Britten Choral Guide
with Repertoire Notes by Paul Spicer
This Guide to Britten’s choral works, compiled by Paul Spicer, has been prepared by The Britten-Pears Foundation in conjunction with Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers, Chester Music and Faber Music. For further details about Britten’s works, please consult Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works (1999), available from Boosey & Hawkes and viewable online at www.brittenpears.org.

This Guide is included as a PDF on a CD audio sampler, with track numbers referred to within the works listing. If you are a choral director and would like to receive a copy, please contact your local office of one of the publishers or distributors listed on page 24.
PREFACE

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) was a unique force in British music. Of the fine composers among his contemporaries, none wrote such a wide variety of music across such a broad spectrum of genres and for such a range of ages and abilities. In many ways, though he might have been surprised by the comparison, he was the natural successor to Vaughan Williams, whose instincts for community and the nurture of amateur musicians brought him an almost cult-like status in Britain. Britten did not devote himself so wholeheartedly to these things, but a sizeable proportion of his choral music is easily within the reach of a good ordinary choir, another part is well within the grasp of a reasonable church choir, and there is, of course, all the music he wrote specifically for children. Among the 60 or so non-operatic choral works there are also works which are exceptionally demanding and perhaps best left to professionals and outstanding amateurs. The range of this output and the frequency of performance of the better-known works underline Britten’s ubiquity in the world of choral singing, not just in the English-speaking community but far beyond.

As with many composers who have devoted themselves to writing a large corpus of music for one particular genre, Britten has suffered from being too well-known for a few familiar pieces. Rejoice in the Lamb, A Ceremony of Carols, Hymn to the Virgin, Hymn to St Cecilia, Jubilate Deo in C and others have tended to obscure the fuller picture of Britten’s choral output and, if nothing else, I hope that this new practical guide will encourage choral directors to look beyond their favourites and explore the rich variety of music which is still almost undiscovered. Schools, or choirs of upper or lower voices, will find music here of wonderful quality which rarely sees the light of day. Similarly, there is a genuine mix of sacred and secular and some useful blurring of the edges where words can be equally appropriate in either context. I hope that this guide will also be of real practical help to those who aim to build programmes which may be structured in specific ways – thematically, by voice type, by religious or non-religious setting, or by the balancing of a well-known piece by a less-familiar or almost unknown work. It is a spirit of discovery and adventure which should fire the use of this guide, and it is a love of all this music which has inspired its writing.

Britten was a practical composer. He knew that the music he wrote was performable because he himself was an accomplished professional musician. This is, again, where the Vaughan Williams analogy holds true. To be there, in among those doing the singing, directing the performance, advising other conductors and acquiring great expertise and experience over a creative lifetime, gave him an unusual insight into what choirs enjoy singing. He discovered what levels were attainable by different types of group, and did much to encourage that sense of ambition which has led to a genuine rise in the quality of amateur choral music-making.

Britten was also a practical composer because he gave his performers all the information they need to deliver a convincing and ‘authentic’ performance - his scores have clear and unambiguous performance directions throughout. He is known to have remarked that, if musicians follow his instructions to the letter (and can play or sing the notes in an accurate and musical fashion), they will give a performance of which the composer would approve. So, before we get to the guide itself, the principal instruction to choral directors is to prepare the score thoroughly prior to embarking on rehearsals. Read the words in order to understand Britten’s setting of them, and mark, learn and inwardly digest Britten’s clear instructions about speed, dynamics, phrasing, and, often most importantly, articulation. The mood of a piece so often comes from the composer’s approach to the text. Britten tended to choose texts which were not widely set by other composers. But to compare, for instance, his two connected settings of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ God's Grandeur in A.M.D.G. and The World of the Spirit with Kenneth Leighton’s version is to clearly demonstrate the point. No two responses could be more different and yet each excitingly shows the composer’s individual reaction to the poem. To examine Britten’s popular Jubilate Deo in C alongside Howells’ Collegium Regale setting of the same words written some fifteen years earlier is, again, to emphasise how their idiomatic interpretations of the text helped shape each piece.

Britten’s style grew out of the English choral tradition he knew so well. He had not been a cathedral chorister but had boarded at Gresham’s School from the age of 14. There he was exposed to the standard repertoire of the Anglican Church and his earliest well-known piece, A Hymn to the Virgin, was written when he was only 16 and still a schoolboy. It unequivocally shows his feeling for the beauty and potential of choral sound, so it is no wonder that such precocious talent should develop to the extent it did. While there are pieces from his output which are more stylistically searching, this early gem sets the scene for a choral output that is essentially approachable, tonal, lyrical, and pleasing to both performer and listener. It is a remarkable legacy.

Paul Spicer, Lichfield, 2011

NOTE:
The difficulty level indicated in the Guide is from 1-5 with 1 being the least difficult.

Sales materials are indicated after each entry. Unless listed on sale, scores and parts are available on hire from the publisher.
THE CHORAL WORKS

Mixed Voices unaccompanied

Advance Democracy (1938)

for SSAATTBB unaccompanied

Text: Randall Swingler
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 2

Advance Democracy is a piece of unabashed political propaganda commissioned by the London Co-operative Society. At a time of great anxiety in Europe and on the eve of the second World War, this poem by Randall Swingler paints a dark picture of the threat of dictatorship. At democracy doesn’t ‘rise up and cry that what our fathers fought for we’ll not allow to die’. It is a strange piece and its overtly political message makes it quite difficult to programme except as a curiosity. Britten, however, paints a very clever picture with a long legato line moving constantly through the texture from soprano to bass and back much in the manner which he had used in The Three Kings in A Boy was Born. Around this swirling figure the other parts sing sharply punctuated chords which are full of menace. The final section moves into the major (Britten’s brightly flag-waving C major) and the ending is forcefully emphatic.

The best way to perform this piece is to take the words at face value and sing them as Swingler intended, with passion and involvement taking care to really follow Britten’s careful performance instructions as to articulation and dynamics.

979-0-060-80035-1 Choral score

A Boy was Born op. 3 (1932-33)

Variations for unaccompanied SATB with boys’ voices

Texts:

Theme
A Boy was Born
Anon. 16th century
Anon. before 1536
Anon. before 1529
Anon. 15th Century
Anon. 15th Century
Christina Rossetti
Anon. before 1536
Anon. 15th century
Thomas Tusser
Francis Quarles

*an organ part was created by Ralph Downes in 1957-58 which should only be used in extremis.

Choral score

The extent of Britten’s early genius can, to some extent, be measured by this work. Written while a student at the Royal College of Music aged only 19 it demonstrates the most precocious creative gifts. A rock-solid technique is evident, but also the ability to develop ideas over a large span of time (this is a major work) and, while testing even the best of choirs to its limits, Britten nevertheless always writes within the grasp of what is possible, and not only possible but supremely effective. Each movement contributes to the developing relationship with the initial theme, while also sitting perfectly within the sense of an unfolding ‘Suite’ of movements. The conductor needs to realise the tempo relationships and the contrasts of mood, pace and dynamics, and judge the scale of each movement in relation to the others.

One of the issues with this work is that it requires a boys’ choir in addition to the main choir. This, of course, can also be a girls’ or even a mixed group of upper voices. It does have to be a separate group, however, and in some performances they also have their own conductor, but they should not be placed at a distance due to the intricacy of their part in relation to the whole.

The Theme sets out some of the basic material in a gentle hymn-like manner and connects directly to the first variation which is based on a rocking figure of descending fifths shared initially by the two soprano parts, reminiscent of cooing doves. This is a long and challenging movement though Britten’s voice-leading (where parts can get their notes from others) is mostly helpful. The second variation, Herod, is predominantly for men’s voices. It is an aggressive, gruff play on the slaughter of the innocents and Mary and Joseph’s escape to Egypt. Variation III, Jesu, as Thou art our Saviour, is a beautiful balancing movement for semi-chorus with a treble solo (which can equally be for a girl’s or woman’s voice). Variation IV, The Three Kings, is a tour-de-force of vocal writing. Cleverly using an undulating quaver figure set up by the basses and shared between the two bass parts initially to present a seamless flow, Britten creates a feeling of the distant procession of the kings on their camels. All parts take over the quaver figure at some point and the climax is reached at the presentation of the gifts after which the music gradually fades away as the kings return home. This is an intensely satisfying movement to perform. Variation V is for upper voices singing the wonderful well-known words of Christina Rossetti In the Bleak Mid-Winter with the boys’ choir singing the powerfully emotional anonymous words of the Corpus Christi Carol. The Finale, Variation VI, is the longest and most testing movement lasting nearly ten minutes. Challenges abound in this variation: rhythm, note-finding, especially for the sopranos in the first section where their ‘Noel’ figures have seemingly to be plucked out of thin air; the art of the patter song at the start of the final section ‘Get ivy and hull, woman, deck up thine house, and take this same brawn for to seethe and to souse’ etc; and the sheer relentlessness of the music leading up to the extraordinary and overpowering climax. It may have been all in a day’s work for Britten, but it is a north face of the Eiger for most who have to sing it! The ending is suitably culminating for a programme finale.

2

Choral score
In addition to the challenges and problems already mentioned, one of the major issues a choir will face is that of tuning. A piece of this length which has no instrumental support is inevitably going to be prone to tuning problems. This is especially true in the first Variation where the endless falling fifths have to be sung in a relaxed manner whilst keeping the ear keenly attuned to the dangers of going flat or keener. The composer’s dynamics scheme is varied enough. There needs to be a lot of really piano singing in a performance of this work.

A Boy was Born is one of the most excitingly satisfying of Britten’s choral works. While it should not be undertaken by any but the most ambitious amateur choirs, its challenges are certainly surmountable with a good run of rehearsals. Britten is very careful in his marking of the score. Conductors need to follow his articulation marks in particular, as well as making certain that the dynamic scheme is varied enough. There needs to be a lot of really piano singing in a performance of this work.

This is another tour-de-force of Britten’s student years. Written a year before A Boy was Born when Britten was only in his second term at the Royal College of Music it was never performed complete in his lifetime. He revived New Prince, New Pomp for his Aldeburgh Festival in 1955 and Sweet was the Song for the 1966 Festival. As Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed point out in their Preface to the 1994 edition of the work it ‘shows very clearly how the young composer’s mind was intrigued by the potentialities of a sequence of texts unified by a common poetic theme.’ Britten loved Christmas and was drawn to texts about that season of the year. Christ’s Nativity is very much the product of a young composer, but parts of it are truly lovely and the work, which is not anything like as challenging as A Boy was Born, is well worth serious consideration by choirs planning programmes for the Christmas season.

The first movement is a fanfare which galvanises the listener with its choral shouts of ‘Awake!’ The second, Sweet was the Song, is for upper voices with contralto solo and is often performed on its own. This is very much the precursor of Jesus, as thou art our Saviour from A Boy was Born. A beautiful solo, which really needs a highly competent singer to sing it effectively, is accompanied by seated upper voices singing ‘fulla, lullaby’. The third movement, Preparations, is scored for double choir and is an excited, relentless and more challenging movement. Highly effective writing and some wonderful vocal sonorities all add to the charged atmosphere. The final section is long and reflective and a complete contrast. New Prince, New Pomp uses a soprano soloist with four part choir. The main section of this movement is a lengthy contrapuntal exercise in the manner of a double fugue. Britten was obviously showing his teachers that he could write counterpoint with the best of them. But the result is rather worthy and only comes alive when the soprano soloist rejoins for the final section. It is possible to make this section more dramatic than the notes on the page would seem to indicate, but the conductor needs to take it to heart and work up a head of steam, perhaps allowing a little piu movimento which leads the music to a big climax, both emotionally and dynamically, before it subsides into the soprano solo. The finale is an excited setting of the Carol of King Cnut. It brings the Suite to a suitably upbeat ending.

Christ’s Nativity has many challenges for a choir, but should be perfectly well within the grasp of a good amateur choral society or chamber choir. A conductor considering performing the work will need to consider the two solo movements and whether he or she can field soloists from within his own ranks to do justice to these movements.

Carry her over the water

for SSATB unaccompanied

Choral score

Choral Dances from Gloria

see Choral Music from the Operas

for SATB unaccompanied

Choral score

Chorale after an Old French Carol (1944)

Text: W H Auden
Publisher: Faber Music
Difficulty level: 2

Choral score

Deus in adjutorium meum... (1944-45)

Text: Psalm 70
Taken from This Way to the Tomb (incidental music to the ‘Masque and Anti-Masque’)
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 2

This setting of Psalm 70 (Haste thee O God to deliver me) is a fine, passionate and almost completely overlooked anthem which ought to be in the repertoire of most cathedrals and ambitious church choirs. The psalm is a dramatic one and almost completely overlooked anthem which ought to be in the repertoire of most cathedrals and ambitious church choirs. The psalm is a dramatic one and almost completely overlooked anthem which ought to be in the repertoire of most cathedrals and ambitious church choirs. This setting of Psalm 70 (Haste thee O God to deliver me) is a fine, passionate and almost completely overlooked anthem which ought to be in the repertoire of most cathedrals and ambitious church choirs. The psalm is a dramatic one and almost completely overlooked anthem which ought to be in the repertoire of most cathedrals and ambitious church choirs.

