

Introduction

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Not long ago I attended a formal dinner at a college belonging to one of Britain's most ancient and prestigious universities, and was introduced to the institution's head of house as someone engaged in researching the music of Benjamin Britten. 'Really?' came the Master's reply. 'There's not much point to the Aldeburgh Festival now that Britten and Pears are both dead, is there?' Before I could respond, the Master had moved swiftly down the line, presumably to impart another morsel of wisdom in whatever subject-area was appropriate to the next guest. After dinner, I sat next to the wife of a senior fellow and was introduced in a similar manner. 'Well,' she said as she sipped her coffee thoughtfully, 'I'm afraid I find Britten's music just too *aggressively* homosexual, don't you?' This time I managed to issue a sophisticated rejoinder (the single word 'Why?', if I remember rightly), upon which she rapidly changed the subject.

The persistence of such bigoted views on Britain's most internationally successful and respected twentieth-century composer seems scarcely credible as the century draws to a close, and it remains an uncomfortable fact that – in his native country, at least – a small but vociferous body of commentators still seeks to denigrate Britten's self-evidently significant artistic achievements. Britten was himself no stranger to such negativity, and the seeds of an incipient critical malaise were sown as early as the 1930s when he was making a name for himself as a precocious newcomer armed with a formidable compositional technique embodying a resourcefulness and flexibility never before encountered in British music. From the influences of French impressionism and the Second Viennese School evident in the *Quatre chansons françaises* (written in the summer of 1928 at the age of fourteen, and discussed by Christopher Mark in Chapter 1) to the emulations of Mahler, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Shostakovich and Prokofiev in works dating from his time as a composition scholar at the Royal College of Music (1930–3), the range of music absorbed by Britten was phenomenally broad. During his working apprenticeship as a composer for the GPO Film Unit (1936–8) – a famous product of which is examined by Philip Reed in Chapter 3 – and as the creator of incidental music for stage projects mounted by the Group Theatre and Left Theatre in the same period, Britten's ability to assimilate any musical idiom required of him grew still more pronounced. His

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stylistic boundaries broadened to the extent of absorbing jazz elements, either reproduced in straight pastiche (as in his music to a west-end production of J. B. Priestley's *Johnson over Jordan* in 1939) or more subtly disguised (witness his brilliantly inventive score to the Auden–Isherwood collaboration *The Ascent of F6* in 1937).

Such astonishing technical facility was not destined to endear Britten to the infamously insular critics of inter-war Britain, all the more so because he had resolutely rejected the idiom of earlier Establishment composers such as Vaughan Williams by responding to almost exclusively Continental influences. Compositional ‘cleverness’ was itself looked upon with suspicion in those years, and Peter Evans has justifiably criticized Vaughan Williams’s music for its ‘disdain for technical finesse approaching irresponsibility’.¹ Vaughan Williams is reputed to have referred to the young Britten’s music as ‘very clever but beastly’ during his time as a student at the Royal College, lamenting the fact that an English public schoolboy of his age should be writing ‘this kind of music’.² For his part, Britten felt Vaughan Williams’s music to be blighted by ‘technical incompetence’, and declared (with the benefit of several decades of hindsight) that his own attempt ‘to develop a consciously controlled professional technique . . . was a struggle away from everything Vaughan Williams seemed to stand for’.³ Britten’s *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* (1937), perhaps the finest outcome of the young composer’s prodigious eclecticism, were hailed at the time of their première merely for their ‘virtuosity’, ‘brilliant ingenuity’ and ‘strikingly original effects’.⁴ His Piano Concerto, dating from the following year, provoked this school-masterly outburst from the same distinguished reviewer:

This is not a stylish work. Mr Britten’s cleverness, of which he has frequently been told, has got the better of him and led him into all sorts of errors, the worst of which are errors of taste. How did he come to write the tune of the last movement? Now and then real music crops up . . . but on the whole Mr Britten is exploiting a brilliant facility that ought to be kept in subservience.⁵

Years later, Britten’s virtuosic early instrumental scores would be more warmly appreciated for their wit, ingenuity and vivid characterization (aspects explored by Eric Roseberry in Chapter 12), and seen as laying the firm yet flexible stylistic foundations on which the composer’s later work would build. His output of instrumental music came to include several substantial ‘symphonic’ scores and a small body of impressive chamber music (examined by Arved Ashby and Philip Rupprecht in Chapters 11 and 13 respectively), putting paid to wearily repetitious allegations that Britten’s success was restricted to text-based projects such as opera and vocal music (the latter surveyed by Ralph Woodward in Chapter 14).

