

Saint Nicolas

Benjamin Britten (1913 – 1976)

Introduction
The birth of Nicolas
Nicolas devotes himself to God
He journeys to Palestine
Nicolas comes to Myra and is chosen Bishop
Nicolas from prison
Nicolas and the pickled boys
His piety and marvellous works
The death of Nicolas

Britten's cantata, *Saint Nicolas*, was commissioned to celebrate the centenary of Lancing College, Sussex. Its first official performance took place at the College in July, 1948, though in fact it had already received an unofficial premiere six weeks earlier, at the opening concert of the very first Aldeburgh Festival. Britten himself conducted both these performances, with the part of Nicolas sung by his partner, Peter Pears, a former pupil of Lancing College. The piece is scored for chorus, treble soloists, tenor solo, piano duet, organ, percussion and strings, with a libretto by Eric Crozier. The cantata tells the story of the life and achievements – some real but mostly legendary - of Nicolas, the 4th-century bishop of Myra, in Asia Minor

Very few facts about Nicolas's life are known for certain. It seems that he was born into a wealthy family and was educated by the Church. After his parents died of the plague he gave all his wealth to charity and went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He returned to the city of Myra where he became Bishop, serving there until his death. During the persecution of the Christians he was imprisoned by the emperor Diocletian. He was one of the three hundred and eighteen bishops summoned to attend the first great Church Council at Nicaea.

Little else is known about Nicolas. Nevertheless, he is immortalised in many legends that tell of his care of the poor and oppressed, and his power of appearing from great distances when called. The three golden balls that he carries in statues and pictures symbolise the three purses of gold that he is said to have given secretly in order to rescue three girls from prostitution, a story that is the origin of the pawnbrokers' sign. Another episode relates how he rescued three sailors from drowning, as a result of which he became the patron saint of sailors. However, the miracle attributed to Nicolas that confirmed his position as one of the most pre-eminent saints was his restoration to life of three small boys who at a time of dreadful famine had been pickled in brine by a wicked butcher. From this macabre tale emerged the practice of giving presents to deserving children. With this in mind, and the fact that the Feast of St. Nicolas falls on the 6th of December, it is easy to see how the popular image of St. Nicolas gradually evolved into the much-loved figure of Santa Claus. Following the Reformation, there was a marked decline in the status of many saints, but Nicolas' popularity continued undiminished. He is the patron saint of Russia and Greece, and of course, children.

Britten was always a very practical composer who was equally at home whether writing for modest amateur performances or for international occasions with virtuoso professional soloists. He once said *'It is the composer's duty, as a member of society, to speak to or for his fellow human beings.....I want my music to be of use to people, to please them, to enhance their lives'* (extracts from his response to receiving the first Aspen Award in 1964). All his music testifies to this philosophy and *Saint Nicolas* is no exception. The cantata begins with an introductory movement, followed by scenes dealing with Nicolas's birth and early piety, and his calling to holy orders. Next there is a vivid depiction of a storm at sea and Nicolas's rescue of the drowning sailors whilst on his way to Palestine. The following movements relate his elevation to Bishop, his imprisonment, his bringing back to life of the three pickled boys and other marvellous works. The final scene tells of his tranquil acceptance of death. *Saint Nicolas* was Britten's first large-scale work written with mainly amateur performers in mind, and is a wonderful example of his outstanding ability to capture the essence of his subject-matter with a series of dramatic yet essentially simple ideas to which performers and audiences can immediately relate.

programme notes by John Bawden

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