

BRITTEN'S SERENADE

The Festival presents its first-ever performance of the highly evocative night-themed work.

by Amy Hegarty



Photo by Priska Ketterer

David Zinman

Benjamin Britten's *Serenade for Tenor, Horn & Strings* is a wonderfully moving masterpiece that's been a standout of the repertoire since it was premiered at London's Wigmore Hall in October 1943. This summer, on Wednesday, August 7, the Festival presents the work for the first time in its 47-year history, and Artistic Director Marc Neikrug says he's featuring it now because

he was able to bring together three singular talents. "The opportunity to have Stefan Dohr, perhaps the greatest French horn player of our time, along with tenor Paul Appleby and conductor David Zinman, led to programming this perfect vehicle for their artistry."

Mr. Zinman's decades-long career includes serving as music director of

the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich for 19 years and earning five Grammy Awards. He last appeared at the Festival in 2010, and the Festival is eager to welcome him back. "It's a pleasure to have David perform at the Festival for the first time in nine years," says Executive Director Steven Ovitsky. "I'm especially pleased that he's returning now, as this summer marks 40 years since we first worked



Paul Appleby

together at Chicago's Grant Park Music Festival before going on to have wonderful collaborations at the Minnesota Orchestra."

During the August 7 concert, Mr. Zinman leads a string orchestra in addition to Mr. Appleby and Mr. Dohr, both of whom are making their Festival debuts. Mr. Appleby has performed at the Metropolitan Opera and Dutch National Opera and with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and New York Philharmonic; Mr. Dohr has served as principal horn of the Berlin Philharmonic since 1993.

Britten's *Serenade* occupies a special place in Mr. Zinman's repertoire. He's led the work several times (going back to his grad-school days at the University of Minnesota) and notes that it's "a beautiful piece"—one, he adds, that "always stays with me." The subject of the work is night, and the text, which is based on six poems by English poets that span five centuries (the 15th through the 19th), evokes its different forms and guises. "Britten actually chose each poem to show [a certain] progression," Mr. Zinman says.

"The first poem is about sunset, and then we go through the various stages of night until the very early morning hours, so it's very carefully selected."

Mr. Appleby, whose degrees include a bachelor's in English literature from the University of Notre Dame, notes that "Britten's vocal works are usually so successful because he possessed a rich literary imagination coupled with a commitment to textual intelligibility." The poems, he adds, are "bound together by a distinctly British voice that's remained a consistent, unifying foundation." Britten is able to "underline how such diverse texts are nonetheless part of a single tradition by shaping these songs into a true cycle with a unifying musical structure."

Britten lived in the United States from 1939 to 1942, and he wrote his *Serenade* in early 1943 (when he was 29 years old), not long after he returned to his native England. He composed the piece for his life partner, Peter Pears, who premiered several of Britten's works, and the 22-year-old horn virtuoso Dennis Brain, who was a member of the RAF Symphony Orchestra.

The work comprises eight sections, beginning with the Prologue—a stirring solo movement that introduces listeners to the sounds of the horn's natural harmonics, which lend an otherworldly feel to the entire work—and then moves to the first sung section: the tender and somewhat bittersweet "Pastoral," based on "The Evening Quatrains" by the 17th-century poet Charles Cotton. Next is the spirited "Nocturne," featuring Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Blow, Bugle, Blow," written in the 19th century. The tone changes strikingly with "Elegy," which opens and closes with a dark and dramatic horn solo and in between features William Blake's startling poem "The Sick Rose," written in the late 18th century. "Elegy" segues into the menacing tumult of "Dirge," based on an anonymous 15th-century text, and then the tone changes once again with "Hymn," which opens with bright hunting-horn calls

and is set to the poem "Hymn to Diana" by one of Shakespeare's most influential contemporaries, the late-16th-century and early-17th-century writer Ben Jonson. The lush, plaintive "Sonnet," featuring John Keats's early-19th-century poem "To Sleep," follows, and then the work comes to a close with the Epilogue, which, like the Prologue, is a moving horn solo; this one, however, is played offstage, as if to wish the audience a fleeting and hauntingly memorable good night.

While the range of imagery and emotions Britten explores creates a rich experience for both the performers and the audience, Mr. Appleby says he's particularly drawn to the unspoken vulnerability that's perhaps at the heart of the work. "For me, the main emotional arc of the piece lies in exploring the feeling of aloneness that nighttime can evoke," he says. "If you ever find yourself awake in the middle of the night, that quietness tends to lead to a kind of introspection and contemplation of heavier thoughts that the business of day helps block out. There are playful and amorous nocturnal moments to be enjoyed in this cycle, but I find the courage of gazing deeper into the



Stefan Dohr

darkness of our own hearts to be very moving.”

Also moving for both Mr. Appleby and Mr. Dohr is the mark this work has made on their instruments’ repertoires. “I regard Britten’s *Serenade* as a beautiful gift from the great composer to tenors everywhere,” Mr. Appleby says. “His vocal writing here summons the unique colors of the tenor voice but leaves room for each tenor to fit his instrument into the piece successfully.” Mr. Dohr concurs, saying: “This piece is an absolute godsend of an addition to the horn repertoire.”

But while the artists relish the opportunities this work affords them as soloists, they’re quick to point out that the piece is far more nuanced and complex than if it were simply a virtuosic showpiece. “Every time I play this piece, I’m struck anew by the genius of how we all interact together to illuminate the incredible texts,” Mr. Dohr says. “Sometimes the

two soloists stand in absolute contrast to one another; other times they seem like two expressions of exactly the same voice. The way Britten manipulates the nature of the horn and the voice—along with the whole new world of possibilities he’s able to create in the color of the strings—means that this piece covers the entire spectrum of completely playful to deeply moving. I think it’s one of the most human pieces of work I get to play in my repertoire.”

Expanding on Mr. Dohr’s point, Mr. Appleby says: “As with the tenor and the horn, Britten’s writing for the strings in this piece is miraculous. Britten puts a panoply of string techniques to use in his imaginative scoring of the songs, but what makes the work truly great is that this multiplicity of techniques is never used for its own sake; instead, it’s always to lend precision and detail to the text-setting and to clearly illustrate Britten’s interpretation of the poems. The musical materials and

techniques interact to reinforce each other and create an integrated fabric of song and sound that makes the piece at large greater than the sum of its parts.”

Amy Hegarty is the Director of Publications for the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival.

Wednesday, August 7
6 p.m., New Mexico Museum of Art
BENJAMIN BRITTEN
Serenade for Tenor, Horn & Strings
Paul Appleby, tenor; Stefan Dohr, horn;
David Zinman, conductor;
Jennifer Gilbert, Daniel Phillips,
Todd Phillips, Daniel Jordan,
Harvey de Souza, Ashley Vandiver,
Benny Kim, Sarah Tasker, violin;
Steven Tenenbom, Ida Kavafian,
L. P. How, Margaret Dyer Harris,
viola; Mark Kosower, Eric Kim,
Timothy Eddy, Joseph Johnson, cello;
Leigh Mesh, Mark Tatum, bass
