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THE 1709 'VIOTTI' AND HOW IT HELPED TO MAKE HIS NAME

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THE NAME OF GIOVANNI BATTISTA VIOTTI

is ranked alongside those of Tartini and Paganini in the annals of violin playing. His influence was great; so great that it now overshadows the rest of his life – his humble beginnings in Italy, the political

upheavals that forced him twice to flee to a different country and his failed wine business, which left him an indebted and embittered old man. These troubles and the years he spent away from the violin make his achievements all the more extraordinary. Through his expressive performance style, which we examine on page 32, he influenced a generation of French violinists and beyond: admirers included Joachim and Brahms. Meanwhile his violin concertos represent some of the finest Classical writing for the instrument. They also represent a fantastic technical challenge, as one of their main exponents, Franco Mezzena, describes on page 37.

Viotti's influence extended into another key arena: that of violin making. He was one of the first performers to bring the work of Stradivari to world attention, playing several of his instruments, including the 1709 example featured on this month's poster. The powerful tone and brilliance of sound created by this exceptional combination of performer and instrument helped to create the Stradivari legend. Today the violin, which John Dilworth analyses on page 24, remains one of the most breathtaking examples of his work.

Naomi Sadler Editor



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A 17th-century Russian triptych. Britten's suite is inspired by the Russian Orthodox hymn for the departed



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Britten composed his Third Cello Suite in a short period of time – between 23 February and 3 March 1971 – at a point when he was already very ill, handicapped and depressed. Even so, in the foreword of the first edition of the suite, which he dedicated to Mstislav Rostropovich, he recounts: 'I wrote this suite in the early spring of 1971 and took it as a present to Slava Rostropovich when Peter Pears and I visited Moscow and

Leningrad in April of that year. The occasion was a week of British music, and our programme with the London Symphony Orchestra was made memorable by the fact that both Richter and Rostropovich joined us – surely a unique gesture of Anglo-Russian friendship.'

The first performance of the suite was supposed to be given at the Aldeburgh Festival that same year, but Rostropovich was unable to attend. He had been censured and prevented from leaving the country by the Russian government for his

defence of the dissident novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The work was not, therefore, premiered until 21 December 1974, when Rostropovich gave its first performance at The Maltings, Snape, near Britten's home of Aldeburgh.

The Third Suite is remarkable for showing the powerful influence of the Russian cellist on Britten: in exploring novel sounds, the work allowed Britten to exploit Rostropovich's virtuosity at the cello; and in using Russian themes, it also allowed him to capture Rostropovich's

SONG OF

Written as a gift to Rostropovich, Britten's Third Cello Suite pays tribute to the cellist's virtuosity and heritage, and moved him to tears. FELIPE AVELLAR DE AQUINO examines the use of Russian themes in this harrowing masterpiece

national roots. The work had an equally profound impact on the performer: according to Michael Oliver, in his biography *Benjamin Britten* (Phaidon), Rostropovich 'could not play it without weeping, and since Britten's death he has not felt able to play it at all'. It was apparently for this reason that Rostropovich never recorded this suite.

Since this piece is what Britten described in his foreword as 'a tribute to a great Russian musician and patriot', his basic compositional material was four

Russian themes. Three of these themes are folk songs, taken from Tchaikovsky's arrangements for voice and piano:

Mournful Song (Under the little apple tree), *Autumn* and *Street Song* (The grey eagle), whose basic melodies are given in examples 1–3. The fourth theme is the *Kontakion* (Grant repose together with the saints), a sacred hymn for the departed from the Russian Orthodox Church. It appears in the *English Hymnal* from 1933, edited by Ralph Vaughan Williams. The term *Kontakion* (from the Greek word for scroll) refers to a liturgical form that originated in the Byzantine Church

in the sixth century. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, only the first strophe is included in the modern editions of the service books, which is how Britten found the *Kontakion* in the *English Hymnal*. However, the tune does not exist in a single version, a fact that Britten clearly recognised. Even though he omits some of the verses and slightly modifies a few phrases, he maintains the basic musical content of the hymn. He transposes the tune from A minor to C minor and leaves out the da capo repetition. He also shifts the melody to an upper register in the »

Rostropovich could not play it without weeping, and since Britten's death he has not felt able to play it at all

MICHAEL OLIVER, BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Example 1 Mournful Song (Under the little apple tree)

Allegro ma non troppo

Example 2 Autumn

Allegro

Example 3 Street Song (The grey eagle)

Allegro

SORROW

Example 4

B section, returning it to its original register in the concluding phrase.

Britten includes an optional version of the *Kontakion* to be chosen at the performer's discretion (example 4). The ossia version contains just two alterations, a B flat in bar 1 and a G instead of a B in bar 3. As he explained in the foreword to the work: 'When I played the suite through to Dmitri Shostakovich during our visit to Moscow, he remarked that he had been brought up on a different version of the *Kontakion*. I consulted my friend Bishop Pimen of Saratov and Volgograd, who confirmed that my version was the one he had always known and regularly used. In the score I print both versions, for players to choose whichever they prefer.'

