

## *Les Illuminations*

Benjamin Britten

B. November 22, 1913, Lowestoft, England

D. December 4, 1976, Aldeburgh, England

*First performed in its complete version in January 1940 in London with the Boyd Neel Orchestra and Sophie Wyss (its dedicatee) as soloist*

*Scored for high voice and strings (approx. 23 minutes).*

*Les Illuminations* was written shortly after Britten's arrival in North America in April 1939. He left Britain for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was what he perceived to be an inhospitable climate for artists. The move seems to have renewed his spirit, and he entered a prolific period of composition. Like many of Britten's compositions from this time, *Les Illuminations* seems to inhabit a space of dreams - some disturbing and dark, others playful, and still others that combine this dichotomy within a single movement. Britten's goal of setting the French Symbolist Arthur Rimbaud's prose-poetry was an ambitious one. Rimbaud's poems here are strange and surreal, and the setting of prose poems raises difficulties distinct from treating either genre individually. If the text-setting is odd, as has often been said in regard to this work, it is because the poetic language itself is strange, serving as an impediment to conventional musical treatment.

In *Fanfare*, Britten immediately introduces the sense of dichotomy that permeates the work as a whole, between light and dark, dream and nightmare, extremes in sonority and range and between tonal centers. The violas play a fanfare in B-flat, and the first violins respond in E major while a sustained trill in the cellos and basses creates an undercurrent of energy without pulling in either tonal direction. This dialogue continues until the entrance of the voice on an E natural, announcing the musical and textual motto of the whole work.

Incessant motion in the strings gives *Villes* the feeling of bustling city life. Descending chromatic sweeps take us in and out of ravines; marcato and pizzicato strings illustrate "castles of bone;" and the movement closes with a creeping descent from high strings to low. *Phrase* is spacious and ethereal, the strings playing harmonics and open fifths and ending with a surprising B-flat major chord that sets up the dance in its companion movement, *Antique*. The text of *Antique* is explicitly erotic, a dance-duet between the violin and the voice with the lower strings accompanying.

*Royauté* opens with another fanfare. The orchestration beneath the narrator's words is fuller and richer than in previous movements, thinning out again under the laughter of the would-be queen and eventually fading away as the lovers run towards the palm gardens. *Marine* uses a seascape-like ostinato in the strings and long melismas that suggest the swirling waters. *Interlude* marks the return to a serious mood, creating a separation before *Being Beauteous*, which is the longest of the settings. This movement, dedicated to Britten's partner Peter Pears, is a more understated display of conflict with unsettling chromaticism and the poet's shivers combined with the purity of

unembellished triads. *Parade* is simply unsettling; the basses depict the slow march of the parade which spirals into disarray until a final restatement of the motto forces it back into motion. *Départ* brings the work to a quiet close with a private admission of exhaustion after this sequence of wild visions.

*Program note by Amy Kimura, a doctoral candidate in ethnomusicology at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance.*