



CHANDOS

SIR RICHARD RODNEY

VOL. 5

BENNETT

CONCERTO FOR ORCHESTRA · SONNETS TO ORPHEUS · DIVERSIONS

JONATHAN AASGAARD CELLO
BBC SCOTTISH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

JOHN WILSON



Richard Rodney Bennett, at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, May 1986

Sir Richard Rodney Bennett (1936–2012)

Orchestral Works, Volume 5

	Concerto for Orchestra (1973)	22:06
1	I Aubade. Vivo – Doppio valore – Quasi cadenza – Scherzando	6:59
2	II Adagio – Pochissimo più mosso – Agitato – Presto spettrale – Tempo I (Doppio valore) – Tranquillo	7:57
	III Variations	
3	Tema. Presto –	0:25
4	Variazione I. Leggero –	0:26
5	Variazione II. Molto agitato –	0:34
6	Variazione III. Misterioso –	0:24
7	Variazione IV. Strepitoso –	0:24
8	Variazione V. Quasi campane –	0:38
9	Variazione VI. Appassionato –	0:47
10	Variazione VII. Scherzando –	0:22
11	Variazione VIII. Brillante –	0:21
12	Finale. Molto ritmico – Maestoso	2:37

première recording

Sonnets to Orpheus (1978 - 79)* 32:00
for Cello and Orchestra
To Dan Klein

- [13] I Allegro - A tempo, tranquillo - Con moto -
[Cadenza.] A piacere, poco meno, molto appassionato -
Ancora meno - Poco lento -
Tempo I - Agitato - Tempo I - Meno mosso 8:00
'A tree sprang up, O sheer transcendence!
O Orpheus sings!..'
- [14] II Capriccioso - Stesso tempo ma tranquillo - Come prima -
Cadenza, quasi stesso tempo, molto drammatico -
Presto - Molto mosso - 4:14
'And with tiny steps the clocks
walk beside our primal day.'
- [15] III Arioso - Molto tranquillo 6:01
'Erect no memorial stone. Let the rose
bloom every year to remind us of him.'
- [16] IV Molto animato - [] - Tempo I - [] -
Tempo I - Molto mosso - [] - A tempo, molto mosso -
Cadenza. Poco largamente - Poco meno -
Sempre più tranquillo - 8:57
'Only the Song above the land
blesses and celebrates.'
- [17] V Adagio - Senza misura 4:38
'But the echo of your music lingered
in the rocks and lions, trees and birds. You still sing there.'

Diversions (1989) **18:00**
for Chamber Orchestra

18	Theme ('Whistle and I'll come to you, my lad'). Vivo -	1:14
19	Variation I. Grazioso -	1:31
20	Variation II. Scherzando -	0:46
21	Interlude 1 ('In your [<i>sic</i>] garden'). Allegretto - Scherzando - Largamente -	1:30
22	Variation III. Poco lento - A tempo con moto - A tempo poco sostenuto -	2:11
23	Variation IV. Con fuoco -	1:21
24	Variation V. Tranquillo - A tempo con moto -	2:24
25	Variation VI. Con brio -	1:40
26	Interlude 2 ('My love's in Germanie'). Lento -	2:39
27	Finale. Molto allegro - Alla marcia - Giocoso - Molto vivo	2:41
		TT 72:17

Jonathan Aasgaard cello*
BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra
John Mills leader
John Wilson



Robert Skeide

Jonathan Aasgaard

Bennett: Orchestral Works, Volume 5

Introduction

Sir Richard Rodney Bennett (1936 – 2012) crossed between musical worlds like few other English composers. His mother had studied composition with Gustav Holst; his father wrote lyrics for the songwriter Roger Quilter. Richard, over a seven-decade career, sought to find the most natural and meaningful outlet for the musical ideas that had poured out of him from the age of six. As the son of musicians, he grew up with the belief that the purpose of music is to be performed, to be heard, and to affect its listeners. 'I was at a very good prep school in Kent', he told Norman Lebrecht in a BBC radio interview towards the end of his life:

...and I started writing little things for the choir to sing, and piano duets that I could play and so on, and it was a very good thing for me to be doing. It's partly because my parents encouraged me to write for what was around me. So I never went through that fatal thing of writing 'Symphony Number One' at the top of a page – and then you can't turn the page, of course.

