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978-0-521-19467-9 - Britten's Unquiet Pasts: Sound and Memory in Postwar Reconstruction

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Excerpt

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Introduction

Music played a powerful role in articulating memory and community in British culture of the 1940s and 1950s, within a project of cultural renewal that occupied artists, critics, and planners in the wake of the Second World War. Faced with its decline as an imperial power, “New Commonwealth” immigration, the growing force of American popular culture, and the new social landscape of the welfare state, Britain struggled to reinvent itself. If 1950s Britain underwent a crisis of identity, a very different crisis emerged within musical modernism, as the avant-garde staged a divorce from both the past and a broader culture of listening and music-making. This study falls at the crux of these musical and national dilemmas, exploring how art music in Britain addressed the interconnected problems of cultural continuity and loss, and of community and its failure. In the newly created rituals of renewal that I examine, expressions of mourning and melancholic loss seem to hover at the edges; the quest for renewal is constantly reimagined under this threat of collapse.

This study addresses music’s role in postwar reconstruction with reference to a broad array of sources, including planning and arts administration documents, journalism, social surveys, public ceremonial, television and radio broadcasting, film, theater, and literature. Its central focus, however, is a set of works by Benjamin Britten that grappled in especially subtle ways with the problem of building musical culture in the wartime and postwar years, addressing the ideas of community, ritual, and the deep English past. My narrative follows a trajectory from his return to England in 1942 after three years in the US, through the height of his participation in British cultural life and his most public musical orientation in the late 1940s and 1950s, closing with the *War Requiem* of 1962. Written on Britten’s voyage from the US during the Second World War, *A Ceremony of Carols* offers a point of entry into the climate of cultural renewal and its engagement with ritual, the sacred, and the medieval past. Later works intersected more directly with national events celebrating reconstruction and renewal: the Festival of Britain in 1951, the Coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953, and the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral, bombed in wartime raids. What most marked these episodes, aside from the centrality of public performance

itself, was a double gesture to the future and the past, seeking renewal in cultural memory. Similarly, the works on which I focus posed a new cultural vision through musical and ceremonial gestures to the past. Such gestures, Britten's music suggests, were not always aimed at the preservation of tradition and hierarchy. If the early 1940s to the early 1960s constitutes an urgent phase of British musical reform, Britten's career is centrally involved, his music offering the most sustained engagement with visions of cultural renewal. At the same time, the example of Britten – as a gay, leftist, conscientious objector – reveals the complexity of that vision and the internal tensions that marked it.

Looking through a musical lens reveals some otherwise less conspicuous dimensions of postwar reform. These cohere around two issues associated with modernization and modernity itself, in this period of historical rupture. First, music helps us understand how the idea of the “immaterial” continued to hover around the question of material improvement in British life, both in the austerity of the 1940s and the prosperity of the later 1950s. Music, memory, magic, and the sacred formed a nexus for these concerns with the immaterial; they were imagined as the invisible ties that bind people into communities, link the present with the past, and endow experiences and objects with meaning. As such, they became forms of enchantment to counterbalance the forces of modernization, secularization, commodification, and technocracy. Musical gestures to the past also suggest a slightly different problem of absence and presence in a social and physical landscape littered with relics – debris such as buildings and monuments, the trappings of vanished social orders and declining imperial power, and the remnants of religious practice in an increasingly secular society. Britten's music continually poses the question of how these remnants are to be reincorporated, and endowed with life and presence.

