

The 100th anniversary of the birth of composer Benjamin Britten

Fred Mazelis

23 November 2013

The 100th anniversary of the birth of British composer Benjamin Britten was observed on November 22. Alongside the bicentennial commemorations of Richard Wagner and Giuseppe Verdi it was the third major classical musical anniversary of this year.

Like Verdi and Wagner, Britten had a particular affinity for the operatic form. While clearly not as towering a figure as these two predecessors, he was nevertheless one of the most prominent composers of the 20th century.

The development of opera reached its peak in the 19th century. By the time Britten emerged, leading 20th century opera composers such as Leos Janacek and Richard Strauss were either dead or long past their prime. Britten, who died in 1976 at the age of 63, was not only the most important British composer of opera in several centuries; he was also one of the few 20th century operatic composers whose works met with wide popular as well as critical enthusiasm. With the major exception of Shostakovich—arguably the greatest musical figure of this period—one cannot think of another composer active in the three decades after the end of the Second World War who made as significant a contribution as Britten.

A measure of the esteem in which Britten is held is the fact that more than 1,000 separate commemorative concerts and events have been scheduled around the world during the centennial year. On the weekend surrounding the centennial itself a series of concerts and events is taking place in the seaside town of Aldeburgh in East Anglia where in 1948 Britten co-founded the music and arts festival that continues to this day. Many events are planned in other parts of the UK.

Britten's well-known *War Requiem* (1961) has received separate performances this week in Berlin, Sweden and Budapest. In New York a concert performance of Britten's first great operatic success, *Peter Grimes* (1945), took place at Carnegie Hall. *Billy Budd* (1951), along with *Grimes* the most well-known of Britten's operas, was staged both in Rio de Janeiro and Dusseldorf. In recent months commemorative concerts have also taken place in Spain, France, Japan, Hong Kong, Russia and elsewhere.

Britten's operas, 13 in all, also include *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), based on Shakespeare and revived this year at the Metropolitan Opera; as well as *Death in Venice* (1973), his final opera, based on Thomas Mann's novella; and several chamber operas, composed during the 1940s when wartime and immediate postwar conditions made large-scale productions difficult.

Unlike both Verdi and Wagner, Britten is also well known for work in other forms, including orchestral and chamber music. Prominent in the classical repertory are his early work *A Simple Symphony*, dating from 1932; the *Variations on a Theme by Frank Bridge* (1937); and the ever-popular *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1946). Also dating from Britten's youth are his Piano Concerto, from 1938, and Violin Concerto, from 1939, both of which deserve to be heard far more frequently. These are his only works in these forms, and indeed Britten composed relatively

little orchestral music in the last quarter-century of his life.

Also important among the 95 opus numbers in Britten's catalog are his three string quartets, the last one written only shortly before his death. Between 1964 and 1971 he also composed three suites for solo cello, dedicated to the Soviet-Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich.

No discussion of Britten's music would be complete without reference to his choral and vocal compositions. A list of the most well known of these works would have to include the *Ceremony of Carols*, from 1942, the *Les Illuminations* song cycle, from 1939, and the *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*, from 1943.

Benjamin Britten was born in the town of Lowestoft, Suffolk, in East Anglia, and this region of England was to remain his home and anchor for most of his life. The future composer, the youngest of three children, grew up in a provincial middle class family. He showed unusual precocity at a very young age, being driven toward musical composition almost before he could spell.

Among Britten's early teachers and major influences was the underappreciated English composer Frank Bridge. Britten later recalled hearing Bridge's beautiful tone poem *The Sea*, conducted by the composer, and being "knocked sideways" by what he heard. At the time he was only 10 years old. About three years later the young boy became a composition pupil of Bridge's.

Bridge was an early and important musical influence on Britten. The older composer, who bitterly opposed the First World War from a pacifist standpoint, also influenced his pupil in that respect. The theme of the sea itself always loomed large in Britten's work—never more than in both *Peter Grimes* and *Billy Budd*.

In 1930 Britten became a scholarship student at the Royal College of Music in London. As he matured, the young composer absorbed the influences of Debussy, Mahler, Stravinsky and others. He was also exposed to more avant-garde figures, including Schoenberg, Alban Berg and the young Shostakovich. Britten was impressed by a London production of Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* in 1936, the same year in which the opera and its composer were denounced in *Pravda* at Stalin's behest.

