

Total performance time: approximately 100 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes

Serenade

[Stuart Jackson](#) tenor
[Martin Owen](#) horn

[Britten Sinfonia](#)
Clio Gould leader

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

Prelude & Fugue for 18 strings, Op.29 (1943) 10'

Trad., arr. Britten

O Waly, Waly (from Somerset, arr. 1945/6) 4'
Text: Anon

Frank Bridge (1879–1941)

Sir Roger de Coverley: A Christmas Dance
(1922) 5'

Trad., arr. Britten

The Salley Gardens ('Irish Tune', arr. 1941/2) 4'
Text: W.B. Yeats (1865–1939)

Gustav Holst (1874–1934)

St Paul's Suite, Op.29 No.2 (1913) 14'

- i. Jig*
- ii. Ostinato*
- iii. Intermezzo*
- iv. Finale (The Dargason)*

Edward Elgar (1857–1934)

Serenade for strings, Op.20 (1892) 13'

- i. Allegro piacevole*
- ii. Larghetto*
- iii. Allegretto*

Britten:

Serenade, Op.31 (1943) 25'

- Prologue*
- i. Pastoral*
Text: Charles Cotton (1630–1687)
- ii. Nocturne*
Text: Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892)
- iii. Elegy*
Text: William Blake (1757–1827)
- iv. Dirge*
Text: anon. 'Lyke-Wake Dirge' (15th century)
- v. Hymn*
Text: Ben Jonson (1572–1637)
- vi. Sonnet*
Text: John Keats (1795–1821)
- Epilogue*

INTERVAL

The string orchestra is a versatile ensemble, adaptable to circumstances and available personnel. Some of the works on this programme were written for non- or semi-professional groups and the string orchestra can easily lend itself to the 'lighter' end of the repertoire, such as Bridge's *Sir Roger de Coverley*. Yet professional string ensembles also flourished during the mid-20th century, notably during World War II when instrumental forces could be on the thin side. One of the most successful was the Boyd Neel Orchestra, with whom Britten had a long association. The eponymous conductor was a versatile character himself – initially a medic by profession (after concerts he sometimes had to return to surgery to deliver babies), he later became a full-time conductor, and his orchestra was associated with some of the great works of the 20th century.

Britten wrote his **Prelude and Fugue for 18 strings** as a 10th anniversary gift to the ensemble. It is an intricate, sombre piece – the fugue is a complex network of 18 individual parts – composed in 1943, and carrying echoes of the recently-composed *Serenade*, as well as foreshadowing elements of *Peter Grimes*. After an unsettling opening passage, the bulk of the orchestra moves as one, with Britten demonstrating how sinister a unison passage can be, while a solo violin sings a lonely, melancholy tune over the top (again, suggesting Britten had *Grimes* on his mind). The fugue, with its scurrying subject rising up through the string parts, is in a slightly more cheerful vein, leading to a richly-scored melody. The final section is back in *Grimes* territory again, its insistent bass line looking forward to the opera's Passacaglia.

O Waly, Waly and **The Salley Gardens** are two of Britten's best-known arrangements of traditional tunes (further arranged for string accompaniment). They are from the well-served 'regret for lost love' and 'heartbroken' departments of the folk-song repertoire, and as always with his arrangements, Britten turns the emotional screw just that little bit more, giving the listener a shiver of empathy with the singer of the words. In *O Waly, Waly* there is a gradual thickening of the texture in the accompaniment; while in *The Salley Gardens* a little harmonic slide on 'foolish' catches the breath each time.

Britten's mentor Frank Bridge wrote frequently for string ensemble, and we can hear in the beguiling **Sir Roger de Coverley** what he may have taught his pupil about creating magic from a simple melodic line. *Sir Roger* dates from 1922, the start of a period in which Bridge was exploring a darker, chromatic world. Yet this work is as playful and sprightly as the traditional festive dance tune it uses as its source material. Bridge teases the listener at the start with scraps of the folk melody dotted around the ensemble, before launching into the full rendition.

Under a YouTube film of Holst's **St Paul's Suite**, one of the comments reads 'I have fond memories of playing the viola part for this waaaaay back in high school' – something that would perhaps have gladdened Holst's heart to hear. Like his daughter, Imogen, Gustav Holst wrote for skilled amateurs as well as professionals, and this Suite was composed for the girls at St Paul's School where he was music master. It draws on folk influences (two well-known numbers feature in the final movement) and the opening Jig sets the tone for the effervescent quality of this piece. A light-as-air Ostinato movement follows, with a constant ripple of quavers in the middle-strings and a playful melody above; while the more substantial Intermezzo is a mix of soulful melodies, perhaps inspired by Holst's recent trip to Algeria, and sudden interruptions from a bustling Vivace. The intermingling of folk-tunes 'Dargason' and 'Greensleeves' brings the work to a boisterous close.

Elgar's **Serenade for strings** was also given its first performance (albeit in private) by an all-female ensemble: the Worcester Ladies' Orchestral Class, of which Elgar was conductor. The first movement is based around an initial, anticipatory figure and an outrageously hummable tune. The long middle movement looks forward to Elgar's later style, with a perpetually climbing melody, and a heartfelt emotionalism. Perhaps surprisingly, the final movement is not a virtuosic gallop to the finish line, but a graceful Allegretto, fusing the rolling rhythms of the opening movement with the surging quality of the Larghetto that follows.

Wikipedia helpfully defines 'Serenades' as 'typically calm, light pieces of music'. The Elgar fits easily into that category; Britten's **Serenade** perhaps less so. The working title had in fact been 'Nocturnes', the poetry dealing with what Edward Sackville-West called the 'prestigia' (or tricks) of night. The strings are joined by the intriguing double-act of tenor voice and French horn, inspired by the considerable talents of both Peter Pears and Dennis Brain. The horn brings with it the historical associations of the outdoors and the natural world. The Prologue and Epilogue that frame the piece are played on the 'natural' harmonics of the horn, harking back to its pre-valve state, while in the 'Hymn' the horn is a hunter alongside the goddess Diana. In between, it echoes the voice (in the opening movement); embodies Tennyson's bugler in 'Nocturne'; carries the bulk of the insidious sickness of 'Elegy' with its curdled chromatic slides; and battles aggressively for prominence with the tenor in the terrifying 'Dirge.' It falls silent in 'Sonnet' – mainly for practical reasons, giving the player the chance to leave the stage for the final call, heard from a distance. The work is undeniably beautiful but, as with several of Britten's pieces from the early 1940s, reveals a sense of working through something psychologically complex.