

This additional information is to consult in advance. Please do not print and please avoid using a mobile device during the performance.

The Canticles

You can also watch Dr Lucy Walker's introduction to Britten's Canticles here:

<https://youtu.be/72m30CRWeo0>

Britten composed the five Canticles over a period of 27 years, from 1947 to 1974. They are each for different vocal or instrumental forces, although they all feature the tenor voice – and Peter Pears premiered all five of them. The texts are mostly connected to Christian stories or imagery, yet they are not liturgical. Rather, they deal with spiritual matters of love, faith, loss, birth, and death and are among Britten's most personal works. Several of them were composed in memory of close friends.

Canticle I: 'My beloved is mine'

Op.40 (1947). Text by Francis Quarles (1592–1644)

Composed for the Dick Sheppard Memorial Concert (Dick Sheppard had been the founder of the Peace Pledge Union and had died in 1937).

Britten's first Canticle is a beautiful, lyrical song in three parts. The text is based loosely on the Song of Songs (or 'Canticum Canticorum') from the Bible, and is an ecstatic text with a refrain appearing several times throughout to the words 'I my best beloved's am, so he is mine'. The first part is lyrical and passionate, with the voice soaring over a virtuosic piano line. The second is quicker, with the voice and piano in a clever canon. And in the final section time seems to stand still, with rising, slow-moving vocal lines over low chords in the piano. Canticle I is often interpreted as a remarkably bold (for its time) declaration of love for Pears.

Canticle II: 'Abraham and Isaac'

Op.51 (1952). Text from the Chester Miracle Plays

Dedicated to Kathleen Ferrier and Peter Pears, who performed in the premiere.

This is the longest of the Canticles (at around 17 minutes) and is a duet for tenor and alto or counter-tenor. After a gorgeous opening in which both voices combine to represent the voice of God, commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, the tenor takes the role of Abraham and the alto or countertenor plays the part of Isaac. As in the first Canticle, the music here is in several sections, starting with a beautiful duet in 6/8. The music gradually builds in tension throughout, expressing Abraham's anguish at his terrible task, towards a climax in which he is prepared to kill his son. The voice of God then intervenes with a reprieve, sung to the same music as the opening.

Canticle III: 'Still Falls the Rain – 1940, The Raids, Night and Dawn'

Op.55 (1954). Text by Edith Sitwell (1887–1964)

Dedicated to the memory of Noel Mewton-Wood (1922–1953), a pianist and regular accompanist of Pears, who had committed suicide.

In this Canticle, tenor and piano are joined by the French horn – played in the premiere by Dennis Brain. It is structured in 'Theme and Variation' form (like the opera that immediately preceded this work, *The Turn of the Screw*) with the horn and piano playing the themes and variations. Interspersed with the instrumental sections, is the vocal line delivering the text, and the regular refrain 'Still falls the rain'. Sitwell's words are powerful, with vivid and sometimes disturbing imagery – comparing the violence of the Blitz to that inflicted on Christ on the cross. The music is also forceful, though throughout is anchored by the refrain, and by the low B flats in the piano and horn. The voice joins horn and piano for the final movement, which works towards a gentle, yet sombre conclusion.

Canticle IV: 'The Journey of the Magi'

Op.86 (1971). Text by T.S. Eliot (1888–1965)

Dedicated to James Bowman, Peter Pears and John Shirley-Quirk, who performed in the premiere.

It was 17 years before Britten produced another Canticle. This setting of Eliot's poem is for counter-tenor, tenor and baritone with piano and relates the story of the Magi's visit to the baby Jesus, told from an unspecified period of time later. The text is laconic and matter-of-fact (with the encounter at the stable described as 'satisfactory') and Britten combines the three voices in close harmony; with its jazz-inflected chords, the vocal writing sounds almost like barbershop. The piano accompaniment is rhythmically uneasy, often grumbling away in the lower register – suggestive of the uncomfortable lollop of the Magi's camels. The only hint of the religious connotations of this story is Britten's use of the plainchant 'Magi videntes stellam' (the wise men having seen the star) in the piano, under the repetition of 'satisfactory'.

Canticle V: 'The Death of Saint Narcissus'

Op.89 (1974). Text by T.S. Eliot

Dedicated to the memory of William Plomer, Britten's librettist for *Gloriana* and the three Church Parables.

Canticle V is the first new piece Britten composed after his heart surgery in 1973, and is for voice and harp. Britten was no longer able to play the piano sufficiently well for performance, having suffered a stroke, and his late vocal works are all accompanied by harp. The music at times can seem disorientating and strange, like the imagery in T.S. Eliot's text – which has a hallucinogenic, other-worldly quality. The main harp motif is a figure of six notes, the second three sounding like a distorted reflection of the first. But some passages are in very straightforward C major, such as the section accompanying an almost conventionally poetic passage about walking between the sea and the high cliffs.

– Lucy Walker