



## Pears, Peter (1910-1986)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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British tenor Sir Peter Neville Luard Pears was a highly respected vocalist in opera as well as lieder and choral music whose long and productive career spanned nearly half a century. For forty years he was the life partner of composer Benjamin Britten, who wrote the leading roles in many of his operas and a number of song cycles with Pears as their intended interpreter.

Their partnership is noteworthy not only for the vast body of music and recordings it produced, but also for the extent to which homosexual subjects figured in their work.

Pears was born in Farnham, Surrey, on June 22, 1910 and studied organ at Hertford College, Oxford. From 1933 to 1934, he attended the Royal College of Music as a voice student, and while there he joined the BBC Singers, with whom he remained until 1938. It was as a member of the BBC Singers that he met Britten in 1936; within the year their relationship and artistic collaboration had begun.

In 1939, as World War II began, Britten and Pears, both of whom declared themselves conscientious objectors, left England for the United States. While there, Britten composed the song cycles *Les Illuminations* (1939), a setting of poems by Arthur Rimbaud; and *Michelangelo Sonnets* (1942), a setting of homoerotic verse by the Renaissance artist. These works were premiered after Britten and Pears returned to England in 1942.

In the same year Pears made his debut as an operatic singer as Hoffmann in a London production of Offenbach's *Les contes d'Hoffmann*. His popularity grew, and in 1943, he became a leading lyric tenor of the Sadler's Wells Opera, where he developed an extensive repertoire, including the roles of Almaviva in Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, Rodolfo in Puccini's *La Bohème*, the Duke in Verdi's *Rigoletto*, Tamino in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, and Ferrando in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*.

Pears's greatest triumph in this company, however, was his creation of the title role of the tortured and possibly homosexual outcast in Britten's *Peter Grimes* (1945).

In 1946, Pears co-founded the English Opera Group with Britten. Within a year the company--and the couple--found a home in Aldeburgh, a small fishing town in Suffolk, where they would subsequently found the Aldeburgh Festival and, in 1972, the Britten-Pears School for the training of young musicians.

Over the next three decades, Pears created many operatic roles that Britten wrote for him, including the title role in *Albert Herring* (1947), Captain Vere in *Billy Budd* (1951), Essex in *Gloriana* (1953), Peter Quint in *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), Flute in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), the Madwoman in *Curlew River* (1964), Nebuchadnezzar in *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966), the Tempter in *The Prodigal Son* (1968), Sir Philip Wingrave in *Owen Wingrave* (1971), and Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* (1973).

Pears's career after 1946 was not exclusively devoted to Britten's music, however. From 1948 onward, he sang many roles at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and was noted for his performances of songs and

choral music by such diverse composers as Bach, Schütz, Purcell, Handel, Mahler, Schubert, and Schumann.

In 1974, Pears made a much-belated debut at the Metropolitan Opera Company, New York, in the first American performance of *Death in Venice*.

Even after Britten's death in 1976, Pears continued his singing career until nearly the age of seventy. He spent the remainder of his life teaching and administering the Britten-Pears School.

Pears was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1977, and died in Aldeburgh on April 3, 1986. He is buried there, next to Britten.

### **Bibliography**

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### **About the Author**

**Patricia Juliana Smith** is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University. With Corinne Blackmer, she has edited a collection of essays, *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*. She is also author of *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction* and editor of *The Queer Sixties* and *The Gay and Lesbian Book of Quotations*. She serves on the editorial advisory board of [www.glbtc.com](http://www.glbtc.com).