

FESTIVAL CONCERT. 31 March, 2021 8.30pm

ELINOR BENNETT (Harp)

LACHRYMAE Osian Ellis

The first public performance of "Lachrymae" is a special tribute to OSIAN ELLIS, by his ex-student, Elinor Bennett, Artistic Director of the Wales Harp Festival. The original sound recording of the work by Osian Ellis himself in 2019 can be heard on :

https://soundcloud.com/popd_ping/lachrymae-oe-20-03-27-b

Composer's note :

" This harp solo was written at a most distressing time while Llinos was being treated in hospital for cancer and while her mother, Glynis, sat with her, day and night, for three weeks, until her death in November 2018 at the age of thirty-nine. But her daughter, Elin (13) in spite of her loss, still sings like a nightingale around the house, and appears content.

" Lachrymae" - literally "Tears" is an ancient title, and was used by John Dowland while quoting his song 'Flow , my tears'. Benjamin Britten also wrote a "Lachrymae" for viola and piano (which I also played on my harp with Cecil Aronowitz at the Philharmonie in Berlin, and with Peter Schidloff at the Aldeburgh Festival). Curiously, I came upon the title "Lachrymae" only after I had completed the score.

" I urge my harp to be aggressive and cruel in the first section, reflecting stress and pain; the harp glissando reflects the ebb of life and is followed by a death-knell and the consequent Dorian

"L'envoi" leads us to the forest grave at Boduan. The Dorian mode prevails as we meditate simply on a song - *O wailing wind, have you also lost someone who loved you.* "

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ELEN HYDREF (Harp)

SUITE FOR HARP Op. 83 Benjamin Britten

1. Overture. 2. Toccata 3. Nocturne. 4. Fugue 5. Hymn - St Denio

Osian Ellis premiered a list of many new works for harp during his long career, but pride of place must go to Benjamin Britten's *Suite for Harp* Op 83, which he wrote in March 1969 for that year's Aldeburgh Festival. Britten had written a number of parts for Ellis in operatic scores when he played with the English Chamber Orchestra and the instrumental ensemble of the English Opera Group. He had a particularly prominent role in the three church parables - *Curlew River* (1964), *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966) and the *Prodigal Son* (1968) - and the *Suite* followed hard on their heels. Ellis had tried to persuade Britten for some time to write a solo piece and the result came as a delightful surprise.

In homage to Baroque precedent, the *Suite* opens with a ceremonial C major *Overture* which Britten marks 'Majestic'. A central development adds an air of expectant bustle and the opening is dramatically recapitulated in G sharp - C major returns in sudden, subdued fashion and the movement finally evaporates into thin air. The brooding central *Nocturne* is cast as a passacaglia - one of Britten's favourite forms - and is surrounded on either side by two quicksilver movements, a nimble *Toccata* and ingenious *Fugue*. The finale is based on a famous Welsh hymn, in homage - as Britten put it - to the Welsh dedicatee of the *Suite*. *St Denio* (sung to Immortal, invisible" and known also as *Joanna*) opens the movement majestically and is then treated to a series of variants. Just as a triumphant conclusion is in sight the hymn recedes gently and the magical ending on the dominant gives an impression that the harpist - as in long tradition - has been improvising his variations and now lingers pensively as he ends the piece.

Geraint Lewis 1995 Notes to Elinor Bennett's CD 20th Century Harp Classics (Nimbus Records NI 5247)

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ELINOR BENNETT & ELEN HYDREF (Harps)

DIVERSIONS / CLYMAU CYTGERDD

Diversions for two harps were written to commission by the Bangor Committee of Cymdeithas Cerdd Dant as a test piece for its annual competitive festival held in Bangor 1990.

1. Chasing (*Chwarae Mig*)

A happy-go-lucky', somewhat quirky movement, with the two harps, in quite distant keys, pursuing each other, as if they were playing 'tag' or 'hide and seek'. They eventually collide into each other on the last note of the piece.

2. Descanting (*Canu Penillion*)

The second movement is based on the unique traditional Welsh art of *penillion singing*, or *Cerdd Dant* in which the harpist plays a harmonised melody and a singer (*datgeiniad*) sets verses in counterpoint (or descant) with the harp. Here the second harp plays the melody (*Cainc y Gododdin* an original composition by Osian Ellis himself, written in the tradition of the cerdd dant melodies used by Welsh harpists from time immemorial), and the first harp plays the descant as a setting without words. The original words set to this tune by Osian Ellis were Dylan Thomas' poem 'And Death shall have no dominion'. This movement is often played separately.

3. Gossiping (*Hel Straeon*)

Osian Ellis dedicates this movement "with affection, to all my colleagues, both young and old". Again playing in different keys, the two harps indulge in light-hearted chatter, banter and gossip, tossing nonchalant conversational phrases back and forth one to the other, but eventually coming together in agreement and a conclusion on a final F major chord.

Programme notes (July 2021) by Ann Griffiths (1934 - 2020)

OSIAN ELLIS & BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Harpist and composer met for the first time at Westminster Cathedral in January 1959 after a performance of Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols* in which Osian Ellis had appeared alongside the boy choristers under their inspiring director George Malcolm. Britten invited Osian immediately to take part in the Aldeburgh Festival of 1960 when a new opera was likely to be performed. But even before then, in September 1959, they worked together on the premiere recording of Britten's new *Nocturne* of 1958 with Peter Pears and the LSO conducted by the composer. Although the harp part had been written before Britten met Osian it sounds here as if tailor-made for the harpist's unique gifts. But every harp part Britten wrote subsequently was written specifically for Osian and their friendship and collaboration lasted until the end of the composer's life.

At Aldeburgh in June 1960 the new opera turned out to be *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It contained two harp parts and Osian was invited to choose his co-harpist. Just at the last minute this partner panicked and withdrew, leaving Osian to combine the two parts into one overnight! Britten was astonished and from then on Osian's place in the elite 'Aldeburgh Team' was secure. The last two operas – *Owen Wingrave* and *Death in Venice* also contain major harp parts but after finishing the latter early in 1973 a largely unsuccessful heart operation left Britten unable to play the piano and thus to accompany his partner Peter Pears in recitals all over the world. After some intense consideration it was decided that in preference to finding another regular pianist Britten's place would be taken by Osian and for this combination Britten wrote some of his last works: the 5th Canticle *The Death of Saint Narcissus* (setting an early Eliot poem) and the Robert Burns cycle *A Birthday Hansel*, first heard in public at the 1976 Cardiff Festival. After Britten's death that year, the partnership with Pears continued until he stopped singing.

Geraint Lewis – March 2021

