



LAWO
CLASSICS

Britten:
*Suites
for Solo
Cello*

Amalie
Stalheim

Britten *Cello Suites*

Benjamin Britten first met Mstislav Rostropovich on 21st September 1960, the date of an auspicious premiere. Shostakovich had travelled to London for the first British performance of his Cello Concerto No 1, with Rostropovich as soloist. He introduced the cellist to Britten, who had been thrilled by the new concerto (he was “bobbing up and down like a schoolboy”, remembered Shostakovich). Rostropovich begged Britten to compose a piece for him and the result was the Sonata for cello and piano, Opus 65. Britten wrote of Rostropovich: “[he] freed one of my inhibitions. He’s such a gloriously uninhibited musician himself, with the enormous feeling of generosity you get from the best Russian players, coming to meet you all the way. I’d heard about him and rather unwittingly listened to the wireless. I immediately realised that this was a new way to play the

cello, in fact almost a new, vital way to play music. I made arrangements to come to London and heard him again, and found him in the flesh even more than I’d expected.” As Rostropovich lived under a repressive regime, his knowledge of Britten and his music was negligible, yet the two men would become the warmest of friends.

Within a ten-year period Britten composed five works featuring solo cello, the first being the already mentioned Sonata in C major for cello and piano, dating from 1961. His Symphony for cello and orchestra, Opus 68, followed soon afterwards (1962-3). Britten also composed cadenzas for the recently discovered Cello Concerto in C major by Haydn, which was given its modern premiere in 1962 and which Rostropovich performed at Aldeburgh two years later. A subsequent cello piece which Britten composed for Rostropovich was the miniature Tema “Sacher”, completed early in 1976 as his contribution to a collaborative work by several composers, to celebrate the seventieth birthday of the distinguished music patron and conductor Paul Sacher. In composing these suites for Rostropovich, Britten enjoyed complete freedom, not considering for a second whether the di-

verse technical challenges would be beyond his extravagant ability and taking for granted his total emotional commitment.

Britten completed his First Solo Cello Suite, Opus 72, in 1964. There are six movements (plus three “preludial” cantos before movements 1, 3 and 5), all played without a break, the recurring Canto serving a strong unifying function. The sonorous opening Canto Primo is written in sustained double-stopping throughout. Having been especially impressed by Rostropovich’s performances of Bach’s solo suites, works which the cellist loved above all else - Britten begins with what unmistakably sounds like a direct tribute to these Baroque musical landmarks. In the ensuing Fuga Britten adopts a theme from the very first fugue in Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier, before playfully treating a 2-note staccato figure and its inversion. There is a recurring contrasting section characterised by legato string-crossing, before Britten resumes his humorous development of the 2-note figure, now enhanced by gently persistent use of harmonics. In a movement entitled Lamento, the tonalities of E flat major and E major are pitted against each other, with a little E minor arpeggio serving

as a kind of punctuation. The first recall of the Canto, abbreviated, leads into a pizzicato Serenata slightly reminiscent of Debussy’s Cello Sonata (movement II) and with a distinct Spanish influence. Here a 3-note figure proves to be a recurrent feature. In the following Marcia Britten employs rapid harmonics and col legno to evoke fanfares and drums, alternating with passages of strutting rhythm. The Canto returns (Canto Terzo), initially pianissimo, giving way to the Bordone (marked quasi recitativo). This title indicates a sustained tone or drone; here the note is a D, held throughout while two contrasting musical “personalities” alternate – stolid pizzicato (pesante) and mercurial figuration (animato) which scurries past. The movement also alludes to Britten’s own Violin Concerto and to Elgar’s Cello Concerto. A frenetic moto perpetuo concludes the suite virtuosically, but not before a dramatic final recall of the Canto and subsequent alternation of the two competing moods.

Dating from 1967, the Cello Suite No 2, Opus 80, has five movements. The first — *Declamato: Largo* — begins with an allusion to the opening of Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony, before a substantial passage is de-

voted to obsessive treatment of the interval of a semitone. This deeply serious, eloquent movement gives way to Fuga: Andante, based on a subject of halting rhythm and epitomising Britten’s phenomenal compositional mastery. When writing a contrapuntal tour de force – a fugue or a chaconne - for a solo stringed instrument, a composer has to create an illusion of two or more parts by ingeniously disrupting the melodic line – a device in which Britten’s skill is unsurpassed. Another fascinating aspect is the idiosyncratic rhythmic profile of the theme, making possible a playfulness which one would not automatically associate with fugues. The Scherzo: Allegro molto (marked ruvido – rough) is largely dominated by angular intervals, awkward to negotiate, but also accommodates wit.

The *Andante lento*, which bears a family resemblance to the Adagio of the Cello Symphony (1963), is lyrical in character, though the melodic line is punctuated by pizzicato repeated notes. The increasingly insistent pizzicato element threatens to take over, but eventually is relegated to its initial drum-taps. Following without a break, the final Chaconne (Allegro) comprises twelve variations on a five-bar ground bass, virtuosic, expressively wide-ranging and – un-

characteristically –embellished by many grace-notes.