Five Flower Songs op. 47 (1950)

Texts:

1. To Daffodils
2. The Succession of the Four Sweet Months
3. Marsh Flowers
4. The Evening Primrose
5. The Ballad of Green Broom

For unaccompanied SATB

Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 3-4

These lovely, classic part-songs were written as a 25th wedding anniversary present for Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst of Dartington Hall. Apparently Britten chose the subject matter because they were keen botanists. Whatever the reason for the choice, it was a supremely happy one and brought from Britten a set of pieces which, while in a direct line of descent from the classic part-songs of Elgar, Stanford and Parry, are entirely original.
These songs are designed as a set. The mood-scape shows that Britten was keenly aware of the variety needed to satisfy performers and audience between bookends. The unsentimental originality of To Daffodils with its tempo marking of ‘Allegro impetuoso’ focusing on the speedy demise of the flower which is of course a metaphor for the passing of life; the clever division into four volumes is the format for the pieces. Such a creative section of the Four Sweet Months and that beautifully simple device at the end where each month is named and forms a lovely cadence; the bitter-sweet Marsh Flowers to its poem by George Crabbe and the way Britten makes a slightly menacing atmosphere relieved only by the description of gentler plants; the ever-so-slightly sentimental lovely cadence; the bitter-sweet keenly aware of the variety needed to satisfy performers and audience between bookends.

Points for choral directors to look out for include the tempo of leading to the final flourish makes this a wonderful and exciting finale to a set the ‘slow movement’ of the set; and finally description of gentler plants; the ever-so-slightly sentimental lovely cadence; the bitter-sweet keenly aware of the variety needed to satisfy performers and audience between bookends.

These songs are designed as a set. The mood-scape shows that Britten was immediately recognised as a major addition to the choral repertory and has since become one of his most enduringly popular choral works. It is a nice coincidence that Britten was born on St. Cecilia’s day (22 November). Cecilia is, of course, the Patron Saint of musicians who is supposed to have sung praises of God in extremis of which this is something of a miracle!

Britten responds to Auden’s extraordinary imagery with relish. The poem’s division into three ‘movements’ gives Britten his musical structure, and the provision of a refrain (‘Blessed Cecilia, appear in visions to all musicians, appear and inspire...’) gives a point of reference marking the end of each section, and of the work. The three ‘movements’ are completely different from each other. The first has a kind of ‘ground bass’ moving through it started by the tenors in the first bar and passing between them and the basses. Over this bass, the upper parts sing flowing compound time phrases which are almost hymn-like. The refrain at the end of the verse is a unison version of the initial flowing melody sung by the sopranos.

The second section is a scherzo which gives Britten his ‘middle movement’ contrast. This is marked to be sung extremely quickly. Dotted crotchet 152-160 is impossibly fast! It needs also to be sung with the right speed as the tempo marking is Tempi Larghi. The movement has a somewhat operatic feel to it as though it was to be performed by an opera troupe of reasonable attainment providing that enough rehearsal time is allowed for its preparation. The choir also needs to be able to field five confident soloists. Short as the solos are (except for the first soprano one which is more extended and different from the subsequent ones) they present issues which can test a less-confident singer.

Care needs to be taken with the speed, the semi-chorus placing, and the creation of an atmosphere which demands attention from the listener. Speed: be careful to note Britten’s marking of quaver (8th note) = 69-72. This is very slow indeed. Try it with a metronome. Many conductors perform this piece at crotchet (14 note) = 66! Frankly, I find the original speed too slow to make this piece flow. I see that when I recorded this with the Finzi Singers we made a tempo of crotchet = 55. Purists may be dismayed at this wilful ignoring of a composer’s intentions (especially given the strictures outlined in the Preface to this Guide). I think if I were to re-record this now, I would choose a tempo of about quaver = 88. Note that for the quicker final verse Britten suggests a crotchet tempo. This means he did think about the issues of speed very carefully.

Placing: Some choirs choose to put the semi-chorus at the other end of the church, or in a gallery for dramatic effect. Directors, however, have to remember that while this might work in the first two verses, in the last verse the two groups sing together and have to balance to some degree. Thought should also be given to the fact that if the semi-chorus is placed at the other end of a church behind the audience, the audience sitting near the back will hear them more strongly than the main choir. It is best to place the semi-chorus behind the choir but still quite close, perhaps by the altar if the main choir is in the choirstalls, or just in front of the altar. Always make sure that the semi-chorus can see the conductor!

This work had a long gestation as Britten had problems finding a suitable text. Auden was eventually asked and produced the poem in 1940. Britten’s setting was immediately recognised as a major addition to the choral repertory and has since become one of his most enduringly popular choral works. It is a nice coincidence that Britten was born on St. Cecilia’s day (22 November). Cecilia is, of course, the Patron Saint of musicians who is supposed to have sung praises to God as she was being martyred. The story of her manner of death makes gruesome reading and the act of singing something of a miracle!

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Doubt and Profane op. 91 (1974-75)  
Eight medieval lyrics for unaccompanied voices (SSATB)
Text: Anon. Early English
Publisher: Faber Music
Difficulty level: 5
1. St. Godrick’s hymn (mid 12th century)
2. I mon waxe wod (later 13th century)
3. Lenten is come (14th century)
4. The long night (earlier 13th century)
5. Yif ic of luve Can (earlier 14th century)
6. Carol (mid 14th century)
7. Ye that pasen by (mid 14th century)
8. A death (13th century)

This fascinating and brilliant concert work was written for Peter Pears’ Willibye Consort and was therefore written with one voice for each of the five parts in mind. In reality, rather like A.M.D.G., this is a tall order for the singers and it also creates a very different kind of performance from a carefully directed choral performance. The greater freedom and flexibility which a ‘chamber music’ format allows does not necessarily suit such a highly detailed score. There is the further complication of the requirement to sing properly pronounced medieval words, so overall this work is not for the faint-hearted. It requires and repays serious effort, detailed preparation for the pronunciation issues and decisions about what to do, for instance, in number 5 where the first soprano(s) is/are given a completely free part, differently barred and notated from the rest of the choir. This is where a one-voice-to-a-part performance will be much easier to achieve a natural sounding result than with a multi-voiced group which then has to be directed to achieve true unanimity of ensemble.

The score has a detailed Preface with helpful tips for pronunciation, and it also gives all the poems which Britten sets in the original early English and with a modern translation. Additionally, and very helpfully, Britten gives a phonetic guide to each word in italics in the musical score.

The music is a wonderful mix of styles and moods. This is very late Britten, completed only a year before his death. Here, therefore, is a composer absolutely on the top of his game, hugely experienced, and writing for a group of professional for whom he knew he could be as challenging as he liked. One of the most satisfying elements of Sacred and Profane, to my mind, is the humour and boundless good nature which Britten lifts from these earthy poems. But everything is not always as it might appear. Number 2, for instance, with its ostinato rhythm set up by the two soprano parts in the first bar, may seem an amusing song all about birds in the wood and fish in the river – but then the alto(s) sing ‘and I must go mad, much sorrow I live with...’ Suddenly the whole picture changes and that ostinato becomes a little drumming obsession for a simple medieval peasant. But then look at number 8 and see the real humour which brings this extraordinary cycle to its upbeat conclusion. This poem recounts the stages leading to a death which doesn’t worry the subject at all: ‘Then I shall pass from bed to floor, from floor to shroud, from shroud to bier and the grave. Then rests my house upon my nose. For the whole world I don’t care a jot!’

This work is regularly performed by professional ensembles but rarely attempted by amateurs. It is the preserve of the best but is certainly manageable by really ambitious and high-achieving amateur choirs as long as sufficient time is given to mastering the complexities and dealing with the text. It repays careful work with dividends.

0-571-50086-4 Choral score

The Sycamore Tree (1930, rev.1934/67)  
Anthem for SATB unaccompanied
Text: Traditional
Publisher: Faber Music
Difficulty level: 2

This is a delightful carol which any choir should be happy to include in its Christmas programmes. It is a setting of the famous ‘I saw three ships’ text and indeed it was originally called by the more well-known title. Britten gives us an uncomplicated but wonderfully joyful setting based on a melody with which the carol begins and which has all the elements of a folk-melody. It is the kind of melody we think we have always known which adds to the carol’s approachability. The texture develops as the words dictate until, at the end ‘all the bells on earth did ring’ and Britten has the voices pealing in scales.

This is a straightforward piece and a choir really only needs a good store of enthusiasm, energy and the ability to put across a story in words to produce a good performance (providing they have the notes right in the first place!).

0-571-50096-X Choral score

We are the darkness in the heat of the day (1956)  
(from The Heart of the Matter)
Song for five-part chorus (SMezATB) unaccompanied
Text: Edith Sitwell
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 1-2

This short unaccompanied setting formed part of a programme of Edith Sitwell’s verse put together for the Aldeburgh Festival in 1956. Britten had set her words to music in his Canticle III ‘Still Falls the Rain. After the performance Imogen Holst suggested to Britten that he might consider the setting of We are the darkness in the heat of the day as a separate piece. She prepared the score for her Purcell Singers but it was never performed in Britten’s lifetime.

The short song is almost madrigalian in character, entirely homophonic (choral) and leading to a beautiful and gentle conclusion. This is another of Britten’s rarities which would add interest to a concert programme featuring his music or even recreating the spirit of that Aldeburgh programme around the poetry of Edith Sitwell – and perhaps others.

979-0-060-10585-2 Choral score

Whoso dwelleth under the Defence of the Most High (1937)
Anthem for SSAATTBB unaccompanied
Text: Psalm 91 (Myles Coverdale)
Publisher: Faber Music
Difficulty level: 3

This is the only unaccompanied movement (9th) in The Company of Heaven, (see Choir and Orchestra) which was written as a radio feature for the BBC on the subject of St. Michael and all Angels and broadcast on that feast day (29 September) in 1937 when Britten was 23 years old.

This movement is based on the fifth psalm tone which is sung in unison at the start and features in many of the phrases which follow. It makes an interesting and unusual anthem for St. Michael’s day and has a particularly lovely ending. Although every voice part divides into two (see above) at some points the piece is not scored for double choir and much of it is in single lines.

0-571-51138-4 Choral score

The Shepherd’s Carol (1944)  
for SATB unaccompanied (including SATB solos)
Text: W. H. Auden
Publisher: Novello (published in Sing Novello carol collection)
Difficulty level: 1

While Britten and Auden were living in the United States Auden wrote the text for a Christmas Oratorio which he later re-titled For the Time Being. It was always intended that Britten would set the poem to music. In the end, however, Britten returned to the UK and only set two brief portions of the text when asked to contribute to a BBC radio programme called A Poet’s Christmas. Britten then set the Shepherd’s Carol and Chorale after an Old French Carol. Auden had remarked that the text for The Shepherd’s Carol should be set as either ‘jazz or Folk-song’. Britten’s rather lovely easygoing setting seems to show that he had listened to Auden’s advice.

The format of this beautifully simple carol is a repeated refrain sung by the choir (‘O lift your little pinkie, and touch the winter sky...’) interspersed by a verse each for the four soloists. It is one of Britten’s most touchingly direct settings. It seems odd that he chose to withdraw it after its first performance.

NOV410136 Choral score
The Ballad of Little Musgrave and
Lady Barnard (1943)

for male voices (T Bar B) and piano (Britten notes that this should be two pianos if performed by a large chorus)

Text: anon  from the Oxford Book of Ballads

Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes

Difficulty level: 2-3

This work had a curious genesis. Britten’s stance as a conscientious objector in World War II is well known but his sympathies for those caught up in its ramifications were as deeply felt as anyone’s. Written in the middle of the war years, this ballad was composed ‘For Richard Wood and the musicians of Oflag VIB – Germany’. Wood had organised a music festival at this officers’ POW camp at Eichstätt, Bavaria between February and March 1943 and Britten’s second setting of the poem Te Deum (1949) was written for this festival. It was composed for the centenary Festival of St. Mark’s Church in Swindon – an Anglo-Catholic church with a strong choral tradition which continues to this day. The structure of the piece is also different from the earlier work. A lengthy first section in unison which, while carefully notated in a variety of time signatures so that it feels as if it has the freedom of Gregorian chant, is accompanied by static organ chords in a regular 3/4 metre. It is a really imaginative approach, and is actually very simple to perform. While the organ chords continue, the choir breaks up into simple imitative phrases at ‘The glorious company of the Apostles praise Thee’ but soon returns to the unison lines of the opening. The central section (‘Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ’) has fanfare-like phrases from the choir interspersed by short dramatic outbursts from the organ which then subside into a rhythmic piano section with an important ostinato pedal part for the organ. These two ideas are then mixed together before the opening organ chords return and a treble/soprano solo sings a lovely line. The choir joins and takes the canticle to its gentle conclusion with the soloist having the last word.

