

Programme Note by Chris Darwin: please use freely for non-commercial purposes

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) String Quartet No. 1 in D major (1941)

Andante sostenuto (Tempo I), Allegro vivo (Tempo II)

Allegretto con slancio ('with dash')

Andante calmo

Molto vivace

Britten's compositions for string quartet fall into three groups that were written at very different times of his life: a number of early works from his teens (1928-33) reflect his growing independence from his teacher Frank Bridge; then, his first two numbered quartets published in 1941 and 1945, around the time of *Peter Grimes*; and finally, his third quartet composed after the opera *Death in Venice* shortly before he died.

Britten had met Bridge through his first violin teacher, Audrey Alston, who had been a fellow student of Bridge at the Royal College. Although Bridge, an established composer, was only teaching violin rather than composition, he was so impressed by Britten's precocious compositions, that he befriended him and took him under his compositional wing, probably also encouraging Britten's pacifism. When Britten and Pears left England at the end of April 1939, sailing on the SS *Ausonia* for Canada, Frank Bridge saw them off. It was their last sight of him, since he died in 1941, the year Britten finished this D major String Quartet. The work was commissioned by Mrs Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge to whom Britten had been introduced through Bridge. The first performance was given in Los Angeles in September 1941 by the Coolidge Quartet, and as a result Britten received the Library of Congress Medal for services to chamber music.

The work immediately demonstrates Britten's extraordinary ear for instrumental sound with the high close intervals of the two violins against cello pizzicato, a soundscape that he would return to in *Peter Grimes'* Dawn Sea Interlude. This *Tempo I* episode contrasts in a Rondo form with the faster, lower sounds of the *Tempo II Allegro vivo*. After the brittle, march-like *Scherzo* with its parallels with Shostakovich, premonitions of *Grimes* (the Moonlight Sea Interlude) return in the 5/4 gently rocking sea swell of the *Andantino calmo*, a calm which is interrupted by a forceful, declamatory middle section. Further contrasting passages in the last movement include the scherzo-like rapidly running counterpoint of its opening, sharp, punctuated chords and the strong unison theme from the two violins and viola.