



## Britten, Benjamin (1913-1976)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Benjamin Britten was the most prominent and highly honored British composer of the twentieth century, perhaps the most acclaimed of his countrymen in classical music since Henry Purcell in the seventeenth century. Such recognition is not, however, without considerable irony; many of Britten's greatest works were inspired by his long-time personal and professional relationship with his lover, tenor Peter Pears, and created within the context of a society in which homosexual acts were criminal.

Edward Benjamin Britten (later Baron Britten of Aldeburgh) was born November 22, 1913, in Lowestoft, Suffolk. Although his boyhood was by all accounts ordinary, he showed a prodigious aptitude for music and began playing the piano and composing pieces while still a small child.

He had already completed a number of works when, at age thirteen, he presented them to composer Frank Bridge, whom he met at a local concert performance. Bridge was suitably impressed by Britten's work to accept the boy as a private student. As a childless couple, Bridge and his wife came to regard Britten as a sort of adopted son, and one of the young composer's early notable works, *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* (1937), is a tribute to his mentor.

In 1930, Britten entered the Royal College of Music, where he studied composition and piano. When the RCM denied him permission to study with Alban Berg in Vienna, he left without completing a degree. In the same year, his choral work *A Boy Was Born* was chosen for a performance by the BBC singers. It was on this occasion that he first met, albeit briefly, Peter Pears, a member at that time of this ensemble.

The two were not actually acquainted until 1936, but within the following year they began a personal and professional collaboration that would endure for nearly forty years until Britten's death. A considerable number of Britten's subsequent works feature the tenor voice and were written with Pears as the intended interpreter.

During the mid- to late-1930s Britten began writing music for stage and film, and he also worked collaboratively with W. H. Auden, whose poems he set to music in two song cycles, *Our Hunting Fathers* (1936) and *On This Island* (1937).

In May 1939, as World War II became inevitable, Britten and Pears left England, following fellow pacifists Auden and Christopher Isherwood to the United States, which was still officially a neutral nation. They settled first in New York, where Auden maintained a bohemian ménage, and subsequently in Southern California.

While in New York, Britten collaborated with Auden on *Paul Bunyan* (1941), an operetta based on the American folklore character. The sojourn in America saw the composition of two song cycles for tenor voice that were settings of works by homosexual poets, Arthur Rimbaud's *Les illuminations* (for voice and strings, 1939) and *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* (for tenor and piano, 1940), as well as *Sinfonia da Requiem* (1940), in memory of the composer's parents.

While in California in 1941, Britten read E. M. Forster's essay about British poet George Crabbe whose lengthy verse narrative *The Borough* (1810) detailed the hardships of life in a small fishing port. Crabbe, like Britten, was a native of Suffolk. One of the episodes in *The Borough* relates the misfortunes of a visionary social outcast, a fisherman named Peter Grimes who is accused of causing the deaths of two young apprentices, a matter with significant homoerotic undertones. The story served as the inspiration for Britten's first full-scale opera.

In 1942, after the United States had entered the war, Britten and Pears returned to Britain, working on *Peter Grimes* during their passage across the war-ravaged North Atlantic. They declared themselves conscientious objectors upon their return, a stand that entailed considerable social ostracism during the war years.

*Peter Grimes* was first performed on June 7, 1945 by Sadler's Wells Opera Company, London, with Pears in the title role. The following year marked its American premiere at the Tanglewood Music Festival, where it was conducted by the young Leonard Bernstein.

In the wake of *Peter Grimes*, opera became the genre with which Britten was most closely associated, and virtually all his operas featured Pears either in the lead or in a secondary role.

*Albert Herring* (1947), in which Pears created the role of the sexually repressed title character, was the first opera produced by the English Opera Group, a company Britten and Pears founded. Britten and Pears settled permanently in Aldeburgh, the Suffolk fishing village in which *Peter Grimes* was set, in 1948, the same year they established the annual Aldeburgh Festival, which continues to the present day.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, although he was engaged in administration of the festival, Britten nonetheless continued to compose prodigiously and was simultaneously active as conductor, with a varied repertory of his own works as well as those of other composers.

The opera *Billy Budd*, with libretto by E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier after Herman Melville's story, premiered at Covent Garden, London, in December 1951. The opera, which is unique inasmuch as it has an all-male cast, presents a story, however circumspect, of shipboard homosexual panic.

Attracted to the handsome Billy, the villainous master-at-arms Claggart enacts his desires by systematically attempting to destroy the young sailor. After Billy accidentally kills his nemesis, he is hanged for his murder, despite the affection that Captain Vere, the ship's commander, and the other sailors feel for the young man.

Because the slightly-built Pears lacked the physique to play the title role, the character Billy was written (implausibly, according to some critics) for baritone voice, and the part of Captain Vere, which was assigned to Pears, was made more prominent than it was in Melville's text.

Britten's next opera, *Gloriana* (1953) was written for the celebrations on the occasion of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Its libretto was by William Plomer, after Lytton Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex*. Britten was consequently awarded the title of Companion of Honour, but the opera did not prove a critical success.

Plomer, however, continued to collaborate with Britten, and provided the libretti for the composer's three "Parables for Church Performance," *Curlew River* (1964), *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966), and *The Prodigal Son* (1968).

Britten also composed two operas based on works by Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) and *Owen Wingrave* (1970), and also set William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* (1960) as an opera.

During this highly productive period, Britten composed a number of major non-operatic works as well. As befits Britten's pacifist beliefs, his *War Requiem*, arguably his greatest choral work, combines elements of the traditional Latin mass with passages from the anti-war poetry of Wilfred Owen. This moving piece was first performed in 1962, at the dedication of the new Coventry Cathedral, built on the site of the venerable medieval edifice that was completely destroyed by a German air raid in 1940.

Also notable is the *Symphony in D Major for Cello and Orchestra* (1963), which he wrote for his friend, Russian cellist and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich.

Britten was appointed to the Order of Merit by Queen Elizabeth in 1965.

Britten's last great operatic triumph was *Death in Venice* (1973), based on Thomas Mann's novella. The work delineates the decline of the middle-aged critic Aschenbach (a role created by Pears) as he becomes increasingly obsessed with Tadzio, a young boy he loves from afar.

Earlier in 1973, Britten had undergone open-heart surgery to replace a defective cardiac valve. The surgery left him an invalid for the remainder of his life, yet he recovered sufficiently to attend the first performance of his final opera.

In 1976, Britten was awarded a life peerage by the Queen and given the title Baron Britten of Aldeburgh. His poor health made it impossible for him ever to take his seat in the House of Lords. He died of heart failure on December 4, 1976, in the arms of Peter Pears, at their home in Aldeburgh.

Britten left an extensive body of compositions comprising operas, choral works, symphonies, song cycles, concerti for piano and violin, chamber music, and numerous miscellaneous pieces.

Among the better known are the *Simple Symphony* (1925), *Hymn to St. Cecilia* (1942), *Serenade* (for tenor, horn, and strings, 1943), and *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1945). His last major work, *Phaedra*, a song cycle composed for contralto Dame Janet Baker, had its first performance shortly before his death.

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