PROGRAM NOTES

A Shropshire Lad, Rhapsody for Orchestra (1912)
George Butterworth
Born 12 July 1885 in London
Died 5 August 1916 in Pozières, France

Approximate duration 11 minutes

This is the orchestra’s first performance of A Shropshire Lad.

• Butterworth was one of many English artists whose lives were cut short by the Great War.
• His settings of A.E. Housman poems from A Shropshire Lad are his best-known works.
• This orchestral rhapsody is an epilogue to the songs, and quotes from two of them.

If Mozart had died at 31, we would still have remembered him. By 1787, he had already composed The Marriage of Figaro, all but his final three symphonies, and all but two of his piano concertos. Not so Haydn, who in 1763, at age 31, was an obscure music director in a regional Austro-Hungarian court. The same can be said of many composers who did not achieve greatness until middle age or even later in life.

Like the poet Wilfred Owen, George Butterworth died young, a promising career snuffed out by the massive casualties of World War I. Butterworth enlisted in the Durham Light Infantry when the war began in August, 1914. He went to France in August, 1915, and died in the trenches at the Battle of the Somme one year later. His surviving music is limited in quantity, in part because he was fiercely self-critical and reportedly destroyed many works before leaving for the front. What survives of Butterworth’s music is extraordinarily high in quality.

As a university student at Oxford, Butterworth befriended Ralph Vaughan Williams and Cecil Sharp. All three became avid collectors of English folk song. They shared the conviction that folk song could revitalize English art music and free it from German models. While
Vaughan Williams enjoyed the greatest success, in part because he lived until 1958, Sharp and Butterworth were important in the evolution of the so-called English Musical Renaissance. Butterworth is celebrated for his song cycle, *A Shropshire Lad*, setting eleven poems from A.E. Housman’s 1896 collection. He also composed this orchestral rhapsody with the same title: *A Shropshire Lad*. It includes melodic quotations from the first and last of the eleven song settings: “Loveliest of Trees” and “With Rue My Heart is Laden.”

The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, harp and strings.

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**Nocturne for Tenor, Seven Obligato Instruments, and String Orchestra, Op. 60 (1958)**

**Benjamin Britten**

**Born** 22 November 1913 in Lowestoft, Suffolk, England

**Died** 4 December 1976 in Aldeburgh, England

*Approximate duration 26 minutes*

*This is the orchestra’s first performance of Britten’s Nocturne.*

- Britten chose personal favorite poems for the texts, whose authors differ with each movement.
- His muse and life partner, Peter Pears, was *Nocturne*’s first interpreter, in 1958.
- The poems share common themes of night, sleep, and dreams.
- Listen for cameo roles from each of the obligato instruments.

By the mid-1950s, Benjamin Britten was a major figure not only in British opera, but internationally. With *Peter Grimes, Albert Herring, Billy Budd*, and *The Turn of the Screw* to his
credit, he was both famous and successful. He had also found his milieu in writing for voice and instruments, as opposed to strictly instrumental music.

As with his early 1943 masterpiece, the Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings, Britten assembled an eclectic group of his personal favorite poems for Nocturne. They include verse by Percy Bysshe Shelley, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Middleton, William Wordsworth, Wilfred Owen, John Keats and William Shakespeare. The connection to the earlier Serenade is strong: as writer Peter Evans has observed, he was keenly interested in furthering the musical means he had introduced in the earlier work. (Other writers refer to the Nocturne as a companion piece.) One way to expand that platform was to allow for seven obligato instruments – as opposed to one in the Serenade – while keeping focus on the tenor and, of course, the texts.

Curiously, Britten did not opt for self-contained poems. Rather, he plunged into larger works midstream, excerpting those portions that suited his needs, whether from Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound, or the first stanza of Keats’s Sleep and Poetry. In both musical and textual ways, Britten melds his disparate texts so that they flow logically from one to the next, using his instrumental complement to facilitate transitions. Thus, the songs do not function as individual movements with pauses between; rather, Nocturne is through-composed, with a recurrent theme that functions somewhat like musical thread linking together the individual poems.

