

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

*The Red Cockatoo &
other songs*

(1935-1960)

FOR HIGH VOICE AND PIANO

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These songs are also available for medium / low voice
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PREFATORY NOTE

Since his death in 1976 a number of Benjamin Britten's songs have been published which were originally intended to form part of the major song-cycles, but which were omitted by the composer when he came to make the final versions. This collection, however, brings together nine previously unpublished songs, written over twenty-five years from 1935 onwards, which were independent of the song-cycles, and range from *pièces d'occasion* to songs for projected cycles which were never completed.

The music itself has needed very little in the way of editorial attention, Britten's habitually clear and methodical writing presenting no real problems. But as the individual notes for the songs show, it has not always been easy to date each one exactly, although, where Britten failed to supply the information, other sources (such as a diary entry or letter) have come to the rescue. These have been backed up by detailed biographical and musicological work at the Britten-Pears Library, Aldeburgh, where all the relevant manuscripts are now held.

1 **A poison tree** (1935) William Blake (1757-1827)

An early setting (Britten was twenty-one) of a poem to which he was to return thirty years later when composing *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* Op. 74

for Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. It is not known for whom this particular song may have been written, but it, too, was set for baritone.

First performance: 22 November 1986; Henry Herford (baritone) and Ian Brown (piano); Wigmore Hall, London

2 **When you're feeling like expressing your affection** [1935 or 1936] W.H. Auden (1907-73)

The words to this song were almost certainly written by Auden, but Britten's manuscript gives no indication of authorship and no manuscript in Auden's hand exists. Britten's manuscript is undated, and the song does not seem to have been performed at the time it was written. The text implies that it may have been intended for John Grierson's GPO Film Unit for which both Britten and Auden worked in 1935-6 (their *Night Mail* of 1936 must be the best-known GPO film of all) and it is likely that this is the piece mentioned by the singer Hedli Anderson when, in 1980, she recalled her first meeting with Britten. It is perceptibly related to the cabaret songs written for her by Britten and Auden between 1937 and 1939.

First performance: 15 June 1992; Lucy Shelton (soprano) and Ian Brown (piano); 45th Aldeburgh Festival, Blythburgh Church, Suffolk

3 Not even summer yet (1937)

Peter Burra (1909-37)

Britten met Peter Burra in Barcelona just a year before he was tragically killed in an air accident in April 1937; the song was written for Burra's sister, Nell Moody, to sing at a concert in memory of him later that year, when she was accompanied by Gordon Thorne. The poem (headed 'For a song') had been published in 1930 in *Farrago*, a short-lived arts magazine founded and edited by Burra while he was at Oxford. He had been at school with Peter Pears, and it was the death of this mutual friend which introduced Pears and Britten to one another.

First London performance: 22 November 1983; Neil Mackie (tenor) and Iain Burnside (piano); Wigmore Hall, London

4 The red cockatoo (1938)

Arthur Waley (1889-1969) after Po Chü-i (820 A.D.)

This brief setting perfectly suits the poet's wry observation, written down more than a thousand years before the music. Arthur Waley's translations were also to provide the texts for Britten's *Songs from the Chinese* Op. 57.

First performance: 17 June 1991; Lucy Shelton (soprano) and Ian Brown (piano); 44th Aldeburgh Festival, The Maltings, Snape, Suffolk

5 Wild with passion (*Song, on the water*) [1942]

Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1803-49)

This and the following setting, both of texts by Beddoes, were composed early in April 1942 on Britten's return across the Atlantic in a Swedish cargo ship, the *MS Axel Johnson*. The half-finished *Hymn to St. Cecilia* Op. 27 was completed on 2 April, and although this particular song has no date, its companion is dated 4 April. On this prolonged wartime journey with Peter Pears, Britten began to plan *Peter Grimes*, and also wrote most of *A Ceremony of Carols*. In Halifax, Nova Scotia, he had found a copy of *The English Galaxy of Shorter Poems* (J.M. Dent, edited by Gerald Bullett) which, as well as the carol texts, contained these two Beddoes poems. There are, however, some differences between the version of this poem as published in the *Galaxy* and that in the OUP *Works of Thomas Beddoes* (edited by H.W. Donner) which Britten did not possess until after he had composed the song. His setting therefore lacks the second verse (absent in the anthology) and in bar 25, where Britten set 'sea-gulls', Donner's version 'sea-girls' has been preferred as probably the more correct.

First performance: 15 June 1992; Lucy Shelton (soprano) and Ian Brown (piano); 45th Aldeburgh Festival, Blythburgh Church, Suffolk

6 If thou wilt ease thine heart

(*Dirge for Wolfram*) (1942)

Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1803-49)

See note for No.5. This song and the previous one share the same manuscript pages, from which it is clear that this is the later of the two. Although the idea of a complete Beddoes cycle may have been suggested to Britten by Peter Pears, it did not materialise and no traces have yet emerged of either of these songs having been performed during Britten's lifetime.

First performance: 15 June 1992; Lucy Shelton (soprano) and Ian Brown (piano); 45th Aldeburgh Festival, Blythburgh Church, Suffolk

7 Cradle Song (*Sleep, my darling, sleep*) [1942]

Louis MacNeice (1907-63)

Having begun a setting of MacNeice's 'Cradle Song for Eleanor' while still in the USA (left unfinished when he went back to England), Britten later returned to the poem, probably in the autumn of 1942 when he was working with MacNeice on a series of propaganda programmes for radio.

First performance: 15 June 1992; Lucy Shelton (soprano) and Ian Brown (piano); 45th Aldeburgh Festival, Blythburgh Church, Suffolk

8 Birthday song for Erwin [1945]

Ronald Duncan (1914-82)

Erwin Stein, a pupil of Schoenberg, moved from Vienna to London in 1938 and, working there for Britten's publishers, Boosey & Hawkes, he became one of the composer's closest friends and advisers. In the autumn of 1945 Britten and Duncan were collaborating on *The Rape of Lucretia* and this little tribute to Stein was written to celebrate his sixtieth birthday on 7 November. It was performed for him at a small family birthday party, sung by Peter Pears accompanied by Britten.

First public performance: 22 November 1988 – 75th anniversary of Britten's birth; Christopher Hobkirk (tenor) and Rosalind Jones (piano); Royal College of Music, London

9 Um Mitternacht [1959-1960]

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

Considerably later than all the other pieces collected here, this Goethe setting seems to have been brought about by the gift to Britten of a 1959 edition of the poet's complete works from his close friend the Prince of Hesse and the Rhine, dedicatee of *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* Op. 61. If Britten was thinking about writing a Goethe cycle – as several marked poems indicate may have been the case – he apparently achieved only this one song.

First performance: 15 June 1992; Lucy Shelton (soprano) and Ian Brown (piano); 45th Aldeburgh Festival, Blythburgh Church, Suffolk

Rosamund Strobe
Aldeburgh, February 1994

1. A poison tree

William Blake
(1757-1827)

Benjamin Britten
(1913-76)

Allegro moderato

Voice

Piano

I was an - - - - - gry with my

friend: _____ I

told my wrath, my wrath did

dim.

ff *sf*

9 *p*
end. _____

mf dim.

13 *p*
I was an - - gry with my foe: _____

p *mf* *pp*

16 *dim.*
I told it not, my wrath did

rit.
pp

p

19 *a tempo animato sempre*
grow. _____

ppp molto legato *pp*