This setting is more straightforward than the earlier one. It does, however, have rhythmic issues which have to be mastered fully to do it justice. The choir, for instance, must not be pulled off course by the different time signature for the organ part in the opening and closing sections. It is all very straightforward in reality, it just looks complicated. Britten has thoughtfully annotated the vocal rhythm throughout the organ part for safety. The organist needs to be a confident musician. Where Britten may write eminently practically for the abilities of a parish church choir, he does not make similar allowances for the organist and the accompaniment is key to the success of a performance of this and many other such works.

979-0-060-01426-0 Organ score

A Ceremony of Carols

for SATB and harp

see Children’s and Upper Voices

Festival Te Deum op. 32 (1945)

for SATB (with treble/soprano solo) and organ

Text: Book of Common Prayer: liturgy of Morning Prayer

Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes

Difficulty level: 2-3

Britten’s second setting of the Te Deum is completely different from the C major one he wrote eleven years earlier. It was composed for the centenary Festival of St. Mark’s Church in Swindon – an Anglo-Catholic church with a strong choral tradition which continues to this day. The structure of the piece is also different from the earlier work. A lengthy first section in unison which, while carefully notated in a variety of time signatures so that it feels as if it has the freedom of Gregorian chant, is accompanied by static organ chords in a regular 3/4 metre. It is a really imaginative approach, and is actually very simple to perform. While the organ chords continue, the choir breaks up into simple imitative phrases at ‘The glorious company of the Apostles praise Thee’ but soon returns to the unison lines of the opening. The central section (‘Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ’) has fanfare-like phrases from the choir interspersed by short dramatic outbursts from the organ which then subside into a rhythmic piano section with an important ostinato pedal part for the organ. These two ideas are then mixed together before the opening organ chords return and a treble/soprano solo sings a lovely line. The choir joins and takes the canticle to its gentle conclusion with the soloist having the last word.

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979-0-060-01426-0 Organ score

Antiphon op. 56b (1956)

6'

for SATB with three treble/soprano solos (which Britten indicates can be reduced to one soloist or a semi-chorus) and organ

Text: George Herbert

Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes

Difficulty level: 3

This work was written for the centenary of St. Michael’s College, Tenbury. As so often, Britten uses treble or soprano solos which he indicates should be sung ‘preferably in a gallery apart from the choir.’ Ever the practical composer, however, he also allows that these solo parts can be reduced to one voice or be sung by a small group of voices.

The anthem is an interesting conception and its structure takes its cue both from the early part of Herbert’s text which says: ‘Praise be the God of love, Here below And here above...’, and of the end of the poem which says: ‘Praise be the God alone, Who has made of two folds one.’ It is this division into two which led him into the idea of two groups of singers. It is more than this, though, as the first group, the main choir, has two roles, the singing of energetic phrases in a quicker tempo, and the quiet response to a slower solo line. Having moved backwards and forwards between these two ‘characters’ the choir eventually sings an uplifting ‘fugato’ which builds up a terrific head of steam with the organ part growing into crashing alternate hand chords and the pedals taking wing from the bottom to the top (literally) of the pedal board. A brief silence, and a chorale-like line subsides into a magical quiet ending where the three soloists sing triads to the word ‘one’ whilst the chorus responds with a lower triad on the word ‘two’. The whole thing resolves onto a widely-spaced chord of F major and everyone singing the word ‘one’. A slightly sentimental or glib touch? No, take it at face value after all that has gone before and appreciate Herbert’s imagery. It is a wonderful resolution of the two elements played out through the piece.

As with many other such works, the Antiphon requires an accomplished organist. The choir also needs to be confident both in their notes and rhythm. This is a rarely performed work which should really be much better known and more often performed than at present. It is certainly within the grasp of a reasonably competent choir looking for less well-known music by a great composer.

979-0-060-01390-4 Organ score

A Hymn of St. Columba (1962)

3'

for SATB and organ

Text: attributed to St. Columba (in Latin)

Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes

Difficulty level: 2

This short work was commissioned for the 1400th anniversary of the voyage of St. Columba made from Ireland to the island of Iona. Rather bizarrely, the first ‘performance’ was given outdoors at Churchill, Co. Donegal where St. Columba is said to have preached and was apparently inaudible because of the strength of the wind!

The anthem is wonderfully effective and is a very good example of Britten’s ability to create an original canvas within the traditions of the Anglican Church. The piece is all about the fire in Columba’s belly for his missionary task. The words are almost a variation on the Dies Irae: ‘King of Kings and Lord most high, his day of judgement comes near, Day of wrath and vengeance, Day of shadows and dark clouds...’ etc. Britten brilliantly sets the mood with a disturbing ostinato based on the word ‘one’. A slightly sentimental or glib touch? No, take it at face value after all that has gone before and appreciate Herbert’s imagery. It is a wonderful resolution of the two elements played out through the piece.

Don’t let the brevity of this work put you off from programming it. In fact, Britten wrote four ‘Hymns’ (Virgin/St. Peter/St. Columba/St. Cecilia) which work very well together in a concert and around which an imaginative programme can be built. Its brevity also makes it either suitable as an introit for a service
commemorating Columba, or perhaps, at All Souls or even Remembrance. It would serve equally as an anthem.

In performance it is Britten’s direction that it should be sung ‘with fire’ which should underpin the interpretation. As always, making the most of dynamic variation will give the work some of its colour. The wonderful moment when, after a diminuendo, the first theme returns pianissimo and with a crescendo (...maioris ac tristitiae, Regis regum rectissimii), where the words ‘King of Kings’ are uttered with hushed awe needs special care and thought about tone quality.

Hymn to St. Peter op. 56a (1955) 6’
for SATB, treble/soprano solo or semi-chorus/organ
Text: from the Gradual of the Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul with Allelula
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 3

Written for the Quincentenary of St. Peter Mancroft, Norwich in 1955 and based on the plainsong ‘Tu es Petrus’ which is loudly declaimed on the organ in unison before the choir’s first entry. This more extended anthem picks up on elements which Britten had used in his Hymn to St. Cecile. Earlier. The broad unison melody with which the choral parts start is similar, however, to the opening of the Hymn to St. Columbia. It is the middle section written as a scherzo which is reminiscent of the section in the St. Cecilia hymn at figure 8 (‘I cannot grow; I have no shadow to run away from...’). This is also part of the anthem which might give less able choirs some trouble. It needs to be sung ‘quickly and lightly’ as Britten indicates and his metronome mark at dotted crotchet = 112 is indeed fast! But the notes are not difficult and they certainly reward detailed work. The next section is a reprise of the opening which moves into a dying Allelula. The final section has lovely solo (or semi-chorus) phrases in Latin separated by very soft choral interjections translating these phrases into English.

It makes a very effective concert or liturgical work (see comments in Hymn to St. Columbia about programming).

Jubilate Deo in C (1961) 3’
for SATB and organ
Text: Psalm 100 (Book of Common Prayer; Morning Prayer)
Publisher: Chester Music
Difficulty level: 1-2

This is another of Britten’s best-known and most often performed short choral works. With its lively and spirited organ accompaniment and its simple and direct vocal phrases it positively bubbles with the joyful mood of the words. Short and to the point, it is also straightforward and well within the reach of most choirs. It does need a competent organist who can perform rhythmically, and play scales!

Jubilate Deo in E (1934) 3’
for SATB and organ
Text: Psalm 100 (Book of Common Prayer; Morning Prayer)
Publisher: Faber Music
Difficulty level: 2

This early work was withdrawn by Britten for some reason and was not published until 1984. It was written as a companion piece for the C major Te Deum for St. Mark’s, North Audley Street, London, though intriguingly he wrote it in E major rather than C major. It may not have the same spark of genius as many of his other choral works, but it is a perfectly serviceable setting with broad singable lines and a straightforward organ part. An interpretation with some imagination can make the piece work well and leave a strong impression of these uplifting words.

Old Joe has gone fishing for SATB and piano
see Choral Music from the Operas

Rejoice in the Lamb op. 30 (1943) 17’
for SATB with SATB solos and organ
Imogen Holst orchestrated the work for wind quintet, percussion, organ (ad lib) and strings (1952), and there is also a version for SSAA and organ arranged by Edmund Walters (1966)
Text: Christopher Smart
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 3

One of Britten’s most popular and performed works in this genre, Rejoice in the Lamb was written for the 50th anniversary of St. Matthew’s church, Northampton in 1943. The remarkable vicar, Walter Hussey, was a great patron of the arts. His vision for St. Matthew’s and later for Chichester Cathedral, where he moved to become Dean, is one of the most fascinating stories in the history of the Anglican Church in the last century.

Britten called his work a Festival Cantata and it is structured with choral and solo movements. The text by the supposedly mad Christopher Smart (1722-1771) is part of a poem called Jubilate Agno which he composed in 1711. The central section is a reprise of the opening. The next section is a reprise of the opening movement which moves into a dying Allelula. The final section has lovely solo (or semi-chorus) phrases in Latin separated by very soft choral interjections translating these phrases into English.

It makes a very effective concert or liturgical work (see comments in Hymn to St. Columba about programming).

Song of the Fishermen
for SATB and piano
see Choral Music from the Operas

Tallis’s Canon
for SATB chorus, unison voices and organ or piano accompaniment.
see Choral Music from the Operas

Te Deum in C (1934) 9’
for SATB/treble or soprano solo/organ (harp or piano and strings)
Text: Book of Common Prayer: Liturgy of Morning Prayer
Publisher: Chester Music
Difficulty level: 3

Britten wrote few canticle settings, only two Te Deums, two settings of the Jubilate and a Venite which was not published in his lifetime. He wrote no settings of the Evening Canticles for the Anglican rite. The settings we have are therefore all the more precious and, as always, show the originality of his creative mind. This Te Deum is, to my mind, the finest of these liturgical settings. It has drama, energy, variety, and clarity and integrity of structure. The opening page sets the scene and introduces the pedal syncopated ostinato which underpins the whole of the first section and the ‘reprise’ when it comes after the contrasting central section. The voices climb from the bass up to soprano in quietly urgent statements of ‘We praise you’ and build to a huge climax at ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth’. The central section is given to a treble or soprano soloist with the choir reinforcing his or her phrase ends with quietly urgent chords and the words ‘OChrist!’ Longer phrases develop and lead to the reintroduction of the pedal ostinato and the initial choral material. Another thrilling climax is reached before the beautiful quiet ending.
Few cathedrals or churches sing the Office of Matins these days for which this canticle was intended and so its original liturgical setting is rarely possible nowadays. It is much more of use as an anthem or as a concert item and it now takes on a life of its own. The gentle humour in it with a busy piano part accompanying straightforward choral passages which have nothing of the complexity of metre of the previous song. The message of damnation is delivered in suitably solemn tones before the piece dances off to its laughing ending.

I lov’d a lass (1932) 2’
Lift Boy (1932) 3’

for SATB and piano

Texts: George Withers (I lov’d a lass) and Robert Graves (Lift Boy)

Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes

Difficulty level: 2

These are two delightful and contrasted part-songs for choir and piano which ought to be a gift to choirs looking for rare secular repertoire for their concert programmes. I lov’d a lass is full of fun, while the challenge lies in the regularly changing metre. The choir’s first bar is in 7/8 and is followed by 5/4 and then 3/4. Later on Britten gives us 3/4, 7/8, 11/8, 4/4, 5/4, 7/8, 4/4 in successive bars but this all adds to the entertainment. There are lots of portamenti too in what adds up to a passionate little piece.

Lift Boy sets a nonsense poem by Robert Graves about a boy who starts life as a knife-boy, moves on to become a lift boy and then a lift man. Preached damnation by ‘Old Eagle’ one day, he cuts the lift cables and down they all go. But Graves ends by saying: ‘Can a phonograph lie? A song very nearly contriv’d to make you and me laugh.’ Curious indeed. But Britten obviously sees the humour in it with a busy piano part accompanying straightforward choral passages which have nothing of the complexity of metre of the previous song. The message of damnation is delivered in suitably solemn tones before the piece dances off to its laughing ending.