The early 1940s saw a flurry of planning for the new, postwar British society. By late 1942 a series of Allied victories had begun to make the war's end seem only a matter of time, and many figures in both official and unofficial circles turned their attention to Britain's rebuilding. While these victories had the simultaneous effect of accelerating Nazi atrocities in Germany and occupied territories, the realities of the Holocaust were largely ignored until the war's end; for the moment, there was a new sense of hopeful anticipation and a determination not to return to the social and economic disorder of the prewar situation. Urban rebuilding, education, and health insurance, as well as religious, cultural, and artistic concerns: all were under intense discussion. These were not merely matters of Whitehall or London County

Introduction

3

Council decision-making, but of broad public discourse.¹ In December 1942, William Beveridge issued his report *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, the blueprint for social policy in the postwar welfare state. It garnered enormous public attention through publication and newspaper summaries, and presented perhaps the most galvanizing vision of social change in postwar Britain's "new Jerusalem."² At the most concrete level, the large-scale physical destruction in London was addressed by a series of ambitious plans for rebuilding, some published in popular Penguin editions.³ In 1944, the Butler Education Act was created, with a vision to extend secondary and post-secondary education to a larger section of the populace. In the areas of arts, culture, and religion, the idea of postwar renewal similarly dominated public discourse, with the prospect of massive social and physical reorganization seen as an opportunity for other kinds of change. Planning was not limited to physical and concrete matters, but extended to more abstract improvements to individual and social life. The war itself saw a dramatic upsurge in cultural activity at all levels of British society and a new commitment to arts and culture by the state, as seen in the activities of the new Arts Council, to be discussed in Chapter 1. The art critic Herbert Read was not exceptional in imagining a place for modernism in this future: "But the individuals in whom the spirit of modernism is embodied still survive, still work, still create – however obscurely and intermittently. When the cloud of war has passed, they will re-emerge eager to rebuild the shattered world."⁴ Even the churches were caught up in the planning process, issuing publications on the new possibilities of postwar life, which took their place alongside manifestos on everything from national opera and theater to architecture and education.⁵

¹ Frank Mort, "Fantasies of Metropolitan Life: Planning London in the 1940s," *Journal of British Studies* 43 (January 2004): 121. Some central accounts are: Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939–1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1969); Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945–1951* (New York: Pantheon, 1993); Jim Fyrth, ed., *Labour's Promised Land? Culture and Society in Labour Britain, 1945–51* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995); David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945–1951* (New York: Walker & Company, 2008), 19–59.

² The Beveridge Report and its official summary combined sold over 635,000 copies (Calder, *The People's War*, 528).

³ See Mort, "Fantasies of Metropolitan Life," 120–123. *The County of London Plan* (1943) was the most important of a series of plans for rebuilding London, including the *Report of the Preliminary Draft Proposals for Post War Reconstruction in the City of London* (1944) and *The Greater London Plan* (1944).

⁴ Herbert Read, "Threshold of a New Age," in *This Changing World*, ed. J. R. R. Brumwell (London: Readers Union, 1945), 12, quoted in Anne Massey, *The Independent Group: Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain, 1945–59* (Manchester University Press, 1995), 5.

⁵ Examples include Malvern, 1941: *The Life of the Church and the Order of Society* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1941); Fabian Society, *Plan for Britain: A Collection of Essays Prepared for the Fabian Society*, ed. G. D. H. Cole (London: Routledge, 1943). A more specialized example is E. J. Dent, "The Prospect Before Us," in *A Theatre for Everybody: The Story of the Old Vic and Sadler's Wells* (London: Boardman, 1945).

All of this epitomized what Frank Mort has called a “high moment of collectivism” and a pronounced strain of “practical utopianism” within wartime and postwar public discourse.⁶ When a Labour government was elected in 1945, it continued the process of social reform, consolidating the culture of “planning” that had arisen during the war, until its defeat in 1951. Perhaps the high point of postwar optimism was the 1951 Festival of Britain. The Festival was explicitly a celebration of reconstruction; its goal, formulated in 1945, “was to demonstrate to the world the recovery of the United Kingdom from the effect of war in moral, cultural, spiritual and material fields.”⁷ Aiming to involve the British public in a particular vision of the nation’s future – as classless, progressive, and industrious – organizers simultaneously sought to stimulate activity in the arts and industry, and to project a reinvigorated Britain to a larger world (thereby attracting tourists and investment). The Festival was soon followed by another kind of fresh start, the Coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953. As discussed in Chapter 4, this presented a very different set of ideals for a future grounded in tradition and the national past.

