

EDITED BY MARK BOSTRIDGE  
INTRODUCED BY NICHOLAS KENYON



BRITTEN'S  
CENTURY

CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Contributors include  
Alan Bennett, Michael Berkeley,  
Ian Bostridge, Edward Gardner,  
Stephen Hough and Blake Morrison



BLOOMSBURY

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Benjamin Britten

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B L O O M S B U R Y  
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Information concerning the worldwide celebrations of the Centenary of Britten's birth in 2013 may be found on the Foundation's website: [www.britten100.org/home](http://www.britten100.org/home).

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M. A. B.





# *Introduction*

## The Outsider and the Insider

Nicholas Kenyon

I never knew Benjamin Britten. I never met him, I never saw him conduct or perform live. Yes, I sang his music, and loved it; yes, I heard his music, and marvelled, but I had no contact at all with him as a person. This would be supremely unimportant, were it not for the turmoil of claimed closeness and controversial relationships (or non-relationships) which lie at the heart of so much testimony about him. Britten is one of those supreme creative figures who exert a quasi-magical personal attraction: as Michael Tippett said when he died, ‘I think that all of us who were close to Ben had for him something dangerously close to love.’ Through all the elements of his life – his writings, his interviews, his conducting, his car-driving, his walking on the beach, his festival planning and his piano-playing – you sense a magnetic personality which affected all those who came into contact with him. As a result, throughout his life and after, people have wanted to own him. Colin Matthews recalls how so many recollections of Britten are ‘burnished’ through being repeated constantly over time – which may be the fate of any great figure, but this goes further. In another context (writing about Mozart) Maynard Solomon has described biography as ‘a contest for possession’, and how true that is in the case of Britten. There is something equally Mozartian in the way we feel we can touch Britten the man through the vividness of his communication, both musical and verbal; but how much was deliberately unrevealed, and in the end repressed?

As Paul Kildea’s opening chapter vividly describes, reflecting on the biographies that have preceded his own, Britten’s reputation has

been continuously contested – by his executors, his ‘corpses’, his colleagues, his performers, by modernists and anti-modernists, and more recently by gay studies. It is entirely natural that those who felt most touched and transformed by contact with the composer should argue the case for their view of him. But a century after his birth, we perhaps need to stand back. This book assembles a collection of testimonies, ranging from those who worked most closely with Britten to those who in a newer generation are reacting to his music, and those who offer new perspectives on his work. Together they offer a certainly partial but hopefully stimulating perspective on the creative years of Britten’s century.

When, at the BBC Proms in 1997, we invited Philip Brett to give a broadcast lecture as part of a Britten weekend (or as he put it, typically apologizing for being too establishment, ‘appearing under the auspices of *the* Proms Lecture funded by *the* BBC’) it was already over two decades into his ground-breaking writing on the influence of Britten’s sexuality on his work. He had started from where Hans Keller had begun, in showing the impact of Britten’s homosexuality on *Peter Grimes* (an ‘enormous creative advantage’, Keller had called it), but developing this thought to articulate a much broader concept of Britten’s ‘difference’. Though the influence of Britten’s sexuality had been widely debated in the decades after his death, the line of argument that Brett advanced was not even by then a comfortable one for some who believed that Britten’s homosexuality was essentially peripheral to his artistic achievement. Brett argued that it was central, and shortly after, his view of Britten was accepted into the citadel of recognized musicology, *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, in the form of a new entry on the composer. That fine article (oddly marred by a gender misprint in its opening section!) should have led, as Kildea explains, to a new full-length biography that was cut short by Brett’s own untimely death.

A key figure in maintaining and interpreting the reputation of Britten after his death has been his executor, chronicler, publisher and friend Donald Mitchell. In retrospect it seems entirely right and generous that, as the single person to whom we owe most for our detailed knowledge of and understanding of Britten’s life, Mitchell in the end backed away from the prospect of writing a full biography of the composer. He embraced and promoted the most comprehensive documentation, but in spite of Britten’s request to him, left an overall re-interpretation to others. Mitchell initially

reacted strongly against Humphrey Carpenter's freshly re-thought and lively biography (1992), which, as Kildea points out, used a second-hand report of an early traumatic incident as the basis on which to construct an entire theory of Britten's personality. Brett tried to point out (in a review of the earlier volumes of Britten letters) that Mitchell, who 'has a great deal invested in Britten's stature', should see the question of Britten's homosexuality not as primarily a sexual issue but as an issue with 'broader cultural and societal implications'. This was a key to understanding the composer, which led us to the heart of one issue which recurs through this book of essays: was Britten an insider or an outsider? Did he consider himself to be one or the other, yearning to be accepted into the middle classes while retaining a lifestyle that was reviled by many of that class, or maintaining an external pose while accepting the trappings of the establishment? Did he attempt to influence or construct his identity, or did he simply create his music and let others decide?

