

## 17 Aldeburgh

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But I belong at home – there – in Aldeburgh. I have tried to bring music *to* it in the shape of our local Festival; and all the music I write comes *from* it. I believe in roots, in associations, in backgrounds, in personal relationships.<sup>1</sup>

There could be no clearer expression of Britten's artistic creed than that of his thoughtfully worded speech on receiving the Aspen Award, in which he spoke of his belief in 'occasional music', of an artist's role in society and that music should demand of a listener 'some effort, a journey to a special place, saving up for a ticket, some homework on the programme perhaps'. Here already we have three ideas which, given the right circumstances, could be made to flourish in the shape of a festival. The fourth ingredient necessary for the formula was that 'special place', Aldeburgh; a place which Britten was to regard as his home. As he memorably said in the 1964 speech, 'I do not write for posterity – in any case, the outlook for that is somewhat uncertain. I write music, now, in Aldeburgh, for people living there, and further afield, indeed for anyone who cares to play it or listen to it. But my music now has its roots, in where I live and work.'<sup>2</sup>

It was while driving to Lucerne in 1947 for performances with the newly formed English Opera Group that Pears turned to his companions Britten and Crozier and suggested, 'Why not . . . make our own Festival?'<sup>3</sup> The idea was prompted by the absurd hardship and expense of travelling abroad to find audiences for new English operas that were not being supported in their country of origin. Although it was gratifying to present *Albert Herring* and *The Rape of Lucretia* to packed houses at festivals in Lucerne and Holland and to feel that English opera was once again making its mark, it appeared uneconomic for the English Opera Group tour to be repeated.<sup>4</sup> From this point of view a local festival including opera certainly made sense.

On their return, Britten, Pears and Crozier started making enquiries about the feasibility of an Aldeburgh Festival. It had already been decided that if the Jubilee Hall were large enough to house a simple opera production, plans would be made for a small-scale festival in June 1948. At this stage the practical help of Elizabeth Sweeting was enlisted in examining potential venues.<sup>5</sup> Preliminary findings were positive: the Jubilee Hall, seating 290, was just large enough for opera and the Vicar of Aldeburgh was happy for the Parish Church to be used for concerts. Yet there still

[306]

remained the problems of financing the festival and of determining whether local feeling would be for or against the project, since without popular support the venture would be virtually impossible. A public meeting was held at which Britten and Pears, genuinely fond of Aldeburgh, put forward a persuasive case, and (perhaps surprisingly) the public was won over. Fears that the festival would amount to an unwelcome 'invasion' were allayed so that by the end of the evening promises had already been made against financial loss, outright offers of help received and, far from rushing away, people even stayed behind to discuss the idea further. It was this local support which was of crucial benefit to the early years of the Aldeburgh Festival.<sup>6</sup> As for the financial side, a 'guarantee' system was set up which produced a sum of £1,400. In addition to £500 made available by the Arts Council, this was deemed sufficient for the festival to go ahead.

