

NAXOS

BRITTEN

Violin Concerto

Canadian Carnival Overture

Lorraine McAslan, Violin

English Chamber Orchestra • Steuart Bedford



Benjamin Britten (1913-1976): Canadian Carnival · Violin Concerto Britten / Lennox Berkeley (1903-1989): Mont Juic

Benjamin Britten's post-war pre-eminence as an opera composer has tended somewhat to overshadow the considerable achievements of his earlier years. The three works included on this recording all date from the late 1930s at a time when Britten, then in his mid-twenties, was fluently and prolifically writing works in every medium. Two lighter and still relatively little-known orchestral works here frame the *Violin Concerto*, one of the most substantial and serious of the composer's instrumental scores.

In April 1939, keen to distance himself from some personal issues at home and in any case happy to be leaving what he felt to be the uncongenial artistic climate in England, Britten, in the company of Peter Pears, set sail across the Atlantic in search of fresh opportunities in America. Before reaching their ultimate destination, the two men spent a few weeks in Canada where Britten attended a performance of his *Frank Bridge Variations* given by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. It was during this stay that Britten conceived the idea for an orchestral work based on French-Canadian folk-tunes. Originally planned as a suite, it instead became a single-movement work entitled *Canadian Carnival* (or *Kermesse Canadienne*), which was completed in December 1939. The first performance was given back in Britain as part of a radio broadcast on the BBC Home Service in June 1940 with Clarence Raybould conducting the BBC Symphony Orchestra. As with the *American Overture* composed some two years later, it seems that Britten was intent on assimilating the recognisably American, 'open-prairie' sound associated above all with the music of Aaron Copland. Indeed, Britten was in regular contact with Copland at this time and the American composer's influence is apparent from the opening bars of *Canadian Carnival*. Over a quiet roll on suspended cymbals, a lone off-stage trumpet intones a nostalgic fanfare-like theme, which is then taken up by various wind and brass soloists as if sounding across vast

mountain distances. After a climax is reached, the violins break in with a lively '*alla danza*' idea suggestive of a hoe-down. An expressive rising third on the trumpets, echoed by horns and bassoons forms the basis of a graceful new theme, marked *Andante amoroso*, featuring paired woodwind and brass instruments over a slow waltz-like accompaniment on the harp. After reaching a climax, a mysterious transitional episode featuring *divisi* muted violins over quiet chords in the brass and harp leads to a somewhat quirky treatment of the well-known folk-song '*Alouette*', beginning quietly on the woodwind but gradually increasing in volume and excitement to a riotous climax. A *maestoso* return of the opening trumpet melody on the full orchestra leads to an abbreviated review of the opening material until the off-stage trumpet and cymbals sound once again, winding the music down to a peaceful close.

For all its ebullience and brilliance of orchestral colour, *Canadian Carnival* is essentially a *jeu d'esprit* that does not find Britten working at full compositional pressure. The same, however, could certainly not be said of the *Violin Concerto*, one of the composer's finest works and one that fully stands comparison with the violin concertos of Berg, Bartók, Prokofiev and Shostakovich. Inexplicably, the work remained relatively little-known during Britten's lifetime and it is only in recent years that its full value and significance have come to be recognised. In April 1936, Britten had attended the International Society for Contemporary Music Festival in Barcelona where he had accompanied the violinist Antonio Brosa in the first performance of the *Suite Op. 6*. The festival programme also included the posthumous world première of Berg's *Violin Concerto*, which made a deep impression on Britten. It is tempting to infer that Britten might have been inspired to compose his own concerto after hearing the Berg performance, but apart from sharing a predominately sombre, elegiac atmosphere, the two

works have little in common. A more urgent source of inspiration for Britten was the rising tide of Fascism in Spain and the worsening political climate which would ultimately throw the country into civil war. In this respect, the *Violin Concerto* follows in the line of a number of other Britten works from this period, including *Our Hunting Fathers*, the *Ballad of Heroës* and the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, in which he gave artistic expression to his growing awareness and anxiety at developing world events. Britten began composition of the concerto in November 1938 and completed it in September of the following year. The first performance was given on 28th March 1940 at Carnegie Hall in New York with Brosa as soloist and John Barbirolli conducting the New York Philharmonic. Britten made some minor revisions, mainly with regard to the solo part, in 1950 and 1954.

