

Benjamin Britten: *Saint Nicolas* op 42 (1948)

Extracts of Programme Notes from the Cleveland Philharmonic Choir's performance in 2003, kindly provided by John Hillier.

Composed to a skilfully-crafted libretto by Eric Crozier, the cantata is scored for solo tenor, large mixed chorus including boys, a semi-chorus of girls' voices, strings, piano duet, organ and percussion. Although written for semi-amateur performance (the tenor, the leading string players and the principal percussionist should, according to the composer, always be professionals), to classify it as 'music for children' is somewhat disingenuous. It is far too complex and demanding for that.

Episodic in structure, it tells in nine sections the life of St. Nicholas, with each scene seeking to characterise a particular aspect of the story. In Britten's hands, however, this sequence becomes a powerful dramatic entity and a moving experience for performers and audience alike. The cantata is melodic and much more accessible than some of the more avant-garde music of the time. It tells its story with directness and with a simplicity which is almost disarming of criticism.

In *Saint Nicolas*, Britten uses the full range of his vocal and instrumental forces flexibly and resourcefully through narrative sequences and by means of larger set-pieces, like the storm he conjures up in scene 4, the processional entrance of the 'pickled boys' in scene 7, the inspired chant-like setting of the *Nunc dimittis* in scene 9 as Nicolas contemplates death (there are echoes here of Part I of Elgar's *Gerontius*), as well as the cathartic use of the final hymn.

Britten includes two familiar hymns in *Saint Nicolas*, involving the audience like a church congregation in the singing: To celebrate Nicolas's enthronement in scene 5 of *Saint Nicolas*, Britten sets *The Old Hundredth* ('All People that on Earth do Dwell') – and, following the death of Nicolas, *London New* ('God moves in a Mysterious Way') as a moving and dramatic conclusion to the whole cantata.

Britten had experimented with this technique in two earlier radio cantatas in 1937 and 1938 . . . what E. M. Forster described as 'one of those triumphs outside the rules of art'. It shouldn't work so well, but somehow it does, and we have all the hallmarks of a master composer in full command of his material and of the forces at his disposal, bringing together adults and children, instrumentalists, singers and audience alike in a communal act of music-making to create a unique aesthetic experience.

Saint Nicolas

1. Introduction (Tenor and Choir)
2. The Birth of Nicolas (Tenor, treble and Children's Choir)
3. Nicolas devotes himself to God (Orchestra)
4. He journeys to Palestine (Tenor, Choir, Gallery choir)
5. Nicolas comes to Myra and is chosen Bishop. (Tenor, Choir and Gallery Choir)
Congregational hymn.
6. Nicolas from Prison (Orchestra)
7. Nicolas and the Pickled Boys (Three trebles, Choir, Gallery Choir)
8. His Piety and Marvellous Works (Choir)
9. The Death of Nicolas (Choir).
Closing hymn.