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During Britten's sojourn in the USA in the Second World War, attempts to tarnish his reputation took a more sinister and personal turn. A notorious example was a statement by George Baker of the Royal Philharmonic Society in a letter published by the *Sunday Times* on 15 June 1941:

In your last issue, Mr Ernest Newman, under the heading 'Thoroughbreds', said he had 'been fighting single-handed the "battle of Britten" '.

There are a number of musicians in this country who are well content to let Mr Newman have this dubious honour. The young gentleman on whose behalf he fights, Mr Benjamin Britten, was born in 1913. He is in America. He may have had perfectly good reasons for going there, and may decide to return to his native land some time or other. In the meantime I would like to remind Mr Newman that most of our musical 'thoroughbreds' are stabled in or near London and are directing all their endeavours towards winning the City and Suburban and the Victory Stakes, two classic events that form part of a programme called the Battle of Britain; a programme in which Mr Britten has no part.

It was, of course, the spectacularly triumphant staging of *Peter Grimes* in 1945 that secured Britten's international reputation soon after his homecoming – although that success, too, was tainted by open resentment against the three-man team of conscientious objectors (Britten, Peter Pears and Eric Crozier) responsible for mounting the opera's first production. Britten's pacifism was nevertheless to prove a deep and lifelong commitment which, as Donald Mitchell reveals in Chapter 10, by no means bore artistic fruit merely in those scores where the preoccupation is most obvious.

In the immediately post-war years, Britten's creativity and sense of cultural responsibility both seemed unstoppable as he produced a steady stream of universally acclaimed stage works and pursued his firm commitment to touring them to venues well outside the privileged milieu of central London. The evolution of the versatile medium of chamber opera, charted by Arnold Whittall in Chapter 5, was but the first of many compositional developments rooted in considerations of practicality and accessibility. The success of the Aldeburgh Festival, founded in 1948 and discussed by Judith LeGrove in Chapter 17, furthered the sense that here was a musician devoted to the wider community, his compositional gifts backed up by phenomenal talents as a performer which made him the envy of many a less-gifted composer. The warmly complimentary tone generally adopted by Britten's reviewers began to change around 1951, however, when the composer's former champion, the influential Ernest Newman, dismissed *Billy Budd* in print as a 'painful disappointment'.⁶ The tone of other reviews of this Festival of Britain opera was unusually

carping. One writer shed intriguing light on the widespread shift in critical stance by commenting that ‘one always resents having it dinned into one’s ears that a new work is a masterpiece before it has been performed; and Benjamin Britten’s “Billy Budd” was trumpeted into the arena by such a deafening roar of advance publicity that many of us entered Covent Garden . . . with a mean, sneaking hope that we might be able to flesh our fangs in it’.⁷ The débâcle surrounding the notorious gala première of Britten’s Coronation opera, *Gloriana*, brought this resentment swiftly to a head in 1953 in circumstances re-assessed by Antonia Malloy-Chirgwin in Chapter 6.

Ernest Newman’s short-sighted response to *Billy Budd* had been promptly rebuffed by Donald Mitchell, who had by the early 1950s begun to make a name for himself as an outspoken champion of Britten’s music in the pages of his journal *Music Survey*.⁸ Mitchell’s editorial work with Hans Keller led naturally enough to their decision to collaborate on a volume of essays written by a long list of distinguished contributors and entitled *Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on His Works From a Group of Specialists* (DMHK), which appeared in 1952. The composer declared himself to be delighted with ‘the seriousness of it, the thoroughness of its planning & editing, its excellent get-up, & the admirable quality of a good deal of the contents’.⁹ Less pleased were the representatives of the growing anti-Britten lobby, startled as they were at the audacity of issuing a detailed – and positive – study of a composer still only thirty-nine years of age. Peter Tranchell spoke for them in a brutal review entitled ‘Britten and Brittenites’, which took several of the symposium’s contributors to task for their modish use of ‘musicological jargon’, the author barely disguising his resentment that here was a book daring to consider a living composer ‘great’ in spite of his objection that ‘the serious appraisal of a creative artist’s work must be left to posterity’.¹⁰ Tranchell concluded by extending ‘to the subject of this hero-worship my condolences that the book should not have been better written and that he should have been the victim of so inopportune an outburst of noble intentions’.