The first movement is a prime example of Britten's highly original re-thinking of sonata-form. The work opens with a quiet rhythmic motif on timpani and cymbals which, transferred to bassoon and flutes, underpins the soloist's entry with the intensely lyrical first theme. After a cadenza-like passage, this is taken up by the orchestral wind. An abrupt change of texture brings about an insistent repeated-note idea which in turn serves as an accompaniment to the vigorous second subject, played *agitato ma espressivo* on the soloist's G-string. This too is developed by the wind. The highpoint of the movement comes when the strings gently reinstate the first theme, beautifully harmonized, while the soloist superimposes a fusion of both accompaniment ideas. The second subject is not recapitulated, but the repeated-note figure returns in the coda as a delicate counterpoint to the violin's ascent in a luminous glow of double-stopped harmonics. The scherzo is a whirlwind of energy, ferociously difficult for the soloist, with resourceful and incisive orchestration, though the melodic material is almost entirely derived from simple ascending and descending scales. After a contrasting 'trio' section in which a pleading motif from the soloist is continually undercut by orchestral interjections of the scherzo material, there is a bizarre transitional passage in which two piccolos

play a flickering ostinato while underneath, the tuba in its lowest register reintroduces the scalic patterns from earlier on, an astonishingly imaginative idea. A powerful and menacing orchestral tutti leads into an extensive cadenza which functions as a résumé of thematic material heard thus far while also forging a link to the final *Passacaglia* which is begun with solemn dignity by the trombones making their first appearance in the work. A series of variations follows, widely varied in mood and character. After a sustained *Largamente* climax brings about a decisive resolution onto the tonic D, there is a long drawn-out and hauntingly beautiful coda in which sequences of slow-moving orchestral chords are answered by the violin's impassioned lament which finally trails off with a high trill on the notes F sharp and F natural so that neither the major nor minor mode is established – in 1938, with the world situation hanging in the balance, the future was unknown.

The Barcelona excursion also provided the inspiration for the short orchestral suite *Mont Juic*, which Britten composed in collaboration with Lennox Berkeley in 1937. Britten met Berkeley during the mid-1930s through their mutual friend, Peter Burra (Burra, to whose memory *Mont Juic* is dedicated, was tragically killed in an aircraft crash in April 1937) and during this period, the two men were on close terms: they shared Britten's home at the Old Mill in Snape, Suffolk, for a time and Berkeley was Britten's travelling companion to the ISCM festival where his own *Domini est Terra* was due to be performed. The idea for the suite was inspired by a display of folk-dancing that the two composers witnessed in Mont Juic, the site of the 1929 International Exhibition on a hill near the city. The result was this witty, attractive and infectious score, based on a pot-pourri of various Catalan folk-tunes. The two composers chose not publicly to divulge which movements were written by whom, but Berkeley later told the composer Peter Dickinson that the first two movements were mainly his and the third and fourth mainly Britten's, though, as Berkeley's note to the published score states, both composers had a hand in determining the form and orchestration of each

movement. After the first broadcast performance by the BBC in January 1938, Berkeley wrote to Britten with characteristic modesty, saying 'I must say that I thought your two pieces more effective than mine'. Certainly the most substantial movement is the third, subtitled *Lament (Barcelona, July, 1936)*, a clear reference to the dark clouds gathering over the country's political horizon. This movement features a prominent solo for alto saxophone, an instrument that Britten also used to similar elegiac purpose in *Our Hunting Fathers*,

Sinfonia da Requiem and, somewhat later, in the opera *Billy Budd*. The central section of the movement is based on the Catalan national dance the Sardana. The other three movements are slighter in conception but are full of vivid and lively invention. It is puzzling that this delightful and brilliantly orchestrated score is not performed with more frequency.