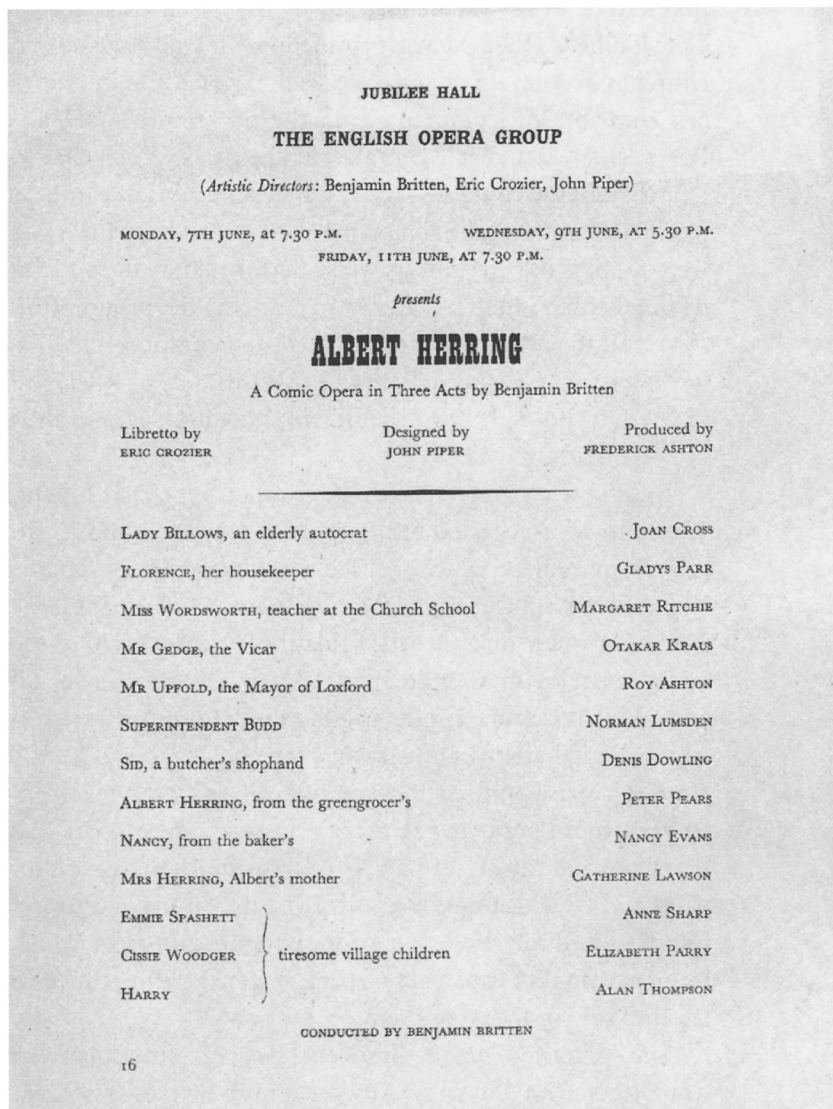
Pears's original vision of an Aldeburgh Festival had been a 'modest [one] with a few concerts given by friends'.<sup>7</sup> The festival was to be built around the English Opera Group, both practically and artistically: the Group would provide the singers and instrumentalists necessary for recitals and chamber music, while opera (central to Britten's output) would be at the heart of the proceedings. Since it was very much an experiment, this first festival was limited to a week and two weekends with a programme largely consisting of chamber concerts and recitals to minimize rehearsal time. Britten gathered around him not only some of the finest British performers of his day but also a daunting line-up of figures from the literary world. There were lectures on subjects ranging from literature (William Plomer on Edward FitzGerald and E. M. Forster on George Crabbe and *Peter Grimes*), to theatre (Tyrone Guthrie on 'The Theatre Today'), music (Steuart Wilson on 'The Future of Music in England') and art (Sir Kenneth Clark on 'Constable and Gainsborough as East Anglian Painters'), in line with the founders' concept of the Aldeburgh Festival as a festival of 'Music and the Arts'. Exhibitions – *Peter Grimes* stage models and designs, contemporary East Anglian paintings, Suffolk writers' manuscripts, John Constable's paintings – were held throughout the town to tie in with the lectures and give the festival a local flavour. It was this individuality to which E. M. Forster alluded when he wrote that 'a festival should be festive' and 'it must possess something which is distinctive and which could not be so well presented elsewhere'.<sup>8</sup>

Musically the festival also had a unique character. At its centre in 1948 was *Albert Herring*, which was given three performances in the Jubilee Hall (see Plate 20). The opera was a resounding success: the intimacy of the small stage brought out the comedy of the piece and nowhere else could the references to local people and places have been better appreci-

ated. The première of *Saint Nicolas* took place in the first concert of that festival, and was another landmark.<sup>9</sup> It was the first of what was to be a long line of Britten works given their first performances at the Aldeburgh Festival, and involved – together with professional singers – the local community, in the shape of the Aldeburgh Festival Choir. This brought together singers from all over east Suffolk, from choral societies, schools and church choirs. Entry to the choir was by audition, with preliminary rehearsals being held by local conductors before forces were joined for the last few practices. By all accounts those first two performances of *Saint Nicolas* were particularly magical: E. M. Forster described how ‘the sudden contrast between elaborate singing and the rough breathy voices of three kids from a local “Co-op” made one swallow in the throat and water in the eyes’<sup>10</sup> and Imogen Holst recalled that ‘the crowning glory of the work came at the end, when the listeners were drawn into the singing of “God moves in a mysterious way”, and the “frozen hearts” in the audience-congregation became unfrozen’.<sup>11</sup> *Saint Nicolas* was repeated frequently at subsequent festivals.