While the state continued to project visions of renewal, the ambitious plans of the early 1940s met with frustration almost as soon as reconstruction began. Britain was slow to recover economically, both from the war and from the decline of imperial power, already well under way in the 1930s. There was a new economic crisis in 1947, seriously impeding Labour’s projects and prolonging wartime austerity. Travel, building materials, petrol, manufactured goods, and even food were rationed. Between the crippling austerity of the late 1940s, the election of a Tory government in 1951, and the nascent consumer culture of the 1950s, some saw postwar projects of leftist reform giving way to a reassertion of hierarchies and a culture of escapism. J. B. Priestley declared in 1949: “We are revolutionaries who have not swept away anything. We are Tories loudly denouncing taxes and regulations chiefly invented by Tory Ministers. We are Socialists busy creating peers and cheering pretty princesses. We are a dreary self-righteous people with a passion for gin, tobacco, gambling and ballet.”⁸

This sense of disappointment extended to the arts. Already in 1947, Cyril Connolly bemoaned the lack not only of promised government

⁶ Mort, “Fantasies of Metropolitan Life,” 122. He is referring specifically to urban planning, within the broader discourse of postwar reform.

⁷ Ramsden Committee Report (1945), quoted in Becky Conekin, *The Autobiography of a Nation: The 1951 Festival of Britain* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 28.

⁸ J. B. Priestley, *New Statesman* (July 1949), quoted in Robert Hewison, *In Anger: Culture in the Cold War 1945–1960* (London: Methuen, 1988), 4.

Introduction

5

support, but also, more importantly, of a broader sense of optimism and excitement: "The fact remains that a Socialist Government, besides doing practically nothing to help artists and writers . . . has also quite failed to stir up either intellect or imagination; the English renaissance, whose false dawn we have so enthusiastically greeted, is further away than ever."⁹ In the historiography of postwar British arts and literature, the late 1940s and 1950s have until recently been seen as marked by mediocrity and exhaustion, by a regressive preoccupation with a lost past and withdrawal from the political ambitions of the 1930s.¹⁰ The nostalgia for a lost order was epitomized by Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), with its representation of an interwar upper-class idyll. Arriving in London in 1945, the *New Yorker*'s Edmund Wilson expressed concern at the literary scene's loss of a "middle-class" voice, and its nostalgic preoccupation with boarding schools and country houses.¹¹ On the stage, similarly, the country house and the upper classes were a common subject in the plays of T. S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, and Terence Rattigan, as well as more middlebrow fare such as Agatha Christie's long-running *The Mousetrap* (1952). Here, too, and in the preponderance of historical plays, Wilson noted a pervasive escapism in response to the hardships of postwar London.¹² Arthur Marwick has suggested that the novels of the time tended to have "a national, even parochial, quality."¹³ While British film had prospered during the 1940s, by 1951 the Ealing Studios were in decline. According to one account, the 1950s "is widely perceived as being a dull period" for British film, "an interregnum sandwiched between the inventive 1940s and the exciting 1960s."¹⁴ Paul Griffiths has characterized British musical culture in the first decade after the war as "deliberately conservative," as if "the effort to rebuild and radically reform . . . had been diverted in Britain into a re-establishment of traditional norms."¹⁵

⁹ Cyril Connolly, *Horizon* (April 1947), quoted in Hewison, *In Anger*, 27.

¹⁰ For one account of this period as "complacent" and "backward-looking" in cultural, social, and economic fields, see Hennessy, *Never Again*, 444–449, 432–436.

¹¹ Edmund Wilson, "Notes on London at the End of the War," in *Europe Without Baedeker: Sketches among the Ruins of Italy, Greece and England, together with Notes from a European Diary: 1963–1964*, rev. edn. (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 14–17. Wilson's use of the term "middle-class" is not entirely straightforward. He opposes a lost "middle-class" voice to the contemporary dominance of the "official governing classes," which many journalists and historians referred to as the middle class.

