

Arvo Pärt, Cantus in memory of Benjamin Britten

Submitted by Jim Waddelow

Composed in 1977, Pärt himself describes his sentiments of the title dedication following Benjamin Britten's passing: "Why did the date of Benjamin Britten's death – 4 December 1976 – touch such a chord in me? During this time, I was obviously at the point where I could recognize the magnitude of such a loss. Inexplicable feelings of guilt, more than that even, arose in me. I had just discovered Britten for myself. Just before his death I began to appreciate the unusual purity of his music – I had had the impression of the same kind of purity in the ballads of Guillaume de Machaut. And besides, for a long time I had wanted to meet Britten personally – and now it would not come to that." With a stark orchestration of a single orchestral chime and strings, the pacing of the dynamics from the softest of softs to the full power of a fortissimo is combined with an incremental widening of the ranges of the string sections. It occurs on such a slow scale that the listener barely notices. Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten is similar to many of the other works that the composer wrote in the decades between 1970 and 1990. Pärt describes the style of writing "tintinnabular": similar to the ringing of bells. Utilizing simple chordal harmonies, slow-moving or unmeasured notes, this sustaining music rings to the point that phrases overlap. The Tintinnabuli are rhythmically simple, with a steady and flowing tempo. Influences of Baroque and Renaissance choral music are characteristic of this period of the composer's work, and like much of Pärt's music, the Cantus is an instrumental setting of a sacred text. Pärt is unusual for a modern composer in that he has attained popularity in his own lifetime.

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