

***Simple Symphony* for String Orchestra, Op. 4..... Benjamin Britten  
(1913-1976)**

*Composed in 1933-1934 based on themes from 1923-1926.*

*Premiered on March 6, 1934 in Norwich, conducted by the composer.*

“This *Simple Symphony*,” reads a note in the published score, “is entirely based on material from works which the composer wrote between the ages of nine and twelve. Although the development of these themes is in many places quite new, there are large stretches of the work which are taken bodily from the early pieces — save for the re-scoring for strings.” When Benjamin Britten wrote those words in 1934, at the ripe age of 21, he was already a composer of sixteen years experience: his precocity is matched by only a handful of figures — Mozart, Rossini, Mendelssohn, Schubert — in the whole history of the art. When he was two, he would cry to be taken to the piano so that he could pick out tunes for himself; three years later he scribbled down his first music. Formal piano instruction followed at seven, viola lessons at ten. (He was to dedicate the *Simple Symphony* to his viola teacher, Audrey Alston, who introduced him to Frank Bridge.) At seven he was devouring scores of symphonies and operas with the fascination other children reserved for *Robinson Crusoe*. By age nine he had completed an oratorio and a string quartet, and by 1930, when he entered the Royal College of Music, he had additionally authored ten piano sonatas, three piano suites, six quartets and dozens of songs. Of those puerile years, Britten recalled, “I remember the first time I tried [to compose], the result looked rather like the Forth Bridge, in other words hundreds of dots all over the page connected by long lines all joined together in beautiful curves. I am afraid it was the pattern on the paper in which I was interested.... My next efforts were much more conscious of *sound*. I had started playing the piano and wrote elaborate tone poems usually lasting about twenty seconds, inspired by terrific events in my home life, such as the departure of my father for London, the appearance in my life of a new girl friend or even [the report of] a wreck at sea. My later efforts luckily got away from the emotional inspirations and I began to write sonatas and quartets which were not connected in any direct way with life.” It was on several of these pieces from his earliest years that Britten based his delightful *Simple Symphony*.

Britten wrote the *Simple Symphony* between December 1933 and February 1934, the year after he left the RCM and was just beginning to establish himself as a professional composer. (The timing seemed fated — Elgar, Holst and Delius all died in 1934.) He selected several of his songs and piano pieces, threaded them into four suite-like movements and gave them a deft scoring for strings. “In the process, one suspects, they may have lost something of their innocence,” wrote Peter Evans in his study of the composer’s music. “The twenty-year-old composer seems to have been unable to resist a few touching-up strokes of sophistication.” Yet this music, with what Norman Fulton called its “clever simplicity,” never fails to charm audiences with its wit, craft and touching hints of nostalgia for a fine childhood that Britten had quickly outgrown.

The infectious innocence of the *Simple Symphony* is amply attested by the allusive alliterations of its movement’s titles: *Boisterous Bourrée*, *Playful Pizzicato*, *Sentimental Sarabande* and *Frolicsome Finale*. The *Boisterous Bourrée* is a small sonata form whose themes (D minor, martial and rhythmic; F major, playful and dance-like) were taken from the Piano Suite No. 1 (1926) and a song of 1923. *Playful Pizzicato* was based on a Scherzo for Piano and a song, both from 1924. The *Sentimental Sarabande* derived from the Third Piano Suite (1925) and, in its central section, a 1923 waltz of most tender emotion. The Piano Sonata No. 9 of 1926 and a song from one year earlier were used in the *Frolicsome Finale*, which is disposed, like the first movement, in a crystalline sonata structure.

**Concerto Fantasy ..... Philip Glass  
for Two Timpanists and Orchestra (born in 1937)**

*Composed in 2000.*

*Premiered on November 19, 2000 in New York City, conducted by Leon Botstein with Jonathan Haas and Svetoslav Stoyanov as soloists.*

“You know there is a maverick tradition in American music that is very strong. It’s in Ives, Ruggles, Cage, Partch, Moondog, all of these weird guys. That’s my tradition.” Thus Philip Glass traced his artistic lineage in an interview with the composer Robert Ashley. Glass, born in Baltimore on January 31, 1937, began his musical career in a conventional enough manner: study at the University of Chicago and Juilliard; a summer at the Aspen Music Festival with Milhaud; lessons with Nadia Boulanger in France on a Fulbright scholarship; many compositions, several of them published, in a neoclassical style indebted to Copland and Hindemith. In 1965, however, Glass worked with the Indian sitarist Ravi Shankar in Paris on the score for a film titled *Chappaqua*, and that exposure to non-Western music was the turning-point in forming his mature style.

