

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) Canticale III *Still falls the rain* Op 55 (1954)

Britten's third Canticale *Still Falls the Rain (The Raids, 1940, Night and Dawn)* is a setting for tenor, horn and piano, of a poem by Edith Sitwell. Britten wrote it in 1954 shortly after *The Turn of the Screw*, and it was first performed by Peter Pears, Dennis Brain and Britten at the Wigmore Hall the following year in a memorial concert for Noel Mewton-Wood, to whom it is dedicated. Newton-Wood was a brilliant young Australian pianist, friend of Britten and accompanist to Pears, who had recently committed suicide, blaming himself for the death of his manager and lover Bill Fedricks from appendicitis.

Edith Sitwell was overwhelmed by the first performance and subsequently collaborated with Britten on a work for the 1956 Aldeburgh Festival centered on the third Canticale but flanked by readings and three further settings by Britten of her poetry. The event was called "*The Heart of the Matter*".

The self-consciously shocking, sardonic world of *Façade* is far from that of *Still Falls the Rain*, one of Sitwell's most substantial poems. Here the crucifixion is a powerful metaphor for the Blitz, and man's perennial culpability: "*Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails / Upon the Cross*".

The Canticale consists of six variations on a theme that contains all twelve chromatic pitches. The first five variations are for piano and horn, with the tenor declaiming Sitwell's verses. The final variation is introduced by a quotation from Dr Faustus ("*O lle leape up to my God: who pulles me doune*") in *Sprachgesang* – speech-rate articulation but with the intonation of steady musical pitches. The tenor joins the horn and piano for the coda representing the voice of God: "*Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood, for thee.*"