Britten’s and Pears’s practical involvement was such that during the first festival they gave performances every day except one and twice took part in two concerts per day. Apart from Pears’s role in *Saint Nicolas* (which was conducted by Leslie Woodgate), he sang the title role in the three performances of *Albert Herring* which Britten conducted; there was a recital of English and German song, a concert by the Zorian String Quartet in which Britten played the keyboard parts of Bridge’s *Phantasy Quartet* and Purcell’s *Golden Sonata*, an ‘Aldeburgh Serenade’ concert devised by Basil Douglas in which both Britten and Pears were involved, and a chamber concert in which Britten shared the conducting with Arthur Oldham. Even with these heavy performing commitments, Britten and Pears held ‘open house’ at their home in Crag Path – thus creating for themselves what could easily have been a punishingly hectic schedule. In retrospect, though, Pears was adamant about Britten’s enjoyment of it: ‘In fact, those early festivals were among the happiest years of Ben’s life . . . because there was something to do: I mean, he liked to do things, he liked to work. He liked to have an aim and an object. He liked to work for people and he liked to be useful, to be serving the public.’<sup>12</sup>

If the first Aldeburgh Festival had been an artistic success, and judging from the favourable reviews it certainly was, from a financial point of view good ticket sales had made it nowhere near as disastrous as might have been expected – there was even a credit balance in the accounts. This was largely due to the economical use of a small number of performers for several events, but one other important factor should not be overlooked: the hidden subsidy from Britten and Pears themselves, who took no fees.



**Plate 20** Programme book to the first Aldeburgh Festival (1948), detailing the first performances of *Albert Herring*

At the post-festival meeting of the Executive Committee, of which Lord Harewood was President and Felicity Cranbrook Chair, a 'universal desire that the festival should be repeated from year to year' was minuted; and so what had started as an inspired idea became the tangible reality of an annual event.

In terms of content and programme planning the second year was similar to the first. A strong focus on local issues was retained and the programme book, beautifully produced with photographs and black-and-white illustrations, once again contained topical essays: an account of the

first festival by E. M. Forster, a survey of coastal erosion at Aldeburgh by C. E. Colbeck (then Mayor of Aldeburgh), an article about east Suffolk churches by John Piper and a piece about Bach and Purcell by Pears. This last contribution commented on the programmes of Sacred Music & Poetry, in which Bach cantatas, anthems by Purcell and readings of English religious poems of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were featured. Purcell and Bach, along with Dowland, Mozart and Schubert, were among the composers most performed at the Aldeburgh Festival during Britten's lifetime, and from studying the programmes it becomes clear that there was a nucleus of favoured composers. As Crozier stated, 'We hoped, by pleasing ourselves, to please many people: if we had tried to please everybody, the result could only have been a timid and half-hearted mixture of oddments.'<sup>13</sup>

In the early years the festival expanded very little in length (between 1948 and 1959 it lasted either nine or ten days) and a pattern of programming evolved which was remarkably consistent. There was always a large choral concert in the Parish Church on a Saturday afternoon, flanked by opera on either the Friday or Saturday evening and at least two other concerts of the 'Serenade', chamber or solo-recital type. This ensured that anyone coming to Aldeburgh for only the weekend could be guaranteed a variety of musical fare. During the week, in addition to other concerts, opera performances or 'opera evenings' (where Pears and other singers would perform extracts from operas accompanied by Britten at the piano and introduced by Lord Harewood), there would be films, lectures and wine tastings, not forgetting the Sunday Festival Services – an important coming together of locals and visitors in which two of the founders would take an active part, Britten reading the lesson and Pears taking a solo in a verse anthem.