In the first song, strings alone support the tenor. Each of the obligato instruments assumes a cameo role in the succeeding movements, lending its particular timbre to that poem. We hear bassoon for Tennyson, harp for Coleridge, horn for Thomas Middleton, timpani for Wordsworth, English horn for Wilfred Owen, and flute and clarinet for Keats. Not until the final song (marked Postlude in Britten’s score), from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 43, does Britten employ the full
instrumental complement.

Vocally and compositionally, Britten’s style is free and rhapsodic, as if governed by the unpredictable nature of the dreams that constitute its textual narrative. Similarly, his harmonic approach is more willing to stray from conventional tonality, suggesting that – as lyrical as were his fundamental impulses – that he was not immune to other, sometimes radical currents roiling the world of classical music in the late 1950s. That stated, Nocturne never fails to resonate with the inherent beauty of Britten’s musical gift.

The score, which Britten dedicated to Gustav Mahler’s widow, Alma Mahler Werfel, calls for flute, English horn, clarinet, bassoon, horn, harp, timpani, strings and solo tenor.

Elegy for String Orchestra
Grace Williams
Born 19 February 1906 in Barry, Wales
Died there 10 February 1977

Approximate duration 6 minutes

This is the orchestra’s first performance of Elegy for String Orchestra.

• A minor figure today, Grace Williams remains a proud name in Welsh music.

• Her early works, including this Elegy, reflect her teacher Vaughan Williams.

• Listen for sighing figures and a reluctance to conclude a musical ‘paragraph’ until the end.

Yes, there are other Williamses in music beside the film score phenom John Williams and Britain’s Ralph Vaughan Williams. Though largely forgotten outside the UK today, Grace
Williams was one of a prodigiously gifted group of women studying at London’s Royal College of Music in London in the late 1920s. Their principal teachers were Vaughan Williams and Gordon Jacob. Grace Williams’s fellow students included Imogen Holst (the daughter of Gustav Holst) and Elizabeth Maconchy, both of whom became significant figures in English music.

A native of Barry, on the north coast of Bristol Channel, Williams came from a music-loving family. Both parents were teachers; her father was an accomplished pianist and choral conductor. Grace studied piano and violin from a young age, and played trios at home with her father and her brother Glyn, a cellist. By 1923, when she matriculated at University College, Cardiff, she had manifested both interest in and a gift for composition. She went on to attend the Royal College of Music. A post-graduate scholarship enabled her to study in Vienna with Egon Wellesz. From the 1930s through the end of the war, she lived and taught in England. In 1946, she returned to Wales to work for the BBC, writing scripts and composing incidental music. That was her day job as she developed a reputation as a composer. She continued composing through the mid-1970s, largely through commissions from the BBC, the National Youth Orchestra of Wales and two Welsh music festivals.

Her *Elegy for Strings* is regarded as a pivotal work. Williams’s early compositions show the influence of her teacher, Vaughan Williams, and Sir Edward Elgar, the pre-eminent British composer of the day. The *Elegy* is more individual, prescient of her later style, which adapted the inflections and rhythms of the Welsh language. Melancholy and replete with sighs, it breathes with tonal uncertainty. Despite being grounded by a pedal point for much of its duration, it does not resolve to a clear cadence until the final measure. Williams’s work takes its place proudly beside other elegiac works like Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* and George Walker’s *Lyric for Strings*. 
The Elegy was first performed on 25 February 1936, by the BBC Welsh Orchestra under the direction of Idris Lewis. Williams revised the score – which calls for strings alone – in 1940.

*On Wenlock Edge*, a song cycle on texts of A.E. Housman

Ralph Vaughan Williams

Born 12 October 1872 in Gloucestershire, England

Died 26 August 1958 in London

*Approximate duration 23 minutes*

This is the orchestra's first performance of *On Wenlock Edge.*

- Vaughan Williams chose the same poet as George Butterworth for this cycle.
- Ironically, A.E. Housman was anti-musical and opposed these songs.
- Vaughan Williams’s cycle became quite popular during World War I.
- Folk song influence is apparent in most of the tenor’s melodies.

