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Introduction

Lucy Walker

In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* (1999), Mervyn Cooke remarks in some astonishment that, 'as the century draws to a close' there persists a noticeable strain of 'bigoted views' towards Britten, particularly with regard to his sexuality.¹ This trend, as his introduction then goes on to explore, serves mainly to distract from the remarkable breadth and scope of Britten's repertoire and also to imbue studies of his works, particularly the operas, with a very specific slant. The *Companion*, until now the most recent book of essays on Britten to be published, successfully counteracts such narrowness of perspective. Yet Cooke also recounts the history of 'Britten criticism', and we find that, although 'posterity, on the whole, continues to serve Britten well',² some writers have tended to throw a protective arm around the composer, shielding him from potential disapprobation; and even as recently as 1999 it appeared that certain elements of Britten studies required particular pleading. The result of this has been that, at times, negative critical readings of the composer's works or, more particularly, his life may have been blue-pencilled.

This collection was not specifically devised in opposition to previous Britten literature, or to draw direct comparisons with Cooke's collection. However, *Benjamin Britten: New Perspectives on his Life and Work* arrives exactly ten years after the *Companion*, and the intervening years have quite definitely witnessed a noticeable shift in perspective. For example, it is a feature of this new volume that while some of the 'controversial' elements of Britten's history are engaged with head-on – most notably his pacifism – they are not necessarily explained away or excused. Furthermore, a palpable objectivity towards the composer is in evidence here, and this is most likely due to the 'newness' of the contributors, most of whom are entering the world of Britten criticism for the first time.

These essays had their origin in papers presented at a Britten Study Day held at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in April 2008, and, although they have undergone considerable revisions since then, the spirit of the original study day is preserved in the order of the collection and in the freshness of the approach. The 'New' of the title draws attention to several elements. First,

some of the writers are not only new to Britten studies in terms of their publishing history but are publishing for the first time, having recently completed or reached a significant stage in Britten-related doctoral theses. Others are established scholars who are writing on Britten for the first time. Only a couple can be said to be 'Britten scholars', and thus the collection represents something of a break with the past in incorporating a mix of postgraduate writers and more experienced scholars in the same volume. Additionally, the collection reveals the extent to which Britten scholarship is reaching outside the confines of Anglo-American criticism.³

Secondly, *New Perspectives* represents a new type of structure. Previous volumes of Britten essays have been in the form of 'Companions',⁴ with the aim of achieving comprehensiveness where such a prolific composer was concerned – chapters on the early years, vocal music, orchestral music, operas, and pieces for children, etc. This group, on the other hand, was serendipitously formed from its origins in a conference that had no specific theme, other than to discuss Britten. As a result, the collection can be seen to represent the Britten 'Zeitgeist': a 'snapshot' of what researchers happened to be working on at the time of the call for papers.

One final element of 'newness' is that the original study day – and thus the book – was initiated by a new venture: the online Britten Thematic Catalogue, a collaborative research project between the Britten–Pears Foundation and the UEA.⁵ In itself, this is a hugely important and pioneering project that will make accessible for the first time the entire range of information regarding Britten's *œuvre* online, providing a model for other catalogues and extending the debate on the use of the internet as a tool for the capturing and dissemination of these resources. As some of the essays demonstrate, the project has also given rise to the exploration of a wide diversity of other ethical, cultural and psychological issues concerning the development of an artist and the responsibilities towards their legacy of those who come after them. I very much hope that the project will inspire further 'new perspectives' on Britten during its genesis over the next few years, and after the catalogue has been unveiled in completeness for the composer's centenary in 2013.

The collection follows, more or less, the pattern of the original study day. It begins with Colin Matthews' 'Going behind Britten's back' which outlines the ethical concerns that he – as Music Director of the BPF – must address when considering the publications of works that Britten may well have wished to suppress. In the context of the Britten Thematic Catalogue, which has to date catalogued over 700 works of the composer's unpublished juvenilia, this chapter will gain increasing relevance as Britten's 'bottom-drawer manuscripts'⁶ become fully documented, available to research, and attractive to publishers.

Some of the works may also be available to perform, which is the subject of Sharon Choa's 'Performing Early Britten'. Choa, who directed premières of several pieces of juvenilia during the Study Day, discusses these and other orchestral works by Britten from 1926–7, which could be described as 'turning points' in his early compositional career, and in particular which raise a variety of problems concerning the performance, and performance expectations, of Britten's early 'masterpieces.'

What follows is a group of essays concerning Britten's absorption of and expression in his works of various musical and non-musical influences, including the works of Shostakovich and Verdi, the poetry of Ovid, and the audio-visual phenomena of the cinema. Cameron Pyke's 'Shostakovich's Fourteenth Symphony: A Response to *War Requiem*?' outlines two significant, ostensibly very different works in the context of Britten's and Shostakovich's friendship and creative relationship. Pyke argues the case for a strong interconnectivity between symphony and requiem especially in relation to the chosen texts, the exegesis of the theme of death and the characteristic deployment of orchestral forces. Despite what amounts to almost a coyness in directly commenting on each others' work, Pyke reveals that Britten and Shostakovich demonstrated a long-distance and long-term mutual assimilation of musical and extra-musical *topoi*.

Assimilation is also the subject of George Caird's '*Six Metamorphoses after Ovid* and the Influence of Classical Mythology on Benjamin Britten'. In terms of mainstream critical literature on the subject the 1951 work for solo oboe has been somewhat neglected, as has, Caird suggests, the importance to Britten's *œuvre* of classical mythology. Britten had written for the oboe at different times in his life and for different individual players, but in this work – composed for Joy Boughton – Britten made use of the instrument to represent certain tropes in classical mythology, a subject which, as Caird proposes, is of as much significance to Britten's repertoire as liturgical or biblical texts.