The contents of programmes changed very little: an orchestral concert would include a Haydn or Mozart symphony and a Mozart piano concerto as well as a more modern work; a chamber concert almost invariably featured works by Mozart, Schubert or Haydn as well as a piece by Janáček, Bridge or a less familiar twentieth-century composer; and a Britten–Pears recital often began with German Lieder (usually Schubert) and after the interval featured Britten's or other English songs, ending with Britten's own folksong arrangements. As for opera, in 1949 Britten composed a specifically 'Aldeburgh' piece for the festival: *Let's Make an Opera*, with a libretto by Crozier. Set in Iken Hall, not far from Snape, the girls and boys of the cast were given the names of 'the Gathorne-Hardys of Great Glemham, Suffolk'.<sup>14</sup> Daringly Britten invited the audience's participation in the songs which framed the three scenes of the opera (see pp. 284–5). Also revived in 1949 were *Albert Herring* and *The Rape of*



*Lucretia*, while in 1950 Britten's realization of *The Beggar's Opera* was staged in the Jubilee Hall and *Let's Make an Opera* repeated.

In 1951 Aldeburgh was chosen as a centre for the Festival of Britain but, despite an increased grant from the Arts Council, a heavy loss was incurred. This was perhaps surprising since there were only four opera performances – two double-bills of *Dido and Aeneas* with Monteverdi's *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* and two performances of *Albert Herring*. Looking back on 1951 and the following years Stephen Reiss, Elizabeth Sweeting's successor, blamed the financial plight on 'false economies and a mistaken belief in the guarantee system as the most effective form of subsidy'.<sup>15</sup> The tide began to turn in 1955, when covenanted subscriptions were introduced, but it was not until 1957 that the festival's fortunes really began to improve. In this year the first late-night concerts were held, in conjunction with the BBC Transcription Service, at 10.45 p.m. in the Parish Church. The five-part series featured Buxtehude's *The Last Judgment*, a cycle of cantatas with related texts, and was performed by singers from the English Opera Group with the Aldeburgh Festival Orchestra, conducted by Charles Mackerras. Late-night concerts (this time early settings of the Magnificat) were again included in the 1958 festival<sup>16</sup> and thereafter were financially supported by the BBC Transcription Service until 1971. The driving force behind these concerts was Imogen Holst, who had come to work for Britten in 1952 and became a mainstay of the festival for the next twenty-five years. Early music was a particular passion of hers, as can be seen from the phenomenal range of music featured – from Osbert Parsley (a little-known sixteenth-century Norwich composer) or Pérotin to a programme of eighteenth-century Spanish chamber music – and for these concerts Holst conducted the Purcell Singers herself. There were also regular appearances by leading figures in the early-music scene: Ralph Downes, the Deller Consort and David Munrow's Early Music Consort. Imogen Holst's contribution as an artistic director from 1956 until her retirement in 1977 was invaluable, as was her help in so many practical and advisory ways. For her own part, she recalled that at the programme-planning meetings Britten was always the one to think most quickly and clearly, 'always aware of the difficulties of organizing a festival'.<sup>17</sup>

The popularity of the Aldeburgh Festival brought its own problems. The Jubilee Hall and Parish Church were simply not large enough to accommodate the number of people applying for tickets, and it seemed ludicrous to forgo potential extra income simply because of lack of space. Plans for a new theatre or opera house in Aldeburgh itself were tentatively discussed for some time before being made public in the October 1956 report from the Chair, Fidelity Cranbrook. A plot of land was bought at

Adair Lodge, not far from the Parish Church, and in February 1957 estimates were drawn up for the cost of the building work. The programme book of that year contained 'Notes On An Opera House For Aldeburgh' by H. T. Cadbury-Brown (rather fancifully comparing the project with Wagner at Bayreuth), together with an aerial photograph showing the precise location of the proposed Festival Theatre. In retrospect it is easy to see that the siting of the theatre would have been disastrous for Aldeburgh, causing terrible problems of parking and traffic congestion, so it was perhaps fortunate that the project came to nothing.

