

# BLISS

CHANDOS

## MIRACLE IN THE GORBALS METAMORPHIC VARIATIONS (Complete)



BBC

Philharmonic  
Orchestra

MICHAEL SEAL



Sir Arthur Bliss, 1972

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## Sir Arthur Bliss (1891–1975)

### Miracle in the Gorbals, F 6 (1944) 36:44

A Ballet in One Scene

Scenario by Michael Benthall

To Trudy, Barbara, Karen

thanksgiving for November 5th, 1943

- |    |      |  |      |
|----|------|--|------|
| 1  | I    | Overture. Sostenuto  | 2:43 |
| 2  | II   | The Street. Allegro energico – Poco meno mosso –<br>Tempo I – Poco meno mosso  | 2:28 |
| 3  | III  | The Girl Suicide. Andante (movendo)  | 2:47 |
| 4  | IV   | The Young Lovers. Tempo di Valse – Più mosso –<br>Meno mosso –   | 1:33 |
| 5  | V    | The Prostitute and the Boy. L'istesso tempo – Più mosso –<br>Poco meno –   | 0:57 |
| 6  | VI   | The Official. Allegro molto  | 0:55 |
| 7  | VII  | The Discovery of the Suicide's body. Allegro molto –   | 1:27 |
| 8  | VIII | The Suicide's Body is brought in. Larghetto –  | 2:22 |
| 9  | IX   | The Stranger. Andante maestoso – Più mosso –<br>Meno mosso –   | 3:03 |
| 10 | X    | Dance of Deliverance. Moderato – Più mosso – Giusto –<br>Pochissimo più mosso (con ardore) – Meno – Maestoso –<br>A tempo – [Maestoso] – A tempo | 3:57 |
| 11 | XI   | The Official and the Prostitute. Allegro molto – Molto meno mosso –<br>Largamente – Meno mosso   | 1:50 |

- |    |      |  |      |
|----|------|--|------|
| 12 | XII  | Intermezzo. Tranquillo – Tranquillo – A tempo [I] – Moderato con brio – Pochissimo meno mosso – Andante maestoso – Allegro vivace – Andante maestoso | 4:49 |
| 13 | XIII | The Slander Campaign. Allegro vivace –   | 1:34 |
| 14 | XIV  | The Conversion of the Prostitute. Andante – L'istesso tempo (tranquillo) –   | 1:56 |
| 15 | XV   | Finale. The Killing of the Stranger. Allegro feroce – [Un] poco meno mosso – A tempo pochissimo meno mosso – Molto sostenuto                         | 4:17 |

*première complete recording*

**Metamorphic Variations, F 122** (1972) 43:13  
 for Orchestra  
 To George and Ann Dannatt in token of a long and cherished  
 friendship

- |    |     |  |      |
|----|-----|--|------|
| 16 | I   | Elements. Larghetto tranquillo (Slow Two) – Sempre tranquillo – Very slow –  | 3:30 |
| 17 | II  | Ballet. One in a bar (Liltingly) – Poco meno mosso – Subito Tempo I –  | 1:30 |
| 18 | III | Assertion. Allegro energico – Più animato –  | 2:04 |
| 19 |     | Contrasts. Very slow – Lively – Very slow – Lively – Very slow – Lively – Very slow – Lively – In tempo, alla marcia – | 2:52 |
| 20 |     | Children's March. Alla marcia –  | 2:23 |
| 21 | IV  | Speculation. Very slow –   | 2:04 |

22	V	Interjections. Andante sostenuto - (Clarinet Cadenza.) Gradually moving - Quick - (A little slower) - A Tempo I - [ ] - A Tempo I - A Tempo Più animato - A Tempo I - [ ] - A Tempo -	4:00
23	VI	Scherzo 1. Vivo - Molto meno mosso (Moderato) - Subito Tempo I -	2:36
24	VII	Contemplation. Larghetto	2:17
25	VIII	Polonaise. Alla polacca - Molto meno mosso (Andante) - (A sad little echo of the Polonaise) -	3:29
26	IX	Funeral Processions. Larghetto	4:03
27	X	Cool Interlude. Andante molto tranquillo - [ ] - Tempo I -	2:52
28	XI	Scherzo 2. Vivo - Larghetto -	1:42
29	XII	Duet. Pochissimo più mosso - Molto meno mosso -	2:38
30	XIII	Dedication to G.D. and A.D. Allegro moderato (gaily) -	0:48
31	XIV	Affirmation. Andante maestoso - Moving on just a little - Tempo I - Moving on just a little - Larghetto - Climax - Larghetto tranquillo (as at start of work)	4:18
			<b>TT 79:57</b>