A.E. Housman (1859-1936), the poet of "To an Athlete Dying Young" and "When I Was One-and-Twenty" – both of which came from his most famous collection, "A Shropshire Lad" (1896) – was one of the most anti-musical poets. His artistic goals were in many respects similar to those of musicians. For example, he wanted poetry to move the reader (or listener), and in one lecture he posited that poetry was inexplicable and not appropriate for analysis. In his view, poetry could be evaluated by its physical effect on a reader. Such overtly emotive theories would seem inherently compatible with music, but Housman disliked musical settings of his poetry.

Vaughan Williams's *On Wenlock Edge*, a song cycle consisting of six poems from "A Shropshire Lad," displeased him most of all. So deep ran Housman's distaste that the composer
encountered difficulty in obtaining permission to print the texts in the program at the time of the
song cycle's premiere. It is a pity such a keen poetic sensibility as Housman's was not enhanced
by a more sympathetic pair of ears, for his verse is very musical indeed. Vaughan Williams not
only did justice to Housman's poetry; he raised it to a higher plane and brought it to a larger
audience.

Housman's "A Shropshire Lad" became extremely popular in England during the First
World War. In 1909, when Vaughan Williams’ song cycle was first performed, the poetry
collection was somewhat well-known, but not to the extent that it would be later. Vaughan
Williams had returned in autumn 1908 from several months' study in Paris with Maurice Ravel.
Understandably, the English critics were primed to perceive the French master's influence in
Vaughan Williams's music. If they did, such perception was imaginary. Ravel himself, who
thought so highly of On Wenlock Edge that he arranged for its performance in Paris in February
1912, commented that Vaughan Williams was the only one of his students who did not compose
exactly like himself.

On Wenlock Edge is quintessential Vaughan Williams. He wrote songs his entire life,
although he is better known for large-scale works. Most of his so-called "folk-song" works date
from 1905-1907. Clearly this cycle falls close on their heels, and Vaughan Williams left a
perceptible folk imprint on most of his tenor's melodies. The collaborative chamber ensemble,
no less than a full piano quintet, is not to be misconstrued as accompaniment. The five players
are integral to the musical texture and to the miniature drama set forth in each song.

If you take the time to read through the texts before the performance, you will derive
considerably more pleasure from the beauty of Vaughan Williams's music as you follow the
poetry in concert. Gifted composers setting their mother tongue are almost invariably sensitive
to nuances of prosody, accent and the natural speech rhythms of a human speaking from the heart. Ideally, they also recognize the need for exclusively musical rumination on a thought. Vaughan Williams was probably the most brilliant Englishman in this regard until Benjamin Britten. Each of his six songs is a treasure, just as each of Housman's poems has a powerful message to be experienced independently of the larger collection. Vaughan Williams intended for the six to be heard together as a cycle, however. In their entirety – well over 20 minutes – they comprise a major work analogous in scale to his monumental operas and symphonies. Their collective impact is greater as we evaluate the essential fatalism of Housman's texts with the equally affirmative sweep of Vaughan Williams's music.

The original score, from 1909, was for tenor, string quartet, and piano. Vaughan Williams revised it in 1923 in an orchestral version calling for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), oboe, English horn, two clarinets (second doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones (in movement 5, ‘Bredon Hill’ only), timpani, suspended cymbal, side drum, gong, glockenspiel, harp, celeste and strings.

Tam O’ Shanter Overture, Op. 51

Sir Malcolm Arnold

Born 21 October 1921 in Northampton, England

Died 23 September 2006 in Norwich, England

Approximate duration 8 minutes

This is the orchestra’s first performance of the Tam O’ Shanter Overture.

• Remember the Colonel Bogey March? That’s Malcolm Arnold, too!
• This composer had character, film savvy, and a wicked sense of humor.
• *Tam O’Shanter* has roots in literature: a ballad by Robert Burns.
• Listen for echoes of *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* as Tam’s supernatural adventures unfold.

If Malcolm Arnold’s name sounds vaguely familiar, it’s probably because of his adaptation of “Colonel Bogey March” in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. David Lean’s 1957 classic film won six Academy Awards, including best picture, best actor (for Alec Guinness) and best original film score for Malcolm Arnold. (The march was actually composed by a British lieutenant in 1914, but Arnold’s cinematic use brought it into the realm of popular culture.)