In the mean time, the lack of space was solved by moving away from Aldeburgh to larger churches further afield. 1956 was the first year in which Blythburgh Church was used, for a concert of unaccompanied sacred music from the Purcell Singers and Pears, conducted by Imogen Holst. The first performance of *Noye's Fludde* in 1958 was presented in Orford Church,<sup>18</sup> which had the advantage of having no large or heavy fixed pews so that the back of the church could easily be cleared to accommodate staging. *Noye's Fludde* was another of the festival's landmark compositions, following very much in the tradition of *Saint Nicolas* and *The Little Sweep* in its involvement of the audience, but with the opportunity for far greater numbers of Suffolk children to take part.

Although Orford Church was to be used again for the three Church Parables in the 1960s, it was no answer to the problem of where to perform larger-scale secular concerts or opera. A temporary solution was found in the expansion (at a cost far below that of the projected new theatre) of the Jubilee Hall, which reopened in time for the 1960 Festival. For the occasion Britten composed *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a full-length opera, but written very much to suit the limitations of what was, even with the enlarged stage, still a small auditorium.<sup>19</sup> Britten was determined that a larger venue should be found in order that a more varied repertoire could be heard at the festival. After much thought Stephen Reiss, then Festival Manager, suggested Snape Maltings as a candidate for possible conversion. In October 1965 Reiss wrote to Ove Arup, a distinguished civil engineer whose work had included Coventry Cathedral and the Sydney Opera House. Shortly afterwards Derek Sugden was sent by his employees, Arup Associates, to look at the Maltings – a group of traditional nineteenth-century buildings constructed from local brick with timber roofs now covered with mossed asbestos tiles. The original plan was to take out the central wall of the large kiln to allow seating for 750, to replace the charcoal timber roof, to provide a removable proscenium for opera and to make the auditorium suitable for use by Decca as a recording studio. It was a tall order, particularly as Britten initially wanted to limit expenditure to £50,000.<sup>20</sup> Paramount was the need for a

good acoustic: the building would be a concert hall first and foremost with facilities for recording, and if opera were also possible it would be a bonus. Work began in May 1966 and the programme book of that year's festival included both photographs of 'Snape Malt House' before its conversion and a picture of the architect's model of the stage.

Remarkably, the transformation was completed in time for the 1967 Festival, when the concert hall was formally opened by the Queen. A new era now dawned for the Aldeburgh Festival: gone were the days of hearing a recital of Wilbye's madrigals sung by the English Opera Group in the Tudor Brandeston Hall, or of listening to ad hoc 'Music on the Meare' at Thorpeness. These smaller, more informal events gave way to concerts where there were no longer problems of transport to remote churches or worries over seating arrangements. With the concert hall and its excellent acoustic came new possibilities for expansion: the first festival in which it was used lasted twenty-four days, and included ten opera performances and fifty other events. There were also casualties. Setting aside the unhelpful criticism that the festival was no longer the intimate 'family affair' that it used to be, with the extra work-load it was not possible for the festival administration still to promote the highly successful 'Bach at Long Melford' weekends which had run annually in September since 1962.

1968 saw the addition of a new Artistic Director, Philip Ledger, to the existing trio of Britten, Pears and Holst for an even more ambitious festival of twenty-three days with eleven opera performances (including Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy* in the Jubilee Hall). Then, in the following year, disaster struck as fire gutted the Maltings Concert Hall on the first day of the festival. Britten, ever practical, immediately began to discuss contingency plans for the remaining concerts and vowed publicly that the hall should be rebuilt – a relatively easy task in that the basic plan had already been approved and most of the walls survived intact. The problem of fund-raising proved less straightforward, however. As the building had been comprehensively insured it was assumed that no further funds were needed, yet Britten wanted to take the opportunity to correct certain drawbacks which, as with any new building, had become apparent only through use.

