual friend who had accidentally died. Within a couple of years, they had established a relationship that would last a lifetime and embrace virtually all aspects of their lives.

Three years older than Britten, Pears was at the time just beginning his career as a singer although his voice was deemed 'too slight' to promise much. Britten, it seems, saw a more powerful potential, his love inspiring a series of compositions which took advantage of Pears' musical intelligence, challenged and helped develop him into a singer of renown. A significant proportion of Britten's considerable vocal output, from songs and song cycles to operatic roles, was writtenspecifically for Pears whose interpretations in turn became iconic.

As this recording shows, Pears voice is not always 'beautiful': his unmistakable tone is easy prey to crude parody. But his expressivity, his

unique command of musical rhetoric and his ability to create a strong sense of character are not so easily satirised, let alone matched. These were talents of paramount importance to Britten, who was aware of his debt to Pears: 'What have I done to deserve such an artist and man to write for? ... I love you, I love you, I love you.'

Composed between March and October 1940 in America, the *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* was the first work that Britten composed for Pears, and is dedicated 'To Peter'. A true 'Renaissance man', Michelangelo was a poet as well as a painter, sculptor and architect. He was also homosexual and wrote a number of passionate sonnets of which Britten chose (in sung order) numbers XVI, XXXI, XXX, LV, XXXVIII, XXXII and XXIV. The lyrics follow conventional themes concerning amorous agony and ecstasy ('Love takes me captive, and Beauty binds me'), but with a signal lack of sentimentality. As technically demanding and intensely expressive as anything penned by Monteverdi, they are set in a musical style that contrasts with those of *Les Illuminations*, the *Sinfonia da Requiem* or *Paul Bunyan*, which also

date from Britten's American sojourn. Pears and Britten gave the cycle its premiere in September 1942 at the Wigmore Hall in London.

With *Winter Words*, Britten responded instead to poems by a great English writer more renowned for his novels, Thomas Hardy. Wilfred Mellers regards *Winter Words* as 'the finest and most deeply characteristic of [all Britten's] cycles dedicated to a single poet, and to voice and piano'. Britten chose eight poems, the last seven of which are ballads – 'dramatic vignettes ... tiny operas', Mellers call them – concerned with innocence and experience. Britten is often said to be concerned with the corruption of innocence. However, these songs and the operas *Billy Budd* (1951) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) indicate that it was the problematic relationship between the two that fascinated him, as it has many an artist with a moral sensibility.

'Let the Florid Music Praise' is the opening number from Britten's first published set of five songs to texts by W.H. Auden, *On This Island*, of 1937. Although the first edition was published as Volume 1, and Britten eventually set eight

Auden poems in all, there was to be no second volume. Indeed, these were the last of the poet's texts which Britten would set as solo songs. In 'that fanfare poem', as Britten referred to it, the composer matches Auden's artful text with a stirring mixture of Stravinskian and neo-baroque music. Soprano Sophie Wyss and Britten premiered the set in London on 19 November 1937.

Who Are These Children?, composed in 1969, bears the subtitle 'lyrics, rhymes and riddles by William Soutar for tenor and piano' and is Britten's final song cycle for these forces. The complete cycle of twelve songs, in Scottish dialect or English, was given by Pears and Britten on 26 September 1971 in the Maltings Concert Hall in Snape (partial performances having been heard earlier during the same year). These are songs of protest and sorrow at injustice and cruelty: 'A wound which everywhere / corrupts the hearts of men: / The blood of children corrupts the hearts of men'. Composed between the eloquent Third Suite for Solo Cello (1971) and Britten's final tribute to Pears, the opera *Death in Venice* (1973), Britten's settings are poignant and

unsettling, compassion alternating with smouldering anger.

The songs for low voice eventually published in 1969 under the title *Tit for Tat* were first composed between June 1928 and January 1931. During the summer of 1968, Britten recomposed these early settings of poems from Walter de la Mare's *Peacock Pie*, which were published in the year of Britten's birth, 1913. He and John Shirley-Quirk premiered these mournful, disturbing short verses at the Aldeburgh Festival on 23 June 1969. Though written in the style of simple nursery rhymes, de la Mare's poems deal with serious subjects: 'Sad winds where your voice was; / Tears, tears where my heart was; / And ever with me, / Child, ever with me, / Silence where hope was.'

In addition to composing original vocal music Britten also made arrangements of folk songs and 'realisations' of early music. The former activity was, of course, an important source of inspiration for the generation immediately preceding Britten, although Britten's arrangements avoid stereotypical folklore. His realisations of Purcell's music sprung from the

practical need for performable versions of works such as *Dido and Aeneas* and *The Fairy Queen* at a time when they were less well known and appreciated than at present. Britten also prepared individual Purcell songs and for solo and ensemble performances, unavoidably adding a dash of his own musical personality. While the early music revival has successfully re-evaluated Purcell's music in its own right, Britten's realisations deserve credit in much the same way as do Mozart's reorchestrations of Handel's oratorios: the mingling of two musical minds of genius is a rare and marvellous thing.

Stephen Schafer

Recording producers: James Walker (Michelangelo Sonnets); Peter Andry (Winter Words), John Culshaw (Let the florid music praise); Ray Minshull (Who are these children, Tit for Tat, Purcell realisations)

Recording engineers: Kenneth Wilkinson, John Dunkerley (Who are these children, Tit for Tat, Purcell realisations)

Recording location: Kingsway Hall, London, July 1954 (Michelangelo Sonnets); Decca Studios, West Hampstead, London, March 1954 (Winter Words), October 1955 (Let the florid music praise); The Maltings – Concert Hall, Snape, UK, November 1972 (Who are these children, Tit for Tat, Purcell realisations)

Eloquence (Australia) series manager: Cyrus Meher-Homji

Cover photograph: Benjamin Britten, c.1965 (photo: Decca)

Art direction: Chilu Tong

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