The Third Suite is divided into nine short movements: *Introduzione* (Lento), *Marcia* (Allegro), *Canto* (Con moto), *Barcarola* (Lento), *Dialogo* (Allegretto), *Fuga* (Andante espressivo), *Recitativo* (Fantastico), *Moto perpetuo* (Presto) and *Passacaglia* (Lento solenne). It is best viewed as a hybrid structure, combining continuous-variation technique with the multi-movement construction of the suite, in which, as opposed to the standard organisation of the variation, the themes are presented at the end of the piece, as a coda to the *Passacaglia*.

The continuous-variation technique can be noticed in the way that the movements are constructed. They are entirely based on the four borrowed themes and played without interruption. Even when there is a musical silence between movements, they are connected by the word *attaca*. Furthermore, the introductory movement can be viewed as a variation on the *Kontakion*, while the *Canto* is a variation of *Mournful Song*. This latter movement is followed by the *Barcarola*, which is structured as a threefold continuous

variation, while the *Passacaglia* is a continuous variation per se.

The borrowed themes work not only as the building blocks of this composition but also as the unifying element of the suite. In some instances the Russian themes simply define the mood or character of the movement, while in others they work as the basic melodic material from which the entire movement is constructed. In order to create unity, in several instances Britten uses one motivic element in a certain movement, foreshadowing what will be explored in the next. In a similar way, he employs a melodic fragment of one movement in a distant one, as in bar 49

Example 5a

Example 5b

Example 6a fragments of the Canto, shown above the corresponding music of the Fuga

Example 6b

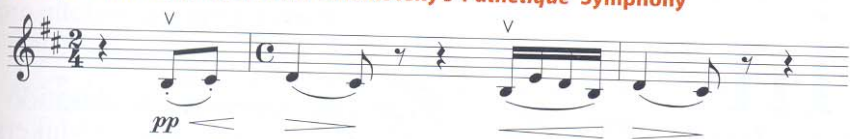
of the second movement (example 5a) and in bars 26–27 of the fifth movement (example 5b), which share the same pitch content. Furthermore, he uses small fragments of the *Canto* (example 6a) to elaborate the subject of the *Fuga* (example 6b).

The Tchaikovsky link in this suite is not restricted to the use of his arrangements of folk songs. On the contrary, there are many strong bonds between Britten's Third Cello Suite and Tchaikovsky's '*Pathétique*' Symphony. In a general sense, both works reflect the inner thoughts of the composers during the final years of their lives, when they were grappling with the subject of death. Significantly, both pieces not only use the lament tetrachord (one of the commonly used passacaglia formulas of the 17th century), but they also quote the same theme from the *Kontakion*.

It is common knowledge that Britten took Tchaikovsky as a model to compose his ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas*. Hence, it is quite possible that he mirrored on Tchaikovsky's '*Pathétique*' in order to express his sorrowful feelings in the Third Cello Suite. The most compelling element that links the two works is the *Kontakion*, which Tchaikovsky quotes in the development of the first movement of his symphony (bars 202–205); despite the rhythmic alterations, he employs exactly the same version that Shostakovich mentioned to Britten.

I would go even further and relate the melodic motif of the first theme of the '*Pathétique*' to the opening motif of the *Kontakion*. Both share a similar melodic contour and the motif of the '*Pathétique*' seems to be a rhythmic diminution of the motif of the *Kontakion* (compare example 7 with example 8a). The main motif of the

Example 7 the main motif from Tchaikovsky's 'Pathétique' Symphony



Example 8a



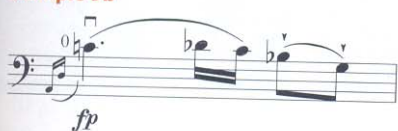
Example 8b



Example 9a motif from Street Song



Example 9b



'Pathétique' is a thematic transformation of the Russian *Kontakion*.

Furthermore, from bars 160–170 of the first movement of Tchaikovsky's 'Pathétique', as Timothy L. Jackson describes in *Tchaikovsky: Symphony no. 6* (Cambridge University Press), the bass line 'unfolds the chromatic descending tetrachord D–C–B–B flat–A – a traditional

Baroque topos signifying lament, death, and the Underworld'. Britten, however, employs the lament tetrachord as the ostinato figure that forms the ground bass of the Passacaglia.

The use of the Russian *Kontakion* is one of the main elements that give the sorrowful character to Britten's suite. In fact, three movements that are pillars in the structure of the piece are heavily grounded on this hymn: the opening *Introduzione*, the *Dialogo*, which is the very middle movement, and the final *Passacaglia*.

The *Introduzione* has the declamatory style and religious character of the *Kontakion* and is marked *parlando*, in a clear reference to the vocal nature of the borrowed themes. It has a sectional phrase structure that is similar to that of the *Kontakion*, in which

the phrases are clearly defined by rests. Furthermore, each phrase of the *Introduzione* is articulated by a fermata on its final note, as in a chorale setting.

This movement is in fact a variation on the *Kontakion*. Hence, two motifs from the hymn form its basic melodic material: motif a, the melodic arch within a diminished fourth (example 8a) and motif b, the insistent repeated notes (example 8b). In order to underscore the religious character, the low C that is part of Britten's harmonisation of the *Kontakion* appears in the opening movement in repeated pizzicatos in a way that resembles church bells.

