



**BLISS**

**CELLO CONCERTO**

**GUY JOHNSTON**

**ROYAL LIVERPOOL**

**PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA**

**ANDREW MANZE**





**SIR ARTHUR BLISS** 1891–1975

**CELLO CONCERTO F.107**

1 I. ALLEGRO DECISO 10.58

2 II. LARGHETTO 7.40

3 III. ALLEGRO 6.03

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## SIR ARTHUR BLISS (1891–1975)

Arthur Bliss was half American on his father's side. He studied with Charles Wood and Edward Dent at Cambridge, and later with Charles Villiers Stanford at the Royal College of Music. After distinguished service in World War I, he gained notoriety with ensemble works such as *Madam Noy* (1918) and *A Colour Symphony* (1921–2) and by the end of the 1920s had established himself as a distinctive voice in British music. During the 1930s his reputation was enhanced by his choral symphony *Morning Heroes* (1930), Clarinet Quintet (1932), Viola Sonata (1933), *Music for Strings* (1935) and Piano Concerto (1938–9).

Notable artistic collaborations included those with H.G. Wells and Alexander Korda on the film *Things to Come* (1934–5); Ninette de Valois and Robert Helpmann, respectively, on the ballets *Checkmate* (1937) and *Miracle in the Gorbals* (1944); and J.B. Priestly on the opera *The Olympians* (1948–9). During World War II Bliss was Director of Music at the BBC where he established programmes such as 'Composer of the Week'. Bliss was knighted in 1950 and appointed Master of the Queen's Music in 1953, a post he served diligently and with distinction. Works of the 1950s and 1960s include the scena *The Enchantress* (1951), *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow* (1955) and *The Beatitudes* (1961). His final orchestral works include the Cello Concerto (1970) and *Metamorphic Variations* (1972).

**D**uring the mid-1960s Bliss, now in his seventies, composed fitfully, only writing small-scale occasional music: seemingly, the significant part of his composing career had ended. However, at the end of that decade his creative urge was rekindled, and from 1969 until his death there was a late harvest when six major distinctive works appeared including the Cello Concerto, completed in March 1970. The Concerto had been requested by the great Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, to whom it was dedicated 'with admiration and gratitude'. The cellist's suggestion enabled Bliss to fulfil a long-standing ambition: 'I have always wanted to write some music for solo cello and orchestra; ever since as a young man I played through the classic repertoire for the instrument with my cellist brother, Howard.'

The work received its premiere on 24 June 1970 at The Maltings, Snape as part of that year's Aldeburgh Festival. It was performed by its dedicatee with the English Chamber Orchestra conducted by Benjamin Britten. At this point it was designated a 'Concertino', since Bliss felt that he had composed a 'light-hearted work'. Britten, however, pronounced it a major piece, and begged Bliss to alter the title to 'Concerto'. Its scoring is for an orchestra of Classical period proportions, with the addition of harp and celesta.

An important feature of the Concerto is the cross-referencing and integration of its principal thematic ideas in all of its three movements. The opening Allegro deciso is created around the contrasts between music of vibrant energy on the one hand and reflective introspection on the other. Following the briefest of preambles, a robust, urgent theme played by the soloist and marked by jerky dotted rhythms defines the first characteristic. Also of thematic significance as the movement progresses is the tiny, descending four-note pattern played by the woodwind and horns in the opening bars. A slowing of tempo, combined with shadows dappling the music, evokes the second aspect of the movement's character. With the main speed re-established, a richly lyrical flowing secondary theme is announced, again by the solo cello.

Straddling the movement's central core is an extended cadenza, with the soloist initially accompanied by harp. It leads to further reflection, with the falling phrase now bell-like, and tender solo cello harmonics. Typically in this landscape of shifting moods, the tempo whips up again for a vigorous orchestral tutti leading back to the main theme. The orchestra alone surges to the movement's climax with first trumpet to the fore, before ushering in a meditative, elegiac coda haunted by the descending scale, where Bliss deftly alludes to both primary themes.

With its frequent lilting triplet rhythms, almost in the manner of a siciliano dance, the Larghetto slow movement has the charm of a wistful lullaby. Prefaced by a pastoral introduction scored for woodwind, it is created from a series of ruminations growing from the soloist's theme, which contains elements related to both ideas of the preceding movement. Throughout, the orchestration is delicate, whilst the movement's gentle climax is not only superbly paced by Bliss but also exquisitely scored for brass, harp and celesta. In the mind's eye it might be evoking the image of radiant shafts of sunlight bursting from clouds.

A fanfare-like rhythmic figure on timpani heralds the high-spirited, almost Haydnesque final Allegro, with the soloist's athletic theme in triple time. The music passes through a variety of swiftly changing time signatures, until a *sostenuto* passage brings an extended lyrical melody tinged with both sadness and nobility, accompanied by delicate, swaying woodwind colours. A section of tenser music leads to a dissonant climax before the movement, and the Concerto as a whole, culminates in the return of the first-movement theme blazoned out by the orchestra, followed by a quick-dash coda to the conclusion. Overall, Bliss aptly summed up the Concerto by explaining that 'there are no problems for the listener – only the soloist!'

## ANDREW BURN

Chairman

The Bliss Trust

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON SIR ARTHUR BLISS, PLEASE VISIT [BLISSTRUST.ORG](https://blisstrust.org)



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