Brett's seminal lecture, reprinted here in the spoken form in which he gave it, and his subsequent *Grove* article, contain one of the most thought-provoking sentences that has been written about the composer, expressed with typically concise eloquence: '*Britten's artistic effort was an attempt to disrupt the centre that it occupied with the marginality it expressed.*' This is certainly not a formulation that the composer would have recognised, with his repeated claims to be of use to people, to serve the community. 'It is quite a good thing to please people', he said, and thus proposed a rather cosier view of his place in society. The broad concept of 'difference' is one that Brett articulated in his other primary area of study, that of early music. He wrote a generation ago that the historical performance movement 'has given us a sense of difference, a sense that by exercising our imaginations we may, instead of reinforcing our own sense of ourselves by assimilating works unthinkingly to our mode of performing and perceiving, learn to know what something different might mean and how we might ultimately delight in it.' That has a very close resonance with the story of Britten, because what has happened since it was written is that Britten's music (just like the performance practices of the early music movement), having started as a resolutely non-central, critical feature of our musical life, has actually become central to it. As a result, in both areas, the centre has moved.

Perhaps a quarter of a century on from Brett's original lecture, we could reformulate that thought just slightly and say that Britten *transformed the centre that he came to occupy with the marginality which was so productive for him*: trying to capture the sense that Britten's experience as an outsider (and let us not forget, for much of his life an illegal outsider), was a crucial and positive part of his creative stimulus. He did not noisily disrupt the centre (as for instance, during this period of classical music, it could be argued that first the modernists and then the minimalists did); he worked from within to gain increasing acceptance, so that by the time of the *War Requiem* he was seen as encapsulating a national mood and a broad appeal. He was an initially awkward social outsider, who sought middle-class acceptability and warm contact with royalty, as long as it did not restrict his creative freedom. So Britten's place at the centre of our musical life was earned through hugely increasing and broadening the range of what was accepted at that centre, without betraying the source and inspiration of that in his own difference. That can be seen too in Britten's avoidance of conventional forms in his output: there is no long string of symphonies or concertos in his output, and even 'opera' was reinvented in the church parables. Instead he created new forms for young people's music-making, highly individual scorings, unusual and innovative approaches to text. It is one of many paradoxes that Britten did not 'compromise' in order to reach people; he never wrote down to his audience. Yet on the other hand his music does crave to be accepted through what Brett called its 'desperately inviting surface'.

It is revealing that in his diaries, now scrupulously selected and edited by John Evans (*Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten 1928–1938*, Faber), Britten is so fascinated by and interested in performance. You might expect a composer to be interested above all in works: new pieces, rival composers, classic discoveries, scores to be explored – and the young Britten does comment repeatedly on these from *The Rite of Spring* on. His discovery of Mahler can be traced to radio listening in this period. But in his fascinating accounts of what he heard on the radio, scarcely an entry passes without a comment on whether or not the music he heard was well performed. 'I am v disappointed with orchestra; marvellous playing but ensemble bad' ... 'bad slips on part of orch.' ... 'played with fire & spirit but rather inaccurate' (1931)... the performance was only a Kensington drawing room

apology for the wild, sensuous & beautiful music'.... 'Performance was scandalous. Super refinement – without style and taste – string playing as dead as nails' (1935). Throughout his life the composer continued to be obsessive about performance, especially how his own works were to be performed – Edward Gardner is fascinating here on the daunting degree of detail in Britten's performance indications, in which he tries to specify so closely what he means as to potentially leave the performer too little scope for freedom.

The importance that Britten gave to how music, his own and others, actually sounded, and his wish to control it, provides one key motivation for why he devoted so much time and effort to the major and demanding undertaking of the Aldeburgh Festival. The mythic origins of the Festival lie in Peter Pears's oft-quoted line 'Why not make our own festival? A modest festival with a few concerts given by friends.' But that is only half the story: given by friends, *for* friends: the essential appeal was to those who shared the interests and enthusiasms of Britten and Pears. To what extent these overlapped with the needs and tastes of the local community is at the very least an open question. Unlike some composers who are relatively unconcerned about how their works are treated once they have been written, Britten wanted as much creative control as possible over how his works were performed by the musicians he chose, in the circumstances he wanted, and thus to ensure that they were well received by an audience that was as sympathetic and understanding as possible. The experience of collaborating with Glyndebourne on *Lucretia* had not been a happy one, and the later ghastly experience of Covent Garden premiering *Gloriana* for the Coronation, vividly recalled by Lord Harewood, was a watershed in Britten's attitude to the wider world. He wanted his work to travel around the world, but he wanted to be sure it was created in the way he conceived it.