The fifth movement, *Dialogo*, which is an outgrowth of its preceding *Barcarola*, combines two different characters: the grotesque, which is a variant of the motif in example 9a; and the solemn, which comes from the ceremonial character of the *Kontakion*. The dialogue is created by the bowed against the plucked voice. The top notes of the first appearance of the plucked voice consist of an elaboration of motif a from the *Kontakion*. In addition, from bar 18 to the end of the movement, the effect of a bell that we have heard in the opening movement is back in the left-hand pizzicatos.

The final movement, *Passacaglia*, has its ground bass derived from the opening of the *Kontakion* as a variant of motif a in example 8a. It is interesting to notice how the ground bass sounds throughout the entire movement either as a closed unity, as at the beginning, or in a large span, as in bars 52–62. Starting in bar 82, some fragments derived from the *Mournful Song* are interpolated into the *Passacaglia*, foreshadowing the full statement of the four themes.

The other three themes are as important as the *Kontakion* in the genesis of the suite. The second movement, *Marcia*, is clearly based on a motif from *Street Song* (example 9a). This motif, formed by an upper neighbour tone and a descending leap of a minor third, is widely explored (example 9b). In bars 4–5 this motif appears slightly modified, while bars 7–8, 18–19 and 51–52 explore just the rhythm pattern from the first half of the motif. In contrast, in bar 17 Britten emphasises the leap of a minor third.

Starting from bar 22, the repeated-note motif from example 8b appears in ▶



PHOTO: BRIAN SEED/LEBRICHT

Benjamin Britten advises Mstislav Rostropovich, his inspiration for the suite

Example 10

arco
22
pp
motif b
motif a

Example 11

tranquillo subito a tempo
p dolciss. f
nat.

Example 12a

(Recitativo)
10
p f
nat.

Example 12b

(Autumn)
3
p

Example 13a

Recitativo
p

Example 13b

Presto (moto perpetuo)
pp
nat.

There are strong bonds with Tchaikovsky's 'Pathétique'. Both works reflect the thoughts of the composers during the final years of their lives

the Canto. Its repeated arpeggio pattern suggests the wave movement that is characteristic of the Barcarola. In this movement some of the melodic contours from *Autumn* and *Street Song* are ingeniously hidden within the texture. The Barcarola also contains a strong reference to Bach's works, for Britten clearly emulates the opening of the Prelude from Bach's G major Cello Suite. The movement can be divided into three subsections, in which the last two are variations of the first, thus forming a threefold continuous variation.

The sixth movement, as previously mentioned, is an intricate three-voice fugue whose subject is based on *Mournful Song*. Even though the subject is diatonic, each of the three entrances is in a different key. Thus, the subject is first stated in E flat major, answered in D major (bar 6) and then presented in F major (bar 11), which creates a polytonal texture.

The following movement, Recitativo (Fantastico), is probably the least tonally centred and the most fragmented of the entire suite. Curiously, it starts with

the same pitch collection that closes the preceding movement: B flat—C—D flat (these three notes are also a derivation from the motif from *example 8a*). As in the first movement, each fragment of the Recitativo is articulated with a rest and a fermata. Furthermore, in this short movement Britten explores a wide range of sonorities and effects such as the combination of tremolo and glissando, and trill and glissando, besides the use of ponticello and artificial harmonics.

As an example of how the material of each movement is driven by the borrowed themes, the running passage in bar 10 (*example 12a*) is based on a fragment from bars 3 and 4 of *Autumn* (*example 12b*). Furthermore, in bar 20, a variant of the second half of *Street Song* is presented in accelerando, emphasising the motif

G flat—E flat—D (*example 13a*), until it becomes a tremolo. This same motif is altered to G flat—D—E flat (*example 13b*) and becomes the main motif from which the Moto perpetuo is built. At the end of the Moto perpetuo this cell is insistently repeated (bars 30—33), where D becomes a pedal over which G flat and E flat alternate in the fast semiquaver (♩) rhythmic pattern. This creates a parallelism between the end of the Recitativo and the Moto perpetuo (movements seven and eight). Furthermore, the motif from *example 8a* is constantly present in the Moto perpetuo, intertwined within its texture.

Through the use of Russian folk themes and the *Kontakion*, this highly emotional work pays homage to a Russian musician, but can also be viewed as Britten's own statement about death and mortality. It is closely linked to Tchaikovsky's *'Pathétique'* Symphony, and like that work, offers a glimpse into the mind of the composer during the final years of his life, with the subject of death an element that is ever present. ■

rhythmic diminution, alternating between two strings, and this is followed by a remnant of the motif in *example 8a* (*example 10*, see page 57). From bar 55 until the end of this movement Britten interpolates small fragments derived from *Mournful Song*, foreshadowing the third movement, Canto (*example 11*, see page 57). Canto, which is a variation of *Mournful Song*, starts with a transposition of the folk theme, maintaining its character throughout the entire movement. As previously shown, elements of this movement will be used to form the subject of the fugue later on.

The fourth movement, Barcarola (Lento), moves off from the final note of