¹² Wilson, "Notes on London," 10–13.

¹³ Arthur Marwick, *British Society Since 1945*, 4th edn. (London: Penguin, 2003), 54.

¹⁴ Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s: The Decline of Deference* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 1.

¹⁵ Paul Griffiths, "Music," in *The Cambridge Cultural History of Britain*, vol. IX, *Modern Britain*, ed. Boris Ford (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 51–52.

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Conservative retrenchment was one response to wartime crisis and postwar reforms, but the very embeddedness of artists and intellectuals in the postwar welfare state also arguably led to a kind of dullness. Noel Annan remarked on this unrebelling “intellectual aristocracy” already in 1955.¹⁶ Robert Hewison has characterized the 1950s as a period of “Mandarin” values, during which artists and intellectuals were so implicated in state institutions and the Oxbridge axis that they protected their own positions with a reassertion of “hierarchy and tradition.”¹⁷ Others have seen such “Mandarin” values as more benign: well intentioned in their paternalism, if fundamentally unadventurous.¹⁸ The result is a 1950s British culture often characterized as “middle-class” (specifically upper or “leisured” middle-class, as opposed to Wilson’s use of the term), “Establishment,” or the product of a “postwar consensus,” its mood of complacency unsettled only in the late 1950s by the “angry young men” (exemplified by John Osborne’s 1956 play *Look Back in Anger*) and the Movement writers (including Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin), who brought a voice of young male restlessness and disaffection to the English scene.

This picture of mid-century English culture has been complicated by some recent scholarship.¹⁹ Greater attention has lately been paid to the anxious modernity of the 1950s: the celebration of progress in the Festival of Britain,²⁰ art’s intersections with mass culture and technology (in the Independent Group, for instance) and other aspects of experimentalism and innovation.²¹ Scholars have looked to the issues

¹⁶ Noel Annan, “The Intellectual Aristocracy,” in *Studies in Social History*, ed. J. H. Plumb (London: Longmans, 1955).

¹⁷ Hewison, *In Anger*, 74. Alan Sinfield provides a similar account of the institutionalization of culture and a resulting complacency in *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 43–57.

¹⁸ See Michael Frayn, “Festival,” in *Age of Austerity*, ed. Michael Sissons and Philip French (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1963), 319–320. Also see Hewison, *In Anger*, 14.

¹⁹ On the mythologizing of the postwar consensus, see Conekin, “*The Autobiography of a Nation*,” 13–15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Massey, *The Independent Group*. On music, see Philip Rupprecht, “‘Something Slightly Indecent’: British Composers, the European Avant-Garde, and National Stereotypes in the 1950s,” *Musical Quarterly* 91 (2008): 275–326; Louis Niebur, *Special Sound: The Creation and Legacy of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop* (Oxford University Press, 2010). Ben Earle calls for a revision of Griffiths’s account of postwar conservatism (referenced above) in “The Real Thing – At Last? Historicizing Humphrey Searle,” in Matthew Riley, ed., *British Music and Modernism, 1895–1960* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 294, 300. Even in broad social histories, accounts of the arts in 1950s Britain seem to be changing. Brian Harrison, for example, describes a set of innovations, particularly in the late 1950s, and focuses on the effects of rapid technological change, in *Seeking a Role: The United Kingdom, 1951–1970*, *The New Oxford History of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), 374–379.

of class and gender addressed by middlebrow fiction,²² and to figures of social disorder such as the working-class “spiv” and the urban queer, simmering anxieties about race, and the porous divide between the elite and London’s underworld.²³