Yes, Britten wanted his music to be useful to people, but like most great creative artists, he wanted to be useful to people *on his own terms*. Performers and administrators served his ends – hence they came and went, even those with long and devoted service, with alarming unceremoniousness, in one day and out the next. (Even as key a performer as Janet Baker reveals in her account here that she deliberately did not 'get too close to the flame'.) 'A few friends' were not beyond being sacrificed by Britten to the needs of the work in hand. That was unavoidable if the work came first, and it always did. Later on, that original Pears thought about the Festival

would be reimagined and reformulated as a key part of the Britten persona, both in his famous Aspen Award speech (1964) and his acceptance of the freedom of the Borough of Aldeburgh (1962). 'I believe, you see, that an artist should be part of his community, should work for it, with it and be used by it.' But to characterize the key purpose of the Festival as a service to the community is a little disingenuous. If the community liked it, so much the better, but it was at root a service to the performance of his own music (and the music he loved) in the best way possible. We should probably not take as too typical the witnesses Tony Palmer captured for his fine 1967 film *Benjamin Britten and His Festival*, but they do stick in the mind: the first rather tweedy, the second a fisherman on the beach giving their reactions to local involvement in the Festival: 'Well there's a hard core, they just go away...one goes to Aberdeen, he reckons that's far enough, another one who's reputed to get a case of whisky, lock the door and doesn't answer it till it's all finished.' 'Benjamin Britten is a very nice man, he'll stop on the beach and have a word with you. But it'd be a laugh on the beach if I tell the fishermen I've been to the opera...'

We should probably take as a truer articulation of Britten's purpose the more nuanced line he took with Lord Harewood in a 1960 radio interview: 'There are enough people who like the things that we like.' He refers to the character and size of the buildings: 'the shape of the festival... is very much dictated by the town itself, the buildings, the size of those buildings, and the quality of those buildings.' Then in the Aspen speech this is developed: 'I believe in roots, in associations, in backgrounds, in personal relationships...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.' That is very deftly put: the roots and associations are to do with his, Britten's, relationship to the place, and the result is for 'anyone who cares...to listen.' Rather, like many great impresarios, Britten led taste through his own decisive views and his own superb performances.

I do not mean to imply that the Aldeburgh Festival has been anything but a tremendous artistic achievement for most of its years, and a great force for musical good. Its agenda links directly into thinking about Britten's 'difference'. It was outside the centre of musical life when it was founded, and could thus be a perfect example of the word Kenneth Clark invented, a 'micropolitan' culture, at one remove from and in tacit criticism of what was going

on in the metropolitan mainstream. When the Aldeburgh Festival started, in London the post-war Proms were in the ascendant, with a populist agenda under Malcolm Sargent that became ever more pronounced in the 1950s with constant annual reiterations of Beethoven, Brahms and Tchaikovsky symphonies. By contrast, in the whole period up to Britten's death the Aldeburgh Festival did not include a single symphony by Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky or Sibelius – and not just because of the size of the Jubilee Hall (where the festival was based until the opening of Snape in 1967), since Britten did do Schubert and Mozart, and when he wanted to perform Mahler's *Fourth Symphony* he did so in Orford Church (see also my Hesse Memorial Lecture 2007 'Metropolitan, micropolitan, cosmopolitan', and Rosamund Strode, *Aldeburgh: Music of Forty Festivals*).

The Aldeburgh Festival became distinctive by building around Britten's works a shapely collection of marvellous music which both illuminated and contextualized his work and helped to reshape the concept of the Western canon: Purcell and Dowland songs, Mozart piano concertos, Bach cantatas, Schubert lieder, the series of medieval and renaissance music that Imogen Holst brought to Aldeburgh Church. Over the first forty festivals, there were about 132 works by Britten, 136 by Bach, 136 by Mozart, 138 by Schubert, 112 by Purcell: a highly characterized musical cosmos. Then there was other contemporary music, where the record is more ambiguous. In the early years there was innocuous new music by friends and colleagues, and later the Society for the Promotion of New Music brought music by Richard Rodney Bennett, Susan Bradshaw, Cornelius Cardew, Hugh Wood, Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle in their early days. Britten certainly encouraged its inclusion, though he tended not to involve himself in its performance, though Pears occasionally did. One of the main achievements of all this repertory was to enable us to understand Britten's own music better: a worthy but, again, a not unselfish aim.