Besides venue, the other most important aspect responsible for shaping the course of the Aldeburgh Festival was Britten's collaboration with other artists. Its effect can most readily be traced through the succession of first performances of works inspired by these musicians: *Lachrymae* (1950) written for the violist William Primrose, the *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid* for oboist Joy Boughton (premiered on Thorpeness Meare in 1951), *Songs from the Chinese* (1958) and *Nocturnal after John Dowland* (1964) for guitarist Julian Bream, *Sonata in C* (1961)



and the first two Suites for cello (1965 and 1968) for Rostropovich, *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* (1965) for Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, *Gemini Variations* (1965) for the Hungarian Jeney twins, *The Golden Vanity* (1967) for the Vienna Boys' Choir, the Suite for Harp (1969) for Osian Ellis and *Canticle IV: Journey of the Magi* (1971) for Pears, James Bowman and John Shirley-Quirk. As well as Pears, who was in any case central to Britten's creativity, among the most important of these friendships were those with Bream, Ellis and Rostropovich. Bream and later the harpist Osian Ellis<sup>21</sup> both accompanied Pears and were the inspiration for folksong arrangements by Britten; in addition, the Julian Bream Consort frequently performed at the festival. George Malcolm was another mainstay, devising and conducting concert programmes and accompanying singers or instrumentalists. Above all, the Russian connection – Britten's friendship with Mstislav Rostropovich, his wife Galina Vishnevskaya and with Sviatoslav Richter – had a strong bearing on the character of the Aldeburgh Festival in the 1960s. With boundless enthusiasm Rostropovich immersed himself in the festival and all it had to offer, to the extent that after Britten's death he was willing to continue his support by becoming an Artistic Director in 1978.

By the time of the restoration of the improved Snape Maltings Concert Hall in 1970, the Aldeburgh Festival had been moulded to a form which, broadly speaking, corresponds with that of today. Britten's achievement in establishing an internationally renowned festival, with its own concert hall, is clear; what is perhaps not so obvious is his relationship with the festival – the interaction between composer, performer and public. To return briefly to the founding of the festival, there was certainly more to the idea than merely cutting the cost of touring with the English Opera Group. From the early post-war years onwards there was a gradual but steady stream of festivals being set up throughout Britain, of which that in Edinburgh, founded in 1947, was the first and largest. Peter Diamand, secretary to the Holland Festival from 1947 until 1965 when he joined the Edinburgh Festival, referred to this as part of a 'healing process' by which the country could begin to make amends for the cultural starvation of the war years.<sup>22</sup> Britten had a strong sense of duty, so there may have been a sense in which he wanted to be actively involved in this resurgence. Above all, though, Britten *enjoyed* the idea of a festival, so much so that in 1964 he described it as 'the musical project I have most at heart'. While he had no need to provide a platform for his own work – his growing reputation was sufficient to ensure performances elsewhere – he threw himself wholeheartedly into making the venture a success,<sup>23</sup> ultimately by providing a steady supply of new works to be premiered at the festival. This was vital both for his creative development and for the festival: Britten

would write works for specific performers to tempt them to Aldeburgh, where they might take part in a number of concerts; the festival would in turn benefit from the attraction of a new piece and the presence of its eminent dedicatee.

As Britten's life became increasingly crowded with commissions and concert engagements it required careful planning to avoid clashes with the festival period. The winter was kept largely free for work on new compositions but rehearsal schedules for the festival could be worked out as early as January to save time later. Other work, such as programme-note writing, planning programmes, booking artists and marking-up scores could also be done in advance. Inevitably, though, as each festival approached time became scarce and last-minute crises, such as Rostropovich's illness in 1963, brought increased pressure. Rehearsal time was at a premium, so programmes would feature works which were already being prepared for a recording. Importantly the new concert hall, for which Britten had striven so hard, allowed him to put on or perform any work of his choosing and removed the necessity of travelling to London for recording sessions.