I lov’d a lass
979-0-060-01454-3 Choral score
Lift Boy
979-0-051-41850-3 Choral score

Voices for Today op. 75 (1965)

Anthem for Chorus (men, women and children) with organ accompaniment (ad libitum)

Text: At the suggestion of E.M. Forster and Peter Pears, Britten chose a selection of ‘sentences or verses from the great peace lovers of history’: Jesus Christ, Asoka, Sophocles, Lao Tzu, Bright, Penn, Melville, Camus, Lec, Yevtushenko, Blake, Hölderlin, Tennyson, Shelley and Virgil.

Publisher: Faber Music

Difficulty level: 4

For Today is an example of a substantial choral work by Britten which is almost never performed. It was composed for the 20th anniversary of the United Nations and was given three simultaneous premières in London, New York and Paris. Note-wise it is not as difficult as Sacred and Profane for instance, but it is not easy, and it is not an immediate work to grasp as it is unlike any other in Britten’s output. Its performance complexities add to these issues. Britten has scored the work for a main chorus part for SATB and a separate boys’ choir (which, of course, can be boys and girls or just girls) which he indicates should be in a gallery if possible with its own conductor. His detailed performance instructions show how these two groups should operate. ‘The boys’ part has no regular measured tempo, but its rhythm is shown by dotted barlines... The speeds of the two choruses are usually not the same, but the boys must coincide whenever there is a long barline running from top to bottom of the system.’ Further instructions are given including singing the work in the performers’ vernacular (except for Virgil’s Elocuente).

If it all sounds complicated and off-putting it should be given its chance to shine through a committed performance. In some ways it shares a mindset with Advance Democracy in that it is a politically motivated work whose text advocates the peace which Britten so passionately believed in and which later on was writ large in the War Requiem. In reality, what sounds complicated in the coordination of the two choirs is perfectly straightforward to realise as Britten gives ‘curlewed’ signals in the score where either choir can hold while the other completes its phrase, so that a point of required ensemble can be reached at the same moment.

After a richly scored opening ‘if you have ears to hear, then hear!’ the music becomes almost surprisingly sparse as if Britten wants maximum clarity from the singing of the words. He wants his points made clearly and concisely. The boys’ choir does not join until the extended setting of Virgil which is at approximately the half-way point. Here, the choir sings short chant-like phrases divided by commas while the boys sing a wordless melody at a completely different speed, ignoring the commas of the main choir but having key moments of common arrival. The music of the main choir develops with a variety of textures and dynamic contrasts reflecting the text. Eventually, in the final section, the boys divide into two parts singing the words of the opening (quoted above) and the choir sings Virgil’s closing words (in Latin) ‘Start now, little boy, by greeting your mother with a smile. Her ten months’ pregnancy has been long and tiring. Start now little boy...’ (The ten months is within the scale of the Julian calendar).

There is an organ part which can be used and which Britten noted ‘should be used primarily when the resonance of the building is inadequate’. In my opinion the organ part enhances the work.

Andante comodo

Advance Democracy

Te Deum

Venite Exultemus Domino (1961) 6’

for SATB and organ

Text: Psalm 95 (Book of Common Prayer: Morning Prayer)

Publisher: Chester Music

Difficulty level: 1-2

This work was not published in Britten’s lifetime but it was obviously intended as a companion work to the Jubilate in C as it was written in the same year. It wasn’t performed until 1983 when it was given its premiere in Westminster Abbey under Simon Preston. The choir sings chant-like phrases almost in the manner of Anglican chant. The organ joins the end of a phrase and modulates forward chorally which has got over the surprise at its means and has settled into focusing on the words, the music takes on a life of its own. The gentle Gloria is especially effective.

Venite Exultemus Domino
979-0-060-01457-8 Vocal score
979-0-060-01458-6 Choral score

A Wedding Anthem (Amo Ergo Sum) op. 46 (1949) 10’

for SATB with soprano and tenor soloists and organ

Text: Ronald Duncan

Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes

Difficulty level: 3-4

This anthem, which is really more like a mini cantata than an anthem, was written for the marriage of the Earl of Harewood and Marion Stein. It took place in St. Mark’s, North Audley Street, London, the church for which Britten had written his C major Te Deum and E Jubilate. The original soloists were Joan Cross and Peter Pears and Britten conducted.

The difficulty with this work is that it really requires two professional soloists to do it justice. The choir begins the anthem and Britten uses the Ave Maria which Duncan places at the beginning and end of the first verse like a peal of bells. It is wonderfully effective. It is also used as a refrain. The second section (verse) is marked ‘Recitative’ and is for soprano solo. The early freedom implied by that term gives way to an Andante commodo and the soloist sings a beautiful lyrical setting of Duncan’s imaginative words. The choir returns with a piano version of the ‘Ave Maria’ as a refrain and the tenor soloist takes over for verse three. Britten’s flowing organ accompaniment takes its cue from the opening words here: ‘As mountain streams find one another Till they are both merged there’... This is another extended and lovely solo for the tenor. In verse four, the choir rejoins for a brief refrain using the opening words of the anthem, and the soloists now sing a lively, playful duet. The ending for everyone is a quietly ravishing ‘Amen’.

This is another work of Britten’s which is almost never performed. The choral parts are not difficult and the organ part is less challenging than some of Britten’s other choral/organ works. Only the solo parts would seem to represent a barrier to a regular performance profile for the anthem. These are not difficult solos in themselves, but do need singers who can project a real sense of the ‘solo’ and also have an easy top B (both soloists) which can be managed without fuss in a lovely rising scale situation.
Children’s and Upper Voices

### A Ceremony of Carols op. 28 (1942, rev.1943)

- **Difficulty level:** 3
- **Publisher:** Boosey & Hawkes

**The Ceremony of Carols** is one of Britten’s best-known and most-performed works. It is a brilliantly conceived and dramatic concert work which sees the voices process to their places singing unaccompanied plainsong and, at the end, processing out again to the same chant. Enjoyable solos and duos add further colour and surrounds the voices with its pictorial musical imagery. If anything shows the genius for writing for voices it must be this work.

The challenges here are in creating a real equality between voice parts, fielding a confident pair of soloists, and making the most of the wonderfully colourful poems Britten has chosen to set. Pronunciation is not really an issue, but when recorded this work with the Finzi Singers I decided to follow the example of the Nativity of Our Lord and surrounds the voices with its pictorial musical imagery. If anything shows Britten’s genius for writing for voices it must be this work.

### The Children’s Crusade op. 82 (1969)

- **Difficulty level:** 3-4
- **Publisher:** Faber Music

This is a big serious piece for children – yet another fine example of Britten writing a major work with a serious subject at its heart for young people to both sing and play. The huge array of percussion is designed to be played by school children supplemented by a few teachers/adults. The piano and organ parts are specifically designed to support the singers and to help with providing the pitch for starts of phrases and often with continuation as well.

The choral parts are all for unbroken voices though there is one solo part which Britten allocates to a ‘tenor’ though, in reality, he is still thinking of this as a child’s voice which is ‘on the cusp’ – an alto in chest voice.

The Children’s Crusade is another war piece. Coming after The War Requiem where he had unburdened his soul in relation to his pacifist convictions, he still wanted to take up Wilfred Owen’s assertion that ‘all a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true poet must be truthful.’ This piece is another demonstrating the futility of war, witnessed through the eyes of a group of brave Polish children in the face of overwhelming odds. It is a moving work on various levels, but the immediacy of Brecht’s imagery (the dog adds further to the poignancy of the story) coupled with Britten’s decision to use children to perform it, leaves an indelible impression on the mind of the listener, and undoubtedly the performer – as was obviously intended.

This is not an easy work. Unlike the light-hearted Welcome Ode this is a major undertaking. Britten is, as usual, very clear in his intentions and writes a helpful explanatory preface. He notes that two conductors are probably necessary especially as there are times when the voices and the instruments follow different tempi. He uses a ‘curlew’ sign – as he did in Voices for Today and elsewhere – to indicate when one group must wait for the other before continuing. Compared with some of the convoluted aleatoric or improvisatory passages required by contemporary composers Britten’s devices are fairly straightforward and are clearly notated. They should not hold undue terrors for modern performers. However, they do require understanding and performance discipline and conductors who will be clear in their directions.

Britten asks for nine soloists. These are all children from the choir who, as Britten directs, ‘should stand and sit where marked in the score’. One sings out of sight. The vocal parts are not particularly difficult though they are certainly not easy. The keyboard parts provide a good deal of support in terms of starting notes etc. But this is never done obviously and the singers will have to know how to hear what they are being offered in support.

The bottom line in this piece is that these young people are never being written down to. Britten writes a work which challenges them on every level – including the nature of the story. That makes The Children’s Crusade a hugely worthwhile work to rehearse and perform. With today’s emphasis on co-education the involvement of girls with boys makes the whole thing far more achievable in every sense than it might have been at the time of its premiere.

Rediscover a dramatic and involving score. This is a kind of Noye’s Fludde but exclusively for children.

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### Fancie (1961, rev.1965)

- **Difficulty level:** 1
- **Publisher:** Boosey & Hawkes

This was originally one of three settings of Shakespeare texts by different composers – the others being Kodály and Poulenc. It is classic Britten: lovely singable lines, colourful piano part and a highly effective division into three parts at the end in the revised version. It would programme well with The Oxen.

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<td><strong>Fancie (1961, rev.1965)</strong></td>
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Friday Afternoons op. 7 (1933-35) 23

Twelve children's songs with piano accompaniment

Texts:
1. Begone, dull care (anon.)
2. A tragic story (William Makepeace Thackeray)
3. Cuckoo! (Jane Taylor) (in 2 parts, 2nd ad lib.)
4. "Ee-Oh!" (anon.)
5. A New Year Carol (anon.)
6. I must be married on Sunday (Nicholas Udall)
7. There was a man of Newington (anon.)
8. Fishing Song (Izaac Walton)
9. The useful plough (anon.)
10. Jazz-Man (Eleanor Farjeon)
11. There was a monkey (anon.)
12. Old Abram Brown (anon.) (in 4 parts)
13. Lone Dog

Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes

Difficulty level: 1-2

This set of mainly unison songs for young voices is a gift for a concert of music for upper voices. It is a substantial work taken as a whole but its individual movements are both short and straightforward in their various challenges. Britten wrote the work for the boys of his brother's preparatory school (age 7-13), Clive House, Prestatyn, in Wales to sing. However he encountered a problem with copyright over the use of the Lone Dog. He therefore wrote Begone, dull care to replace it. When these issues were resolved later years the song was included as an appendix item in the 1994 edition.

The real beauty of these songs is that Britten never writes down for the children. These are art songs in the best sense of the word and mix both dark and light humour with seriousness and romance to create a little world of changing scenes and emotions. The texts are, as always, carefully chosen to give Britten maximum variety of mood and to challenge and encourage the children's interest and involvement. The piano parts carry a lot of the responsibility for the creation of mood and atmosphere and ideally need a pianist of reasonable accomplishment to do them justice. In There was a monkey Britten writes an increasingly challenging part which is very effective in making the charged mood rise to its climax. However, he writes an easier alternative part which can be played if the pianist finds the other too difficult.

The mixture of texts gives Britten wonderful opportunities for word painting. The lively Begone, dull care which opens the work, the nonsensical poem of A tragic story where a man wants his pigtail to hang in front so he can see it, the gentle story of the Cuckoo and his progress through the months of the year, the rather sobering story (especially in our post-fox hunting ban days) of the shooting of a fox by a farmer whose geese it has killed, the sublime A New Year's Carol – and so on, leading to the powerful four part canon of Old Abram Brown. These little pieces demonstrate so clearly Britten's genius – his ability to represent the two ships. The pianist needs to be competent and rhythmically well-loved works for upper voices. It was written for George Malcolm’s outstanding boys at Westminster Cathedral with their distinctively bright continental tone. Many other types of upper voices have since adopted it, of course, and these days it is as much performed by women or girls, or mixed boys’ and girls’ voices as by boys alone. The Missa Brevis requires three soloists,
though it is possible to make it work with only two. The choir is divided into three voice parts, the third of which needs to be able to produce low As.

The work is incredibly fresh and original. Part of this is Britten’s organ part which is no ‘accompaniment’ but rather an equal partner in the realisation of the text in music. Britten’s direction in the Kyrie that the voices should sing ‘passionately’ underpins the approach to the performance of the whole work. It is an intensely dramatic reading of these familiar words. The grave passion ‘passionately’ underpins the approach to the performance of the whole work. The grave passion ‘passionately’ underpins the approach to the performance of the whole work.

