

Holst: Brook Green Suite

I Prelude

II Air

III Dance

The *Brook Green Suite* was one of Holst's final works, completed while the composer was in hospital in 1933, a year before his death. The piece was written for the strings of the junior orchestra at St. Paul's Girls' School in Hammersmith where Holst served as music master. The school's location in the Brook Green suburb is the obvious source of the work's title but there would have been special significance for Holst as this was also the place of his wedding to his wife Isobel in 1901.

Holst was active in his role as music master at St Paul's for nearly three decades and wrote a number of pieces for the students there, perhaps the most well-known being the *St Paul's Suite* (published 1922). The *Brook Green Suite* can be seen as a successor to that earlier work. They are similar in style and are well-suited to their intended performers. As to intent, Holst wished to provide new music of substance for young players, not merely a 'simplified' arrangement of existing material.

Brook Green consists of three movements (although there were originally four, mirroring the *St Paul's Suite*). The first of these, 'Prelude', is cast firmly in C-major, with melodic material based on that scale. The music does not cover a wide range of pitches but the use of melody and counter-melody, in the context of a generally pastoral mood, provides a warm and rounded texture.

The central 'Air' has the feeling of folk music without using any traditional folk tunes; in common with his English pastoral colleagues such as Vaughan Williams, Holst's music contains far less 'genuine' folk music than is commonly perceived. The final movement is, however, partly based on a tune that Holst had heard in Sicily. The designation 'Dance' is entirely appropriate here. An additional fourth movement 'Gavotte' was removed after a private performance.

Programme note (c) Owen E Walton 2023.

Rowley (arr. Armstrong): Pavan

Born in Ealing, West London in 1892, Alec Rowley was a contemporary of Gerald Finzi and some of Finzi's sweet and scrunchy harmonies can be heard in much of Rowley's music, though he pushed his personal musical boundaries further than Finzi ever did.

Rowley won numerous prizes at the Royal Academy of Music where he studied from 1908, particularly the Mortimer and Prescott Prize for Composition. He was a superb organist and prolific composer, and worked in many fields within the arts during his lifetime. He was a performer on the organ and piano and a much-respected teacher at Trinity College of Music, where two prizes bear his name. He was also a church organist, broadcaster and administrator, working for the Royal Philharmonic Society for almost a decade in the latter part of his life. He died at the age of 65 whilst playing tennis, another of his keen interests.

His compositions are numerous and range from three piano concertos and concert works for full orchestra and string orchestra, to many dozens of short works for chorus, solo voice, piano or organ. Several of his orchestral works were performed at the Proms under the baton of Henry Wood, including his second piano concerto, in 1940, with the composer as soloist. He wrote over 250 piano works alone, many of them pedagogical in nature.

The work performed this evening dates from 1948. Originally for organ, it is typical of his late Romantic style. During his life, Rowley arranged many of his keyboard works for other forces, notably string orchestra, and it was these works, and a desire to perform this lovely piece in particular, which inspired my own arrangement.

Programme note by Lee Armstrong.

Elgar: Serenade Op. 20

I Allegro piacevole

II Larghetto

III Allegretto

Now considered one of the greatest British composers of all time, Edward Elgar certainly did not enjoy prodigious success. It was not until the premiere (and subsequent overseas performances) of the *Enigma Variations* that he became fully established as a composer. Prior to this time his output had consisted of exercises in various smaller-scale genres; he found, like many composers before and after, that he was struggling to make enough money from composition to support his family.

Despite also receiving its first 'official' British performance in the same year as the variations, the *Serenade for Strings* was originally composed a number of years earlier. The first known performance, in private by the Worcester Ladies' Orchestral Class, took place in 1892. There has been much speculation that the origins of the piece stretch back even further to 1888 with the (now lost) *Three Sketches for Strings*. Since no manuscript of that earlier work exists, it is known that the *Sketches* anticipate exactly the structure of the *Serenade*. Furthermore we know that Elgar was at times reluctant to give up on material composed when he was a youth, orchestrating selections of juvenilia in 1907 to form the two *Wand of Youth* suites. The *Serenade* as we know it today was published as early as 1893 and had its professional premiere in 1886 in Antwerp but, as we have seen, had to wait until three years later before reaching a wider British public.

The work consists of three movements. The very opening outlines a rhythmic motif that sets the tone of the first movement. This has a gentle, rocking character that some have suggested has the manner of a cradle song. Elgar doesn't wait long before introducing a melody and the whole movement is suffused with Elgarian wistfulness. The second movement features one of Elgar's most accomplished melodies, amply demonstrating his skill in composing lengthy and sustained melodic material. The tempo increases once again for the final movement; notice here how Elgar returns to the motif of the opening movement in the later stages.

Today the *Serenade* is one of Elgar's most popular works with both listeners and performers alike. Aside from anything else Elgar himself was a violinist and so it comes as no surprise that string players have embraced his idiomatic writing for their instruments. Indeed the musical content of the work is so intrinsically linked to the characteristics of the chosen instruments that it provides a near-ideal matching of medium and message.

Britten: Saint Nicolas Op. 42

I Introduction

II The Birth of Nicolas

III Nicolas Devotes Himself to God

IV He Journeys to Palestine

V Nicolas Comes to Myra and is Chosen Bishop

VI Nicolas from Prison

VII Nicolas and the Pickled Boys

VIII His Piety and Mighty Works

IX The Death of Nicolas

Britten's cantata 'Saint Nicholas' was composed in 1947-48 in response to a request from Lancing College, Sussex to honour the centenary of the school. Tenor, and partner of Britten, Peter Pears had attended Lancing as a youth and so the pair were already known to the masters there. St Nicolas, the patron saint of children, was also co-patron of the school; thus the sixth-form master, Basil Handford, suggested the saint as the subject for the new work.