In 1965-1966, Glass spent six months traveling in India, North Africa and Central Asia, and he returned to New York in the spring of 1966 with a new musical vision (and a new religion — he has been a Tibetan Buddhist for years). Glass rejected his earlier works, formed an ensemble of amplified flutes and saxophones, electric organs and synthesizers, and began writing what is commonly known as “Minimalist” music (though Glass loathes the term; Debussy likewise insisted that he was not an “Impressionist.”) “Minimalist” music is based upon the repetition of slowly changing common chords in steady rhythms, often overlaid with a lyrical melody in long, arching phrases. The style is viewed by its adherents as hypnotic and trance-like, lifting the spirit out of the mundane and freeing the mind; its detractors call it dull, simple-minded and boring. Glass’ works (and those of his sometime fellow Minimalist travelers, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, John Adams and several other of America’s most important composers), stand in stark contrast to the fragmented, ametric, harshly dissonant post-Schoenberg music that had been the dominant style for the 25 years after the Second World War. Minimalist music is meant, quite simply, to sound beautiful and to be immediately accessible to all listeners. Indeed, Glass represents the epitome of the modern “cross-over” artist, whose music appeals equally to classical, rock and jazz audiences.

Such an extraordinary, new style was not quickly accepted, but Glass was determined to continue on the path he had set for himself. He kept composing and honing the skills and performances of his ensemble, but supported himself for some time as a taxi driver and plumber. His first wide recognition came with the four-and-a-half-hour opera *Einstein on the Beach*, produced at the Metropolitan Opera House on November 21, 1976 in collaboration with multi-media artist Robert Wilson. Glass has since become one of America’s most successful and widely known composers with the creation of some twenty operas (including *Satyagraha*, based on Gandhi’s years in South Africa; *Akhmaten*, concerning an Egyptian pharaoh martyred for his monotheism; *Galileo Galilei*; and *Appomattox*), compositions for dance companies, film scores (perhaps most memorably those for *The Thin Blue Line*, *Koyaanisqatsi*, an extraordinary movie comprising exclusively images and music without a single spoken word, and the Oscar-nominated *The Hours*), works for his own ensemble (their 1981 recording, *Glassworks*, was a best-seller), eight symphonies, a dozen concertos, works for chorus and for solo piano, and several unclassifiable theater pieces (*The Photographer*, *1000 Airplanes on the Roof*, *The Mysteries* and *What’s So Funny?*). He has also collaborated with Paul Simon, Linda Ronstadt, Yo-Yo Ma and Doris Lessing, among many others. In February 2003, Glass was elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

The *Concerto Fantasy* for Two Timpanists and Orchestra is the product of the musicianship and persistence of timpani virtuoso Jonathan Haas. Haas first asked Philip Glass to write a timpani concerto in the early 1990s, but Glass’ many composing and performance commitments delayed the project for almost a decade. Haas spent the interim forming a consortium of orchestras committed to co-commissioning and performing the work, and to demonstrating to Glass the potential of the timpani as a solo instrument. By the time the work was completed in 2000, it had become a *Concerto Fantasy* for not one but two timpanists playing fourteen separate timpani, which would allow the principal players of the participating orchestras to join Haas as a soloist.

For the premiere of *Concerto Fantasy*, given by Leon Botstein, the American Symphony Orchestra and fellow timpanist Svetoslav Stoyanov at Avery Fisher Hall in New York on November 19, 2000, Jonathan Haas provided the following information on the work: “Thematically this Concerto sounds to me purely American, heroic in nature and derivation. From the opening bars, one is quite sure that a new sound has been created by combining the incredibly large

sonorities of the fourteen timpani with the full orchestra. As is the case with all of Glass' work, the repeating figures actually move long at a quick pace. Keys are established but moved through at an astonishingly fast rate, which also makes for some very quick tuning changes in the timpani. The underlying rhythm is always motoric and grooving.

“The second movement contains recognizable Glass harmonies and allusions to masses of people moving in slow and colorful lines. The movement from minor to major key centers allows the timpani to sound, in the minor keys, very dark and foreboding and, in the major ones, very bright and hopeful. The slow movement is brought to its conclusion with a beautiful reiteration of the theme subject, played only by the duo-timpanists.

“The finale is a mixed-meter, dance-like form, shifting between 4/4 and 7/8 time signatures. This kind of shifting certainly comes from the many influences of world music that permeate Glass' recent works. To me it sounds like a wild dervish that might accompany a shaman in some far-off fantasized land. The thematic material, alluding to the first movement, has a wit about it which, when heard coming from the timpani, is paradoxically charming and compelling at the same time. The closing moments of the piece emphasize the sheer athleticism and power of two timpanists doubling stroking in sixteenth-notes as they reach a wonderful zenith and conclusion.”