While not as difficult note-wise as the Ceremony of Carols (and being far shorter as well), there are still plenty of challenges for any group of voices that undertakes this work. It needs three really equal voice parts and solo voices that can sing with confidence and conviction. Tuning issues will also arise at key points, and the ability to tune three part chords instinctively is needed in much of the work. It also helps if the organ which plays with the voices has a suitable range of colours to realise Britten’s intentions.

979-0-060-01469-7 Vocal score
979-0-060-01470-3 Choral score

O can ye sew cushions? (1942) 3’
arranged for SSA and piano by Imogen Holst
Text: Traditional Scottish
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 1
Britten made many folk song arrangements throughout his life with those from the British Isles becoming particularly popular. Imogen Holst, Britten’s amanuensis for many years, made an arrangement of this song for SSA which simply fills out the harmony for the lower parts in well-written singing lines.

979-0-051-45213-9 Choral score

The Oxen (1967)
Carol for women’s voices (two parts) and piano
Text: Thomas Hardy
Publisher: Faber Music
Difficulty level: 1
Peter Pears’ sister asked Britten to write this carol for publication in the National Federation of Women’s Institutes’ Book of Carols (1968). All the Somerset branches of the WI were asked to submit possible texts for Britten to choose from. Hardy’s well-known poem ‘Christmas eve, and twelve of the clock’ brought from Britten a beautiful setting in which the piano part mirrors the tolling of the clock for midnight. It is in three clear sections with the central section being quicker before moving back to the original material for the final part. It is straightforward for singers and memorably effective. It would programme well with Fancie.

0-571-51860-5 Choral score (Part of Three Carols for Upper Voices)

Psalm 150 op. 67 (1962) 6’
for two part children’s voices and instruments
Scoring: Treble instr 1, Treble instr II, bass instr, 2 perc (timps, sd or tamb, cymb, susp cym, trng, tamb or castanets), keyboard. Optional parts, transposed if necessary, for 2 cl; tpt, hn, tbn; va
Text: Psalm 150 in English
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 1-2
This setting of the great psalm of praise which concludes the Psalter is typical of Britten’s compositions for schools. It was composed for the centenary of Britten’s own prep school – Old Buckenham Hall School (called South Lodge School when he was there) – which he attended between 1923 and ’38. As can be seen from the scoring details above it is intended that as many children as possible can be involved in the performance by playing a variety of instruments which are not specifically detailed. So, there are two ‘treble instrument’ parts which might be anything from a recorder to a violin or flute and a ‘bass instrument’ which might be a ‘cello or a bassoon – and so on. The voice parts divide into four (a canon at “let everything that hath breath praise the Lord”) but are basically in two parts and there is a great deal of unison singing.

As one might expect, Britten makes full use of the different forms of praise described in the verses of the psalm to colour his composition. The delightful, dancing 7/8 rhythm of ‘Praise him with the sound of the trumpet’ makes an irresistible, light-hearted and toe-tapping section before the climatic ‘Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord’. A Gloria gives the work a suitably climactic ending.

This is another brilliant, flexible and involving work for children. At only six minutes duration it can form a magical item in a school concert without the additional challenges of scenery/choreography which some of his other works for young people can involve.

979-0-060-01504-5 Vocal/piano score
979-0-060-01505-2 Choral score
979-0-060-06664-3 Set of parts
979-0-060-06663-6 Full Score

Rejoice in the Lamb
for SSA and organ
see Mixed Voices with keyboard

Rosmini Suite (1935) 12’
for boys’ voices and chamber ensemble
Scoring: fl (=picc), ob, cl; 2 perc (xyl, sd, bd, cymb, trng, glock, tamb, susp cym, wb, castanets); piano
Text: Wordless
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 1 (chorus)
This is essentially a chamber ensemble work with a wordless boys’ chorus adding another element to the scoring. I quote Paul Banks’ Britten Catalogue as to the background of the work:

“These arrangements were made in connection with Lotte Reiniger’s short animated silhouette film The Tocher (GPO Film Unit, 1935), but in the event only music from nos 1, 2 and 5 was used on the soundtrack (conducted by Britten). In 1936 nos 1, 2 and 4 were rescored and with two new arrangements formed Soirées musicales, op.9. In 1941 no.3 was reworked as the opening march of Matinées musicales.”

The boys’ voices are used in two movements only. In the second they sing a beautifully lyrical wordless melody to an ‘ah’ vowel or as a hum. In the fifth and final movement they sing a madrigalian ‘tra la la’ in an Allegro con brio which is irresistibly lively and ends with a shout!

979-0-060-83650-3 Piano reduction

Sweet was the song
for upper voices with contralto solo
see Christ’s Nativity in Mixed Voices unaccompanied

Three two-part songs (1932) 6’
1. The Ride-by-nights
2. The Rainbow
3. The Ship of Rio
for boys’ or girls’/women’s voices and piano
Texts: Walter de la Mare
Publisher: Chester Music
Difficulty level: 1
These are three lovely songs making a really delightful set in a concert programme. They were originally called Three Studies in Canon and that says all that needs to be said about how these pieces are structured. Britten loved writing in canon and seemed to tease out the fun of having voices leading and following each other. Remember that fabulous three-part canon in the Ceremony of Carols: This little babe as one of the most brilliant examples. These pieces are very straightforward for all participants – piano and voices and are ideal material for schools or for upper voice choirs looking for original material which lights a special touch paper.

976615 Choral score

The Twelve Apostles (1962) 6’
for tenor solo, unison chorus and piano
Text: traditional
Publisher: Faber Music
Difficulty level: 1
A Wealden Trio (1929, rev.1967)  3’
Christmas Song of the Women
for unaccompanied SSA
Text by Ford Maddox Ford (1873-1939)
Publisher: Faber Music
Difficulty level: 2

The earliest versions of this choral work were composed when Britten was aged only 15, therefore pre-dating A Hymn to the Virgin. He uses an interesting text for what is essentially a miniature scena in which three women bemoan (in dialect – which the performance notes suggest should not be exaggerated!) the fact that Christmas is hard when there is little food, there is no wood for the fire and their husbands are good-for-nothings. They end by feeling aggrieved that it is warm in heaven and cold on earth but note that Jesus was born in equally poor conditions as the ones in which they live and so they can relate to him and his parents on this level. Britten, young as he was, felt the instinctive drama of this (as the incipient opera composer).

The carol can be sung by three solo voices, or three soloists with a chorus, or the whole piece can be sung by a choir. The most dramatic option is the soloist followed by a chorus which is surely the way Britten intended it. Soloists should be placed a little apart from the chorus, if this option is taken, in order that issues of balance don’t arise. This is especially true when, in the second half, a soloist sings with the chorus.

The carol is essentially straightforward and ought not to present undue problems to a choir used to singing rhythmically, dealing with duplets in a compound time signature and which can field three confident soloists.

0-571-51860-3 Choral score

This piece was first performed along with King Herod and the Cock by the London Boy Singers (see the entry above). It is interesting to note that Britten originally intended a larger-scale work which would have become his Canticle IV but what he wrote was beyond the capabilities of the London Boy Singers and so Britten switched track leaving the other work unfinished and wrote these two folk song arrangements instead.

The tune of this song is well-known, lively, and perfect for singing by a group of children. The pianist takes the weight of responsibility for creating the right mood to support the singers. The idea of using a tenor soloist in dialogue with the children is brilliant. Not only does it add colour and texture but an element of drama as well. The ending rushes madly for the final barline!

0-571-50595-3 Choral score
Ballad of Heroes op. 14 (1939)  
for tenor (or soprano) solo, chorus and orchestra  

**Difficulty level:** 3  
*for chorus*

This highly dramatic and rarely performed work was written for a Festival of Music for the People and first performed on 5 April 1939 at the Queen’s Hall, London, conducted by Constant Lambert. It is another of Britten’s passionate outbursts against the waste and horror of war which had already engulfed Europe once earlier in the century and was about to do so for the second time. The declaration of war was made on 3 September that year. His choice of texts is highly significant. He had collaborated with Randall Swingler as recently as the previous year on his short unaccompanied choral work, Advance Democracy – another politically motivated piece (see separate entry). Both Swingler and Auden were aiming in their poems to goad the downtrodden Englishman into action. Britten’s genius lifts this work above being just a worthy celebration of the 500th anniversary of the foundation of Basle University. It is tongue-in-cheek satire, a commentary on the state of the nation’s choral life. The melody Britten uses is from Valentine Schanus’s Schmatze Lieder of 1539, later set by Luther to the words of the Lord’s Prayer and simply known as Vater Unser (Our Father) and used a number of times by J.S. Bach.

The choral parts are straightforward and designed for simply effective declamation. The overture is an ABA shape with the central section being a quietly reflective respite from the excitement. The musical lines bear some semblance to the shape and feel of the choral melody thereby binding the music more grippingly together before the strings take off once again on their galloping semiquavers. The choir comes in again for the final few pages of the score and the whole edifice builds to a thrilling ending.

This is a great concert opener with or without a special occasion to justify it. Short, sharp and effective it has the audience putting their seat belts on and wanting the road ahead filled with an intensity rare in music of this period. A great piece for a Britten centenary concert.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CD track 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-571-50144-3 Chorus part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-571-50151-6 Study score</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cantata academica, carmen basiliense, op. 62 (1959)  
21' for SATB soloists, chorus and orchestra

**Difficulty level:** 4  
*for chorus*

Britten’s genius lifts this work above being just a worthy celebration of the 500th anniversary of the foundation of Basle University. It is tongue-in-cheek mockery and mockingly non-academic while referring all the time to academic musical forms and formulae. It is written in two parts (everything is in the statutory Latin of student touchline shout. This has outrageously high notes for the tenors or encouraging the kind of noisy ‘I’m from the best university’ kind of student touchline shout. This has outrageously high notes for the tenors and basses who hum a student song; another terrific Britten scherzo; and a slow and powerful recitative and choral and a slow Epilogue in which the funeral march music from the opening returns.

Virtually the whole of the first section of the opening movement is in unison for the chorus. The slow treadmill of the funeral march is given an added solemnity by this unison singing. The first ten bars are recited on a low C, the next eight bars an octave higher, and after this there is a mixture of simple harmony (more to underpin the text) and quick-fire phrases interrupt the ongoing relentless orchestral progress often underlined by the last section of the Cantata which brings in the bells, piano, huge percussion and the inevitable chorale in which the choir sings ‘that a free academy may thrive in a free community, for ever the ornament and treasure of illustrious Basle’.

There are seven movements in Pars I and six in Pars II. The tenor soloist is given three florid recitatives, accompanied only by a piano, which act as bridges between other orchestrally accompanied movements. Of these the most noteworthy are the Arisio con canto popolare for soprano solo with tenors and basses who hum a student song; another terrific Britten scherzo; and a wonderfully rauous final pair of movements (Canon ed ostinato and Corale con canto) where Britten seems to be aping the Vivat Reginal cries in Parry’s I was glad or encouraging the kind of noisy ‘I’m from the best university’ kind of student touchline shout. This has outrageously high notes for the tenors (top B) which further endorse this feeling. There are real echoes of the Spring Symphony (see separate entry) final movement here which are further underlined by the last section of the Cantata which brings in the bells, piano, huge percussion and the inevitable chorale in which the choir sings ‘that a free academy may thrive in a free community, for ever the ornament and treasure of illustrious Basle’.

This may not be Britten at his most soul-searching but, as always, there is plenty here to enjoy, especially if the work is not taken too seriously. It is a celebratory, occasional piece and it could be well taken up by other academic establishments celebrating big anniversaries. The chorus parts are not very difficult, though they do present challenges for the choir – not least in having tenors capable of those very high notes at the end. The Tema seriato con fugato is sinewy and needs careful tuning. It also has the subject regularly given upside
down after its initial sounding by the basses. All good fun.

979-0-060-01402-4 Vocal/piano score
979-0-060-01401-7 Study score

Cantata misericordium, op. 69 (1963)  20'
for tenor and baritone solos, small chorus and string quartet, string orchestra, piano, harp and timpani.

Text: In Latin by Patrick Wilkinson
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 4 (chorus parts)

This work is a different as chalk from cheese from the Cantata academica. Here is a soaringly beautiful work which presses all Britten’s sympathetic buttons. It was composed for the centenary of the Red Cross and first performed in Geneva on 1 September 1963 conducted by Ernest Ansermet. Britten worked with his librettist, Patrick Wilkinson, to create a dramatic scene around the parable of the Good Samaritan. How appropriate this was for the organisation whose work it was intended to celebrate. Wilkinson set it in Latin, giving the Cantata a timeless sense of the universality of the message the parable conveys.

