

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) String Quartet No.3 Op.94 (1975)

I. Duets

II. Ostinato

III. Solo

IV. Burlesque

V. Recitative and Passacaglia (La Serenissima)

Britten's compositions for string quartet fall into three groups that were written at very different times of his life: first, a number of early works from his teens (1928-33) which 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, this third quartet – one of his last works.

Britten's health deteriorated through heart disease during the last decade of his life. He finished his final opera *Death in Venice* in the spring of 1973, and after celebrating its completion went into hospital to have a failing heart valve replaced. The operation was only partly successful, and also induced a slight stroke which affected his right hand. For the next year he composed nothing, and failed even to join in the celebrations of his own 60th birthday in November. With dedicated nursing care he gradually returned to composition, revising his third cello suite after a visit by Rostropovich in early 1974, and being encouraged by Donald Mitchell to revise his early unnumbered String Quartet in D for publication. Mitchell was a friend and biographer of Britten, first Professor of Music at Sussex University and co-founder with Britten of Faber Music. Further inspiration came to Britten from hearing Janet Baker, for whom he had composed the *Rape of Lucretia*, sing Berlioz's *Nuits d'été* at the Aldeburgh Festival; this performance led to his composing the dramatic cantata *Phaedra* for her.

The third quartet, though composed at around the same time as *Phaedra*, has close links with Britten's *Death in Venice*. The quartet is dedicated to Hans Keller, a personal friend and tireless advocate of Britten, who co-edited with Donald Mitchell the influential *New Series* of the *Music Review* in the early 1950s. Keller wrote of the Third Quartet that here the composer had taken '*that decisive step beyond – into the Mozartian realm of the instrumental purification of opera*'. Keller was clearly a bigger fan of the string quartet than of opera ('*I never was an opera fan—about twenty-five musically supreme masterpieces in this curious medium apart*'), but his comment captures the relationship between Britten's opera and his quartet: the extremely

spare writing of the quartet distills some of the essence of Britten's opera and of its tormented protagonist Aschenbach.

Most of the quartet was written in a now Grade-II-listed potting shed at Chapel House in Horham, Suffolk where Pears and Britten moved in 1971 when Red House in Aldeburgh became too congested for composition. But the final movement was written in Venice itself on Britten's last visit there in November 1975. Britten explicitly marks motifs from *Death In Venice* in the introductory recitative of the last movement, each player introducing a different one. Perhaps the most significant is that introduced *pizzicato* by the first violin, which is derived from Aschenbach's tormented "Phaedrus aria". Aschenbach reflects on his attraction to the beauty of the young boy Tadzio, which could be either unfulfillingly Platonic, or corruptingly Dionysian. Auden had famously written to Britten warning him against allowing the bourgeois to repress the chaotic bohemian in his personality. But Britten found it hard to "embrace disorder" and the tension shaped his life, health and music.



Britten heard a run-through of this third quartet by the Amadeus Quartet in the library of the Red House in Aldeburgh on 28 September 1976, but he died two weeks before the première at the Snape Maltings on 19 December.