There has also been a re-evaluation of English approaches to modernism and the uses of the past at mid-century, predicated in part on post-colonial approaches and on expanding definitions of modernism, as encompassing, in Miriam Hansen’s words, “a whole range of cultural and artistic practices that register, respond to, and reflect upon processes of modernization and the experience of modernity.”²⁴ Jed Esty, for instance, has cast the “parochial” quality in mid-century English literature in a new light, articulating a shift from cosmopolitan modernism to local culture and the deep past, often rendered sacred or magical in character.²⁵ He finds similar preoccupations in 1930s documentary, the later fantasy of Tolkien, and the development of English Cultural Studies in the 1950s, with its attention to the habits of daily life as a source of culture (in Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*) and to the reconciliation of “culture as art and culture as a ‘whole way of life’” (in Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society*).²⁶ Alexandra Harris has grouped this same literary turn along with Neo-Romanticism in the visual arts – a loosely defined movement dating from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s, epitomized by Britten’s collaborator John Piper, and shaped in particular by the demand for official art in wartime – and other kinds of localist endeavors into what she calls “Romantic Modernism.”²⁷ For Harris, this movement was a

²² Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s–1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford University Press, 2001).
²³ Richard Hornsey, *The Spiv and the Architect: Unruly Life in Postwar London* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Frank Mort, “Scandalous Events: Metropolitan Culture and Moral Change in Post-Second World War London,” *Representations* 93 (2006): 106–137.
²⁴ Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 6 (1999): 59–60. A similarly revisionist account of art, nostalgia, mass culture, and mid-century modernism is Richard Halpern, *Norman Rockwell: The Underside of Innocence* (University of Chicago Press, 2006). These approaches have been more influential in treatments of English literature and visual arts. A different approach to the project of recovering a British modernism is apparent in recent British musicology, as seen in Riley, ed., *British Music and Modernism*.
²⁵ Auden is an exception, his plays avoiding this religious orientation. Auden converted to Anglicanism in 1940 (through the efforts of Charles Williams, a religious dramatist), after he had largely abandoned verse drama.
²⁶ Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 188. Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life, With Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957). Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).
²⁷ Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010). On Neo-Romanticism, also see David Mellor, ed., *A Paradise Lost: The Neo-Romantic Imagination in Britain 1935–55* (London: Lund Humphries, 1987). The term was introduced in Robin Ironside, “Painting since 1939,” in *Since*

reaction to the “limitations” of a modernism that embraced abstraction and internationalism while rejecting the proximate and the past, and a response to a sense of civilization’s “imminent demise” (11). Esty, on the other hand, sees this shift primarily in post-colonial terms, differentiating it from earlier recourses to “Little England.” This was a self-anthropologizing move, he argues, as England turned inward to find the kind of cultural integrity it had formerly located in colonized societies, recovering an English particularity as a consolation in the face of Empire’s decline.²⁸

These narratives intersect with Britten’s career, not least through the figures of E. M. Forster, W. H. Auden, and Piper, and in many ways this cultural vision culminates, belatedly, in the endpoint of my study, the new Coventry Cathedral, which involved many of the leading figures of Neo-Romanticism. Music played an important part in visions of English cultural renewal, as we will see in Chapter 1. And music in general was often seen as one area in which reforms actually worked, offering an exception to the general sense of artistic stagnation. While Edmund Wilson commented on a certain regression in London’s literary scene, for instance, he was immensely impressed by the premiere of Britten’s *Peter Grimes* (1945).²⁹

But Britten also complicates the intertwining stories of “Establishment” art, postwar renewal, and a nativist turn. There is a doubleness in his impulse toward and skepticism about postwar cultural ideals. This aspect of Britten’s music reveals more than his own sense of marginality within the cultural Establishment. It suggests areas of uncertainty at the heart of the most official ideals of national culture. Instead of arguing that Britten offered a perspective from the margins, then, this study reconsiders the meaning of an Establishment that included him as its primary musical voice.³⁰ If historians have tended to see an elite culture simply repackaged and fed to a broader public in the 1950s, my own project addresses the problems that the people in charge of this process – composers, broadcasters, performers, critics,

1939 (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1948), first published in 1946 (Massey, *The Independent Group*, 8). Also see Geoffrey Grigson, “Authentic and False in the New ‘Romanticism,’” *Horizon* 17 (March 1948): 203–213.

²⁸ Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, 121, 1–15.

²⁹ Wilson, “London in Midsummer,” in *Europe Without Baedeker*, 186–191.