Britten’s scoring further emphasises the intimacy of the work which has echoes of Saint Nicolas and the Ceremony of Carols in its use of the harp and piano. The separate string quartet, however, is the truly personal touch giving that powerful sense of looking in on a private conversation. The quartet begins the work with a contrapuntal figure which returns at key moments as a refrain or as a joining passage marking the arrival of a new potential source of help to the wounded man, and again at the end. This is a work which barely raises its voice. The emphasis is on compassion and not on the violence done to the traveller who was so badly injured and so callously ignored by the priest and the Levite who passed by. This Cantata immediately followed the composition of the War Requiem, and Owen’s pity and waste of war is at the heart of this new work which could have painted a very different picture of righteous indignation or the fighting which would leave the traveller broken by the wayside. The end of the work also has strong resonance with the War Requiem when the Samaritan has taken the traveller to recover in a local inn and says: ‘sleep now, my friend, sleep: forget your injuries.’ Britten has achieved a remarkable effect in this work. It leaves an indelible impression on its listeners and, like many familiar pieces which are regularly performed. Both these works make individual people’s reactions are to these two scores there is no doubt that they represent a completely different aspect of Britten’s creativity from the many familiar pieces which are regularly performed. Both these works make powerful statements and are emotionally intense. They need good, experienced, intelligent, thoughtful, and vocally interesting readers to do justice to what is a hugely important element in their performance.

The work is divided into three parts: Before the Creation, Angels in Scripture, and Angels in Common Life and at our Death. Michael was, of course, an archangel and his feast day marks the celebration of all angels. The theme of angels is therefore an obvious one. The musical movements are separated by spoken texts taken from many sources. It is ideal to have two voices, a male and a female, to bring additional vocal colour to a performance. As with The World of the Spirit it is perfectly possible to cut sections of text if they are felt to be too long.

The work opens with Britten’s representation of chaos. This is done effectively by other worldly timpani rolls, 32’ pitch notes on the organ and quiet unison lines from the strings. Sudden outbursts of forte from the organ (one falling fiery meteorites lightening up the gloom). The first speaker joins the end of this movement and then both give the first set of readings. The short first part is concluded by a big choral movement. Part II begins with a series of short readings interspersed by brief choral references to Jacob, Elisha and Mary who have featured in the readings. The fourth movement which follows is a big choral movement this time including the soloists. It is based on the plainsong ‘Christe, sanctorum decus Angelorum’. The fifth movement is an extraordinary coup de théâtre, setting the famous passage in the Book of Revelation about war in heaven. This is St. Michael’s battle with the dragon, Lucifer, and his victory resulting in Lucifer’s expulsion from Heaven. Britten’s brilliant imagination has the tenors and basses speaking their part but at given approximate pitches. He also asks that as the dynamic rises, so does the pitch. The effect is animal and dramatic. This movement concludes Part II.

Part III has some very compelling readings which are responded to by further fascinating choral settings. Movement seven, in particular, a tenor solo aria, conjures an extraordinary sound world. The text begins ‘A thousand thousand gleaming fires Seem’d kindling in the air... Methought the very breath I breathed “Was full of sparks divine...” It gives clear hints of future operatic music and seems somehow to sound like fireflies in the way Britten uses his strings, both with muted and a mixture of bowed and plucked instruments, and works his textures. The soloist is given staccato phrases to sing in among more lyrical parts. The whole thing is mesmerising in its effect. The ninth movement ‘Who’s dwelleth under the defence of the most High’, a setting of Psalm 91 in the Myles Coverdale translation, is the only unaccompanied setting in the work and it is also available separately (see separate entry). Britten uses another chant as its basis – that of the fifth psalm tone. The final movement is a choral setting of the well-known hymn ‘Ye watchers and ye holy ones’ to the tune Hyfrydol. Reaching a powerful climax with a final ‘Amen’ the music winds down with the choir singing repeated ‘Amen’ and the soloists singing ‘Heaven is here, and all the angels of Heaven’.

While the format of this work is similar to The World of the Spirit its musical language is very different. In many ways this piece is more forward looking than its successor but in other ways the next work is more satisfying and more memorable – to this listener at least – in a concert performance. Whatever individual people’s reactions are to these two scores there is no doubt that they represent a completely different aspect of Britten’s creativity from the many familiar pieces which are regularly performed. Both these works make powerful statements and are emotionally intense. They need good, experienced, intelligent, thoughtful, and vocally interesting readers to do justice to what is a hugely important element in their performance. The Company of Heaven is less expensive to perform than The World of the Spirit but it is of course likely that the orchestration of the rest of the programme will dictate which piece is preferred.

979-0-060-01409-0 Choral score
0-571-51090-6 Full score

Children’s Crusade
A Ballad for Children’s voices and orchestra
see Children’s and Upper Voices

The Company of Heaven (1937)  45’
Cantata for speaker(s), soprano and tenor soloists, chorus, timpani, organ and strings
Text compiled by R. Ellis Roberts
Publisher: Faber Music
Difficulty level: 2-3 (chorus)

Britten wrote this work as a radio feature for the BBC marking Michaelmas Day – St Michael and all Angels – on 29 September. One of two such works he composed close together, this was written in 1937 and The World of the Spirit (see separate entry) the following year. He collaborated with the writer Richard Ellis Roberts on both projects. Britten was only 23 when he wrote this work but his reputation had already reached the point where he was recognised as one of the most formidable talents of his generation. When one considers that his set of virtuoso choral variations A Boy was Born was already four years old and his Frank Bridge variations had just been completed it is hardly surprising that the BBC would seek to commission him.

This unusual arrangement of the British National Anthem was written for the Leeds Festival and sets two verses. The first is miraculously piano and the hushed awe engendered is extraordinary. How did he come up with something so simple and so original? This verse is in E major. Four bars later and a molot crescendo past we are in a flag waving B major and singing for all we are worth. The final phrase is repeated twice to round the whole thing off. It is a prime example of the simplest things so often being the most effective, as heard when this version has been programmed at The Last Night of the Proms.

979-0-060-01472-7 Vocal/piano score

Inkslinger’s Love Song
for tenor solo, chorus and orchestra
see Choral Music from the Operas

God Save the Queen (1961)  3’
for SSAATTBB and orchestra
Scoring: 2,2,2,2; 4,2,4,3; timps; 2 perc (cymb, sd, bd); strings
Britten also made a reduced orchestration in 1967:
2,2,2,2; 2,2,0; (ad lib); timps; 2 perc (cymb, sd, bd) strings
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 1-2

This unusual arrangement of the British National Anthem was written for the Leeds Festival and sets two verses. The first is miraculously piano and the hushed awe engendered is extraordinary. How did he come up with something so simple and so original? This verse is in E major. Four bars later and a molot crescendo past we are in a flag waving B major and singing for all we are worth. The final phrase is repeated twice to round the whole thing off. It is a prime example of the simplest things so often being the most effective, as heard when this version has been programmed at The Last Night of the Proms.
Lullaby of Dream Shadows
for chorus and orchestra
see Choral Music from the Operas

Praise We Great Men
8'
for SATB solos, chorus and orchestra

Orchestrated and completed by Colin Matthews (1976)

(3 fl III = picc, 2 ob I-III, 2 cl I-II=bass, 2 bsn I-IV, 2 tpt, 2 or 1 trb/timp/s
2 perc (bd, cym, vib, glock) piano/harp/strings

Text: Edith Sitwell
Publisher: Faber Music
Difficulty level: 2 (chorus)

Edith Sitwell had composed her poem ‘Praise We Great Men’ for Britten, who wanted it set tomistislav Rostropovich to perform in his first season as conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington. Britten got about half way through but he became so ill that he could not complete it. He therefore talked to the composer Colin Matthews, who had recently collaborated with him on completing the Welcome Ode (see separate entry), and agreed that Matthews should orchestrate the work. Matthews added a coda as a ‘completion’ which was simply a repeat of an earlier section of the work.

The work opens with a dramatic gesture from the choir with no orchestral preamble. A great cry of ‘Praise we great men!’ sweeps up and down with equally dramatic dynamic shifts from forte to pianissimo or, a little later, from a ff to pp. Matthews’ orchestration is instinctively colourful and shows his deep empathy with Britten’s soundworld. Sitwell composed her poem in stanzas of unequal length. According to Matthews, Britten originally marked the poem up in eleven sections which he changed to ten when he united the first two. This division into short ‘movements’ gave him plenty of opportunities for new colour and variety of forces. Thus the first section is scene-setting and triumphant. The second uses the four soloists which Britten told Matthews he envisaged as ‘leading singers of a professional choir rather than as fully fledged “solosits”. He was therefore thinking of them chorally and as a consort of blended and balanced voices. The full chorus joins, and the first word of the next section ends the previous one. A compound time signature heralds a new mood and altos and basses sing quietly and ‘marked’ in praise of ‘Those who can raise Gold spirits of men from their rough Ape-dust’. There is much pairing of parts in this section between altos and basses and sopranos and tenors. At figure 4 there is an extended tenor solo which is the music Matthews took for his coda which follows to end the fragment.

Though this is a truncated work, the slow coda, only fourteen bars long, is long enough to impart a satisfyingly rounded-off feeling. What is missing is obviously enough to impart a satisfyingly rounded-off feeling. What is missing is obviously the necessary ‘coda as a “completion”’ which was simply a repeat of an earlier section of the work. Its orchestration is minimal and the string parts are aimed at connecting with young people. Typical of Britten is the eminently practical nature of the work. Its orchestration is minimal and the string parts are written to be played by amateurs led, as Britten notes, preferably by a quartet of professionals. He also notes that the piano duet part is not difficult and can also be played by less experienced players. Only the first percussion part should be taken by a professional. He should also play as many of the other instruments as he can. The other parts can be played ad libitum by one or more ‘enthusiastic amateurs’. This is Britten the social musician, the encourager and provider of good new music for the young of all abilities. If some of the music is not what the classical music establishment thought the composer should be spending his time on, we should focus instead on how young performer’s faces light up as they get stuck into the task in hand and involved with the story. It has all the right elements for our ‘Harry Potter’ age: magic (lots of miracles), drama (storm at sea), imprisonment (will he, won’t he get out?), and even a wand – of sorts – in his crozier!

Rejoice in the Lamb
for SATB and orchestra (wind quintet, percussion, organ (ad lib) and strings)
see Mixed Voices with keyboard

Saint Nicolas op. 42 (1947-48)
50’
Cantata for tenor solo, chorus (SATB), semi-chorus (SA), four solo boys, string orchestra, piano duet, percussion and organ

Scoring: Piano duet; organ; strings; percussion (Timpani/side drum, bass drum, tenor drum, cymbal, triangle, gong, whip, tambourine)
Text: Eric Crozier
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 3

Saint Nicolas (note the name has no ‘H’ in it) was written for the centenary of Lancing College in Sussex, the independent secondary boarding school on the south coast of England which Peter Pears had attended in his teens. It has a vast chapel intended by its founder, Revd Nathaniel Woodard, as the cathedral for all the schools of his extensive foundation known collectively as ‘Woodard’ schools.
Spring Symphony op. 44 (1948-49) for soprano, alto and tenor soli, mixed chorus, boys’ choir and orchestra

Texts:

- **Part One**
  - Introduction: Anon. 16th century
  - The merry cuckoo: Edmund Spenser
  - Spring: Thomas Nashe
  - The driving boy: George Peal and John Clare
  - I am thy morning star: John Milton

- **Part Two**
  - Welcome maids of honour: Robert Herrick
  - Waters above: Henry Vaughan
  - Out on the lawn I lie in bed: W H Auden

- **Part Three**
  - When will my may come: Richard Barnefield
  - Fair and fair: George Peal
  - Sound the flute: William Blake

- **Part Four (Finale)**
  - London, to thee I do present: Beaumont and Fletcher
  - the merry month of May: Anon.

**Sumer is icumen in**

Scoring: (8t vs p, (4t vs p), 2 ob, ca, 2 cl in (fl), bass cl, 2 bn, dbn; 4 hn, 3 tpt in C, 3 trb, tuba, cow horn; timps, 4 perc (sd, td, tamb, cymb, bd, gong, bells in A, Bb, vb, xl, castanets, vbr); 2 harps; strings

**Difficulty level:** 5

The Spring Symphony was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Music Foundation and is dedicated to Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It was actually premiered at the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam in July 1949 before its American premiere the following month at Tanglewood by its dedicatees. This work is a major undertaking from all points of view. It uses a huge orchestra (complete with cow horn which has to be hired specially), a children’s choir whose tone quality is completely different from the main choir – a second group of sopranos don’t know. Beyond these early works which give us such insights into the development of Britten’s musical personality, Richly rewarding discoveries.