**BBC Philharmonic Orchestra**

**Zoë Beyers** leader

**Michael Seal**



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Michael Seal

## Bliss: Miracle in the Gorbals; Metamorphic Variations

### Miracle in the Gorbals

On the evening of 5 November 1943, in a blacked-out Waterloo Station, Arthur Bliss (1891 – 1975) was reunited with his wife, Trudy, and daughters, Barbara and Karen, whom he had not seen for well over two years. Stranded with his family in the United States at the start of the Second World War, he had made the perilous voyage back to London in June 1941 without them, to take up a bureaucratic position at the BBC. An adept administrator, Bliss had been rapidly promoted, appointed Director of Music within a year. But the job at the BBC left no opportunity for composition. With his family restored, Bliss wasted little time in returning to creative work, resigning in January 1944 and leaving the BBC in March. His first project on regaining freedom ended in disappointment: the score for a cinematic version of George Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Though he completed a good deal of music for this film, Bliss apparently found the director, Gabriel Pascal, impossible to work with; at any rate, the soundtrack for the 1945 release (a notorious flop) was by Georges Auric. By the summer of 1944,

however, Bliss was engaged on a quite different project, which would bring him one of the great successes of his career.

In 1937, Bliss had composed his first ballet score, *Checkmate*, to chess-inspired choreography by Ninette de Valois, for what was then the Vic-Wells company. At the première, in Paris, and then during two London seasons, the role of the Red King had been danced by Robert Helpmann. Now Helpmann, having himself since turned choreographer, asked Bliss for a new score for the renamed Sadler's Wells ballet. *Miracle in the Gorbals* would be based on an idea by Helpmann's partner, Michael Benthall. Channelling at once Jerome K. Jerome's 1908 play, *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* (familiar to audiences of the period in its 1935 film version), and Ivan's tale of 'The Grand Inquisitor' from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), Benthall's scenario features the appearance of a Christ-like figure amid Glasgow's most infamous slum. This mysterious Stranger performs a miracle, reviving the Girl Suicide, who in despair had earlier thrown herself into the Clyde. The locals rejoice, but an Official

(Benthall had in mind a priest) is jealous and, after a failed attempt to cast doubt on the virtue of the Stranger via the local Prostitute, has him slashed to death by a razor gang. Working with enthusiasm back in the music room at Pen Pits (his modernist villa in the Somerset countryside), Bliss completed the ballet on 15 October 1944, though a piano score must have been ready some weeks earlier to permit choreography and rehearsals. The opening night arrived less than two weeks later, on 26 October, at the Prince's (now the Shaftesbury) Theatre, in London.

With Helpmann dancing the role of the Stranger, alongside other stars of the contemporary British ballet scene (including a very young Moira Shearer), and with a striking set by Edward Burra depicting a Glasgow tenement, complete with fish and chips shop and bar, *Miracle in the Gorbals* scored a genuine hit, which was repeated season after season up to 1950. Bliss's vivid response to Benthall's somewhat lurid scenario was integral to the success. Composed in the art deco idiom that Bliss had established by the 1930s, essentially conservative yet full of stylish detail, *Miracle in the Gorbals* compares favourably to the nowadays better-known *Checkmate*: both more compact in duration and more varied

in style. The range of expression which Bliss achieves is remarkable: from the tranquil, diatonic lyricism of the opening of the Intermezzo (following the conversation between the Official and the Prostitute), to the violently dissonant expressionism that accompanies the murder. A neoclassical tinge attaches to parts of the score. The Stranger enters to a passacaglia, while the Overture (for which Burra created a drop-scene showing the prow of a ship under construction) has the character of a sarabande, as does the cortège for the Girl Suicide's corpse. There are less archaic dances too, including a number of waltzes. At one point during the Intermezzo, following the opening lyrical section, the stage directions ask for a 'palais glide', a dance hall craze of the mid-1930s, typically performed in short lines, alternating men and women. But it seems that Bliss had little experience of contemporary popular entertainment. For his palais glide, he provides a Latin-flavoured number in triple time, led by solo trumpet accompanied by tambourine and guitar effects on *pizzicato* strings (there is a hint of fandango); in practice the dance required four beats to the bar.

Most striking in stylistic terms, and a departure for the composer, is the music for the rejoicing after the Girl Suicide's

resurrection. In a BBC memo of November 1941, Bliss had proclaimed, 'The jazz band can be used for artificial excitement and aphrodisiac purposes, but not for spreading eternal truths'. Nevertheless, he chose to cast the central climax of his new ballet as a full-blown example of symphonic jazz, heavily syncopated and replete with big band brass effects and improvising tom-toms. Perhaps this should be taken as a nod in the direction of Bliss's friend Constant Lambert, the composer of *The Rio Grande* (1927) among other jazz-inspired works, and also the conductor of the première of *Miracle in the Gorbals*. To repeat: the score boasts a wide range of idioms. But it is no mishmash. Bliss handles his materials with the greatest care for clarity of dramatic delineation, notably employing a veritable system of leitmotifs. There are themes for each of the principals: a sultry waltz for the Prostitute, the Stranger's solemn passacaglia, and an angry burst of brass for the Official. These are all transformed, in Wagnerian manner, to match the ballet's narrative development. Other materials are also recalled after their initial presentation: for instance, when the Stranger revives the Girl Suicide, Bliss switches from the passacaglia to a reminiscence, on solo clarinet, of the music last heard as she walked despondently towards the river.

Benthall's concatenation of religion, social realism, and melodrama was evidently intended to shock. That the success of *Miracle in the Gorbals* should have been real, but no less short-lived, is hardly surprising. A revival at the end of the 1950s had no successor until the 2014 production by Birmingham Royal Ballet, with new choreography by Gillian Lynne who, remarkably, had also danced, as an unnamed 'inhabitant of the Gorbals', at the première (though, as she acknowledged, she did not remember a single step). The music did not entirely disappear in the meantime. Movements from the ballet were recorded by Lambert in 1946, and the composer subsequently prepared a Concert Suite, published in 1948, and later recorded by both Bliss and Paavo Berglund. The existence of an engraved version of about half of *Miracle in the Gorbals* provoked a mild dilemma when it came to preparing a new edition of the score for the Birmingham revival, one also used in the present recording. Should an edition attempt to reconstruct Bliss's music as ballet audiences first heard it, or incorporate the revisions made for partial performance of the score in concert? By his own admission, Bliss could never leave his music alone. For him, a set of proofs was not so much an opportunity to check that the engraver had

made no errors as an encouragement to rewrite what he had composed. To preserve the composer's second thoughts, by no means all of which were incorporated into the orchestral parts of the Concert Suite, and which thus were never fully heard, the decision was taken to prepare a hybrid. Where sections of the score were engraved, this is the version adopted; otherwise, the edition follows Bliss's manuscript.

Editorial problems did not end there. Soon after the manuscript's delivery to the publisher, in October 1944, a photographic copy was made. Into this, the composer entered revisions, many (but again not all) of which were transferred by a copyist to the orchestral parts. Bliss incorporated some of these revisions (not all of them) into his original manuscript, where he also made further changes (once again, not always adopted in the parts). There are annotations by Bliss to his copy of the Concert Suite. And there is another crucial source: the engraved piano reduction, published in 1945, which surely relates to the rehearsal score that Bliss must have provided to Helpmann before the première (the whereabouts of which are currently unknown), but which also bears witness to the composer's penchant for revision. It is in the piano reduction, for example, that we find the definitive division

of the score into fifteen movements: the manuscript full score divides the same music into seventeen. Collating all these materials was something of a labour of love, and one that revealed a good deal about the character of Bliss as a composer. Evidently his overriding goal was differentiation: the revisions always aid the firming up of contours and highlighting of contrasts. Where ambiguity persists among the various sources, a single rule aided editorial decisions: to allow the detail to stand out as sharply as possible.

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#### **Metamorphic Variations**

From 1969 onwards, until his death, in 1975, Bliss enjoyed a remarkable Indian Summer of creativity, composing six major works as vigorous and inventive as at any time earlier in his career. These include two orchestral works, the Cello Concerto (1970), and *Metamorphic Variations* (1972), a commission by the Croydon Arts Festival.

Bliss and his wife, Trudy, were close friends of George and Ann Dannatt, and regularly stayed at their rural Wiltshire home. George was a distinguished abstract painter, associated with the St Ives artistic community, as well as a music critic and

writer. It was during a visit in 1972, when he was mulling over the form of his new work, that Bliss saw a triptych of recent paintings by his friend, titled *Tantris*, inspired by the Tristan and Isolde legends. Each one of them had its own identity, but borrowed elements from the others and in the process transformed them. Bliss succinctly described them as 'varied studies of the constant object',<sup>1</sup> and realised that he could create a set of orchestral variations by adapting Dannatt's concept. By the end of the year, Bliss had completed the work, which was titled 'Variations for Orchestra', comprising sixteen movements; its dedication reads, 'To George and Ann Dannatt in token of a long and cherished friendship'.

The première took place at Fairfield Halls, Croydon, on 21 April 1973, with the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Vernon Handley. However, during rehearsals a decision was made to cut two movements. Bliss had undoubtedly composed a virtuosic orchestral work and rehearsal time was at a premium even with an orchestra of such calibre; furthermore, Handley was not conducting the rest of the programme, and maybe Bliss himself was anxious that the work was indeed just too long.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Bliss to Dannatt, 17 June 1972. Quoted in Paul Spicer. *Sir Arthur Bliss, Standing out from the Crowd*. Robert Hale, 2023.

At the next two performances, in Sheffield and Liverpool respectively, in February 1974, with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Sir Charles Groves, the work was performed again without the movements deleted at the première, and under the same title. The fourth performance, in January 1975, was a studio recording by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, once more conducted by Handley. Bliss now called the work *Metamorphic Variations* as he was unhappy with what he felt was a bland title and had turned to Dannatt for suggestions. Bliss had put forward 'Transformations', Dannatt countered with, amongst others, 'Metamorphic Variations: Metamorphoses'. The latter also appealed to Trudy Bliss for whom geology was a major hobby. The word 'Metamorphoses' was dropped and Bliss provided an explanation about the title in the score:

The composer has added the word 'Metamorphic' to characterize this work, because the three themes that constitute the opening section Elements undergo a greater transformation, during the course of the music, than the simple word 'Variations' implies.

As for the axed movements, called 'Contrasts' and 'Children's March', when it came to publication, Bliss elected to have

them printed as supplementary movements in an appendix, leaving it to the discretion of the conductor whether or not to include them, and indicating where they were to be inserted in the case of performance. What is perhaps surprising is that Bliss, as far as is known, never suggested to either Groves or Handley, in the three performances which followed the première, that the work be played as he had originally conceived it; it would have been an opportunity for him simply to decide whether inclusion of the supplementary movements enhanced or diminished the whole. At the time of his death Bliss remained undecided whether they should be reinstated or not. Among authorities of his music, Dannatt was adamant that the cuts should stand; however, the late Giles Easterbrook (Head of Promotions at Bliss's primary publisher, Novello & Co.), who worked closely with the composer, resolutely believed the opposite. This first complete recording gives listeners the opportunity to decide for themselves.

Although the *Metamorphic Variations* has received three commercial recordings, none has included the cut movements; hence the work had to wait until 26 February 2025 for its first full performance, when it was played by the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Michael Seal, at the Royal

Concert Hall, Nottingham. This recording took place the next day.

The overall character of *Metamorphic Variations* is signalled by the title of the individual sections, which, Bliss explained, 'indicated the general mood of that particular variation'.<sup>2</sup> Other aspects to note are his command of orchestral sonorities, which reflects a lifetime's experience, and in particular his continuing exploration of percussion timbres, specific instruments highlighted in different movements.

Initiated by a *pianissimo* tam-tam stroke, 'Elements' lays out the core thematic ideas from which the subsequent variations spring. The first two are a long expressive *cantilena* for solo oboe, and a two-bar phrase first heard on horns, then strings. These are repeated in a variety of instrumental colours, Bliss taking time to etch them onto the listener's consciousness. The third element is a taut, dissonant chordal cluster, revealed very slowly as a note-by-note descent on woodwind and muted horns. Also of significance are the stark octaves, overlapping the first two 'elements', which will reappear from time to time. At the close, *divisi* first violins adumbrate the rhythm of the first variation.

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur Bliss, Introduction to BBC Symphony Orchestra's broadcast of *Metamorphic Variations*, 22 March 1975.

Its title, 'Ballet', is a reminder that dance was integral to Bliss's career, which included impressive scores for the ballets *Checkmate* (1937) and *Miracle in the Gorbals* (1944). The lilting rhythm and athletic energy of the music, derived from the first 'element', forge ahead, suggesting an imaginary scene from a dance drama. Piccolos and a harp *arpeggio* lead *attacca* to 'Assertion', in which an emphatic, accented rhythmic melody, played *con forza* at the start by the first violins, together with side drum perfectly evoke this title. The idea presented by the violins alternates with a flowing woodwind commentary, and as the movement proceeds, pitted with dramatic pauses, timpani join in, hurling out the jerky rhythm. A *fortissimo* cadence and bassoon trill set the scene for the first of the variations omitted at the première.

'Contrasts' is drawn from the third thematic 'element', its slowly spreading, muted string chord offset by a melodic fragment played by flute and piccolos, emphasised at times by xylophone. Further colour is added by the vibraphone's slow vibrato, until a martial rhythm ushers in the other movement that Bliss cut.

Glockenspiel taking the percussion limelight, and starting with just violins and violas, the 'Children's March' seems at first

to inhabit an innocent world of childhood play. Yet, as the movement gathers pace, the mood increasingly turns edgy and threatening, and brassy forces, in the guise of solos for trumpet and trombone, come to dominate. As the procession, now just on strings, fades, disappearing into the distance, what fate awaits the young marchers? Sinisterly effective, the variation makes one wonder how on earth Bliss could have excised such a brilliant cameo.

'Speculation' is characterised by quivering *pianissimo* woodwind trills, within which whisps of the first 'element' are passed around solo instruments including muted cello, flute, oboe, and violin. This mysterious landscape is twice disturbed by *sforzando* eruptions, and the variation ends with the music dying away to *niente*. In between short chorale-like episodes, the first for brass, the trumpet's tune again sourced from the first 'element', 'Interjections' takes the form of melismatic cadenzas for clarinet, bassoon with flute, then flute alone, and an animated, devil-may-care passage marked *brillante* for the first and second violins.

Mercurial in character, 'Scherzo 1' contains rapid changes of metre and virtuosic orchestral writing that provide challenges for the players. As the pace quickens, the mood turns, as often in Bliss's music, to a

sense of menace and danger, braying brass underpinned by thundering tenor and side drums. Only a brief slackening of tempo brings respite in the form of a short trumpet solo. Towards the end, the tension suddenly dissipates, leaving the solo viola to round off the variation which continues straight into the next. Caressingly crafted around variants of the woodwind's lapping octave figure mentioned in the context of 'Elements', 'Contemplation' provides a haven of balm. The music builds to a positive climax and a break, before solos for the principal second violin and leader, offset by the octave figure in harp and piccolo, conclude the variation.

In the 'Polonaise', the constant experimenting with percussion timbres in the work takes on its most bizarre manifestation, when Bliss combines his Polish dance with the sound of castanets, an instrument so completely associated with the dances and rhythms of Spain. It is quite a jolt, but how it works, enhancing this exuberant, rumbustious variation!

Bliss described the link that follows as 'a sad little echo of the Polonaise' and after it, and the briefest of pauses, the 'Funeral Processions' come centre stage. Without doubt, the emotional heart of the work, here is a profound threnody of mourning inspired by two sources. Firstly, as mentioned before,

there were Dannatt's *Tantris* paintings, described by the artist as being

predominantly dark red, black and gold,  
[which] possessed a sombre quality, the  
three images being based on the elements  
from Tristan – he, Isolde and the fatal  
goblet from which they drank.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, Bliss, surely, was remembering, for one final time in his music, his beloved brother Kennard, a victim of World War One carnage, and dedicatee, together with 'all other comrades killed in battle', of his choral symphony *Morning Heroes* (1930). Trumpets, subsequently combined with horns, lead the solemn processions to the grave, Bliss perfectly judging the march's momentum, and bringing the variation to a searing, discordant climax.

'Cool Interlude' offers an oasis of timely tranquillity, a welcome foil to the intensity of the previous variation. The word 'cool' is used here in its meaning of freshness and calm, which Bliss evokes through pellucid, chamber-like scoring for celesta, harp, and flutes (later clarinets) as a crystal-clear backdrop for florid solos by viola, cello, and violin. Shorter than its namesake, 'Scherzo 2'

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<sup>3</sup> George Dannatt. Liner notes on *Metamorphic Variations*, p. 9, Nimbus Records, NI 5294. BBC Welsh Symphony Orchestra, Barry Wordsworth, conductor. Recorded 5 and 6 January 1991.

is fleet of foot, and has something of the chase about it. The movement opening with alternating *staccato* trumpets and trombones, as the woodwinds join, so do this variation's distinctive percussion instrument – woodblocks – which, Bliss indicates, are to be prominent! At one point hunting horns are clearly audible and the variation ends with a blaze of brass. Changing to a slow tempo, and providing connection to the next movement, the third of the 'elements', the cluster chord, returns over yet another deft percussion sonority, a suspended 'sizzle' cymbal.

Set against a pulsing rhythm played by harp and muted *pizzicato* strings, an impassioned 'Duet' for solo violin and cello unfolds. With another, slight change to a slower tempo, the soloists play as one to a dappled accompaniment. After a lengthy moment of silence, 'Dedication to G.D. and A. D.' is a brass salute to Bliss's dedicatees, in the form of a canon which is initiated by the trumpets, then followed, in turn, by horns, trombones, and tuba. It is a reminder of Bliss's skill at composing notable fanfares for special occasions.

In its majestic, stately manner, the finale, 'Affirmation', bears witness to the composer's flair for ceremonial and pageantry. Tubular bells peal, and the music ultimately swells to a forthright *sforzando* chord, marked 'Climax',

which, as George Dannatt aptly commented, 'disintegrates' to bring the work full circle. The oboe's plaintive song is heard for the last time, ending *pianissimo* on a high B flat, before, in Bliss's own words, it 'withdraws into silence'.<sup>4</sup>

Despite being seriously ill, Bliss was able to listen to the BBC broadcast of *Metamorphic Variations*, on 22 March 1975. It was the last performance of the work that he would hear; he died five days later. As he listened to 'Funeral Processions', what must have been his thoughts? Earlier in the year he had written to the composer William Alwyn,

Belief should extend to the mystery  
beyond death. I am not convinced that this  
is the final shutting of the door.<sup>5</sup>

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## Miracle in the Gorbals

### Scenario

**Dramatis personae: the Girl Suicide, the Lovers, the Official, a Beggar, the Prostitute, a Street Boy, the Stranger, a Crowd**

The scene of the ballet is laid in the Gorbals, Glasgow's most sordid slum. It is late afternoon and people are returning from

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Bliss. Broadcast introduction.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Spicer.

work. Through the bustle of the crowded street pass first an official, and then a prostitute; and as darkness is falling a young girl, solitary and pathetic, moves sadly through the throng towards the river. Two lovers dance together.

Suddenly there is a commotion, and men enter carrying the body of the lonely girl. The official comes forward and tries in vain to revive her, while the crowd stands gaping.

At the back of the stage the stranger enters quietly and stands looking at the scene. He comes down through the crowd, which unconsciously gives way to him. He stretches out his hand to the girl. Slowly life comes back to her and she dances, expressing her renewed faith and courage. The crowd is caught up by emotional fervour and dances round her and the stranger.

The official is jealous of the stranger's power over the people, and forms a plan to trick him. He sends the stranger to the prostitute's room on a supposed errand of mercy, and then through one of the women he starts a whispering campaign. When the stranger comes out of the prostitute's house, he finds a hostile crowd grouped round the doorway. He walks away quietly, ignoring their insults. The prostitute comes down alone, her face shining with a new faith.

The official watches her go out, and then, determined to be finally rid of the stranger, organises the young men of the street for a sinister attack.

The stranger returns alone, and one by one the young men step from doorways and jostle him until they surround him. He makes no resistance and in a savage scene, with razors and broken bottles, they murder him. They disperse silently, leaving his slashed and battered body alone on the stage.

An old beggar comes out of a doorway as the young girl and the prostitute return to find the stranger has been killed. The three cover the stranger's face, and turn away as dawn breaks and signs of life stir again in the sordid street.

## **The Action**

### **I. Overture**

The curtain rises on the drop curtain, representing the dockside.  
Lights gradually dim.

### **II. The Street**

*A typical dockside street with tenement buildings on either side, leading to the river embankment at the back.*

Curtain

The street is full of teeming life, men returning from work, women emptying rubbish bins into

already overflowing bins, children playing in and out of the street.

A Beggar plays on his violin outside the tenement buildings.

A Prostitute enters from her house and parades the street.

Darkness is falling and the street lamps are lighted.

### **III. The Girl Suicide**

A Girl obviously friendless and alone passes through the street.

She is accosted by a drunken group.

In despair, she makes her way slowly to the river.

### **IV. The Young Lovers**

A young girl and boy come from different doorways and dance to express their idyllic love.

The girl is roughly called in by a woman, and leaves regretfully with a final kiss.

### **V. The Prostitute and the Boy**

The Prostitute accosts the boy, but he repulses her.

### **VI. The Official**

The Official enters and orders the Prostitute to leave the street. A street fight develops. The Prostitute sullenly leaves.

### **VII. The Discovery of the Suicide's Body**

Suddenly some of the children give the alarm that there has been an accident. People appear from every direction and run towards the embankment, women leaving their laundry, children their games.

The Official forces his way through the crowd and demands explanation of the commotion.

### **VIII. The Suicide's Body is brought in**

The lifeless body of the Girl is brought from the river. The Official tries to revive her but in vain.

He crosses her hands on her breast and covers her face. The crowd stands silent.

### **IX. The Stranger**

The Stranger appears at the back and surveys the scene.

He slowly comes down through the crowd, which unconsciously gives way to him.

The Official opposes him.

The Stranger stretches out his hand to the Girl, whose body quivers into life.

She rises, putting her hand in his,

### **X. Dance of Deliverance**

and starts a slow dance.

The crowd forms a wide circle as the Girl, expressing new-found faith in life, dances.

They gradually become infected with her

enthusiasm and begin to dance with her, trying to touch the garments of the Stranger and showing something of the vitality and simplicity of the religious fervour of a negro congregation.

The Stranger calms the crowd.

The Stranger speaks to the crowd, and the wondering crowd disperses.

The Stranger and the Girl leave the street.

#### **XI. The Official and the Prostitute**

The Official has watched the foregoing scene with anger, and seeing his world crumble, resorts to the Prostitute.

The Prostitute dances and finally accepts him with contempt.

The two leave the street.

#### **XII. Intermezzo**

The street is quiet. People come and go.

Two men and two girls, arm in arm and obviously a little drunk, do a palais glide.

The Official furtively leaves the Prostitute's house.

She appears at the window, throwing down a cigarette end,

which is picked up by the Beggar.

The Stranger reappears with the Girl Suicide.

The Official sends a boy to him with a false message that there is someone sick in the Prostitute's house.

The Stranger enters the Prostitute's house.

#### **XIII. The Slander Campaign**

The Official whispers in a woman's ear, pointing to the Prostitute's house.

Excitedly, the woman calls a friend and passes the scandal on.

From doorways, windows and balconies a crowd appears, which behaves with increasing hostility to the Stranger.

They wait for him outside the Prostitute's door.

#### **XIV. The Conversion of the Prostitute**

The Stranger appearing at the Prostitute's doorway is greeted by insults. With great simplicity, ignoring them, he leaves the stage, followed by the mob.

The Prostitute appears with her cheap finery gone, her face alight with faith.

She walks in the direction of the Stranger, observed from a doorway only by the Official.

#### **XV. Finale. The Killing of the Stranger**

The Official puts the young men in doorways to lie in wait for the Stranger as he returns.

The Stranger returns alone, and the young men emerge from the doorways and jostle him, bumping into him till he is surrounded.

They attack him with razors and bottles.

He falls dead.

During this long pause a ship's hooter sounds off stage. The assailants disappear.

The Stranger's body is found by the Prostitute

and the Girl, who weep and comfort each  
other. The Beggar covers the Stranger's face.

Dawn breaks.  
The curtain falls slowly.



**BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, with Ben Gernon, its former Principal  
Guest Conductor**

The **BBC Philharmonic Orchestra** is reimagining the orchestral experience for a new generation – challenging perceptions, championing innovation, and taking a rich variety of music to the widest range of audiences. Alongside a flagship series of concerts at Manchester’s Bridgewater Hall, the Orchestra broadcasts concerts on BBC Radio 3 and BBC Sounds from venues across the North of England, annually at the BBC Proms, and from its international tours. It also records regularly for Chandos Records and has produced a catalogue of more than 300 discs and digital downloads. Championing new music, it has recently given world and UK premières of works by Anna Appleby, Gerald Barry, Erland Cooper, Tom Coult, Sebastian Fagerlund, Emily Howard, Robert Laidlow, James Lee III, Grace-Evangeline Mason, David Matthews, Outi Tarkiainen, and Anna Þorvaldsdóttir, the scope of its output extending far beyond standard repertoire. Its Chief Conductor is John Storgårds, with whom the orchestra has enjoyed a long association. The French conductor Ludovic Morlot is its Associate Artist, Anna Clyne, one of the most in-demand composers of the day, its Composer in Association.

In May 2023 the Orchestra performed at the Eurovision Song Contest, both at a free concert with the previous Ukrainian

winner, Jamala, and in the final itself with the Italian artist Mahmood for a rendition of John Lennon’s *Imagine* during the Liverpool Songbook medley. The Orchestra continues to deliver a programme of engagement with children and young people. At the end of 2023 it released *Musical Storyland*, a major new ten-part series featuring the musicians of the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, which brings famous stories from around the world to life using the power of music. This was the first time an orchestra has been commissioned to make a series of films for UK network television. Through all its activities, the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra is bringing life-changing musical experiences to audiences across Greater Manchester, the North of England, the UK, and around the world. [www.bbc.co.uk / philharmonic](http://www.bbc.co.uk / philharmonic)

Possessing infectious energy and enthusiasm, **Michael Seal** has worked with many of the UK’s finest orchestras and built a reputation for outstanding results, delivered with great charm and often on a typically British tight rehearsal schedule. Since 2005 he has conducted the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra more than 300 times as either Assistant or Associate Conductor, making his conducting début at the BBC Proms with the Orchestra in 2023 with the

festival's first ever Bollywood concert. His in-depth knowledge of orchestras from an insider's position (he was a violinist with the CBSO early in his career) gives him a unique perspective and allows him quickly to build rapport and trust with the musicians before him. In the UK he is frequently invited as guest conductor with all five BBC orchestras as well as the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Academy of St Martin in the Fields, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, Philharmonia Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, and Ulster Orchestra. Abroad, he has conducted the Brussels Philharmonic, WDR Funkhausorchester Köln, Münchner Rundfunkorchester, hr-Sinfonieorchester Frankfurt, KBS Symphony Orchestra, Seoul,

Kuopio Symphony Orchestra, Sinfonia Lahti, Kringkastingsorkestret (Norwegian Radio Orchestra), Odense Symfoniorkester, Joensuu City Orchestra, Orquesta Académica del Instituto Superior de Arte del Teatro Colón, Orquesta Filarmónica de Buenos Aires, Trondheim Symfoniorkester, RTÉ Concert Orchestra, and RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra. During the global pandemic of 2020 / 21, he started his podcast, 'a mic on the podium', which offers regular interviews with other prominent conductors. It has become highly successful, gaining rave reviews, and, owing to its unique format, has now been placed in the National Sound Archive at the British Library. Michael Seal will make his début with the Beethoven Orchester Bonn in 2026 and Belgian National Orchestra in 2027. [www.michaelseal.com](http://www.michaelseal.com)

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**Acknowledgements**

Chandos Records would like to thank The Bliss Trust for its kind support of this recording.



The Bliss Trust promotes the music of Sir Arthur Bliss (1891 – 1975) and supports young composers and musicians. [www.blisstrust.org](http://www.blisstrust.org)

**Recording producer** Brian Pidgeon

**Sound engineer** Stephen Rinker

**Assistant engineers** Owain Williams (*Metamorphic Variations*) and Amy Brennan (*Miracle in the Gorbals*)

**Editor** Jonathan Cooper

**A & R administrator** Karen Marchlik

**Recording venue** MediaCityUK, Salford, Manchester; 27 February (*Metamorphic Variations*) and 1 March (*Miracle in the Gorbals*) 2025

**Front cover** Scene from the original 1944 Sadler's Wells Ballet production of *Miracle in the Gorbals*, choreographed by Robert Helpmann who also starred as the Stranger / GRANGER – Historical Picture Archive / Alamy Stock Photo. Despite every effort, we have not been able to identify and contact the individuals pictured in the photo, nor their heirs, for permission to reproduce their likeness here. We should be pleased to hear from any person who might offer useful information in this regard.

**Back cover** Photograph of Michael Seal © Eric Richmond

**Design and typesetting** Cass Cassidy

**Booklet editor** Finn S. Gundersen

**Publishers** Novello & Co., Ltd, London

**UPC** 0095115537022

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Chandos Records Ltd, Colchester, Essex CO2 8HX, England

Country of origin UK

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# SIR ARTHUR BLISS (1891-1975)

1 - 15 **MIRACLE IN THE GORBALS, F 6** (1944) 36:44

A Ballet in One Scene  
Scenario by Michael Benthall

*première complete recording*

16 - 31 **METAMORPHIC VARIATIONS, F 122** (1972) 43:13  
for Orchestra

TT 79:57

**BBC Philharmonic Orchestra**  
Zoë Beyers leader  
Michael Seal

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