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■Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

■Violin Concerto Op. 15 (31')

Inspired partly by the English poet W. H. Auden, Benjamin Britten moved to the United States of America in the spring of 1939. Both Auden and Britten foresaw the outbreak of another world war. Auden was a known pacifist, who would later publish the famous poem “September 1, 1939,” which he wrote upon hearing Hitler’s invasion of Poland. Auden’s feelings are clearly expressed towards the end of the poem — he writes, “we must love one another or die.”

Britten began writing his Violin Concerto, Op. 15 in 1938 while still in England. The first performance of the Violin Concerto took place at Carnegie Hall in New York on March 28, 1940, with John Barbirolli conducting the New York Philharmonic. The violin soloist was Britten’s Spanish friend Antonio Brosa, with whom Britten worked closely, consulting about violin techniques. In the 1950’s, Britten made some revisions. The Concerto comprises three movements. It opens with a timpani solo passage that ends with a single cymbal stroke. The solo violin follows it and plays tranquil but somewhat somber melodies. The fast second movement exhibits numerous scherzo-like rhythms. It concludes with a substantial cadenza, which leads into the finale. The last movement is a passacaglia, a set of variations on a ground bass originally developed in the baroque period. Britten, however, follows the baroque model less strictly. The whole composition concludes with the solo violin softly playing a prolonged trill in its highest register.

[Akira Ishii]