The flair with which Bennett could turn artistic pages was a source of astonishment

(and occasionally unease) to his classical contemporaries. His musical education embraced lessons with Lennox Berkeley, the bohemian world of the English serialist Elisabeth Lutyens, and a life-changing period of study with Pierre Boulez, in Paris. As a mature composer he met the European *avant-garde* on their own terms at Darmstadt – but he could also craft unforgettable melodies in film scores such as *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974) and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994). His opera *The Mines of Sulphur* enjoyed international success after its première, at Sadler's Wells, in 1965: two decades later, as a jazz pianist, he performed sessions at the Algonquin Hotel which made him the toast of New York. He was equally comfortable in the company of Eartha Kitt and Karlheinz Stockhausen (though Bennett's beloved cat Pussy was rather less enthusiastic about Kitt's Chihuahuas).

And yet throughout it all Richard Rodney Bennett approached his art with supreme professionalism, in a musical voice that remained fresh and lucid. Versatility (and, indeed, professionalism) was not always perceived as a virtue in the dogmatic

atmosphere of postwar classical music, and the lifelong commitment which Bennett showed to his creative gift came, at times, with a high professional and personal price. The three works recorded here date from the period 1973 to 1989, and span a turning point in his career and his private life. But whatever the outward circumstances, and whatever the genre in which Bennett chose to work, the directness and spontaneity of his inspiration blows through his music like a spring breeze – expressed in a musical language that is often urbane, sometimes intensely passionate, but always indelibly his own.

Concerto for Orchestra

Few young composers in postwar Britain could ignore the overwhelming presence of Benjamin Britten. While studying with Lennox Berkeley, at the Royal Academy of Music, Bennett had sent his Variations for unaccompanied oboe to Britten and had received an encouraging letter in return. But while Britten could be generous towards fledgling composers, his attitude cooled markedly once they were old enough to be potential rivals. Britten was dismissive of Bennett's opera *The Mines of Sulphur*, and incidents such as the Prime Ministerial dinner at Downing Street in 1972 – when

an inebriated Malcolm Arnold buttonholed Britten and declared, 'You know, Ben, this Richard Rodney Bennett is a f***ing good composer! He's better than you!' – cannot have helped.

Accordingly, the relationship between Bennett and Britten was one of colleagues rather than friends. Bennett found William Walton more congenial company and preferred to deal with the Aldeburgh clique through Britten's partner, Peter Pears, who was (as Bennett told his biographers Anthony Meredith and Paul Harris) 'infinitely more approachable'. Nevertheless, Britten's sixtieth birthday, in November 1973, was a public occasion that could not be ignored, and Bennett met him on a small patch of shared musical ground: the twelve-note 'Tema seriale con fuga', from Britten's *Cantata academica* (1959). Bennett's *Alba* – an organ piece based on Britten's theme – is dedicated 'to Benjamin Britten on his 60th birthday'.

The same material appears in the first movement of Bennett's Concerto for Orchestra – composed between June and October 1973, officially in response to a commission from the Denver branch of the English Speaking Union, but actually at the instigation of Brian Priestman, the British chief conductor of the Denver Symphony Orchestra. 'There is no tradition in Denver,

so we don't have to be fearful of it. We don't have to conform', said Priestman to the *New York Times*, and Bennett effectively had *carte blanche*. The result – it was premièred, in Denver, in March 1974 and subsequently performed in New York as well as by numerous UK orchestras – was (in the composer's words) 'a large-scale three-movement work which, as the title implies, is intended to display the modern orchestra as a virtuoso body of players'. 'Although I have written two symphonies', he wrote:

I have more recently been stimulated by the idea of the concerto, not in an attempt to recreate the 19th century concerto form, but rather because the concept suggests a dramatic confrontation or conflict... I believe that this concerto for orchestra carries these ideas onto a larger 'canvas' juxtaposing families of instruments, solo instruments with ensembles, and contrasting different types of musical material in an attempt to create a vivid and compelling dramatic argument.

