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BRITTEN AND ROSTROPOVICH  
The historical and intellectual context of Benjamin Britten's solo suites for cello

DLA doctoral thesis

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## **The subject of the research:**

I turned to the cello suites of Benjamin Britten specifically to deepen my own performance experience as a cellist and to spur my curiosity. I played, analysed and studied the works, and I sought out everything I could hear, listen to and read about them, I did not avoid. The two names in the title, Britten and Rostropovich, represent the relationship between two important musicians of the twentieth century. Benjamin Britten and Mstislav Rostropovich. But it is much more than that. Britten was deeply fascinated by Rostropovich's personality and art, which not only inspired him to write new compositions, but also introduced the cello community to challenging new technical solutions with these works. Britten's six works for cello display a level of virtuosity not found in his previous compositions. Rostropovich's natural physical qualities, including his large hands, long fingers and, above all, his strength and endurance, all contributed to his outstanding instrumental achievements.

For much of his career, Benjamin Britten was recognised as the most important English composer of the century and also as an artist whose music was said to embody a kind of 'innate Englishness'. Despite the subject matter and sources of much of his work, Britten himself resisted identifying with vague - and often contradictory - assumptions about the definition of Englishness. Whilst Britten accepted commissions from major national institutions throughout his career, he was also openly suspicious of prevailing attempts to reconcile contemporary creative expression with a proudly English or British identity. I am writing about a creator who has lived through the real hell of modern man, especially in spiritual and emotional terms, while living in a world that was essentially at peace in his time, and in which he could be considered ultimately at home. During his lifetime, Rostropovich was the dedicatee of more than 100 works, including Benjamin Britten. These works are deeply etched in the cellist's musical memory and form the repertoire of the most frequently played works.

As I was writing, I felt compelled to ask myself whether there is a modern composer whose music, as a closed whole, sheds light on all, or at least many, of the problems of theory. Can we conclude that the works of composers whose music in the 20th century is based on negation are pedagogically useless? When the a-tonal, a-periodic, a-symmetrical, etc. aspects, which, if they are presented as principles or slogans, do indeed greatly reduce the possibility of analysis?

## **The research method:**

It is very interesting, sometimes absurd, to assume a connection between the musician's "how-to" on the instrument, the performer's essentially technical curiosity asking "how", and the theoretician's attitude of interpreting and formulating an analytical judgment of the music in his hands. The two points of departure, the musician's practice and the theorist's direction of progress, are of declining effectiveness. The performer becomes hesitant when moving in the direction of a theoretical sum, the music theorist, the historian or the critic experiences the same in his or her work when he or she has to grasp the how-to of the performance of concrete music. I will attempt to recall the period, the cultural climate and the artists who shaped it, by focusing on three cello suites, the composer and the performer, whose friendship and mutual influence resulted in the creation of masterpieces. Almost every branch of musicology has published a wealth of research, sources and interpretations on this subject. The relationship between performer and composer. The history, the system, the types and qualities of these relationships.

In the search for the "binders" of the oeuvre, we could add a third criterion to the two given by Britten in the context of the operas. This was the composer's social esteem and, even more importantly, the composer's constant attention to his audience, for whom it was important that his music, to quote his monographer Eric Walther White, 'appealed not only to the ears of the uninitiated but also to the general public'.

Britten wrote six works for cello, the Cello Sonata in C, Op. 65, the Cello Symphony Op.68, the three solo Cello Suites, Op.72, Op.80, Op.87 and the Tema 'Sacher'. Even so, there were too many works left to analyse, I started to compare them, then I came to the conclusion that the three solo suites could form a complete dissertation, and, as I could not find any significant Hungarian literature on the three suites, I consider it important to make the interpretations and evaluations available in Hungarian to the cellist community and Hungarian culture in Hungary.

Following Britten's guidance, we find new tonal formations in the new works, which are beyond the characteristics of the major-minor system, but always clear. Tonality analyses can be carried out on the basis of the quintal system, even independently of the triadic functions. We can easily highlight the central note, interval or chord of each piece. In the music history of the first half of the 20th century, it provides a multifaceted combination of rhythms and metres. We discover that the structuring of time is independent of classical time theory. We find characteristic time units and distinctive principles of centroid formation. The dynamic and static melodic patterns

of new music are clearly demonstrated, as well as the various new scales and often modal tone sequences. This form of analysis should be confirmed primarily by listening, rather than only through the score. It can also be noted that the pieces include homophonic, polyphonic and monophonic techniques, with the corresponding solo lead.