This composer was no one-work wonder; to the contrary, Arnold was among Britain’s most prolific composers. He started as a trumpeter, earning admission to the Royal College of Music at age 16. There he began composing under the tutelage of Patrick Hadley and Gordon Jacob: names that are all but forgotten now, but both men were at the top of their game in 1930s Britain.

Excepting two years of military service during World War II, Arnold spent most of the 1940s playing in the London Philharmonic and the BBC Symphony Orchestra. In 1948, he received the Mendelssohn Scholarship, which allowed him to devote himself to composition full time.

He is deservedly celebrated for his film scores, which also include *Hobson’s Choice*, *The Belles of St. Trinians*, *Suddenly Last Summer* and *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*. But to categorize Arnold solely as a cinematic composer would be an injustice. He composed nine symphonies, about twenty concertos (nearly all written as musical portraits of the friends for whom he wrote them) and a wealth of other orchestral pieces, in addition to a lengthy list of chamber and solo instrumental works.
Arnold had a lively and sometimes wacky sense of humor – a 1956 score is entitled A *Grand Grand Overture* for organ, 3 vacuum cleaners, floor polisher, 4 rifles and orchestra – that endeared him to British audiences. Despite an unflagging, even reactionary, loyalty to traditional tonality, he demonstrated remarkable facility in his music. Idiomatic writing for instruments has made him a favorite of band and orchestra players.

*Tam–o–Shanter* is an orchestral overture from 1955. The title comes from a ballad written in 1791 by the Scottish poet Robert Burns. Arnold had read a multi-volume biography of Burns as part of a burgeoning interest in opera; he felt he might find a suitable operatic topic in Burns’s poetry.

Robert Burns wrote his finest poetry in the Scots dialect spoken by peasants and 18th-century educated Scotsmen alike. His "Tam O'Shanter" derives from an old witch story about Alloway Kirk, a ruin near the poet's home. Burns wrote it for inclusion in a book on Scottish antiquities. His sympathetic and humorous tale of Tam, a wayward, henpecked womanizer who likes to drink and whose judgment is inferior to that of his trusty gray mare Meg [Maggie], became his most famous poem. Because Arnold's musical narrative adheres closely to the events chronicled in the poem, a summary is in order. According to *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*:

Tam, a farmer, spends the cold evening of Ayr's market day in a snug alehouse, where he becomes tipsy and amorous. Eventually riding home, he passes the Kirk of Alloway. Seeing it mysteriously lighted, he stops and looks in. Weird warlocks and witches are dancing to the sound of the bagpipes, played by Old Nick, the Devil. Roused by the sight of one `winsome wench' among the old
beldams, Tam shouts to her. At once the lights go out and the horde of witches rush out in pursuit of Tam. Terrified, he wildly spurs his grey mare, Meg, and just reaches the middle of the bridge over the Doon before the girl catches him. Once over the middle of the bridge he is out of her power, but his mare's tail is still within the witches' jurisdiction, and this the girl pulls off.

Scottish folk tunes are present from the opening. Arnold’s sly mockery of Tam’s tipsy state comes through in the sliding brass and bassoon. The music is frankly pictorial and yes, cinematic, bringing Burns’s ballad to vivid life. Tam is the trombone solo, reacting first to the prospect of entertainment, then to unease. Timpani thunder, cymbals crash, piccolos pierce, brilliantly evoking the blurred perception and increasing fear as terror trumps his amorous intent. When Tam comes upon the witches’ sabbath, Arnold uses trombones, bassoons and horns to imitate Scottish bagpipes. We hear the abandon of highland fling, a crazy chase scene, clanging church bells and a fleeting sentimental apotheosis at the end.

In its orchestral brilliance and clear narrative, Tam-o-Shanter is a worthy heir to Berlioz’s Symphonie fantastique, Musorgsky’s Night on Bare Mountain and Strauss’s Till Eulenspiegel’s Merry Pranks.

The score calls for two flutes (second doubling piccolo) and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, crash cymbals, suspended cymbal, snare drum, tenor drum, tam tam, chimes, whip and strings.

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