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■Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

■Sinfonia da requiem Op. 20 (21')

After graduating from the Royal College of Music in London in December 1932, Benjamin Britten gradually became recognized as a composer. The premiere of his *Sinfonietta*, Op. 1, a three-movement chamber-orchestra piece that he wrote while still a student, took place in January 1933. Another composition from his student days, the oboe quartet titled *Phantasy*, Op. 2, was broadcast by the BBC on August 6, 1933. The broadcasting company also included his choral composition called *A Boy was born*, Op. 3 in a music program aired on February 23, 1934. His relationship with the BBC eventually led to composing numerous pieces for film, radio, and theater. Being a pacifist, however, Britten became increasingly uncomfortable remaining in Europe, where another war involving major powers became inevitable. In April 1939, Britten left England for the United States of America, where his *Sinfonia da requiem*, Op. 20 was composed.

In the early autumn of 1939, Britten accepted an offer that came through the British Council to write an orchestral piece. The commission was later revealed to have come from the Japanese Government who wanted, in addition to composers of their own, Britten, Jacques Ibert, and Richard Strauss to provide music to honor the 2600th anniversary of the Japanese Imperial dynasty. Britten's work, however, was not performed at the celebration, mainly because the characteristics of the piece did not suite the festivity. *Sinfonia da requiem* consists of three movements that are performed without an interruption. According to the composer, the first (*Lacrymosa*) is "a slow marching lament" and the second (*Dies irae*), "a form of Dance of Death, with occasional moments of quiet marching rhythm." The finale (*Requiem aeternam*) proceeds "very quietly, over a background of solo strings and harps." The movement titles derive from Roman Catholic Mass for the dead, but the piece bears no liturgical meanings; instead,

the music strongly reflects the circumstances that would soon become the most brutal and violent in the history of mankind.

[Akira Ishii]