

## The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra (YPGO) by Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

The famous English composer Benjamin Britten wrote this piece in 1946, originally to accompany a Ministry of Education film about the modern symphony orchestra. The piece is now only heard in concerts and recordings. In it he uses a theme by another Englishman- the Baroque composer Henry Purcell (1659-1695). Purcell once wrote some incidental music for a stage play- *Abdelazar*, and the first eight bars of Britten's YPGO quotes one of the numbers from this incidental music.

The YPGO takes the form of theme and variations- with Purcell's music as the theme. Following the orchestral statement of Purcell's theme Britten divides the orchestra into its various families of instruments, then into its individual instruments. Each of these families and instruments is given, in turn, a chance to play a version of the theme. Each of these versions of the theme sound different; they vary from each other in many musical ways. Benjamin Britten wrote music that suited the families and instruments well- so as to demonstrate to the listener their special musical qualities. Each variation features its own a) instrumental tone colour b) melody and harmony c) speed, time signature and rhythms d) dynamic shape i.e. pattern of louds and softs. The combination of all these basic elements creates the emotional impact or mood of the variation.

In the final variation of this sixteen minute piece the instruments are gathered together in a fugue. A fugue is like a complicated type of round (e.g. London's Burning, Frere Jaques), where the instruments play the same tune one after the other. Britten asks each of the instruments in turn to play a brilliant and rapid fugue theme. When all the instruments have had a turn with Britten's melody, Purcell's grand theme is reintroduced in the brass. *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* concludes on a triumphant note, with all the instruments gloriously reunited.

Listed below are the instruments in Britten's orchestra, in their families.

*Brass*: french horn; trombone; trumpet; tuba.

*Percussion*: bass drum; castanets; cymbals; gong; snare drum; tambourine; timpani; triangle; whip; wood block; xylophone.

*String*: double bass; harp; viola; violin; violoncello ('cello).

*Woodwind*: bassoon; clarinet; flute; oboe; piccolo.

## The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra- Listening and Responding Worksheet

Your teacher will write on the board the question number to attempt as the music plays. Write the name of the *family* or *instrument* playing.

If you are able, write a tempo indication- *fast, moderate, or slow* and try to comment on the general dynamic of the variation- *loud or soft*. If you have time, write a word to indicate *the mood* created by the music. In section E and F just write the instrument as you hear it.

### Section A (4 families)

1. theme in orchestra
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

### Section B (Woodwind)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

### Section C (String)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

### Section D (Brass)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### Section E (Percussion)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

### Section F (fugue)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.
- 12.
- 13.
14. percussion/ brass

### Section G (coda- It. tail)

1. Purcell's theme returns in brass- with the fast fugue theme above
2. codetta- exciting concluding section, featuring snare drum