

Benjamin Britten – Double Concerto for Violin and Viola

Allegro ma non troppo

Rhapsody: poco lento

Allegro scherzando – Tempo primo (Allegro ma non troppo)

Benjamin Britten was born on November 22nd 1913 (St Cecilia's Day) in Lowestoft, Suffolk. He grew up in Suffolk before moving to London in 1930 to study at the Royal College of Music. He died in Aldeburgh on December 4th 1976.



Between 1930 and 1935 Britten wrote several of his most popular works, such as the Simple Symphony, the Elegy for Solo Viola and the Phantasy Quartet Op. 2 for Oboe and Strings. Britten was very much in the public eye from the age of twenty, especially after his *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* were performed at the Salzburg Festival in 1937, bringing his work to international attention. Despite this success, several of his works were not premiered until many years later and some emerged even after his death in 1976 – most notably *Young Apollo* (written 1939) and the *Double Concerto for Violin and Viola*, not premiered until 1997.

The *Double Concerto for Violin and Viola* was written in 1932 when Britten was a scholarship student at the Royal College of Music. Running time is 20-25 minutes.

Britten began the concerto in March 1932, whilst studying composition with John Ireland and Frank Bridge. The first movement was completed in just two days, but the second movement took considerably longer and diary writings indicated that Britten was not happy with it and then that he was 'putting the concerto away for a bit.' The finale was eventually finished on May 4th.

Britten was also not happy with his studies at the RCM, mostly due to what he felt were low levels of musicianship. At the time of writing his *Double Concerto* he was also rehearsing his *Sinfonietta* with the RCM orchestra. He wrote in his diary that the rehearsals were not going well: '*I have never heard such an appalling row.....new arrangements are made that my sinf. should sound less like anaemic cats.*' Could this have been a factor in the lack of a realised full score of the *Concerto*?



The piece begins with a melody based primarily on a sequence of 'horn-like gestures' (repeated ascending fourths and fifths) heard at the very start of the first movement in the solo horn. The second movement is much more lyrical than the first and the harmony is rich, with pairs of lines often moving in contrary motion. The 'Rhapsody' title is felt by the meandering solo lines and the

flexibility of the tempo, hinting at Britten's future talents as a composer of songs and opera. A short bridge then leads to the finale.



In the 1930s Britten was inspired by the works of Igor Stravinsky (particularly *Petrushka*, *Rite of Spring* and *Symphony of Psalms*) after his teacher Frank Bridge took him to a concert. This influence, and the influence of William Walton's *Viola Concerto* (1929) can be heard clearly throughout the *Double Concerto* in its structure, style, harmonic precision and instrumentation.

The first performance of the *Double Concerto* took place in 1997 at the 50th Aldeburgh Festival with Katherine Hunka, Philip Dukes and the Britten-Pears Orchestra conducted by Kent Nagano. Its first recording was with the Halle, Gidon Kremer and Yuri Bashmet. The first North American performance of the concerto took place on July 25th, 1998 with Jorja Fleezanis, Thomas Turner, Eiji Oue and the Minnesota Orchestra.

References

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www.sfsymphony.org

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