Britten initially suggested Handford write the libretto himself; after Handford had politely and humbly declined, Britten approached Eric Crozier for the task. Crozier has directed the first production of *Peter Grimes* in 1945, wrote the libretto for *Albert Herring* (1947) and went on to found the English Opera group and Aldeburgh Festival in 1947 and 1948, respectively. Indeed, it was at the 1948 Aldeburgh Festival that *Saint Nicolas* was first performed (in agreement with Lancing College, where the work was performed a few weeks later). Crozier continued to work with Britten in the following years on the children's opera *Let's Make an Opera* (1949) and *Billy Budd* (1951).

Taking into account the nature of the original commission, Britten ensured that his music was within the technical reach of students of the college. While by no means easy, Britten stipulated that only the lead string players, tenor soloist and percussionists should be professional. The full roster of performers extends to mixed choir, tenor soloist, four boys singers, strings, piano (four hands), organ and percussion.

Crozier's libretto takes episodes from the life of Saint Nicolas, with the chorus imploring the title character to recount the true story of Nicholas the man. In addition to the sections outlined by Crozier, Britten suggested a section based on the miracle of 'the pickled boys'; this would ultimately provide the dramatic climax of the work. The way in which the boys Timothy, Mark and John are miraculously restored from being served as the main course at an inn to the prime of their youth has been seen as some commentators as a metaphor for Britten's apparent desire to return to aspects of his own youth.

Throughout the cantata Britten's music vividly reflects the narrative; so much so that in-depth analysis is not required. However, a brief synopsis would prove beneficial.

There are nine sections in total. In the 'Introduction' the chorus implores Saint Nicolas to tell stories of his life. This he begins to do in 'The Birth of Nicolas', describing incidents of his youth. A jaunty, childlike tune recurs throughout this movement. The boy Nicolas is naturally depicted by a boy treble (the composer stipulated that he should be 'the youngest boy in the choir'); by the end of the movement he has grown to be a man and the part is taken up by a tenor.

Peter Pears was the tenor for the first performances and slightly later recording (Decca, 1955). It is with his voice in mind that Britten set the third section, 'Nicolas Devotes Himself to God', as a recitative for tenor and strings. Here Nicolas, bereaved of his parents, expresses his concerns over the weaknesses of the human race and makes the decision to embrace God.

The predominantly tranquil mood conveyed here contrasts with the stormy mood-painting of the subsequent 'He Journeys to Palestine'. Here, the volatile motion of waves is conveyed by piano and percussion. A great storm engulfs the ship on which the Saint is travelling, terrifying the sailors into various outbursts. The storm finally subsides as Nicolas gathers his fellow travellers in prayer.

For the fifth movement, 'Nicolas Comes to Myra and is Chosen Bishop', Britten composes music that is much more tonally-focussed than what has come before, so much so that the movement ends with a congregational hymn. Britten takes as his model the great Passions of J.S. Bach where there were similar elements of collective worship; it is also likely that some inspiration was taken from Tippett's use of a similar device (albeit with spirituals taking the place of hymns) in his seminal *A Child of Our Time* (1941).

Similarly to the third movement, 'Nicolas from Prison' is cast as an accompanied recitative. The mood of this sixth movement is in stark contrast to its predecessor, conveying a wildness that infuses both the vocal line and the orchestral writing.

The aforementioned 'Nicolas and the Pickled Boys' provides a substantial set-piece. Nicolas is taking rest at an inn; invited to dine with a group of travellers he instead warns them against eating the food that is presented to them. For this is not the usual hearty pub-grub but the bodies of three young boys who have been murdered and pickled (the local butcher being the culprit). With little fuss the Saint implores the three boys to 'put your fleshly garments on', the ensuing miracle restoring the boys to life.

In 'His Piety and Mighty Works' the chorus extolls Nicolas's virtues and recounts some of his good deeds. The narrative content and positioning in the overall structure of the piece is not dissimilar to that of 'The Hero's Works of Peace' in Richard Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*. While eschewing Strauss's musical cross-referencing and self-quotation, it is perhaps worth noting that this is the most 'romantic' sounding of all the music in *Saint Nicolas*, creating an atmosphere of nostalgia that is common to both works.

The story comes to an end with 'The Death of Nicolas', where an accepting Nicolas embraces the end of his life and concludes with another congregational hymn.

Saint Nicolas has gained some popularity in the years since its composition and it was, unsurprisingly, recorded as part of Decca's long-running and extensive project to record much of Britten's output with the involvement of the composer. The present work had only a few years to wait before receiving such treatment. In that original recording, Peter Pears played the role of Nicolas. For movie fans it may be of interest that a very young David Hemmings played the part of young Nicolas. Hemmings had made a huge impression on Britten a few years earlier, creating the part of Miles in *The Turn of the Screw* and was, by the time *Nicolas* came to be recorded, the obvious choice to play the part. In a bittersweet twist, having spent an inordinate amount of time coaching the young Hemmings before, during and after the initial performances of *The Turn of the Screw*, Britten cut all ties with the teenager after his voice broke during a performance of the opera in Venice. Hemmings' turn to acting was probably a given at this point but it is tantalising to think how different a direction his career would have taken if Britten had reacted differently.

Programme notes (c) Owen E Walton, 2023.