

BENJAMIN BRITTEN: TRIBUTES AND MEMORIES

A personal letter from the young Austrian composer H. K. Gruber, dated 5 December 1976 and addressed to Mr. R. A. Fell, Managing Director of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd., is reproduced here with the author's permission. It became the starting-point for our collection of informal tributes.

YESTERDAY we heard the bad news about Benjamin Britten's death. I want to say some words about him to you, and not only because he is one of the greatest treasures of England & Boosey & Hawkes. No, there is a general reason to consider when we are thinking of Britten. This was my first thought when I heard the news: he was a member of a generation for whom the top principle was to be serious when working with musical material. As Schönberg said: 'Honesty in handicraft' ('Redlichkeit im Handwerk'). While for some composers of a younger generation a top principle seems to be to find a new bluff to dupe the audience, making a kind of show-off-music. Surrounded with such show-off-composers it was always a consolation to know that people like Britten are still working.

But now the new situation makes me solicitous & I am full of reasons to be sad together with you & the publishers.

H. K. Gruber

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SOME years ago TEMPO required examples of Ben's manuscript sketches for the *War Requiem*. As David Adams's production assistant I made the necessary approach to Aldeburgh.

Shortly afterwards the composer made what I believe was his last visit to the Regent Street offices of B & H, bringing with him the beautifully written pencil sketches of part of *War Requiem*, in particular—as I remember, the Sanctus.

He brought them to me personally, he said, because he wanted to explain that they hadn't been specially written out for reproduction, as people might otherwise think. 'I'm afraid,' he said apologetically, 'that is how I wrote them down at the time'.

This is just another instance of Britten's remarkable humility about his own professionalism on the one hand, and his acute sensitivity to others' opinions on the other.

Martin Hall

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IN 1963 Richard Rodney Bennett, Malcolm Williamson and myself were invited by the MacNaghten Concerts to write a composite work to honour Britten's 50th birthday. This was the only occasion I met Ben for any length of time, and naturally I remember the occasion with some vividness. He seemed to be genuinely touched by our joint tribute to him, and made a charming and gracious speech of thanks which contained many deprecatory remarks about himself and his own works. He referred to himself (if I remember correctly) as 'ancient' and his works as 'old things that I have written'. I was astonished by his modesty and charm, both of which were borne out later in the evening when I had the opportunity to talk to him. As I was at that time writing my first opera the subject of opera-composition in general was touched on. I mentioned how much I admired *Peter Grimes* (though he must surely have been more than a little tired of hearing of such admiration by then). His reply took me aback: 'But Nicholas, it's full of howlers!'

Although I had not the courage to ask him, I assume he was referring to the libretto; but with his standard of self-criticism it occurred to me later he could well have meant the music—inconceivable though this might be to anybody who did not write that great work. (Eric Crozier once described to me the writing of this libretto in wartime London. Britten, Montagu Slater and he would meet in a teashop—near the British Museum, I think—over a period of about two years to discuss the work's progress. The curious combination of wartime brutality and teashop gentility was obviously a fertile breeding-ground of ideas. That libretto still seems to me an extraordinary achievement when one bears in mind the almost complete absence of anything in English for Britten/Slater/Crozier to build on—a few howlers notwithstanding.). Ben kindly enquired whether my own work was going well, and I was able to tell him it was, at that particular moment. 'Good!' he said, 'get as much done now as you can, because it gets much, much more difficult as you grow older.' At the time this seemed an extraordinary confession, coming from someone who had quite recently produced *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the *War Requiem* and several smaller pieces in quick succession, and the rich flow of subsequent works would seem to make it even harder to believe in his case. But it only goes to show the struggle and hard work he must have had to sustain such an astonishing output.

After that occasion he wrote me a very charming letter in which he offered—'being a very old hand at opera writing, although I'm sure in a very different way from you' (!)—to give me any practical help he could in that most difficult of arts. Alas, for one reason or another it proved impossible to go and talk to him about it, but how much I would have benefited from his advice at the time.

As it was, all the advice I got from Ben was from studying his music, which I'm sure he would have agreed is almost certainly the best source. Leaving aside his music's content—insofar as that is possible—what do I, as a composer, most admire him for in a practical sense? In a creative artist of his stature and type certain qualities, such as clarity of thought and form, can be taken for granted, but among much else three things particularly come to mind. First, his setting

of the English language. His feeling for poetry (not only English) and the inflexions of language make him, I think, the greatest musical realizer of English, although certain works of previous eras have achieved a comparable fusion in their own terms (the solo parts in *Gerontius*, for example). Second, he is one of the 20th century's great orchestral composers, even though his output for orchestra alone is sadly limited to a few works. His orchestration has an individuality, incisiveness and integration with the musical material only achieved by the greatest composers. Third, I admire the predominance, the hegemony almost, of *line* in his music; that sense of a musical phrase or paragraph being dominated and hence defined by its most natural musical constituent.