The first movement – 'Aubade' or morning music – is composed of several closely related sections which contain the kind of contrasted tempi found in a much larger work – there is a tiny scherzo and a brief slow movement, framed within lively opening and closing sections...

The second movement consists of a scherzo framed within two slow sections. First there is a lyrical passage for oboe, harp and strings... Gradually the tension increases until finally the orchestra plunges into a macabre scherzo (Presto spettrale)...

A solo violin floats the movement's opening oboe melody over the central section of the scherzo: the centre of the movement (and the whole work). 'The last movement', continues Bennett,

is a series of variations, strongly contrasted in mood, though not in tempo... The theme is enunciated by strings and horns. Then follow eight variations:

- I. Leggero (woodwind and high strings)
- II. Molto agitato (horns)
- III. Misterioso (tremolo strings)
- IV. Strepitoso (brass)
- V. Quasi campane ('Like Bells')
- VI. Appassionato (upper strings)
- VII. Scherzando (percussion)
- VIII. Brillante (woodwind and brass)

The last variation is followed by an extremely lively finale.

Sonnets to Orpheus
British composers often endure a curious

career trajectory – hailed for their freshness and irreverence in their youth and cherished as national treasures in their old age. In between come the middle years, when their public stature rises as their critical stock falls: attracting honours and high-profile commissions at the same time as the bloom of novelty fades from their reputation, if not (and in Bennett's case, emphatically not) their inspiration. Bennett was in his forties when he began his cello concerto, *Sonnets to Orpheus*. It was commissioned by the 1979 Edinburgh International Festival as the centrepiece of a residency that also featured late-night jazz sets with Bennett's regular collaborator Marion Montgomery and a performance, with Barry Tuckwell, of Bennett's new Horn Sonata.

'He is now 42, a tall slim, spare man', wrote Philip Radcliffe in the Hallé orchestra's in-house magazine (the Hallé, under James Loughran, was due to give the concerto's première that September).

He gives the impression of being a man
who lives a full (some might say over-full)
life and enjoying the 'problem' of trying to
fit everything in...

In truth, Bennett was at something of a crisis. He had never been a doctrinaire modernist, but throughout the 1970s he had drifted apart from the *avant-garde* establishment, and

felt increasingly burdened by professional responsibilities.

'I used to teach quite a lot', he told an American interviewer, Bruce Duffie, in 1988.

I also used to sit on a lot of committees on
the Arts Council of England, and I also used
to judge an awful lot of composition prizes.

I think a lot of it I did out of guilt.

Late in 1978, it had also become clear that Bennett was at a breaking point in his relationship with his long-term partner, Dan Klein. They had rented a flat in New York; and at Christmas 1978, Bennett told Klein that he intended to make a clean break and move permanently to the USA. *Sonnets to Orpheus* was begun that December in New York, completed in May in London, and premiered in Edinburgh on 3 September 1979, with Heinrich Schiff as soloist. Bennett began his new life in America the following month.

For Bennett's biographers Meredith and Harris, this concerto, inspired by five of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, was a conscious response to Bennett's personal circumstances – a 'leave-taking' and an apologia for his decision to place the needs of his art at the absolute centre of his life. Orpheus, after all, was the supreme embodiment of music – a life-force, irresistible and unquenchable even after Orpheus himself was dismembered by

Maenads (Bennett was acutely aware of the critical backlash against his more recent works). Brief quotations from Rilke's poems are associated with each of the five movements, the cello cast as both singer and song against a colourful (but always translucent) orchestra. Bennett dedicated the score 'to Dan Klein'.

