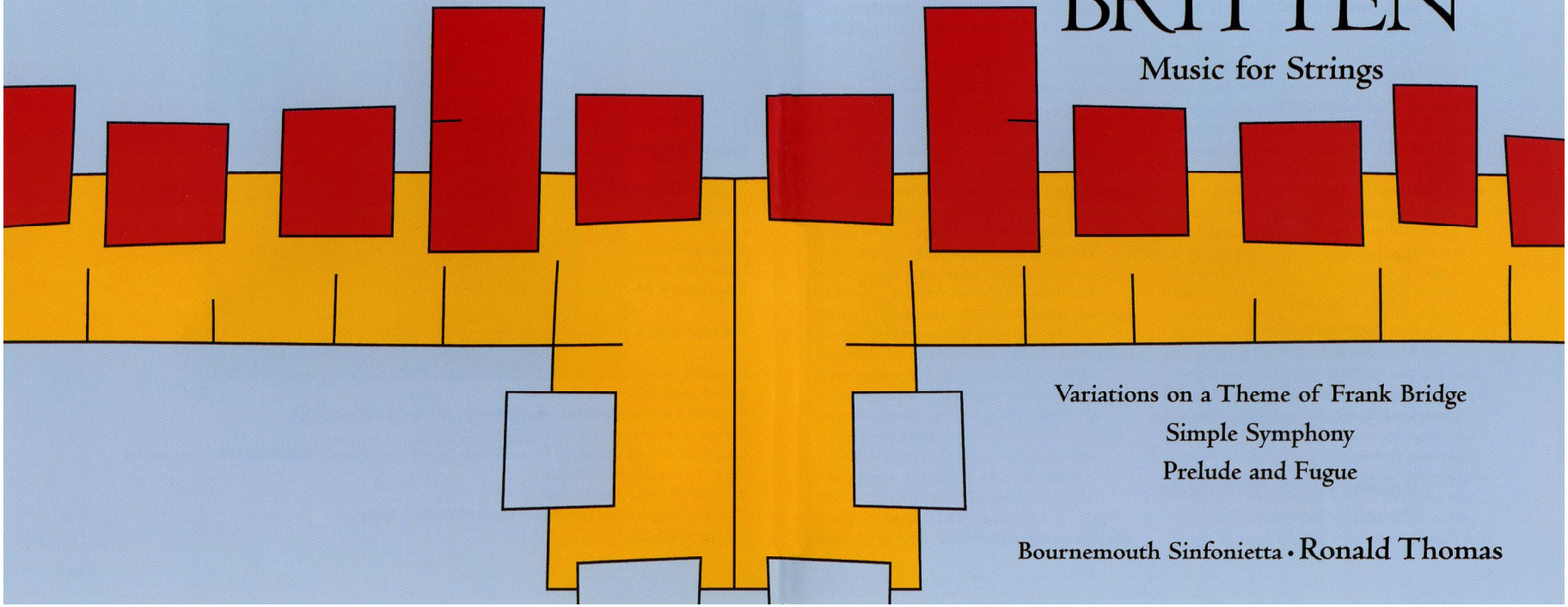
CHAN 6592

CHANDOS COLLECT

BRITTEN

Music for Strings



Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge

Simple Symphony

Prelude and Fugue

Bournemouth Sinfonietta • Ronald Thomas

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

	Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge, Op. 10	**25:40**
1	Introduction and Theme	2:01
2	Adagio	2:31
3	March	1:03
4	Romance	1:24
5	Aria Italiana	1:18
6	Bourrée Classique	1:17
7	Wiener Walzer	2:43
8	Moto Perpetuo	1:07
9	Funeral March	3:31
10	Chant	1:27
11	Fugue and Finale	7:06
	Simple Symphony, Op. 4	**16:17**
12	Boisterous Bourrée	2:58
13	Playful Pizzicato	3:02
14	Sentimental Saraband	7:20
15	Frolicsome Finale	2:54
16	**Prelude and Fugue, Op. 29** for Eighteen-part String Orchestra	**9:04**
		TT 51:09

Bournemouth Sinfonietta
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Britten: Music for Strings

The three works by Benjamin Britten on this disc represent his legacy for string orchestra, excepting his arrangement of Purcell's Chacony in G minor. They also cover nearly twenty years of his creative development, from the juvenilia which was polished for the *Simple Symphony* to the maturity of the eighteen-part *Prelude and Fugue*. The two later works are also Britten's homage to and acknowledgement of Boyd Neel's outstanding contribution to the development and consolidation of the standards of string playing which London has enjoyed for so long. In forming his Boyd Neel String Orchestra in 1933 Neel not only offered training and experience to young performers of quality, but also provided English (and foreign) composers with a first-class ensemble for the performance of works for string orchestra. Of course there already existed a great legacy of English music for strings, including Elgar's *Serenade for Strings* (1892) and *Introduction and Allegro* (1905), and Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* (1910), but it is more than coincidence that Bliss's *Music for Strings* (1935) and Tippett's *Concerto for Double String Orchestra* (1939) appeared at a time when Boyd Neel had brought his orchestra to international status. With the outbreak of the Second World War, Neel returned to his original occupation as a doctor, but resumed full-time music-making after hostilities ended. In 1953 he was invited to become Dean of the Conservatory in Toronto.

