

Benjamin Britten

*Johnson over
Jordan*

SUITE FOR ORCHESTRA

(1939)

Compiled by Paul Hindmarsh

FABER *ff* MUSIC

This Suite was first performed by the Northern Sinfonia conducted by Odaline de la Martinez in a studio broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 25 February 1990. The first concert performance was given by the English Chamber Orchestra conducted by Steuart Bedford at The Maltings, Snape, as part of the 43rd Aldeburgh Festival, on 22 June 1990.

The Suite is recorded by the English Chamber Orchestra conducted by Steuart Bedford on Collins Classics 11922 (CD)

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ORCHESTRA

Flute (=Piccolo)

Oboe

2 Clarinets in B $\flat$

(1=Clarinet in E $\flat$, 2=Bass Clarinet, Clarinet in A and Alto Saxophone)

or 3 Clarinets in B $\flat$

(1=Clarinet in E $\flat$, 2=Clarinet in A, 3=Bass Clarinet and Alto Saxophone)*

Bassoon

2 Trumpets in C

Trombone

Timpani

Percussion (1 player):

Suspended Cymbal, Bass Drum with foot pedal and Hi-hat, Tam-tam, Side Drum, Tenor Drum

Piano

Strings

Duration: 18 minutes

**Ossia clarinet parts*

In 'The Spider and the Fly' with two players only, the second player takes the Bass Clarinet, Alto Saxophone and Clarinet 3 part. The part to be omitted is marked $\square$. This material is allocated to other woodwind parts which are cued accordingly.

It was for J.B. Priestley's three-act 'modern morality', *Johnson over Jordan*, that Britten composed his most substantial and ambitious theatre incidental score in early 1939. Although produced for the commercial, West End theatre, *Johnson over Jordan* was as experimental in its way as anything produced by the more identifiable avant-garde, particularly through Priestley's development of the concept of chronological time and by his impressive fusion of different elements — music, dance, mime, scenery and lighting — to create not just a play but a truly remarkable theatrical event. The contributory elements, of which Britten's music was undoubtedly one of the most significant, coalesced to form part of the overall presentation and were not in any way subordinate to Priestley's text.

Priestley acknowledged the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* as the source for *Johnson*, in particular the condition known as 'Bardo', a peculiar hallucinatory state somewhere between life and death. The play concerns the recently deceased Robert Johnson — an *Everyman* figure — whose life history is played out in reverse order. Aspects of his character are explored in a series of scenes taken from a widely dispersed chronological sequence. The climax of the play is reached when he must be released from the state of Bardo and peacefully bid farewell to all that has been familiar.

The first performance of *Johnson over Jordan* took place at the New Theatre, London, on 22 February 1939, in a production directed by Basil Dean, with Ralph Richardson in the title role. It was subsequently transferred to the Saville Theatre, where it ran until the summer.

The Suite comprises four principal numbers from Britten's extensive score linked by the music which accompanies Robert Johnson's funeral:

Overture: which commences with the crucial 'death' motif and which is organically developed both in the rest of the Overture and throughout the remainder of the score.

Incinerators' Ballet: the chief dance number from Act I in which sackfuls of banknotes are symbolically burned. The number concludes with a significant restatement of the 'death' motif. (The original choreography was by Anthony Tudor.) Material from this movement was to find its way into the third variation, *March*, of Britten's *Diversions*, Op. 21, for piano (left hand) and orchestra, composed in the United States during the summer of 1940.

The Spider and the Fly: a popular-style dance number to accompany the demonic night-club scene of Act II, when Johnson reveals the baser aspects of his personality. Britten's music finds the authentic voice of thirties vernacular band music. In the original production two versions of this number were heard, one orchestrated for the conventional big-band sound of the era by the well-known band-leader 'Geraldo' (Gerald Bright), with whom Britten consulted, and another made by the composer himself for conventional instrumentation. It is the latter that appears in the Suite.

End Music: after a series of nostalgic and wholly benign encounters in Act III, the moment arrives when Johnson must be released from the state of Bardo. The entire play builds up to this moment. In Dean's original production, Britten's blazing D major music accompanied a final overriding image of an ordinary individual pictured against an enveloping cyclorama of blue space and stars.

JOHNSON OVER JORDAN

Suite for Orchestra

BENJAMIN BRITTEN
(1939)

1. Overture

Andante maestoso

Piccolo *ff* *tr*

Oboe *ff* *tr*

E♭ Clarinets *ff* *tr*

B♭ Bassoon *ff* *tr*

Trumpets 1 (in C) 2 *ff* *tr* *a2*

Trombone *ff* *tr*

Timpani

Percussion *ff* *tr* *Susp. Cym.* *B.D.*

Piano *ff* *tr*

Andante maestoso

I Violins *ff* *tr*

II Violins *ff* *tr*

Violas *ff* *tr*

Cellos *ff* *tr*

Basses *ff*

A **B** Allegro (ma non troppo)

Picc. take Flute *sf* *p* *ff*

Ob. *sf*

Ev. *sf*

Cl. *sf* *p*

B♭ *sf* *p*

Bn. *ff* *p*

Tpt. 1 *sf* *ff*

Tbn. *sf* *ff*

Susp. Cym. *sf*

Perc. B.D. *ff* *pp*

Pno. *sf* *fff* *p dim.* *pp*

A **B** Allegro (ma non troppo)

I. *sf* *pizz.* *p* *pp marcato*

Vn. *sf* *pizz.* *p* *pp marcato*

II. *sf* *pizz.* *p* *pp marcato*

Va. *sf* *pizz.* *p* *pp marcato*

Vc. *sf* *pizz.* *p* *pp marcato*

Cb. *ff* *pp marcato*

I
Vn.
II
Va.
Vc.
Cb.

[C] Solo
Ob. *mf espress.*
E♭
Cl. *mf*
B♭
Bn. *mf*
Pno. *p*

[C]
I
Vn.
II
Va.
Vc.
Cb. *pizz.*
p