

Sinfonietta, op.1 (1932) – Benjamin Britten (1913 – 1976)

The *Sinfonietta* was Britten's first published work, written in just under three weeks in the summer of 1932, whilst he was still a student at the Royal College of Music. Scored for wind quintet and string quintet (or small string orchestra), the work is remarkably assured and points directly to some of the more 'mature' works of Britten's early period (*Frank Bridge Variations* etc). The choice of ensemble seems to suggest a link to the Schoenberg First Chamber Symphony (1906), which Britten was certainly aware of at the time. It was perhaps because of this that many of Britten's RCM professors deemed the work unsuitable for performance (the RCM and the Second Viennese School did not mix in the heady days of the 1930s). Despite this, it would be Britten's only work from his student days to be performed at the college, even though the premiere had taken place some two months earlier at a Macnaghten-Lemare concert (an enterprising avenue for new British works performed at a small theatre in Notting Hill Gate).

For all the perceived influence of Schoenberg (is the opening horn solo directly related to the Chamber Symphony?) the overriding feeling, especially in the second movement, is restrained pastoralism. Titled 'Variations', the second movement would be one of the few occasions where Britten would follow on from his musical fore-bearers; (does one hear a Lark Ascending at one point?) though this is possibly no surprise in a work dedicated to his teacher, Frank Bridge. Perhaps unsurprisingly Britten's approach to form in the *Sinfonietta* is very original, very mature. In the opening movement the opening bars (possibly just the opening clarinet melody) present the themes that will provide material for the whole work. We can view the opening movement as in sonata form, but with a second development replacing the conventional recapitulation – a Britten favourite from the 1930s (and from other times, String Quartet No.2 etc). Carrying on the formal innovations and thematic economy, the second movement's theme for the variations is taken from the second subject from the first movement (first found in the flute at fig. 6).

It is perhaps the third movement, 'Tarantella' which can be visibly seen and heard to be the most "Britten-ish" with its choice of dance form, though possibly not worn comfortably, linking it directly to the *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* (1937). Again, the formal scheme is unusual, with many of the themes from the previous movements returning, to a form of summation. The opening horn solo returns to herald a move to a tonal centre of D, the first subject returns to form the background to the *pizzicato fugato* section.

Sinfonietta is undeniably Benjamin Britten, though perhaps one of the final works by the 'boy' composer. Although forward looking, it probably has more in common with the *Simple Symphony* than the *Frank Bridge Variations* or *Les Illuminations*. However there is plenty to admire in this work, if not for the remarkably confident instrumental writing and handling or formal schemes; then for the rhapsodic beauty of the second movement.