It is fascinating to speculate whether the publicity of the first Boyd Neel String Orchestra helped to decide the twenty-year-old Britten to write his **Simple Symphony**. Whatever the impetus, the work took only seven weeks to complete, from 23 December 1933 to 10 February 1934. It was first performed on 6 March 1934 in Stuart Hall, Norwich, near Britten's birthplace of Lowestoft in Suffolk, with the composer conducting the Norwich String Orchestra. It is dedicated to Audrey Alston (who became Mrs Lincolne Sutton). Although given the Opus number 4, the *Simple Symphony* is chronologically the ninth of Britten's published works. From his earliest experiments in composition Britten seems to have carefully preserved his own music, and the *Simple Symphony* is a perfect example of using juvenilia to good purpose. The pieces on which it is based were written when he was between nine and twelve. Their fresh quality brings to mind the early works of Mozart and

Mendelssohn, and the engaging titles of the four short movements are self-explanatory. The first has a strong contrapuntal bias, and is based on two themes, one gay, one lyrical. The second movement is in the form of a scherzo and trio, and played pizzicato throughout. Eloquent contrast is provided by the lovely saraband, which prepares the listener for the powerful unison statement that opens the dramatic finale. Although scored for either string quartet or string orchestra, the symphony possesses a richness of material that is best appreciated in the latter instrumentation.

The masterly scoring probably already owes something to the help and encouragement of Frank Bridge, who first came across Britten when the boy was at Gresham's School at Holt in Norfolk. By the time Britten left the school, in 1928, Bridge had recognised his genius, and even when the young composer went to the Royal College of Music in London, to study with John Ireland and Arthur Benjamin, Bridge continued to offer what help he could. Undoubtedly he provided his greatest practical benefit to Britten through the example of his own refined craftsmanship, and the younger composer always acknowledged his great personal debt to Bridge. His **Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge** is one of the finest musical tributes from a pupil to a master. Bridge was born in 1879 and died in 1941, since when his music has fallen into undeserved neglect. Even if his large-scale suite *The Sea*, which was very highly regarded by Sir Henry Wood, is considered too risky for the box office, many of his chamber works are worth reviving. While Britten's *Variations* are, not surprisingly, more Britten than Bridge, they serve a valuable purpose in keeping alive the name of an important British composer.

Between the *Simple Symphony* and the *Bridge Variations* Britten had completed some eight works, including his symphonic song cycle *Our Hunting Fathers* and the popular Rossini transcriptions *Soirées musicales*, both in 1936. The *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* were composed at Peasenhall in Suffolk, and completed on 12 July 1937. The first performance was given on 27 August the same year by the Boyd Neel String Orchestra at the Salzburg Festival. The score is inscribed 'To F.B. A tribute with affection and admiration'. The theme comes from the second of Bridge's *Three Idylls*.

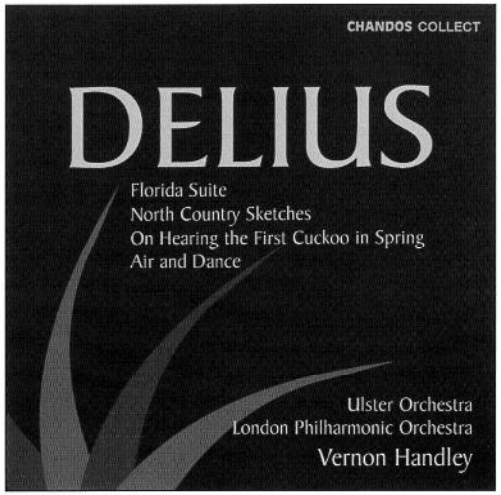
The work opens with a vehement pizzicato call to attention, heralding the Introduction and first statement of the Theme. Then follows the first of the ten variations, a beautiful *Adagio* in which it is not difficult to discern the influence of the newly discovered music of Mahler. Then follows a goose-stepping March, a stark reminder of the shadow of Nazism that hung over artists in the middle-thirties; after a short pause there is a return to sanity with a graceful Romance, after which the first violins take up the Italianate Aria with gusto. The classical Bourrée is a neat little parody, while the delicious affectation of the Viennese waltz is little short of superb. There follows a fast-moving *Moto Perpetuo* of shimmering tremolos, and a movingly prophetic Funeral March, again strongly Mahlerian. The Chant is intensely personal, with divided violas providing a masterly rhythmic pattern against eerily held harmonies in the upper strings. Then the Fugue, in which the influence of Bridge's craftsmanship is in evidence, leads to a Finale which is as exciting as it is inevitable.

With the *Frank Bridge Variations* Britten joined the select group of English composers who had written masterpieces for string orchestra. The piece was soon accepted and loved by the public, largely thanks to the championship of Boyd Neel. Three years after its first performance Neel conducted another major Britten premiere when Sophie Wyss sang *Les Illuminations* in London on 30 January 1940. Boyd Neel combined his musical and medical lives during the years of the Second World War, in the course of which his orchestra celebrated its tenth birthday with a concert in the Wigmore Hall on 23 June 1943. For the occasion Britten composed his **Prelude and Fugue** for Eighteen-part String Orchestra, calling for ten violins, three violas, three cellos and two double-basses.

The Fugue in the *Bridge Variations* had ended with a brilliant stretto in fifteen parts, and it is possible that Britten was harking back to that idea when he conceived the new work for Neel. Certainly the main interest is focused on the Fugue, the Prelude offering a broad solo violin melody which reappears in fuller dress for the coda. In the Fugue each section of the orchestra enters initially with a sequence of parallel imitative strands, and this process is also used in the dazzling stretto which ends the work.

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