***Symphonie Fantastique, Op. 14a* ..... **Hector Berlioz**  
**(1803-1869)****

*Composed in 1830.*

*Premiered on December 5, 1830 in Paris, conducted by François Habeneck.*

By 1830, when he turned 27, Hector Berlioz had won the *Prix de Rome* and gained a certain notoriety among the fickle Parisian public for his perplexingly original compositions. Hector Berlioz was also madly in love. The object of his amorous passion was an English actress of middling ability, one Harriet Smithson, whom the composer first saw when a touring English theatrical company performed Shakespeare in Paris in 1827. During the ensuing three years, this romance was entirely one-sided, since the young composer never met Harriet, but only knew her across the footlights as Juliet and Ophelia. He sent such frantic love letters to her that she never made any response to them, fearful of encouraging a madman. Berlioz, distraught and unable to work or sleep or eat, wandered through the countryside around Paris until he dropped from exhaustion and had to be retrieved by his friends.

Berlioz was still nursing his unrequited love for Harriet in 1830 when, full-blown Romantic that he was, his emotional state served as the germ for a composition based on this “Episode from the Life of an Artist,” as he subtitled the *Symphonie Fantastique*. In this work, the artist visualizes his beloved through an opium-induced trance, first in his dreams, then at a ball, in the country, at his execution and, finally, as a participant in a witches' sabbath. She is represented by a musical theme which appears in each of the five movements, an *idée fixe* (a term that Berlioz borrowed from the just-emerging field of psychology to denote an unhealthy obsession) which is transformed to suit its imaginary musical surroundings. The *idée fixe* is treated kindly through the first three movements, but after the artist has lost his head for love (literally — the string pizzicati followed by drum rolls and brass fanfares at the very end of the *March to the Scaffold* graphically represent the fall of the guillotine blade and the ceremony of the formal execution), the *idée fixe* is transmogrified into a jeering, strident parody of itself in the finale in music that is still original and disturbing almost two centuries after its composition. The sweet-to-sour changes in the *idée fixe* (heard first in the opening movement on unison violins and flute at the beginning of the fast tempo after a slow introduction) reflect Berlioz's future relationship with his beloved, though, of course, he had no way to know it in 1830. Berlioz did in fact marry his Harriet-Ophelia-Juliet in 1833, but their happiness faded quickly, and he was virtually estranged from her within a decade.

The *Symphonie Fantastique* is one of the most popular works in the symphonic repertory — a position it deserves. Its rich orchestration, vivid harmony, long-limbed melody and invigorating rhythms are combined in forms which derive from Classical models while setting out in daring new directions. Here Berlioz successfully, indeed, flamboyantly, walked one of the most difficult of all compositional tightropes: balancing a definite extra-musical program with the abstract logic of musical forms and materials.

The composer gave the following program as a guide to the *Symphonie Fantastique*: “A young musician of morbid

sensibility and ardent imagination poisons himself with opium in a fit of amorous despair. The narcotic dose, too weak to result in death, plunges him into a heavy sleep accompanied by the strangest visions, during which his sensations, sentiments and recollections are translated in his sick brain into musical thoughts and images. The beloved woman herself has become for him a melody, like a fixed idea which he finds and hears everywhere.

“PART I: *Reveries and Passions*. He first recalls that uneasiness of soul, that *vague des passions*, those moments of causeless melancholy and joy, which he experienced before seeing her whom he loves; then the volcanic love with which she suddenly inspired him, his moments of delirious anguish, of jealous fury, his returns to loving tenderness, and his religious consolations.

“PART II: *A Ball*. He sees his beloved at a ball, in the midst of the tumult of a brilliant fête.

“PART III: *Scene in the Country*. One summer evening in the country he hears two shepherds playing a *ranz-des-vaches* in alternate dialogue; this pastoral duet, the scene around him, the light rustling of the trees gently swayed by the breeze, some hopes he has recently conceived, all combine to restore an unwonted calm to his heart and impart a more cheerful coloring to his thoughts; but she appears once more, his heart stops beating, he is agitated with painful presentiments; if she were to betray him! ... One of the shepherds resumes his artless melody, the other no longer answers him. The sun sets ... the sound of distant thunder ... solitude ... silence ...

“PART IV: *March to the Scaffold*. He dreams that he has killed his beloved, that he is condemned to death, and led to execution. The procession advances to the tones of a march which is now somber and wild, now brilliant and solemn, in which the dull sound of the tread of heavy feet follows without transition upon the most resounding outburst. At the end, the *idée fixe* reappears for an instant, like a last love-thought interrupted by the fatal stroke.

“PART V: *Dream of a Witches’ Sabbath*. He sees himself at the Witches’ Sabbath, in the midst of a frightful group of ghosts, magicians and monsters of all sorts, who have come together for his obsequies. He hears strange noises, groans, ringing laughter, shrieks to which other shrieks seem to reply. The *beloved melody* again reappears, but it has lost its noble and timid character; it has become an ignoble, trivial and grotesque dance-tune; it is *she* who comes to the Witches’ Sabbath.... Howlings of joy at her arrival ... she takes part in the diabolic orgy ... Funeral knells, burlesque parody on the *Dies Irae* [the ancient ‘*Day of Wrath*’ chant from the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass for the Dead]. Witches’ Dance. The Witches’ Dance and the *Dies Irae* together.”

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