During these years Britten gradually began to synthesize his own style. His musical language owed something to the music he soaked up from various sources, but it also stood apart. It was distinctive, memorable. He used dissonance but never abandoned tonality. His music powerfully evoked the natural landscape, but without the pastoral moods that characterized much of contemporary English music at that time.

Britten's style also communicated struggle, conflict, unhappiness. It was not conventionally pretty, but neither was it simply designed to shock or to disorient the listener. Music critic Alex Ross characterizes Britten's music as "poised perfectly between the familiar and the strange." Leonard Bernstein called Britten "a man at odds with the world ... When you hear Britten's music, if you really *hear* it ... you become aware of something very dark."

At the same time, Britten's music was not simply a personal statement. As he later explained, "I want my music to be of use to people, to please them."

The music could not be separated from important extramusical influences in the lives of Britten and other musicians and artists during this period. He came of age in the 1930s, a decade of political and social upheaval. The young man was influenced by the growing danger of a new world war amidst the Depression, the victory of the German Nazis, and the Spanish Civil War. Britten, like others of his generation, turned to the left. He met poet W. H. Auden, a close friend for the next decade. In 1937 he met the tenor Peter Pears, who was to become his lifelong professional and personal partner.

During these years Britten, though quite naïve politically, spoke openly of his "socialistic inclinations." Biographer Humphrey Carpenter describes a 1935 attempt by the young Britten to, in his own words, "talk communism with Mum." During this period Britten also worked at composing incidental film music for documentary film pioneer John Grierson's famed General Post Office Film Unit. Composing accompaniment to portray the world of work, among the films he helped produce was the remarkable documentary *Night Mail* (written by Auden, with narration by Grierson and sound engineering by Alberto Cavalcanti).

Pears and Britten, acting on their pacifist inclinations, wound up following Auden to America in 1939, a decision that exposed the young composer, then barely 25 years old, to charges of lack of patriotism. Unlike Auden, Britten returned to Britain. He spent three years in the US before going back in 1942, where he soon obtained conscientious objector status.

Britten had become somewhat homesick while in the US, and was also disturbed by aspects of life in America. In one letter he complained about how "anything vaguely liberal is labeled as Communist and treated as such."

This was nevertheless a time of great musical productivity on Britten's part. His compositions included his first string quartet, in 1941. The second followed in 1945, after his return to England. Both are fascinating and moving works, with more than a passing resemblance in mood and form to the quartets of Shostakovich, who composed 15, but whose first three quartets are roughly contemporaneous with the initial two by Britten.

An interesting anecdote about Britten's time in America concerns Albert Einstein, who in addition to being a Nobel Prize-winning scientist was also an amateur musician. During the period when Britten and Pears were living with a family on the north shore of Long Island, Einstein visited for evenings of chamber music, with the physicist on the violin and the composer on the piano.

Britten's second quartet, an understandably somber work, was written soon after a trip he made in the summer of 1945 with violinist Yehudi Menuhin to perform a series of recitals for survivors of the concentration camps.

Just weeks before the trip with Menuhin, *Peter Grimes* premiered in London. The idea for the opera had originated some four years earlier, when Britten had first come across the poem of that name written in 1810 as part of a larger work entitled *The Borough*, by George Crabbe. Crabbe came from the town of Aldeburgh, some 30 miles from Britten's birthplace, and it was in Aldeburgh that Britten would lay down roots in 1948 and live for the rest of his life.

The poem tells the story of a troubled English fisherman and his abusive relationships with his apprentices. In the libretto, freely adapted from the poem for the opera, Grimes is portrayed as a more contradictory figure, an outsider, unhappy and misunderstood, whose difficulties lead to tragic consequences.

The music of *Peter Grimes* brings together folk song, modernist influences, and more traditional forms and influences stemming from the tradition of grand opera. The opera, which was originally commissioned

by the renowned conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra Serge Koussevitsky, was an immediate success and Britten quickly became famous.

The theme of the outsider, the troubled nonconformist, is a recurring one in Britten's work, especially in *Peter Grimes* and *Billy Budd*, which premiered about six years later. In both of these works Britten turns to important literary sources—*Billy Budd* is based on the famous novella of the same name by Herman Melville.