It would have taken considerably more than a few gripping critics to check Britten’s continuing meteoric career, however, and the international success of major scores such as *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) and the *War Requiem* (1962) easily compensated for the temporary set-backs of *Gloriana* (1953) and *The Prince of the Pagodas* (1957), neither of which was initially well received – although posterity has since accorded both works a more serious and balanced appraisal. Britten’s stylistic horizons continued to broaden in the 1950s with his investigations of dodecaphony and Far Eastern cultures (his creative encounter with the latter is outlined in Chapter 9), both of which encouraged him to strive for ever

greater economy and clarity in his music. The emotional impact of the *War Requiem* on the popular imagination, even more spectacular than that of *Peter Grimes* before it, kept him firmly in the limelight in the 1960s, and the work's stature was deemed by some to be sufficiently daunting as to make criticism 'impertinent'.¹¹ Needless to say, reaction against this view soon set in, fuelled by discomfort that *The Times* could loudly proclaim the work to be a masterpiece well before a note of the score had been heard in public.

Britten's respectability in musicological circles, initiated by the Mitchell–Keller symposium, began to grow steadily with the appearance of a number of analytical articles on his music in the 1960s. Several perceptive essays by Peter Evans would later form the basis for his detailed book on Britten's musical language (*PEMB*), first published in 1979 and followed three years later by Arnold Whittall's comparative account of the music of Britten and Tippett (*AWBT*). Whittall noted the significance of Evans's monumental tome as the first substantial study of any twentieth-century British composer 'to emphasize technical matters in a systematic manner'.¹² Both books remain the first resort for any would-be student of Britten's music, and have enabled a younger generation of Britten analysts to embark on more elaborate dissections of the composer's works with the confidence born of belonging to a well-established musicological tradition.

A handful of less technical accounts of Britten's life and work had already appeared during the last decade and a half of the composer's lifetime (including two books largely devoted to his operas, published in quick succession by Patricia Howard and Eric Walter White in 1969–70),¹³ and Britten's death in 1976 at the age of sixty-three was quickly and inevitably followed by a rash of personal tributes. The first important step in objectively chronicling the composer's life and career in some detail came two years later with Donald Mitchell's and John Evans's vivid pictorial account (*DMJE*). Then, in 1981, Michael Kennedy's informative and concise biography (*MKB*) elevated the composer to the hallowed status of 'Master Musician'. In the same year, Mitchell began his concerted attempt to illuminate the socially, politically and artistically fascinating years of Britten's first creative period with his book *Britten and Auden in the Thirties* (*DMBA*), a topic reconsidered here by Paul Kildea in Chapter 2. Mitchell's work on Britten's early period culminated in 1991 with the appearance of an encyclopaedic two-volume edition of the composer's correspondence up to 1945, co-edited with Philip Reed (*DMPR*) – a mine of information on everything from the critical reaction to premières of Britten's works, to intriguing trivia such as the composer's preferred brand of toothpaste. The third volume of Britten's letters is

currently in preparation, and the project is likely to extend to at least two further volumes thereafter.

The surge of interest in Britten studies in the 1980s would scarcely have been possible without the formidable research resources offered to scholars by the Britten–Pears Library, established at Britten’s home at The Red House, Aldeburgh, at the start of the decade. Philip Brett’s study of *Peter Grimes* (PBPG), published in 1983, showed how valuable Britten’s libretto drafts and composition sketches could be in shedding light on the composer’s working methods and extra-musical preoccupations, and his book became a model for later monographs on Britten’s major works. Many of the essays in the present volume are indebted to the source materials at Aldeburgh for their insights.