Lloyd Moore

Lorraine McAslan

Initially trained in London as a pupil of David Martin, Lorraine McAslan moved to New York at the age of seventeen, on the recommendation of Isaac Stern, to study with Dorothy Delay at the Juilliard School. Since her return to Britain she has shared the concert platform with Britain's major orchestras and become a popular performer at festivals throughout the United Kingdom, including Aldeburgh, Bath and the Three Choirs Festival, appearing in collaboration with distinguished international conductors. She made her début on the mainland of Europe with the Bern Symphony Orchestra under Eliahu Inbal in a performance broadcast live by Swiss Radio and has broadcast and appeared on television frequently in Britain, where she has also made a number of recordings, including concertos by Mozart and Hofmann, and chamber works by Elgar, Walton, Beethoven, Debussy, Ravel, Saint-Saëns, Bridge and Britten. She has been a strong advocate of British composers, from Elgar, Walton and Britten to the contemporary, and her recordings also include works by Arthur Benjamin, Rebecca Clarke and Kenneth Leighton, among others. Her 1989 recording of the Britten *Violin Concerto* with the English Chamber Orchestra, featured on this Naxos re-issue, won very considerable critical acclaim. She pursues a busy teaching career at the Royal Academy of Music, and plays on an Andreas Guarneri violin of 1691, on kind loan from the Academy.

English Chamber Orchestra

The English Chamber Orchestra, formed in 1960, enjoys an international reputation as one of the world's most celebrated ensembles. The orchestra undertakes a busy annual schedule of concert appearances, which include its prestigious London series. Overseas touring fills approximately three months of the schedule each year and since its first foreign tour the orchestra has performed in almost four hundred cities across the globe. Its world-wide reputation is enhanced by its recordings of over a thousand works and includes numerous award-winning discs as well as those of historic interest. Over the years the English Chamber Orchestra has formed lasting and fruitful relationships with a multitude of great performers, with guest soloists including Maxim Vengerov, Mstislav Rostropovich, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Joshua Bell, Pinchas Zukerman and Mitsuko Uchida amongst many others. In 2000 the widely acclaimed and highly individual Finnish musician Ralf Gothóni was appointed Principal Conductor, and in 2004 Roy Goodman accepted the post of Principal Guest Conductor.

Steuart Bedford

Steuart Bedford is recognised as one of today's leading experts on the works of Benjamin Britten. As a result of his former collaboration with the composer, he has conducted Britten's operas throughout the world, including the world première of *Death in Venice* in 1973, which was followed by the first recording of the work. From 1974 to 1998 he was one of the Artistic Directors of the Aldeburgh Festival eventually becoming Joint Artistic Director with Oliver Knussen. Steuart Bedford has an extensive operatic repertoire and has worked with many of the world's greatest opera companies including English National Opera, the Royal Opera Covent Garden, Metropolitan Opera, Opera North, Scottish Opera, Opéra de Paris, Brussels Opera, Monte Carlo Opera, Lausanne Opera, San Diego Opera, Opera Theatre of St Louis, Santa Fe Opera Festival, Canadian Opera Company, Vancouver Opera, and the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires. He is also highly regarded for his interpretations of the works of Mozart, with acclaimed performances at the Garsington Opera and elsewhere. Although opera commitments dominate much of his time, Steuart Bedford conducts concert engagements, both in Britain and abroad, and has toured Australia, New Zealand, South America and Scandinavia. He has worked with the English Chamber Orchestra (with whom he has toured all over the world), the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, the Philharmonia, Royal Philharmonic, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Northern Sinfonia, City of London Sinfonia, Teatro Colón, Gurzenich Orchestra, Orchestre National de Bordeaux Aquitaine, Orchestre Philharmonique de Montpellier, Dortmund Philharmonic and the BBC Orchestras.



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Benjamin BRITTEN (1913-1976)

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|---|---------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | Overture 'Canadian Carnival', Op. 19 | 13:07 |
| | Violin Concerto, Op. 15 * | 33:09 |
| 2 | Moderato con moto | 9:55 |
| 3 | Vivace - Cadenza | 8:36 |
| 4 | Passacaglia: Andante lento - con moto | 14:37 |

Benjamin BRITTEN (1913-1976) and Lennox BERKELEY (1903-1989)

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|---|---|--------------|
| | Mont Juic: Suite of Catalan Dances, Op. 9 | 12:03 |
| 5 | I Andante maestoso (Berkeley, Op. 9, No. 1) | 3:06 |
| 6 | II Allegro grazioso (Berkeley, Op. 9, No. 2) | 1:42 |
| 7 | III Lament: Andante moderato (Britten, Op. 12, No. 1) | 4:47 |
| 8 | IV Allegro molto (Britten, Op. 12, No. 2) | 2:29 |

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