Te Deum in C for SATB, treble or soprano solo and orchestra (harp or piano and strings)

**Psalm 130 (12’)**

Scoring: 2,s=2(CA),1,bass cl; 1,2,3=(bass),5; timps, strings

**Psalm 150 (7’)**

Scoring: 2,2=2(picc),2,2; 2,3,3,3=(bass),1; timps; 1 perc (cymb, sd, tamburo militaire); strings

These two psalm settings were written in 1932 when Britten was a student at the Royal College of Music as part of his submission for a Mendelssohn scholarship for which he also wrote the Phantasy Quintet in F minor. The scholarship application was not successful but the committee awarded Britten £50 in order that he should not feel discouraged! These psalm settings are the only examples of large-scale choral/orchestral music we have from Britten at this stage of his career and are therefore very valuable as markers and as pointers to his later development. (his nominal teacher), Howells and Vaughan Williams were all encouraging to him after reading the scores, and Vaughan Williams tried hard to get them a performance – something which never happened.

The words of Psalm 130 form that emotive cry for help: 'Out of the deep have I called unto Thee, 0 Lord. Lord hear my voice.' The basic motif for the work is the slowly unwinding and muted compound time quaver (8th note) figure which the strings play at the start. The tempo marking is Poco lento ma comodo and it shows Britten’s keenness to ensure just the right kind of tempo for the music. Attention to detail is evident everywhere, a hallmark of his style even at this stage. The vocal parts are not very demanding and there is much pairing of S/T and A/B. The orchestral scoring is also commendably spare allowing the big moments to really stand out when they arrive. This setting has a real sweep and emotional depth to it and it is curious that no performance was ever achieved.

The paeon of praise which forms the text of Psalm 150 is well-known and is a gift for the composer who can reflect all the different instruments detailed in the text and build up a terrific head of steam. Britten actually set this Psalm again much later in his career in 1962 (see separate entry) but the two settings are fundamentally different. Here, in a 6/8 time signature, the strings play a busy semiquaver (16th note) figure which is interrupted by more static wind chords, before the strings take off again. I wonder if it is possible that this opening was in Britten’s mind when he came to make his setting of the Jubilate Deo in C (see separate entry). It isn’t that the music is the same, but the lively instrumental opening seems to come from a similar mindset. The choir’s entry is in unison and has both the static wind chords and the busy string writing around it. Then things get going and all sorts of colours and descriptive elements are introduced including a particularly effective pizzicato for the ‘lute and harp’. The work ends with an exciting flourish.

In these two wonderfully contrasted settings Britten shows us his aptitude for choral writing, his feel for the balance between choir and orchestra, and his imagination in writing some beautifully descriptive music. We need to hear these early works which give us such insights into the development of Britten’s musical personality. Richly rewarding discoveries.
of warning right at the opening of the work and appears throughout. The point of the tritone, however, is its dual capacity as a discord in its melodic guise, and its harmonic role as part of a chord leading to resolution (it forms part of a dominant 7th chord, for instance). This in itself mirrors the themes of conflict and reconciliation which underpin the whole work. From a practical point of view, however, there are serious tuning issues relating to this interval and this is just one of the many performance challenges which face the intrepid conductor taking on the work. The boys’ choir is placed at a distance and has a chamber organ or harmonium to accompany the voices. This choir still has to be co-ordinated with the main orchestra and will either need to be in the sightline of the principal conductor or give its own conductor.

Layout is a major issue for performers of the War Requiem. Because of the way in which the chamber orchestra and the full orchestra segue in and out of each other’s sections it is much better, in practical terms, for the two groups to be placed together directly under the baton of the main conductor. It is the boys’ choir and its organist who need a satellite conductor especially if they are ‘at a distance’ as Britten directs.

The next major issue is that of balance. Such a large orchestra will threaten even a bawdy bit parts (the tenor solo is a case in point) and bring about a possible reduction in drama, such as those moments of obliteration where it is the effect which matters. Such points occur in the Dies Irae and the Hosanna of the Sanctus and Benedictus amongst others. But much more seriously, the chamber orchestra is given such a characterful part to play that the conductor needs to be very careful that the soloists are not drowned. The most important issue is the audibility of the words. While the words of the Latin Mass are, on the whole very well known, Owen’s poetry is not. The power of the presentation of this work is in the delivery of the message. If that message is weakened by carelessness with balance, or excessive loss of clarity due to an over-resonant acoustic, the performance will not achieve its full purpose however brilliant the playing and singing may be in itself.

After the War Requiem’s early success the critical tide in some quarters turned against the piece. This was a time when the music press was increasingly focusing on the European experimental avant-garde, and composers who extended tonal traditions, such as Britten and Shostakovich, were becoming difficult to place in terms of perceived ‘relevancy’. Of course, performers and audiences remained true to the work and commentators have progressively restored the War Requiem to its central place in the musical canon. With the passing of half a century the critical concern – obsession – with fashion, style and language has faded into insignificance and one is left with the purity of a magisterial work of genius and a message which is as powerful in today’s world of conflicts as it was in 1962.

Listeners and writers may argue about which of Britten’s many great works represent the pinnacle of his achievement. Some will say Peter Grimes, others may point to Billy Budd or his third string quartet – or whichever work speaks most powerfully to that individual. I would say, however, that between the schoolboy A Hymn to the Virgin and the mature War Requiem we have two Starkly powerful works representing two absolute extremes of scale but which demonstrate with vivid clarity the all-embracing nature of Britten’s genius.

Welcome Ode op. 95 (1976)
8
for young people’s chorus (SAB with optional T) and orchestra

Style: 2 fl, 2 ob, 2 c, 2 cl, 2 bn, 4 hn, 2 tpt, 3 trb, tba/timp = 5/sd perc (bd, sd, cymb, trgl, tamb, xylo)/piano/strings

Texts:
1. March
2. Jig
3. Roundel
4. Modulation
5. Canon

Publisher: Faber Music

Difficulty level: 2-3

This irresistible work was written for the Queen’s Silver Jubilee visit to Ipswich on 11 July 1977, though Britten was to die before the premiere. Colin Matthews orchestrated it under Britten’s supervision. The work comes from the same essential stable as the Spring Symphony and the opera Gloriana (see the entry in this guide to the Choral Dances from Gloriana) but, written for a young people’s chorus, is kept simple, direct and engaging. Britten’s sense of practicality led him to write the chorus parts for sopranos, altos and basses only. There is a short
optional section for tenors in the first movement March. Tenors, of course, can easily sing along with the basses and have no reason to be excluded from the choir. Real tenors, as all choral people know, are, like Rachmaninov’s Russian low basses, ‘as rare as asparagus at Christmas’, and Britten knew perfectly well that young men’s voices do not settle into a tenor or bass range properly for some years into adulthood.

The March is brisk, forthright and upbeat. The text is a royal welcome bringing in the whole population of the countryside, animals and all. The orchestral Jig which follows starts with a fiddle solo – very much a recreation of a country fiddler playing solo for people to dance to. The movement swirls around as the lads twirl their girls in a breathless dance. It is simple and yet also incredibly effective writing. The Roundel brings back the chorus in a sort-of round which starts with the soprano and moves to the altos and then basses. A Modulation movement for orchestra links this movement with the final Canon in which the theme is given in unison by the choir first and then broken down into its proper separated entries. The ending has three sharply punctuated and short final chords.

This is another work which is an ‘occasional’ piece but as a taster of what Britten has to offer young singers it is a gift. It can be programmed in a number of ways and would work well as an ‘overture’, or might be used as a celebratory piece for the opening of a new hall, or the welcoming of a dignitary – or simply because it is a good piece!

The World of the Spirit (1938) 42'
for SATB soloists, speaker(s), chorus and orchestra
Scoring: 2 (I=picc),2,2,2; 4,2,3,1; perc (1) (cymb, susp cymb, gong, sd, bd, tamb); timps; harp; organ; strings
Text: various authors compiled by R. Ellis Roberts
Publisher: Chester Music
Difficulty level: 3-4 (choir)

This unusual and in many ways remarkable work was the second quasi cantata Britten wrote specifically for BBC radio (the other is The Company of Heaven – see separate entry). The performing version published in 2001 makes suggested cuts (by Donald Mitchell) in the extensive readings which form a critically important part of the performance. A short prologue featuring the all-important plainsong chant Veni Creator Spiritus, which many will know as the hymn tune sung to the words ‘Come Holy Ghost our souls inspire’, opens the work, appears several times throughout and returns at the end in a fully worked out arrangement. In between these points the speakers read a variety of texts mostly on the subject of peace, generosity of spirit, forgiveness, joy in faith, steadfastness in adversity and the overarching importance of loving one’s neighbour – a common thread through Britten’s life reaching its climax in the composition of the War Requiem. Following the readings there are a number of movements for chorus, for soloists, and with a variety of accompaniments – sometimes organ alone, sometimes a small instrumental group, and sometimes the full orchestra.

One of the most interesting aspects of the work is the youthful Britten’s (he was 24) musical responses to the words he was setting. There are points at which one unequivocally notes Britten’s familiar language which was just in the process of development. Others, though, seem almost to parody other composers. The second movement (O Thou that movest all), basically a hymn, is almost pure Mendelssohn in its lush chromaticism. He just avoids it becoming pastiche, but it sets a non-threatening tone to the soundworld in the early stages of the work. The next movement (The sun, the moon, the stars) has a wonderful sweep to it – almost a tidal motion, perhaps suggestive of his increasing obsession with the sea. It is a beautiful movement. This is my commandment which follows the next readings takes its cue (literally) from the words ‘and after the fire a still small voice’. The utter stillness of this movement is breathtaking and it segues into the next movement With wide-embracing love which is an unashamedly romantic waltz. It is actually in 6/8 but the pulse is so slow that it could be easily taken for 3/4. And that concludes Part I.

Part II begins with the fifth movement O life, O love, now undivided. This uses the melody of the Mendelssohnian hymn from the second movement but very differently presented. Over static string chords the tune is sung in unison and the phrase ends are punctuated by harp chords which are a pre-echo of similar treatments in Saint Nicolas for instance. This highly effective movement develops beautifully. In the second verse the choir harmonises the melody accompanied by lower strings but still having its phrase ends coloured by harp and upper string chords. Finally, the soprano soloist joins fulfilling a gently descending role. Next comes a section of varied readings interspersed by short vocal phrases for the soloists accompanied by organ. This section is more about the spoken word than about the music. The ‘doxology’ to this section, which is what the next movement (The spirit of the Lord) feels like, begins reflectively but suddenly becomes an ecstatically dancing Alleluia. This big movement is the last of Part II.

Part III begins with a beautiful soprano aria (O knowing, glorious Spirit!) accompanied by harp and violin and flute solos. This movement is a real Britten soundscape especially in its ending. This is followed by a setting of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ God’s Grandeur (The world is charged with the grandeur of God). Britten was to base his unaccompanied setting of these words for his choral cycle A.M.D.G. (see separate entry) on the music from this movement. A.M.D.G. was written the year after The World of the Spirit and so this music was still very much in his mind as he wrote the second version. The movements share a terrific energy and almost relentless progress throughout. They also share melodic elements, especially the little chromatic rising figure which initially appears at the end of the very first vocal phrase. The quick repetitions of ‘have trod’ are replicated almost exactly, and the treatment of the gentle phrase ‘Because the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods’ is almost identically set in the later composition. It is fascinating to see how Britten wanted to develop his setting in this work into a larger-scale unaccompanied setting so soon afterwards.

The epilogue to the score, though not quite the final music, is a fully worked out arrangement of the plainsong melody heard at the beginning. This shows Britten’s enjoyment of hymn singing which was to be such an important part of compositions like Saint Nicolas and Noye’s Fludde. The work ends in a quietly contemplative coda with a gentle choral ‘Amen’.

The World of the Spirit is a fascinating and absorbing score. It is completely outside the normal Britten oeuvre and is yet another example of a rarity which should be taken up and widely used. Audiences will love this music, and if the spoken parts are felt to be too lengthy some judicious pruning can easily and effectively be undertaken. Donald Mitchell made cuts from the original in putting the work together for publication and in doing so sanctioned others doing the same if the need or feeling arose.

CD track 30

Part I begins with the fifth movement O life, O love, now undivided. This uses the melody of the Mendelssohnian hymn from the second movement but very differently presented. Over static string chords the tune is sung in unison and the phrase ends are punctuated by harp chords which are a pre-echo of similar treatments in Saint Nicolas for instance. This highly effective movement develops beautifully. In the second verse the choir harmonises the melody accompanied by lower strings but still having its phrase ends coloured by harp and upper string chords. Finally, the soprano soloist joins fulfilling a gently descending role. Next comes a section of varied readings interspersed by short vocal phrases for the soloists accompanied by organ. This section is more about the spoken word than about the music. The ‘doxology’ to this section, which is what the next movement (The spirit of the Lord) feels like, begins reflectively but suddenly becomes an ecstatically dancing Alleluia. This big movement is the last of Part II.

