

## INTRODUCTION

With the exception of the lightweight *Sonatina Romantica*, left unfinished in 1940, Britten composed nothing for piano alone after *Holiday Diary* in 1934 until 1963, when he was asked to write a test piece for the first Leeds International Piano Competition. *Night Piece* (also known as *Notturmo*) was the unconventional but highly successful result, and Marion Harewood, the competition's co-founder with Fanny Waterman, asked him to write a further piece for the 1966 competition. He began a set of variations in the autumn of 1965, but the manuscript breaks off just before the end of the sixth of what appear to have been intended to be at least ten variations. I have added a further 8 bars to conclude the sixth variation, as the music stops in mid-flow.

The work can be dated approximately by a sketch page which began life as an ink copy of the song cycle *The Poet's Echo*, composed in the USSR in August 1965: this progressed no further than the word 'Echo', written in Cyrillic, and the first right-hand piano chord. Underneath is a sketch for the beginning of Variation IV, written in firm pencil, followed by much hastier sketches – one for the figuration of Variation VI, and then what are clearly brief ideas for four further variations. These are reproduced exactly as they appear in the manuscript as Appendix 1 (see p. 10); Appendix 2 is a rejected first attempt at Variation V (p. 11).

It is not known why Britten left the work incomplete, but it may have been due to the pressure to begin work on *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, whose first drafts date from October 1965. The stylistic influence of the Church Parables on these variations is very clear to see, with their free improvisatory rhythms and the use of the 'Curlew' sign. The manuscript of the variations has no title.

## EDITORIAL NOTE

The manuscript of the *Variations* is fluent and relatively free from indecision, apart from the first version of Variation V and one deleted bar in each of Variations V and VI. In spite of the rhythmic complexity of the piece there are only three (bracketed) time signatures given, and the notation implies a great deal of freedom – 'Like an improvisation' at the head of Variation I could equally apply to the subsequent four variations. This score follows Britten's idiosyncratic spacing as closely as possible, but inevitably lacks the flexibility of the manuscript, whose visual aspect is the key to performance (see the reproduction of the first page, over). Britten's suggested fingering for the first twelve bars has been omitted, since it is not carried through in the rest of the work. The only other editorial change is in the final bar of Variation II, where Britten's mistaken use of the 'Curlew' sign (see below) has been replaced by a normal fermata.

## PERFORMANCE NOTE

Britten introduced the Curlew sign  in his church parable *Curlew River*. There it is used to coordinate individual players in free notation, indicating that they should wait until the other players have reached the next barline. For the two hands of the pianist, the implication is that the note in question can be either shorter or longer than notated.

The sign  indicates a tremolando with gradual measured accelerando.

Colin Matthews

V. Quietly

The first system of musical notation consists of two staves. The upper staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It contains a series of chords and melodic fragments, with a *pp* dynamic marking. The lower staff, in bass clef, provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and some melodic lines. The system concludes with a fermata over a chord in the upper staff.

The second system continues the composition with two staves. The upper staff features a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It includes a triplet of eighth notes and a fermata. The lower staff, in bass clef, continues the accompaniment with various chordal textures and melodic lines.

The third system consists of two staves. The upper staff, in treble clef, shows a key signature change to two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and contains a triplet of eighth notes. The lower staff, in bass clef, continues the accompaniment with chords and melodic lines.

The fourth system consists of two staves. The upper staff, in treble clef, features a key signature of two flats and includes a fermata. The lower staff, in bass clef, continues the accompaniment with chords and melodic lines. A *pp* dynamic marking is present in the lower staff.

The fifth and final system consists of two staves. The upper staff, in treble clef, features a key signature of two flats and includes a fermata. The lower staff, in bass clef, continues the accompaniment with chords and melodic lines. The system concludes with a *ppp* dynamic marking in the lower staff.

## Appendix 1

Sketches, and incipits for unwritten variations

[IV.]

(♩ = ♪)

Musical sketch [IV.] showing a single melodic line on a treble clef staff. The music consists of a series of eighth notes with a descending contour, ending with a half note. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). A tempo marking '(♩ = ♪)' is present above the staff.

[VI.]

[VII.]

Musical sketches [VI.] and [VII.] showing two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. [VI.] begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and an eighth-note triplet. [VII.] features a piano-piano (*pp*) dynamic and a sustained chord. The bottom staff continues with a forte (*f*) dynamic.

[VIII.]

*espr*

[IX.]

Canon

Musical sketches [VIII.] and [IX.] showing two staves. [VIII.] is marked *espr* (espressivo) and *f* (forte). [IX.] is marked *f* (forte) and labeled 'Canon'. The sketches show melodic lines in both treble and bass clefs.

[X.]

Musical sketch [X.] showing two staves. The top staff has a melodic line with a slur. The bottom staff has a piano-piano (*pp*) dynamic and a block of chords. The sketch is in treble and bass clefs.