Sonnets to Orpheus is one of the great English cello concertos, and a key work in his career – an emotional turning-point, and one of the largest and most heartfelt of his purely instrumental works. Some critics (perhaps vindicating Bennett's fears) were offhand, though Raymond Monelle, of *The Scotsman*, perceived something more enduring.

There is an English tradition of tender pastoral melody, sweetly accompanied, which comes through Delius and Bliss and Vaughan Williams into much modern film and incidental music and which serious musicians like to despise. They will have to think again after hearing Richard Rodney Bennett's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, which recreates this manner in fresh, acerbic terms... there is a clarity of construction which gives strength and relevance, and the material, swooning and sensuous though it sometimes appears, is treated with economy and simplicity.

In some respects, the review was prophetic. *Sonnets to Orpheus* made little

progress after the initial performances and received neither a London première nor a recording in Bennett's lifetime.

Diversions

'If I can't write something that's of use, then I'm not interested in being a composer', said Bennett to Bruce Duffie in 1988, nine years into his life in New York. 'I want to write music that people will need, and which, preferably, will sound beautiful and be interesting.' When he departed the UK, in October 1979, he left behind all but a handful of his *avant-garde* scores:

Nono, Stockhausen and people like that – once collected so ardently but looking at it coldly, I realised it had gone from me. It was totally over.

he told Meredith and Harris. Over the following three decades his own music would move down a very different path. He had talked of leading a musical life partitioned into several different rooms. Now, as he admitted with some pleasure, the walls between them were coming down.

Diversions was a commission from the Haberdashers' Aske's Schools, in north London, to celebrate their tercentenary, in 1990. It was first played by the combined orchestras of all seven schools at a celebration concert in the Royal Festival Hall

John Wood © BBC



John Wilson and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, at City Halls, Glasgow



Alex Ingram

John Wilson

on 17 March 1990, though Bennett – mindful that even the most musical of schools cannot always run to specialist instruments – scored it for a Beethoven-sized chamber orchestra with added percussion and piano. He had, after all, been writing music for school ensembles since the age of nine.

The finished work is an exuberantly colourful set of symphonic variations based on the Scottish folksong 'Whistle and I'll come to you, my lad'. The six variations include a scherzo and pair of slow movements (with solo viola and violin, respectively), as well as two interludes – the first idyllic and based on the folksong 'In yon garden' and the second, which features a melancholy oboe solo, using a third folksong, 'My love's in Germanie'. A brisk finale, *Molto allegro – Alla marcia*, wraps things up with a true Highland fling. In later years, Bennett reportedly worried that *Diversions* was too long for its material; but when ideas and their treatment are as lively as this, generosity is surely anything but a weakness.

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One of Europe's most versatile cellists, the Norwegian **Jonathan Aasgaard** is active as soloist, chamber musician, studio musician, orchestral principal, teacher, and explorer

of new music. He is Principal Cello of both the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and Sinfonia of London, a regular guest principal of leading British and continental European orchestras, and, as a dedicated teacher, Professor of Cello at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Chamber music performances have taken him across Europe, the Middle East, Japan, South Korea, and the USA: he has collaborated with artists such as the violinists Nigel Kennedy, Henning Kraggerud, and Julian Rachlin, violist Lawrence Power, cellists Yo-Yo Ma and Giovanni Sollima, pianists Simon Trpčeski, Boris Giltburg, and Joanna MacGregor, and clarinetist Martin Fröst in a range of prominent festivals and concert halls. He has performed more than fifty works for cello and orchestra, his discography including recordings of Bloch's *Schelomo*, with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, works for cello and orchestra by Carl Davis, with the Philharmonia Orchestra, and, among a number of recitals, Brahms's cello sonatas, with Martin Roscoe, an 'Editor's Choice' for chamber music in the magazine *Gramophone*. In 2025 he will release a new recording of Walton's Cello Concerto, with Sinfonia of London conducted by John Wilson. A champion of new music, he has given the world première of Carl Davis's *Ballade* for

cello and orchestra, the European première of Giovanni Sollima's Double Cello Concerto, the UK première of Weinberg's Cello Concerto, the US première of concertos by Franz Neruda and Emil Hartmann, and world premières of dozens of solo pieces, many written specially for him. Jonathan Aasgaard plays a cello made by Celeste Farotti, in Milan, in 1926. www.jonathan-aasgaard.com