Billy Budd (with a libretto co-written by E.M. Forster) is the story of a young English sailor impressed into service in 1797, amidst the backdrop of the French Revolution. After accidentally causing the death of the abusive Master-at-arms on his ship, the young man is forced to pay with his life by Captain Edward Vere, even though the latter knows he is dooming a pure and innocent man.

Peter Grimes, with its depiction of an ignorant mob and the intimation of a witchhunt, could be said to anticipate the Red Scare of the early 1950s in the US. *Billy Budd* appeared at the height of the witchhunt associated with Senator Joe McCarthy. Its themes resonated at the time and continue to do so today.

Britten's choice of themes is also bound up with his homosexuality. Much has been written on this subject, and most of it, written in the spirit of today's identity politics, is not very edifying. Nonetheless, the homoerotic themes in both of Britten's best-known operas, especially *Billy Budd*, are fairly obvious.

Of course, during this period same-sex relationships were still illegal in Britain and most of the rest of the world, although Britten's relationship with Pears, especially considering his relatively privileged background and his growing prominence, tended to fall into a "don't ask, don't tell" category. Nevertheless, despite their fame, Britten's and Pears' names were kept on file by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and their visits to the US required a special visa application process.

There is no doubt that Britten's position, his concern over the stigmas faced by sexual minorities, was connected with a broader democratic sensibility. Humanist themes can also be seen in such works as the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, composed in 1939 and conceived as a statement against war; and in the *War Requiem*, in which the original Latin texts of the Requiem are unusually and ingeniously interspersed with poems by Wilfred Owen, the famous antiwar poet who was killed in the First World War at the age of 25.

Britten left his early and vague radicalism behind him, although he remained a man of the left in broad terms. During the postwar period, he became something of a British icon, a symbol of the country's musical achievement, who was honored by the Queen. Tony Palmer's 1979 film on the composer shows an obviously awkward monarch reading her lines at the dedication of the concert hall in Aldeburgh in 1967.

The partnership between Britten and Pears was a very important one on the musical plane. Britten wrote a number of well-known works for Pears himself, including the abovementioned *Les Illuminations* and *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*. Pears' distinctive reedy timbre and high tenor voice takes some getting used to for certain listeners, but its evocative power is shown in these works, as well as with several roles written with Pears in mind—notably *Peter Grimes* himself, and Captain Vere in *Billy Budd*.

Biographers have noted the difficulties in Britten's personal and professional relationships. There were many friendships that he broke off suddenly after slight disagreements or for reasons that were never explained. At the same time, there were many colleagues with whom he remained friendly. Among American composers, Britten had a high regard for Aaron Copland and Bernstein, and the appreciation was mutual. He met Copland in 1939, before the war, and Bernstein several years later. Although from a different background and the opposite side of the Atlantic, Britten to some extent shared a musical approach with the

Americans, especially the aim of writing music for a wider audience.

The friendship between Britten and Shostakovich was especially close. They met for the first time in 1960, when the Soviet composer was in London for a performance of his Cello Concerto. Alex Ross, in his book *The Rest is Noise*, describes how their friendship developed over the next 15 years. They were near-contemporaries, and died within 18 months of one another. Shostakovich dedicated his 14th Symphony, a song cycle that seems to borrow both in form and sensibility from Britten, to his British colleague.

This is a big subject, but it is clear that Britten and Shostakovich shared something, both in their musical language, their approach to composing and to some extent their experiences in life. Both men had been disappointed in their political hopes for the future, Shostakovich most devastatingly, as he fought to navigate his life and career in the face of the Stalinist dictatorship. Both wrote music that said something about life that dealt, though not of course always directly, with the tragic events of their time.

It is worth considering, perhaps, what a musical figure like Britten might have written in a different postwar world—one in which Stalinism and imperialism had not emerged triumphant to establish a tenuous restabilization that took the form of the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s. Perhaps his early “socialistic inclinations” would have found voice in other subject matter for his operas, and his work would have connected more powerfully to a young generation.

This is bound up with the issue of the history of classical music throughout the 20th century, and the enormous damage done by the two world wars and the rise of fascism (See “ War, fascism and the fate of music in the 20th century ,” 25 September 2013).

In any case, the music of Benjamin Britten is deservedly famous and widely listened to today. His work constitutes something of a bridge between the vibrant early decades of the 20th century and the challenges faced by composers and musicians today. His legacy will undoubtedly play an important role in the development of opera and classical music in the 21st century.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact