

Choral Programme Series

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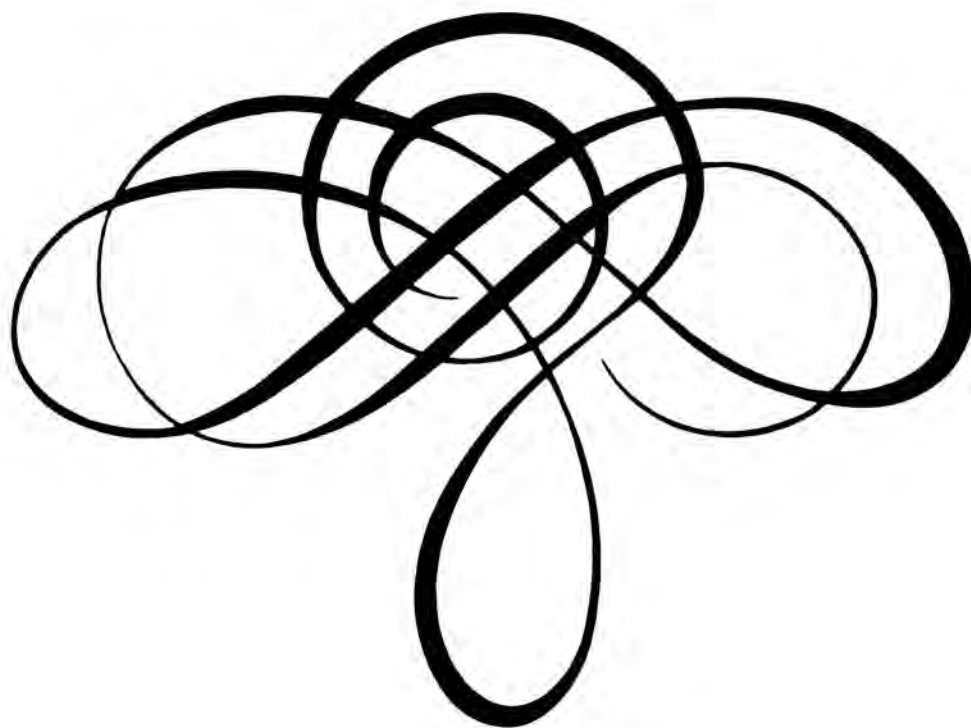
Benjamin Britten

CHRIST'S NATIVITY

CHRISTMAS SUITE

FOR CHORUS (1931)

SATB (*div.*)



FABER *ff* MUSIC

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Christmas Suite for Chorus (1931)

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PREFACE

Christ's Nativity (originally entitled 'Thy King's Birthday') is a fascinating choral work from Britten's student days. He was in his second term at the Royal College of Music, London, when he made the first setting, 'Sweet was the Song' on 13 January 1931. 'The Carol of King Cnut' and 'New Prince, New Pomp' followed respectively on 15 and 25 February, and 'Christ's Nativity' and 'Preparations' on 2 and 11 March. The individual settings were then re-ordered by Britten to form his 'Christmas Suite', published here for the first time in its entirety. We are grateful to Colin Matthews for preparing Britten's MS for publication.

The complete Suite was never performed during Britten's lifetime; but he revived two numbers, 'New Prince, New Pomp', which was heard at the 1955 Aldeburgh Festival when the Purcell Singers were conducted by Imogen Holst, and 'Sweet was the Song', performed by the same forces at the 1966 Festival (this last setting was published as an independent item by Faber Music in 1966).

The Suite had two principal textual sources, a volume of *Christmas Carols*, a present from his elder sister, Barbara, in November 1930, and a *Christmas Anthology*, which he bought for himself while working on the Suite and searching for appropriate poems.

Christ's Nativity shows very clearly how the young composer's mind was intrigued by the potentialities of a sequence of texts unified by a common poetic theme and no less intrigued by what the unaccompanied chorus could offer in the way of colour and contrast, drama and textural variety, ambitions that were to be fulfilled in the early masterpiece that he was to compose just a year later, *A Boy was Born*, Op.3. Last but not least *Christ's Nativity* shows us how, in 1931, his imagination was already fired by the Christmas story, as it continued to be throughout his life. The very last work he was contemplating when he died was a series of 'parables' for school performance based on the events leading to the birth of Christ. Had he lived to complete the cycle, the wheel of creativity, so to say, would have turned full circle.

The first performance of *Christ's Nativity*, of the complete Christmas Suite, was given as part of the 1991 Aldeburgh Festival by the BBC Singers, directed by Stephen Wilkinson, in St. Edmund's Church, Southwold.

Donald Mitchell/Philip Reed
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1. Christ's Nativity

Words: Henry Vaughan

Allegro con spirito [♩ = 160]

SOPRANO
A - wake! A - wake! A - wake!

ALTO
A - wake! A - wake! A - wake!

TENOR
A - wake! A - wake! A -

BASS
A - wake! A - wake! A -

for rehearsal only
pp p mf

a tempo
f sempre

6
A - wake! A - wake, glad heart! get up and sing!

A - wake! A - wake, glad heart! get up and sing!

wake! A - wake! A - wake, glad heart! get up and sing!

wake! A - wake! A - wake, glad heart! get up and sing!

a tempo
f

(♩ = ♩ *sempre*)

14 *f* *mf*

It— is the birth-day — of thy King. A - wake! A - wake! And

It— is the birth-day of thy— King. The sun—doth shake Light from his locks,

8 *f* *mf*

It— is the birth-day of thy— King. A - wake! A - wake! And

f

It is the birth-day of thy King. The sun—doth shake Light from his locks,

(♩ = ♩ *sempre*)

21 *f* *f*

all the way Breath-ing per - fumes, doth spice the day.——

mf *f*

and— all the way Breath-ing per - - - fumes, doth spice the day.——

8 *f*

all the way Breath-ing per - fumes, doth—— spice the day.——

mf *f* *f*

and all the way Breath-ing per - - fumes, doth spice the day.—— A -