Formed in 1935, the **BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra** has been based at Glasgow's City Halls since 2006. It has a rich history of performing, broadcasting, and recording across Scotland and the rest of the UK, and of touring overseas, most recently to South America, China, India, and Japan. Its huge range of repertoire has developed under its Chief Conductors, who include Osmo Vänskä, Ilan Volkov (currently Creative Partner), Sir Donald Runnicles (now Conductor Emeritus), Thomas Dausgaard, and, since September 2022, Ryan Wigglesworth. It has long been a champion of new music, not least through Tectonics, its annual festival of the new and experimental, and it has established strong links with local communities through its learning and engagement programmes, led by Lucy Drever, its Associate Artist. It maintains a close association with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, in Glasgow, working

across a variety of disciplines with conductors, composers, soloists, and orchestral players. The BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra maintains a busy schedule of broadcasts on BBC Radio 3, BBC Radio Scotland, and BBC Sounds, as well as BBC television and BBC iPlayer. It appears regularly at the BBC Proms and Edinburgh International Festival and is a recipient of the Royal Philharmonic Society Award for Ensemble and of four *Gramophone* Awards. www.bbc.co.uk/bbcso

Born in Gateshead and since 2011 a Fellow of the Royal College of Music where he studied composition and conducting, **John Wilson** is now in demand at the highest level across the globe and has over the past thirty years conducted many of the world's finest orchestras. In 2018 he relaunched Sinfonia of London, which *The Arts Desk* described as 'the most exciting thing currently happening on the British orchestral scene'. His much-anticipated BBC Proms début with this orchestra, in 2021, was praised by *The Guardian* as 'truly outstanding' and admired by *The Times* for its 'revelatory music-making'. They are now highly sought-after across the UK, the 2024/25 season notable for performances at major UK venues including the Barbican Centre, Bridgewater Hall, and Glasshouse International Centre for Music, as well as a

return to the BBC Proms. Their large and varied discography having received near universal critical acclaim, in the autumn of 2024 they released their twenty-fourth album since 2019. Their CDs have earned several awards, including numerous *BBC Music Magazine* Awards: for recordings of Korngold's Symphony in F sharp (2020), Respighi's Roman Trilogy (2021), Dutilleux's *Le Loup* (2022), Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (2024), and works by Vaughan Williams, Howells, Delius, and Elgar, a disc which won the Orchestral Award

and was chosen Recording of the Year. *The Observer* described the Respighi recording as 'Massive, audacious and vividly played' and *The Times* declared it one of the three 'truly outstanding accounts of this trilogy' of all time, alongside those by Toscanini (1949) and Muti (1984). In March 2019, John Wilson was awarded the prestigious Distinguished Musician Award of the Incorporated Society of Musicians for his services to music and in 2021 was appointed Henry Wood Chair of Conducting at the Royal Academy of Music.

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E-mail: enquiries@chandos.net Telephone: + 44 (0)1206 225 200 Fax: + 44 (0)1206 225 201



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BENNETT: ORCHESTRAL WORKS, VOL. 5

SIR RICHARD RODNEY BENNETT

(1936 - 2012)

ORCHESTRAL WORKS, VOLUME 5

1 - 12

CONCERTO FOR ORCHESTRA (1973)

22:06

PREMIÈRE RECORDING

13 - 17

SONNETS TO ORPHEUS (1978 - 79)
FOR CELLO AND ORCHESTRA

32:00

18 - 27

DIVERSIONS (1989)
FOR CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

18:00

TT 72:17

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JOHN MILLS LEADER
JOHN WILSON

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