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Carry her over the water (1939/41) 2'
from the Operetta Paul Bunyan op.17
SSATTBB
arranged by Colin Matthews from an ensemble in Act II scene 2
Text: W H Auden
Publisher: Faber Music
Difficulty level: 1-2
This simple and beautifully effective chorus in three verses is entirely choral
with a short section in verse two for upper voices. Only the altos don't divide,
but the division of all the other voices give this short piece a richness which
sounds lovely when Britten’s performance directions are observed (dynamics,
articulation and word colour).
0-571-50594-5 Choral score

Choral Dances from Gloriana (1953) 9'/11'
version for SATB (1954) 9'
version for tenor solo, harp and chorus (1967, for the
opening of the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London) 11'
Text: William Plomer
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 2-3
These colourful pieces form a masque in the opera which was performed for
Queen Elizabeth I (Gloriana) on her visit to Norwich and performed by local
people for her entertainment and in loyal homage. Each short scene represents
a different group: Time, Concord, country girls, (S/A) young rustics and fishermen (T/B) and a finale in which all pay homage to their Queen. In the
version for tenor solo with harp and chorus these movements are prefaced and
linked by the soloist with harp who sets the scene for each movement and, in
the final homage, joins the choir by adding a fifth vocal line (the harp also joins
this movement) which transforms the piece.
These pieces make an ideal concert item and are not very difficult. They do
however need reasonably agile sopranos/altos for the Country Girls’ movements,
and a good balanced team of two tenors and two basses for the Rustics and Fishermen. As with many of Britten’s choral works there is a lovely balance of
moods between the movements which helps to make a satisfying whole. The
Final Dance of Homage is particularly moving with its imitative lines moving
with a short section in verse two for upper voices. Only the altos don't divide,
but the division of all the other voices give this short piece a richness which
sounds lovely when Britten’s performance directions are observed (dynamics,
articulation and word colour).

Inkslinger’s Love Song (Paul Bunyan) (1939-41) 5'
for tenor solo, T/B chorus, orchestra
Scoring: 2 tpt, 2 trb, tuba/1 perc (sd) (timps/harp/piano/strings)
Text: W H Auden
Publisher: Faber Music
Difficulty level: 1 (for chorus)
Britten withdrew Paul Bunyan after its first performance and only revised it in
1974. At that time he omitted two numbers involving chorus: Inkslinger’s Love
Song and Lullaby of Dream Shadows. These were published as separate items
after Britten’s death.
Paul Bunyan was the mythical lumberjack giant whose exploits helped create
the birth of the independent America. Auden described Inkslinger (Paul Bunyan’s book-keeper) as: “the man of speculative and critical intelligence,
whose temptation is to despise those who do the manual work that makes
the life of thought possible... Inkslinger is the only person capable of understanding
who Paul Bunyan is, and, in a sense, the operaetta is an account of his process
of discovery.” Inkslinger finds himself called upon in this number to show how a
love song should be created. The chorus asks:
‘But how do you think we should address her?’ Johnny Inkslinger replies:
‘You must sing her a love song.’ ‘That’s too hard and takes too long.’

‘Nonsense’ replies Johnny, ‘It’s quite easy, and the longer it is, the more
she’ll like it. Use the longest words you can think of. Like this:’
...and so the song begins and Johnny proceeds to sing every long word he can
think of. It’s amusing and rather touching. The chorus of men, when they enter,
play up to the procession of verbosity in a duet with the soloist and the whole
song ends with the quite simple (at last) declaration: ‘I love you.’
This is not a particularly easy piece to programme as you need the forces listed
above and the piece is only five minutes long. But it is a delightful novelty if the
right context can be found.

Lullaby of Dream Shadows (Paul Bunyan) (1939-41) 6’
for chorus and orchestra
Chorus of 2 sopranos and 2 tenors for most of the number, but with a SATB
section at the end. Orchestra (fl/picc, ob, cl, sax, b-cl, bsn/2 hrs, 2 tpt, 2 trb,
tuba/timps/1 perc: SD, tri, susp.cym/harp/piano/strings)
Text: W H Auden
Publisher: Faber Music
Difficulty level: 2 (chorus)
The background to this extract from the original production of Paul Bunyan is
detailed under the entry for Inkslinger’s Love Song. This number was originally
the finale to Act 1 but was cut by Britten after the preview performance before
the first night.
The sopranos and tenors have a conversation about the dullness of being
perpetually beautiful – the all-American beauty. ‘We’re very very tired of
admiration.’ Again, there is humour in the extract but also a serious message
which is underlined when a full chorus completes the number.
As for Inkslinger’s Love Song this is not an easy piece to programme and the
orchestra for this piece is much larger. There will always be situations which
arise, however, where these pieces are perfect for a given situation, and they
offer a lovely way of having a taste of Britten’s stage music when mounting the
whole work would be impractical.

Tallis’s Canon (from Noye’s Fludde) (1958) 3’
for SATB chorus, unison voices and organ or piano
accompaniment.
Text: Joseph Addison
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 1
The magical arrangement of this well-known hymn tune which concludes
Noye’s Fludde is reduced to a single verse arrangement in the Cambridge
Hymnal No.34. As in the opera the words are Joseph Addison’s ‘The spacial
firmament on high’.
978-0-521-20398-2 The Cambridge Hymnal (Cambridge University Press)

Two choruses from Peter Grimes (1945)
1. Song of the Fishermen (4’)
‘Working Chorus’ from the opera Peter Grimes for SATB and piano
Three of the four stanzas from Act I scene 1 and the fourth from Act III
This arrangement published 1947/48, arranger unknown
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 1
This is an inspired choice for an extract from one of Britten’s greatest
masterpieces. The piano part sets the peaceful scene at the end of another
hard-labouring, rough-hewn day of fishing involving the whole community
– men and women. The beautifully simple choral phrases exude both peace
and exhaustion. The different verses tell their story passionately building to
a powerful climax under which the rising and falling figuration in the piano
part mimics the rolling waves of the sea. It ends as it began, quietly using that
familiar Britten fingerprint of the rising and falling arpeggio of superimposed
lefts.
2. Old Joe has gone fishing (2')
Round for SATB chorus and piano
Extract (much arranged from both chorus and solo parts) from Act 1 scene 2 of Peter Grimes.
This arrangement published 1947/48, arranger unknown
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Difficulty level: 2-3

The lively nature of this wonderfully exuberant piece makes a perfect foil for the Song of the Fishermen described above. It is much more challenging to sing but is well worth the effort of learning it. Choirs lap it up because it is such fun. It is a round, and the first challenge is the 7/4 time signature – effectively 1/2; 1/2; 1/2; 3/4. There are four melodies with their associated words. The first is ‘Old Joe has gone fishing and Young Joe has gone fishing and You Know has gone fishing and found them a shoal’. The second – completely different – is ‘Pull them in in h'fuls and in can'fuls and in pan'fuls’ with long notes. The third is a fragmented phrase: ‘Bring them in sweetly/Gut them completely/Pack them up neatly/Sell them discreetly.’ Lastly comes the most difficult of the four: ‘O haul away!’ This is given a rising scale after a tie and a long held note after which the scale falls again. The timing over the ties can cause problems. When all four melodies are put together it is a real tour-de-force and the final page with the top sopranos sailing up to a long top B and the basses right up on an E gives it a terrific ‘wow’ factor. The divisi sopranos on the last page is the only time parts divide in the piece.

979-0-060-01486-4 Choral score

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Lichfield, 2011

New Release
Britten Opera Choruses
A new collection in the Concerts for Choirs series, with choruses selected from operas including Peter Grimes, The Rape of Lucretia, Billy Budd, Gloriana and A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Edited by David Wordsworth.

Published in Summer 2012
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Index of Titles

- A.M.D.G.
- Advance Democracy
- (Finale) Noel! (A Boy was Born)
- “Ee-Oh!” (Friday Afternoons)
- Amo Ergo Sum (Wedding Anthem)
- Antiphon
- As dew in April (A Ceremony of Carols)
- The Ballad of Green Broom (Five Flower Songs)
- Ballad of Heroes
- The Ballad of Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard
- Balulalow (A Ceremony of Carols)
- Begone, dull care (Friday Afternoons)
- A Boy was Born
- The Building of the House
- Cantata academica, Carmen basiliense
- Cantata missericordium
- Carol (Sacred and Profane)
- Carol of King Cnut (Christ’s Nativity)
- Carry her over the water
- A Ceremony of Carols
- Children’s Crusade
- Choral Dances from Gloriana
- Chorale after an Old French Carol
- Christ’s Nativity
- The Company of Heaven
- Cuckoo! (Friday Afternoons)
- A death (Sacred and Profane)
- Deo gracias (A Ceremony of Carols)
- Deus in adjutorium meum...
- The Evening Primrose (Five Flower Songs)
- Fancie
- Festival Te Deum
- Fishing Song (Friday Afternoons)
- Five Flower Songs
- Friday Afternoons
- God Save the Queen
- God’s Grandeur (A.M.D.G.)
- The Golden Vanity
- Heaven-Haven (A.M.D.G.)
- Herod (A Boy was Born)
- Hymn to St. Cecilia
- Hymn to St. Columba
- Hymn to St. Peter
- A Hymn to the Virgin
- I lov’d a lass (Two Part-Songs)
- I mon waxe wod (Sacred and Profane)
- I mune be married on Sunday (Friday Afternoons)
- In Freezing Winter Night (A Ceremony of Carols)
- In the bleak mid-winter (A Boy was Born)
- Inkslinger’s Love Song
- Jazz-Man (Friday Afternoons)
- Jesu, as Thou art our saviour (A Boy was Born)
- Jubilate Deo in C
- Jubilate Deo in E
- King Herod and the Cock
- Lenten is come (Sacred and Profane)
- Lift Boy (Two Part-Songs)
- Lone Dog (Friday Afternoons)
- The long night (Sacred and Profane)
- Lullaby of Dream Shadows
- Lullay, Jesu (A Boy was Born)
- Marsh Flower (Five Flower Songs)
- Missa Brevis in D
- The National Anthem
- New Prince (Christ’s Nativity)
- A New Year Carol (Friday Afternoons)
- O can ye sew cushions?
- O Deus, ego amo te (A.M.D.G.)
- Old Abram Brown (Friday Afternoons)
- Old Joe has gone fishing (Peter Grimes)
- The Oxen
- Philip’s Breeches
- Praise We Great Men
- Prayer 1 (A.M.D.G.)
- Prayer II (A.M.D.G.)
- Preparations (Christ’s Nativity)
- Procession (A Ceremony of Carols)
- Psalm 70 (Deus in adjutorium meum...)
- Psalm 95 (Venite Exultemus Domino)
- Psalm 130
- Psalm 150 (1931)
- Psalm 150 (1962)
- The Rainbow (Three two-part songs)
- Recession (A Ceremony of Carols)
- Rejoice in the Lamb
- The Ride-by-nights (Three two-part songs)
- Rosa Mystica (A.M.D.G.)
- Rossini Suite
- Sacred and Profane
- Saint Nicolas
- Shepherd’s Carol
- The Ship of Rio (Three two-part songs)
- The Soldier (A.M.D.G.)
- Song of the Fishermen (Peter Grimes)
- Spring Carol (A Ceremony of Carols)
- Spring Symphony
- St. Godrick’s Hymn (Sacred and Profane)
- The Succession of the Four Sweet Months (Five Flower Songs)
- Sweet was the song (Christ’s Nativity)
- The Sycamore Tree
- Tallis’s Canon
- Te Deum in C
- That yongë child (A Ceremony of Carols)
- There is no rose (A Ceremony of Carols)
- There was a man of Newington (Friday Afternoons)
- There was a monkey (Friday Afternoons)
- This little babe (A Ceremony of Carols)
- The Three Kings (A Boy was Born)
- Three two-part songs
- To Daffodils (Five Flower Songs)
- A tragic story (Friday Afternoons)
- The Twelve Apostles
- Two Part-Songs
- Two Psalms
- The useful plough (Friday Afternoons)
- Venite Exultemus Domino
- Voices for Today
- War Requiem
- A Wealden Trio
- We are the darkness in the heat of the day
- A Wedding Anthem
- Welcome Ode
- Whoso dwelleth under the Defence of the Most High
- Wolcum Yule! (A Ceremony of Carols)
- The World of the Spirit
- Ye that pasen by (Sacred and Profane)
- O can ye sew cushions?
Britten 100 Logo

A special centenary logo has been created for use in association with any Britten event between September 2012 and August 2014: the two full seasons either side of the centenary year 2013.

For more information see www.britten100.org