Brett’s more recent publications have continued to illuminate the creative results of Britten’s homosexuality, a topic discussed with increasing frankness since the composer’s death (though not always with equal relevance to his art). Clifford Hindley, whose work is represented in Chapter 8, has provided many perceptive and thought-provoking interpretations of Britten’s operas from this perspective. Humphrey Carpenter’s controversial biography of the composer (HCBB), published in 1992, set out to provide a warts-and-all account of Britten’s private life and offers the most comprehensive account of the composer’s character yet to be made available. The motivation behind Carpenter’s close questioning of several men who were taken under Britten’s avuncular wing in their youth is transparent enough, although none confessed to any physical dimension to the relationship. (Britten’s complex attitude towards childhood and all that it symbolizes, which bore fruit not only in music specifically conceived for children to play but also in various stage and vocal works, is considered afresh by Stephen Arthur Allen in Chapter 15.) Carpenter’s otherwise scrupulously well-sourced book unfortunately bases many of its assumptions concerning the tensions in Britten’s psyche upon sexual incidents for which only the flimsiest of evidence survives: an alleged proclivity for little boys on the part of Britten’s father, and Eric Crozier’s recollection that Britten confessed to having been ‘raped’ while at school. The author’s preoccupation with the latter *trouvé* inevitably colours his interpretations of the operas: thus the Novice’s flogging in *Billy Budd*, of which the victim sings ‘The shame’ll never pass’, is directly linked to Britten’s putative ‘rape’, which took place ‘possibly while undergoing a flogging’; the opera as a whole is reduced to an allegory of life in a brutal prep-school.¹⁴ (It might strike the sceptical observer as somewhat odd, however, to find a composer allegedly so traumatized by sexual violation in his youth making a musical in-joke concerning rape in his comic opera *Albert Herring*, where he quotes from the earlier *Rape of Lucretia*: see

p. 103.) Carpenter's attempt to view all Britten's stage works as fundamentally autobiographical leads him up some amusing garden paths. The spoken dialogue at the end of *Grimes* exists, we are told, because 'Britten has perhaps identified so closely with Grimes that he cannot portray his death musically. Death means for Grimes what it would mean for Britten, the end of all music.' This theme is resumed in the discussion of *Owen Wingrave*, which again contains speech at 'one of those moments in Britten's operas that are too intense for singing' (!): Kate's challenge to Owen to sleep in the haunted room is read 'as if Auden had suddenly returned and had again thrown down his 1942 gauntlet' – a reference to Auden's famous letter to Britten in which he advised him 'to suffer, and make others suffer' if he were to develop to his 'full stature'.¹⁵

Consideration of the tensions and frustrations in Britten's personal life may well lend added insight into the preoccupations that coloured his stage and vocal works, but the ongoing fascination with the composer's sexuality seems in danger both of lending too one-sided a slant to interpretations of his operas (the universal appeal of which continues to be vividly demonstrated by numerous high-profile stagings across the globe) and distracting attention from his purely musical achievements. Much of the attractiveness of Britten's art lies in the scope it offers for interpretation on numerous levels, whether arising from the designedly ambiguous dramatic suggestions of his operas, or through a refined musical language that somehow manages to speak directly to the wider public while keeping even the most rigorously systematic musical analysts in employment for the foreseeable future. In that 'somehow' lies the simultaneous freshness and intellectual appeal of a style that, in Robin Holloway's words, 'has the power to connect the avant-garde with the lost paradise of tonality; it conserves and renovates in the boldest and simplest manner; it shows how old usages can be refreshed and remade, and how the new can be saved from mere rootlessness, etiolation, lack of connexion and communication'.¹⁶

Posterity, on the whole, continues to serve Britten well. Interest in the composer's work has never been so widespread, and the quantity and range of postgraduate dissertations devoted to his music on both sides of the Atlantic is formidable. The richness and suggestiveness of Britten's operatic language, in particular, ensure that no commentator can ever hope to have the final interpretative word, and a vast amount of primary source material relating to the composer has yet to be studied in the detail it deserves. The present volume presents a varied collection of essays on a wide range of topics central to Britten's career, some written by those who knew the composer personally and were at the cutting edge of Britten research at its inception, others the work of those who were much too

young to have formed a critical response to his music while he was still alive. One thing all the contributors share is their keen awareness of the rare ability of Britten's music to speak forcibly to a wide audience, even to those listeners whose lack of confidence in musical technicalities might influence them to fight shy of a contemporary idiom. This unusually wide appeal is reflected in the dauntingly extensive catalogue of recordings of Britten's music currently available, perhaps a more potent reflection of an undiminished appreciation of the composer's art two decades after his death than any amount of academic argument advanced in its favour. No one can today claim that Britten's music is not destined to outlive the memory of Pears's interpretations, as once was predicted by the more vociferous of the composer's detractors, or that Aldeburgh and its associated activities have not comfortably outlived the artists who nurtured them half a century ago.