This suggests another way of considering Britten's status as an insider or an outsider, and that is his position in relation to tradition. This is tellingly raised in one of the most sympathetic interviews he gave to Donald Mitchell in 1968, when Mitchell asked him whether he was burdened by the 'great burden of tradition behind you'. Britten replies 'I'm *supported* by it Donald, I couldn't be alone. I couldn't work alone. I can only work really because of the tradition that I am conscious of behind me. ...I feel



as close to Dowland, let's say...as I do to my youngest contemporary.' That view places Britten very close to T. S. Eliot, another key twentieth-century figure who consciously placed himself in a line of tradition, and viewed every new work that was written as modifying the picture of the past and future. But how interestingly Britten's way of expressing that place is characterized by his choice of composer. He said he cited Dowland just because Mitchell and he had just been discussing his music, but the example means that he was appealing to a very different tradition – dependent not on immediate predecessors like Elgar and Vaughan Williams but on distant ancestors like Purcell and Dowland, challenging many conventional notions of Englishness.

For Britten, belonging to a developing strand of tradition seems almost a moral position, but it does not need to be a continuously developing tradition which grows out of what immediately preceded it. In the same interview Britten identifies John Tavener as a composer who with 'many others like him, adore the past and build on the past', but he then criticizes in no uncertain terms (anonymously but identifiably) Harrison Birtwistle whose music-theatre piece *Punch and Judy* had been performed at Aldeburgh at the time Britten had been performing Mozart. 'I know it was probably because of the tightness of time, and the absorption in his own job, but it seemed to me very strange that he didn't want to go and see how Mozart solved *his* problems.' Birtwistle might well have acknowledged some different precursors to his tradition of music drama (probably not Mozart) but what is revealing here is that Britten's stated reason for not responding to Birtwistle's work is its lack of connection to tradition, not what it sounded like...

For those of us who listen to Birtwistle with as much engagement as we do to Britten, and to composers Britten could not feel close to like Beethoven and Brahms with as much enjoyment as to him, no such choice needs to be made. We can accept Britten as a unique voice in the music of the twentieth-century. The status of its supposed conservatism or its relation to the European mainstream is irrelevant. You would not need to hear more than the 16-year-old Britten's *Hymn to the Virgin*, or the later *Hymn to St Cecilia*, to know that it was produced by a genius, or equally to hear in the late works *Phaedra*, *A time there was...* and the Third Quartet a spare distillation and concentration of a lifetime's experience: an experience often concealed, hidden, but powering the most intense expressiveness in its bare shards of music. It is a common thread

lurking somewhere in our musical psyche, as true of Elgar as it was of Britten, that emotional repression in whatever form is an enormously creative force, and indeed articulating that rather than overcoming it is a key strand in musical 'Englishness'.

The periodically vicious assaults on Britten's reputation as a composer seem to be in abeyance; they coloured even his obituaries (which were described by Hans Keller in 1976 as 'a macabre orgy of the bankruptcy of music criticism'). On YouTube you can still come across the period-piece denunciation by the critic Tom Sutcliffe in the TV programme *J'Accuse* (1990): 'Much of what he wrote in the sycophantic closed world of Aldeburgh was academic and loveless, spiritually dead long before he was buried there in 1976', with much about his emotional pulse growing weaker. That has been comprehensively disproved by the increasing impact of his late works, especially *Death in Venice*. Then there has been the new attack from the unexpected source of a former artistic director of the Aldeburgh Festival, the composer Thomas Adès, in several sustained pages of vitriol in interview with Tom Service (*Thomas Adès: Full of Noises: Conversations with Tom Service*, Faber 2012) over-dramatizing the perfectly acceptable observation that Adès writes very different operas from those of Britten.

It is a final paradox that the start of Britten's Centenary year has been launched not with a productive debate about the worth of his music, but with an essentially fruitless (because unresolvable) argument about the cause of his death, arising out of Kildea's new biography. Does it really matter? We can reflect instead that in the 'test of time' that is conventionally applied to the greatness of artworks of the past, the public has spoken decisively and Britten's works are now thoroughly embedded in the musical and especially the operatic repertory. This has certainly been helped by the fact that the musical world has moved away from the extremes of the post-war era to a more inclusive stance, but it is still too simplistic to say that Britten's instinct for success put him on some 'winning side'. By sticking to its principles, by charting a single line of beauty, his work has demonstrated an undeniable integrity. In the Centenary year there will be an extraordinary range of worldwide performances, and through his exceptionally well-managed legacy, a reassertion of his central, humane place as one of the greatest composers this country has produced.

January 2013



# PART ONE

## BRITTEN – THE MAN