Like all great artists Ben's work represents both a gift and a responsibility to those who follow him. In his case the gift is enormous: our responsibility is correspondingly the larger.

Nicholas Maw

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I ONLY met Mr. Britten twice, but I felt I knew him better than that would suggest. I remember, long before I met him, receiving telegrams of good wishes before important concerts I conducted with the children of Cirencester Grammar School (where I taught music for three years)—letters that reflected his interest in music in education, and encouraged me in my composition of music for young people.

When I applied for a Harkness award to enable me to study at Princeton, I took courage and asked Mr. Britten to act as referee, which he graciously did, still without knowing me personally. From America, I wrote to him about my studies and composition, and he replied, to my amazed delight, with long letters about his projects and composition. At last I met him, upon my return from America, at a party to celebrate his 50th birthday.

Our next and last meeting was at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1974, where I had been invited to conduct my *Hymn to St. Magnus* with the Fires of London. I knew he was ill, and not attending concerts, but was delighted to be called into the auditorium by Mr. Peter Pears during the interval to see him (by then the steps up to the green room were too much for him). Quite apart from it having obviously been a very considerable effort for him to attend the concert at all, I was deeply touched by his interest in, and appreciation of, my *Hymn*—which, like some of his own work, is much involved with sounds of the sea.

Recently, I wrote to him to say I was starting a music festival in Orkney, and received an appreciative and encouraging reply.

That was my last contact. I heard of his death when I was in America, at the end of a concert tour with the Fires. I was in the country, in Pennsylvania, and took a long walk in total silence through gently falling snow across a frozen lake, which corresponded exactly to the inexpressible sense of numbness at such a loss.

The world is colder and lonelier without the presence of our supreme creator of music.

Peter Maxwell Davies

I met Benjamin Britten only once, when, a teenager almost too shy to speak except in a gush, I screwed up my courage to approach him as he listened to a rehearsal in Dartington Hall, and asked him about his unpublished settings of Hopkins. It soon emerged that I was trying myself to do something with Hopkins, using enormous orchestral forces in an inept struggle to capture equally inept and enormous adolescent feelings. His advice of course was to be modest, practicable, to write what could be realized. But my joy at his kindness only made it more imperative to myself that I increase the noise and complication. Immediate gratification, however, was afforded by the purchase and consumption of the biggest available box of peppermint creams

—(Let us roll all
Our sweetness up into one ball)—

and a score of Mahler's Third; the Hopkins settings ground to a natural halt soon afterwards.

Later I learned to be supercilious about Britten's music. The simultaneous excitements of discovering Wagner's overwhelming and psychological profundity and Stravinsky's sublime self-objectivizing made an *Albert Herring* or even a *Billy Budd* seem childish and the 'public' manner of the *War Requiem* a betrayal of the authentic voice of the *Serenade*, the *Nocturne*, the *Winter Words*. All this culminated in an outburst of rejection, expressed with the vehement excess that ought to reveal that something is false, except that one enjoys it too much to see. Relished above all was a sense of superior understanding—a *knowingness* in fact ignorant of what was going on, namely that this access of insight was based upon his own.

Naturally it took some years for this to sort itself out, especially after the immediate pressure was removed. But as I gradually got to write the sort of music I had in mind, so I realized (even more slowly) that the violently rejected thing was precisely the thing closest to home. If one spends months on end in one's formative years listening to *The Turn of the Screw* and *Peter Grimes*, mixed up with the *Five Orchestral Pieces* and *Jeux*, the *Dream of Gerontius* and the dances from *The Midsummer Marriage*, the *Four Last Songs*, *Agon* and *Le Marteau sans Maître*, curious transformations will take place that won't allow one to lose any of the elements, whatever the vicissitudes of later taste. One gradually recognizes that one *is* what one assimilates; whether one likes it or not, and so a revulsion from love to hate won't make any difference to the constituents; and that since there is no choice—these accidental conjunctions are here to stay—one had better knuckle down and cultivate one's native soil, with a due sense of one's dependence on it for the sustenance of life.

Recognition of this leads to more straightforward acknowledgements, of an indebtedness and gratitude within the public domain to a composer who was also a great performer, a gatherer and disseminator of music in a unique sense (the best Schubert songs and Bach Cantatas I have ever heard); an 'impresario' of almost Wagnerian infallibility (the Festival, the Maltings, and a whole implicit range of taste and ethos); the inventor and consolidator of English opera and English song.

But above all I feel the private debt, to a composer whose intensely personal achievement nevertheless bears directly on the malaise of music at large—the flight to the extremes that leaves the centre empty. I wouldn't want to say that Britten's style is in itself central; but I think it can show the way better than any

other to a possible pulling-together. In particular the combination of lucidity, emptiness and tightness in the latter works, can reveal common ground between the most unexpected and unrelated sources. This music 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.

Robin Holloway

Benjamin Britten

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