In the last part of my study, I will attempt to show how the series of books, dissertations, interviews, correspondence - volumes - like the visible majesty of icebergs above water - are united as one body with unknowns in the immeasurable depths. The gap, so wide and promising at first, had to be narrowed to capture a sharper picture. Narrowing it down was not easy, since the works of the masters closest to me, and the works I perform most often, are the sonatas and concertos of Prokofiev and Shostakovich, and the cello works of Benjamin Britten, which are not very popular in Hungary. We know them, and perhaps even some more interested cellists have studied and played them. However, it was precisely the rooted and somewhat inexplicable experience of absence that was the attraction and inspiration that drew me in. And which made me address the central question that is also apparent here. What could be most relevant for me and specifically in this area? And the answer I have found is: the multi-faceted relationship between Benjamin Britten and the Rostropovich, and the works that have made this relationship everlasting. Because I think it is important to promote the wonderful works of Benjamin Britten, to awaken my colleagues' attention to them through their analysis, and to inspire my students.

### **Results and conclusions of the research:**

Having become familiar with these pieces, their place in Britten's oeuvre, their historical and stylistic qualities, I feel that, in addition to the actual performance experience, I have also explored the many layers of musical fabric, structure and meaning. In studying these pieces, I have encountered musically and theoretically fascinating content. In trying to give an overview of the suites, I have been able to make a number of comments and provide data - some of them controversial - that have not yet appeared in the domestic literature on Britten's works. The serious lesson of the work published here is that it has enabled me to appreciate the enormity of the tasks that still remain to be done. However, I believe, and hope, that this summary here will also be useful to active musicians and theorists who seek a deeper, more complex understanding of the works mentioned here. In this dissertation I have highlighted and interpreted the mutually influential creative relationship between a world-renowned and versatile British composer and an equally important Russian cellist and conductor. In my

understanding of the period and its cultural, and to some extent political, circles and everyday relations, its emotionally coloured human relationships, I am hopeful that we have been able to get some idea of the simultaneous, present duality of the 1950s and 1970s and the renewal. In addition to the obvious centrality of the music, I have tried to speak of the parallel character traits which, alongside the music, make the period Britten lived through unmistakably identifiable in English literature, painting, sculpture and architecture. In a way, I have sought to see the world of characteristic works of art of a cultural history period together with some specific pieces of music that Benjamin Britten wrote for my instrument, the cello. In particular, 'calibrated' to the inspiration and performing genius of Mstislav Leopoldovich Rostropovich. Listening to these works, it becomes apparent how the compositional techniques of the second third of the 20th century, the expanded possibilities of the cello as a solo instrument and the interconnections between avant-garde composers are evolving. Even if they were far apart in time and space, or even in their world views. Despite the complexity of Britten's thematic treatment, he maintained pitches and used traditional compositional devices to carry out the 'duty' given to himself and the friend who inspired him. Britten is clearly the 'more conservative' composer of his time, but his style differs in many ways from that of his contemporaries. He considered it essential to stay within the bounds of tonality, but he extended tonality with notes and tonalities that reinforced harmonic relationships and tonal sense in the solo suites analysed in this research.

Benjamin Britten's professional universality and cross-continental cultural interests have made him an ambassador for British music, precisely because he is a world traveller in terms of the problems he poses and the way he approaches them. He is always in the top ten of many British music charts. But even when he is not on a high-frequency 'adventure quest', he is also characterised by constant returns. The English music that bears Britten's name is almost identical in its main features to the Russian dialect of Stravinsky, or the Hungarian dialect shaped by Bartók, Kodály and Ligeti. Britten's music, whatever its origins or degree of progressiveness, was open and receptive to the cultural qualities and all the inventions that represented them, and which he used in such a way that its particular or even hidden national character was not lost. Even if the emphasis was on the accentuation of universal values and the tireless search for musical topicality. Both in terms of content and technique.

