

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Benjamin Britten

Born November 22, 1913, Lowestoft, Suffolk, England.

Died December 4, 1976, Aldeburgh, England.

Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge, Op. 10

Britten wrote this piece in 1937 and it was first performed on August 27, 1937, in Salzburg. The work is scored for string orchestra. Performance time is approximately twenty-seven minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first performances of Britten's Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge were given on subscription concerts at Orchestra Hall on October 27 and 28, 1955, with Fritz Reiner conducting.

Benjamin Britten was only thirteen when he met Frank Bridge. Bridge, a well-known composer--and something of an outsider in English music circles--had come to Norwich for the premiere of his *Enter Spring*, and he was at first uninterested in meeting yet another child boasting unusual musical promise. But a few minutes with young Ben convinced him that his talent was one of a kind, and he asked the boy to come back in the morning and bring along some of his scores.

After a few hours that next day, Bridge offered to become Ben's composition teacher, even though he did not, as a rule, take pupils. Almost at once they began to work together--the young boy who had been writing music enthusiastically, but without guidance, since he was five, and this established middle-aged composer--the very image of an artist, with his long hair and unconventional ideas.

"Saw Frank Bridge in his London House," Ben wrote in his *School Boy's Pocket Diary and Note Book for 1928*, after their first session on January 12. "Had an absolutely wonderful lesson." But in no time the lessons were also exhausting and relentlessly demanding, as Bridge ripped apart, phrase by phrase, each exercise that Ben submitted. "He really taught me," Britten later recalled, "to take as much trouble as I possibly could over every passage, over every progression, over every line." As a result, the prolific young composer's output slackened as it grew increasingly more disciplined. Britten often left the Bridges' house beaten down: "I, who thought I was already on the verge of immortality, saw my illusions shattered."

Bridge also opened Britten's ears to controversial and unpopular composers such as Alban Berg--a particular Bridge passion--and Arnold Schoenberg. By sixteen, Britten had already become a proud modernist, reading Proust, studying Picasso's paintings, and raving about the beauty of Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*. (Probably at Bridge's suggestion, Britten eventually considered moving to Vienna to study with Berg. By the time he met Schoenberg, several years later, when Bridge took him backstage after a performance of the Variations for Orchestra, his admiration for Schoenberg's music had waned.)

Although Britten eventually moved on to other teachers at the Royal College of Music, it was Bridge's enlightened attitude and stubborn perfectionism that would forever mark his musical makeup. It is to Bridge that we owe the surpassing clarity as well as the individuality of Britten's best work.

The variations on a theme by his beloved teacher were composed quickly on a commission from Boyd Neel, whose orchestra had been invited to perform at the 1937 Salzburg Festival. Britten worked hurriedly and without apparent stress--although he was so busy that for the first time he left a few days blank in his diary--and, except for one measure that was added later, the entire work was completed in little more than a month. (He began to write out the full score while staying with the Bridges.)

Frank Bridge came to the first rehearsal in London. (When the principal viola had trouble with a solo passage, first Britten, and then Bridge, picked up the instrument and played it perfectly.) Bridge was obviously pleased with "his" work--one of the earliest signs that his pupil's star would eclipse his own. For his theme, Britten turned not to one of Bridge's more advanced scores, but to the *Idyll* for string quartet of 1906, which makes the transformation of language from the Elgar-like early Bridge to the modernism of Britten's own style all the more striking. It also highlights, almost unfairly, the gap between "musical father" and pioneering pupil. Bridge's theme is not stated at the outset, but emerges quietly in the solo strings out of Britten's bold and assertive beginning.

The variations are an odd lot, ranging from a passionate and deeply felt adagio to playful parodies on opera arias, Viennese waltzes, and stuffy bourrées, and returning, only at the end, to the seriousness of the beginning. Britten, who hated the way critics often looked for programs and meanings in his music, said he simply wanted to capture the many sides of a great man--"his integrity . . . energy . . . charm . . . wit . . . gaiety," as he wrote atop the pages of his sketches.

"I don't know how to express my appreciation in adequate terms," Bridge later wrote to Britten, about the only score, ironically, that would keep his name alive. "It is one of the few lovely things that has ever happened to me." Clearly, and perhaps painfully, Bridge recognized that it was Britten after all, and not he, who truly might gain immortality.

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