

# philharmonia orchestra

## **BENJAMIN**     *Sudden Time*

*Sudden Time* was begun in 1989, nine years after George Benjamin made a precocious debut with *Ringed by the Flat Horizon*, performed in Cambridge in March 1980 whilst he was still an undergraduate, and repeated by the BBC Symphony Orchestra in the Proms that same year. Despite the huge success of this and the compositions that soon followed – or maybe because of it – Benjamin's second orchestral piece, *Sudden Time*, took four years to complete.

As in the earlier orchestral and chamber orchestral pieces, the writing is exquisitely delicate and subtle, and the colouration judged with acute sensitivity to shades of dark and light. The string textures expand from normal *divisi* to multiple strands; but, unlike Ligeti's 'micropolyphony', each exercises its freedom and the music is constantly mutating and proliferating as new ideas are born and others disappear. The task Benjamin set himself – or perhaps it emerged during composition – was to write music that ebbs and flows with seamless liquidity and only rarely solidifies into vigorous rhythmic pulsation: the 'sudden time' of the title. This happens most dramatically early on, not so obviously thereafter. There are places where stratified activity becomes more sharply defined in moments of splendid luminescence; but the promise of rhythmic unity is frequently dispelled. The material is connectively generated out of a fusion between intuition and intricate structural control; and the lasting impression is of a landscape painted here and there in broad strokes, but mostly in ever finer detail. To colour which, amongst a large orchestra are some unusual instruments: 'a quartet of alto flutes, a pair of miniature recorders, a muted piano and a plethora of mini-tablas in the percussion'. The considerable forces are used to effect a chamber-music transparency of ever changing perspectives and often great beauty.

Benjamin has likened the music to a dream he once experienced, in which the sound of a thunderclap seemed to be stretched across a minute or more, although it was in reality only a second, as he realised when waking. The 'sense of elasticity, of stretching, warping and coming back together' was a guiding concept of the composition and its title, which Benjamin has taken from a poem by Wallace Stevens called *Martial Cadenza*: 'It was like sudden time in a world without time'. The work is dedicated to Isaiah Berlin.

© Richard Steinitz