The *Third Suite*, completed in nine days in early 1971 (and revised three years later), comprises nine movements played without breaks. In his Foreword to the score Britten wrote: “As a tribute to a great Russian musician and patriot I based this suite on Russian themes: the first three tunes were taken from Tchaikovsky’s volumes of folk-song arrangements; the fourth, the ‘Kontakion’ (Hymn for the Departed), from the English Hymnal.” When he discovered that there were two versions of the Kontakion, Britten included both alternatives in the score. As in his viola/piano piece *Lachrymae* and the Nocturnal for guitar, he employs only variants of his themes, reserving their complete original forms until the end of the work. In the Lento introduction the chant-like melodic line – derived from the *Kontakion* – is punctuated by pizzicato notes on the open C string. The ensuing march is loosely based on the folk-songs *The Grey Eagle* (the quirky opening) and *Autumn* (an idea largely comprising repeated notes and chains of ascending or descending thirds), but the interpolated lyrical phrases towards the end hint at the sustained

melodic line of the following *Canto* (Con moto). Here Britten bases his material on the folk-song *Under the Little Apple Tree*. In the *Barcarola* (Lento) the complete melody of *Autumn* is picked out by the arpeggio figuration. The “dialogo” of movement 5 comprises an alternation of jagged rhythms (grotesco) and pizzicato multiple stops. Again the material subtly incorporates elements of the *Kontakion*, *The Little Apple Tree* and *Autumn*. Each of Britten’s cello suites includes a fugue, the most powerful of them being the sixth movement of this work (Andante espressivo), to which the following *Fantastico*, a capricious recitative interrupted by many pauses, provides an ideal foil. The brilliant eighth movement – *Presto: moto perpetuo* – is followed by another extreme contrast, a passacaglia (Lento solenne), which then leads to complete statements of the three folk-songs and the Kontakion. This finale and the concluding chaconne of the Second Suite are much longer than the majority of movements within the suites.

Mozart and Brahms were inspired by the clarinetists Anton Stadler and Richard Mühlfeld respectively and composed some of their most glorious works for them. Mozart also

wrote horn concertos and a quintet for his friend Joseph Leutgeb, whereas Brahms was inspired by the violin virtuosity and musicianship of Joseph Joachim to compose his Violin Concerto, Double Concerto and three Violin Sonatas. Britten’s inspirations were wider and more numerous. Like Mozart and Brahms, he was deeply influenced by the musicianship and virtuosity of various artists to create music which thoroughly explores the technical and expressive resources of each instrument or voice, as well as embodying the individual performing style of the dedicatee. Without the compositions inspired by Peter Pears, Rostropovich, Dennis Brain, Julian Bream and Ossian Ellis, Britten’s list of works would be depleted.

Philip Borg-Wheeler

Amalie Stalheim

Born in Bergen in 1993, Amalie Stalheim is recognized as one of Scandinavia's most exciting and versatile cellists. She has captivated audiences as a soloist with leading orchestras across Europe and beyond, including the Gulbenkian Orchestra, Oslo Philharmonic, Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, Ankara Presidential Symphony Orchestra, Antalya Symphony Orchestra, Iceland Symphony Orchestra, and the Swedish Radio Orchestra, among many others.

While celebrated for her interpretations of the great classical cello concertos, Stalheim is equally dedicated to contemporary music. Passionate about expanding the cello repertoire, she actively commissions and performs new works by leading composers of our time, including Kaija Saariaho, Lisa Streich, Missy Mazzoli, Britta Byström, Anders

Hillborg, Vasco Mendonça, Daniel Kidane, Anna Berg, Tebogo Monnakgotla, Jo David Meyer, Marcus Paus, Lasse Thoresen, and Jostein Stalheim. She has recently commissioned newly written cadenzas for Haydn's C major and D major concertos, inspired by Rostropovich and Britten.

Stalheim has been recognized with numerous prestigious awards, including the Norwegian Soloist Prize (2021), the Swedish Soloist Prize (2018), and the Ljunggren Competition (2015). She was named a "Rising Star" by BBC Music Magazine (2022), received the Nicholas A. Firmenich Prize at the Verbier Festival (2015) and awarded Performer of the Year (2024) by the Norwegian Society of Composers

Beyond the concert stage, Stalheim is deeply committed to supporting the next generation of musicians. She is the founder of the mentoring program Classical Link, in collaboration with the Bergen International Festival, where young musicians work closely with emerging composers to premiere new works.

From the autumn 2025, Amalie Stalheim is Artist in Residence at the Malmö Academy of Music. Previous-

ly, from 2018 to 2020, she was Artist in Residence at the Swedish Radio's classical music channel P2.

Upcoming highlights in the 2025/26 season include solo performances with the Riga Sinfonietta, Norrköping Symphony Orchestra, Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, Trondheim Symphony Orchestra, Antalya Symphony Orchestra, Wermland Opera, The Norwegian Radio Orchestra and Arctic Philharmonic.





Benjamin Britten

(1913-1976)

Cello Suite No. 1 Op. 72

01. Canto Primo__02:29
02. Fuga__03:45
03. Lamento__03:05
04. Canto Secondo__01:12
05. Serenata__02:05
06. Marcia__03:18
07. Canto terzo__02:11
08. Bordone__03:00
09. Moto Perpetuo
e Canto Quarto__03:20

Cello Suite No. 2 Op. 80

10. Declamato__03:59
11. Fuga__04:03
12. Scherzo__01:40
13. Andante lento__05:33
14. Ciaccona__06:37

Cello Suite No. 3 Op. 87

15. Introduzione__02:30
16. Marcia__01:36
17. Canto__01:13
18. Barcarolla__01:27
19. Dialogo__01:21
20. Fuga__02:28
21. Fantastico (recitativo)__01:21
22. Moto Perpetuo__00:55
23. Passacaglia__07:43

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