

PROGRAM NOTES
BY ERIC BROMBERGER

String Quartet No. 2 in C major, Op. 36

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Born November 22, 1913, Lowestoft

Died December 4, 1976, Aldeburgh

On November 21, 1945, an unusual concert took place in London's Wigmore Hall. That day was the 250th anniversary of the death of Henry Purcell, universally acclaimed England's first great composer, and one of those represented on the program was Benjamin Britten. Britten, whose opera *Peter Grimes* had been triumphantly premiered six months earlier, had a lifelong passion for Purcell's music. The following year he would write his *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, based on a great Purcell theme, and he would make arrangements of Purcell's vocal music throughout his career, as well as a string orchestra version of Purcell's *Chaconne in G minor*. That anniversary concert saw the premiere of an original work by Britten that paid tribute to the earlier master, the *String Quartet No. 2*. Britten's tribute to Purcell in this quartet is oblique: he quotes no music of Purcell, but the last movement – which dominates the structure – makes use of a technique that Britten associated with the earlier composer.

The quartet is in three movements, and it is original from its first instant. Rather than adopting a standard sonata form, which opposes and contrasts material, Britten builds the opening *Allegro calmo senza rigore* on three themes, all of which are announced in the first few measures and all of which are similar: all three themes begin with the upward leap of a tenth. The movement is centered around the key of C major, and the first statement of the theme begins on middle C, with each successive statement rising higher in the quartet's register. The exposition of these three themes becomes so complex that a clear division of the movement into development and recapitulation is lost, and at the climax Britten is able to make all three themes coalesce into one simultaneous statement before the music falls away to a quiet close.

The *Vivace* is a blistering – and very brief – scherzo in ternary form. Britten mutes the instruments throughout and moves to C minor for the outer sections; the music feels consciously nervous, skittering and driving constantly ahead. The central section, in F major and based on a variant of the scherzo theme, brings little relaxation – the sense of nervous energy continues even in the major tonality.

The massive final movement – nearly as long as the first two movements combined – brings the tribute to Purcell. Britten calls this movement *Chacony*, the English name for the *chaconne*. This is a variation form: a ground bass in triple time repeats constantly, while a composer spins out variations above each repetition. As noted, Britten very much admired Purcell's *Chaconne in G minor*, and in tribute to the older composer he writes a chaconne as his finale. It is built on 21 repetitions of the nine-bar ground bass, which is presented in unison (in B-flat major) at the start of the movement. Britten groups his variations imaginatively: the first six are followed by a cello cadenza, the next six by a viola cadenza, the next six by a violin cadenza, and the final three drive to a conclusion that ringingly affirms C major.

String Quartet No. 2 in A minor

WILLIAM WALTON

Born March 29, 1902, Oldham

Died March 8, 1983, Ischia

Walton spent World War II writing film scores, including the music to *Henry V* (he had originally wanted to serve as an ambulance driver, but after he landed several ambulances in the ditch, the government decided that he would be more useful as a composer). In the summer of 1945, months after the end of the war in Europe, Walton set to work on a string quartet. He had written no major works since the *Violin Concerto* of 1939, and Walton – a careful craftsman – required nearly two years to complete the quartet. The first performance, by the Blech String Quartet, took place on a BBC broadcast on May 4, 1947.

All of Walton's considerable virtues are evident in the *String Quartet in A minor*: a clear sense of form, incredible rhythmic energy, and virtuoso instrumental writing. The quartet is remarkable for the central role it assigns to the usually-neglected viola – much of the characteristic sonority of this quartet originates with mid-range sound of that instrument, which announces a number of the quartet's main ideas. The opening *Allegro* is in sonata form. It begins with the two central voices – second violin and viola – in two-part counterpoint, from which the viola spins out the long and haunting main idea that will dominate this movement. At some points this music spills over with a nervous, almost pointillistic energy, and for extended periods Walton changes meters every measure. The development is built around a *fugato* introduced by the viola and derived from that instrument's opening statement. In its closing moments, this

movement seems to lose its energy and glides to silence on the lonely sound of the second violin's sustained fourth.

The second movement, a scherzo, goes like a streak. Marked *Presto*, it is barred in 3/8, and each of those brief measures seems to whip past in a micro-second. This is virtuoso music, full of leaps, trills, and accidentals; its pace broadens slightly at the ringing climax, and suddenly it has vanished. Walton mutes his instruments for the *Lento*, with the viola laying out the long opening idea, marked *espressivo*; over pizzicato accompaniment from the cello, the viola also introduces the theme of the central episode. This is an extended movement, and matters play up to a great climax, performed without mutes, before falling away to the quiet close. The concluding *Allegro molto* returns to the energetic manner of the second movement, but there is a hard-edged brilliance about this finale: long passages are written in unison, and the blistering pace of non-stop sixteenth-notes gives this music the feel of a perpetual motion, with the melodic line whipping around between the four instruments. This is a ternary form movement, with the lyric central episode (quite brief) introduced by the second violin. The opening material quickly returns, and the *Quartet in A minor* flies to its exciting close on unison hammered A's.

SOME NOTES: Listeners may discover that they already know this music, but in another form. In 1972, a quarter-century after it was written, Neville Marriner asked Walton to arrange the quartet for string orchestra. This he did (with considerable revision of the first movement), and it is performed (and has been recorded) under the name *Sonata for Strings*. Also, Walton wrote a string quartet as a teenager, and as a result this *Quartet in A minor* is only sometimes referred to as the *String Quartet No. 2 in A minor* and sometimes simply as *String Quartet in A minor*. The early quartet made something of a splash at the 1923 ISCM festival, but Walton withdrew it, pronouncing it "full of undigested Bartók and Schoenberg." The *Quartet in A minor* is the only one he wanted performed.