Imogen Holst recollected that the Aldeburgh Festival was essential in allowing Britten the opportunity to conduct and so learn the technique of conducting.<sup>24</sup> It was largely due to the experience gained during the late 1940s and 1950s that Britten was able to produce such a legacy of fine recordings with the English Chamber Orchestra during the 1960s and 1970s, as for example his superb interpretation of Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* or his own *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In these recordings it is Britten's ability to view the work from a composer's point of view which gives them that special quality – the taut dramatic pacing of an opera or the structural insight into a symphony – and while Britten may not have felt confident of his conducting technique there is no doubt that he communicated clearly with his orchestras, drawing from them unforgettable performances.<sup>25</sup>

After Britten's death, Pears continued as an Artistic Director, joined by Rostropovich, Ledger, Colin Graham, and Stuart Bedford; and, as was inevitable, the character of the festival gradually began to change. These days it is rare to hear the Bach cantatas or Mozart symphonies of the earlier festivals, but this is as much due to the modern authenticity movement as the festival administration: it no longer seems acceptable to play such works without period instruments or to include them in programmes with music from different periods. Innovations have included the performance of Japanese and Thai music, acknowledging the importance of Eastern influences in Britten's music. As early as the 1973 Festival, Colin Graham had given a lecture on 'The Classical Theatre of Japan', and

in the evening a Japanese cast had performed two Nō plays (*Sumidagawa* and *Funa Benkei*) in the Snape Maltings. After 1976, the oriental connection was kept alive by Donald Mitchell, who devised a weekend of Thai music and dance at Snape in October 1977 and – as Guest Artistic Director – based a series of concerts, lectures and Japanese drama around two performances of *Curlew River* as part of the 1991 Festival. Yet the Aldeburgh Festival retains its identity. Britten's works are at its heart, and even now there are still works – early incidental music or unpublished songs – being heard for the first time in concert performance.<sup>26</sup> Recent Artistic Directors, Oliver Knussen and Stuart Bedford (with Colin Matthews as a close associate), have ensured that a good deal of contemporary music is heard as well as unusual or rarely performed works, though it should not be forgotten that this was also the case in Britten's time.

New generations are bringing fresh vitality to the festival. The Britten–Pears School for Advanced Musical Studies at Snape, established through the vision of Britten and Pears, has developed from a study weekend of lectures and masterclasses for singers in 1972 into a flourishing training centre, attracting high-calibre students from throughout the world and offering tuition by leading musicians. There is a well-established tradition of concert-giving by young musicians at the Maltings, and the Britten–Pears School's opera productions and Britten–Pears Chamber Orchestra's programmes are among the best-supported events in the Festival. The Hesse Student scheme is another valuable way in which young people can participate in the musical life of Aldeburgh. Initiated in 1959 by Margaret, Princess of Hesse and the Rhine, a bursary enables students to attend festival events in return for their help with selling programmes, arranging chairs or running errands. A thriving Education Department at the Aldeburgh Foundation involves schoolchildren in performances (of works such as *Noye's Fludde* and *Saint Nicolas*) during the festival, and in creative workshops throughout the year. Britten's encouragement of younger composers (among those to receive his advice were Oliver Knussen, Robert Saxton, Jonathan Harvey and Alexander Goehr) is continued in the regular feature of a showcase concert in the Jubilee Hall,<sup>27</sup> in two composition awards<sup>28</sup> and in the recent inclusion of a composition course at the Britten–Pears School.

Not least of all, Britten's heritage is safeguarded by the unique archive at the Britten–Pears Library, which has at its centre the corpus of Britten's manuscripts. These were preserved as an entity after Britten's death by a unique arrangement in which manuscripts belonging to the national collection at the British Library were deposited on permanent loan at The Red House, his home in Aldeburgh. The archive also contains an extensive

collection of correspondence, photographs, sound recordings and printed ephemera, constituting a research institute which attracts interest from scholars worldwide.

The musical life that has grown up around Aldeburgh bears witness to Britten's strong commitment to a local community. The Aldeburgh Festival brought him into contact with his performers and public, the two other corners of that 'holy triangle',<sup>29</sup> and helped him to flourish creatively; today it remains an international event when performers, composers and audience alike can be refreshed both artistically and intellectually – and be sure of learning something new.