David Crilly's 'Britten and the Cinematic Frame' discusses the influence of cinema on Britten, specifically the significant effect that working for the GPO Film Unit in the 1930s had on his compositional style. During this period of somewhat hectic activity, the composer was required not only to provide soundtracks but to 'integrate sound into the fabric of the visual dramatic narrative'.⁷ This practice, in such early collaborative films as *Coal Face* and *Night Mail*, argues Crilly, established in Britten's compositional technique a sophisticated manipulation of the visual and oral perspectives expressed by the multivalence of the 'cinematic frame'; and this he later made use of in his stage works, notably *The Turn of the Screw* and *Peter Grimes*.

Jane Brandon's chapter, 'Storms, Laughter and Madness: Verdian "Numbers"

and Generic Allusions in Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*', concludes this eclectic gathering of influences and allusions and also introduces the next group of chapters on Britten's operas. While Britten's admiration of Verdi has often been noted, Brandon's is the first study in any detail to examine how Verdi's operas, and Italian 'number operas' in general, influenced the genesis of Britten's operas as well as their structure, stagecraft and characterization. However, as Brandon points out, a study of Verdian manifestations in, for example, *Peter Grimes* 'often reveals more about Britten's innovations than his reliance on tradition.'⁸ Brandon's chapter reminds us that Britten filtered the past through his own lens and for his own purposes; and *Grimes* can be seen as both tribute to and subverter of Italianate tradition.

The 'neglected' opera *Owen Wingrave* surprisingly found itself the subject of two independently formed papers at the study day, reflecting perhaps its recent smattering of productions in the UK. *Wingrave* is an opera often considered 'difficult': it received a mixed reception after its television broadcast in 1971 and reviews of modern revivals tend to be prefaced with a description of the opera's 'problems'.⁹ Frances Spalding (in 'Dramatic Invention in Myfanwy Piper's Libretto for *Owen Wingrave*') argues for a reconsideration of the dramatic qualities of the opera through a close study of the genesis of Piper's libretto. Spalding describes Piper's collaborative relationship with Britten and the particular problems encountered in devising an opera that would suit the needs of both a television broadcast and future performances on a stage. Piper was not, interestingly, entirely satisfied with certain elements of the libretto – notably the characterization of Kate, over which she strongly disagreed with Britten – but Spalding, and Piper, convincingly present the case for a re-examination and re-hearing of this work.

Arne Muus also examines the libretto in '“The Minstrel Boy to the War is Gone” – Utterance and Dramaturgy in Britten's *Owen Wingrave*' and challenges the critical reception of the work's supposedly weak structure and dénouement. Taking as a critical standpoint various seminal works of Sigmund Freud, Muus investigates Owen's often contradictory behaviour, and suggests that – far from being a weakness in the libretto – the paradoxes in Owen's character are informed by his problematic relationship with his late father. Owen is thus a 'Winslow Boy' first and foremost, and it is his Oedipal struggles which contribute most strongly to the opera's dramatic impact.

J. P. E. Harper-Scott's 'Made You Look! Children in *Salome* and *Death in Venice*' scrutinizes the cultural themes of another recently much-performed opera, *Death in Venice*. Richard Strauss and Britten both produced, for their respective times, scandalous and morally risky depictions of children on the operatic stage partly, it seems, for the scopical gratification of the audience.

While *Death in Venice* and Strauss's *Salome* are – superficially – two operas with very little in common, Harper-Scott places them side by side as unlikely comrades in order to highlight structural and ethical elements both operas address, whether purposefully or not. In Britten's case, suggests Harper-Scott, the composer's intentional classical Greek aesthetic in *Death in Venice*, expressed through the character of Aschenbach and his love for Tadzio, is largely overturned as a result of its intertextual similarities with the 'decadent' *Salome*, and we are 'invited to entertain the thought that the child might be the monster.'¹⁰

Drawing the section on opera to a close, Claire Seymour's 'From the Borough to Fraser Island' takes Britten to Australia and back by way of an imaginative, indeed imaginary, account of an opera-that-might-have-been – an opera whose subject matter was very much the outsider in society. Seymour describes the genesis of a libretto written by the novelist Patrick White and submitted to Britten with the hope of a future collaboration. White's *A Fringe of Leaves* is a fictionalized true story of a Scottish woman who was shipwrecked on an Australian island in the 19th century and who remained there, an outsider inhabiting a world of submerged menace, for ten weeks. Many characteristic elements of Britten's operas can be found in this story: the challenging of innocence, the 'odd one out', the physical power of the sea. While Britten did not in fact set the libretto, largely, it appears, because he took an instant dislike to White, through White's draft text Seymour offers an entirely new angle on Britten's dramatic preoccupations.

The final two chapters consider, in their various ways, a vision of Britten somewhat removed from most narratives of his life and works. Maéna Py's 'Britten and France, or the Late Emergence of a Remarkable Lyric Universe' uncovers the generally hostile critical reception Britten's operas received in France, principally in Paris, from the 1940s until around the 1990s, thus providing a perspective that is largely new to British readership. Only in the provinces, reveals Py, where French musical life was not in the grip of such figures as Pierre Boulez – who actively resisted the performance of non-serialist music in the 1950s and 1960s – did Britten's operas find sympathetic performances and hearings. We find that a staging of a Britten opera in Paris was often considered daring to the point of foolhardiness by the critics; performances were apparently deliberately sabotaged by the management; and while Britten's craftsmanship was often admired, his exactitude amidst the French preference for improvisation was not.

Finally, Brian McMahon, in 'Why did Benjamin Britten Return to Wartime England?', discusses Britten's status as 'outsider' in both the USA – for nearly three years during the early stages of World War II – and in his own

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