³⁰ Sinfield discusses the repercussions of the larger presence of gay men in the postwar cultural Establishment in *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain*, 60–79. On Britten as marginal, see, for instance, Philip Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays*, ed. George E. Haggerty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 220–221.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

9

and administrators – constantly encountered in their endeavor to forge a musical culture for a new society.³¹ Their methods were far from systematic; they were haphazard and experimental, highly contested, and often utterly failed. Britten's works suggest the divergent ways in which music for a new kind of British society could be imagined, as well as the ways it could begin to seem impossible. Using these works as a central focus, this study looks at the centers of cultural power in postwar Britain, tracing the challenges to and failures of self-representation with which they constantly grappled.

A major fault-line in these new kinds of self-representation was the idea of the past itself, which introduces its own set of methodological and theoretical concerns. The Heritage Movement of the 1980s spawned a new scholarly interest in modern constructions of the past, but this scholarship is heavily inflected by the concerns of the Heritage Movement itself. It presents a stable and harmonious construction of the national past put to the service of political conservatism, setting aside other aspects of nostalgia.³² More recently, historians have departed from this mode by highlighting the modernizing uses to which the past has been put in British culture, especially at mid-century, questioning a dominant vision of this period as backward-looking and insular.³³ In the projects I examine, the gestures to the past are neither straightforwardly nostalgic nor optimistic; the idea of the past overpowers attempts to subordinate it to particular notions of national or local identity, and often introduces more problems of identity than it can solve. This is in part because the past persists in a variety of subtly different modes: the ruin, the artifact, the monument, the remnant or trace, the ghost, ritual, memory, tradition, and canon. This book attends to how music negotiates the shifting diversity of these modes, and examines the particular ways in which music – as an auditory phenomenon and a shared event – can work as a memorial practice.

³¹ For accounts of arts institutionalization as the “recycling” of high culture, see Sinfield, *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain*, 43–57; D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultural Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 184–188.

³² See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983; repr. 2000); David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, 1985); Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987); Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985).

³³ See Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters, eds., *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945–1964* (London: Rivers Oram, 1999); Martin Daunton and Bernhard Rieger, eds., *Meanings of Modernity: Britain From the Late-Victorian Era to World War II* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

Examining Britten's engagements with Englishness, memory, and community in the wartime and postwar years, this book shifts attention from works central to Britten's reputation – *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd* (1951), *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) – and turns instead to music more explicitly concerned with the deep English past, and connected with local and national rituals and remembrances. In doing so, it sets aside some important aspects of Britten's work, focusing on the ways in which he shared a broader vision for a renewed English culture – even while inflecting it in unique ways – rather than emphasizing his oppositional or marginal status; and relying less on the theme of the individual opposed to society that has become such a dominant theme in Britten criticism, and which clearly emerges in operas such as *Peter Grimes* and *Billy Budd*.³⁴ Britten's works are deeply informed by personal preoccupations with themes of innocence, violence, and redemption, shaped in part by a strong feeling for Christian traditions and narratives, even if he showed a certain antipathy for the modern institution of the Church.³⁵ But the personal dimensions of these preoccupations have been discussed extensively, and I want to explore instead how these themes resonated in public life. In part, I simply wish to bring to the forefront less-examined aspects of Britten's work, moving away from the biographical focus of much recent scholarship and interpretation, while counteracting a critical tendency to downplay Britten's investments in British society. Even the themes of marginalization or victimization in *Peter Grimes* or *Billy Budd* can fruitfully be seen in light of the concerns for local and national community found elsewhere in Britten's music, for these works are concerned, after all, with the ways in which community – particularly in the absence of family – fails vulnerable individuals. Britten's construction of the marginalized or oppressed individual, moreover, is historically contingent, enmeshed in a particular set of debates about homosexuality and citizenship (as explored in Chapter 3) as well as debates about the relationship of art to culture and of artists to the

³⁴ Britten affirmed the importance of this theme (while also slightly recasting it) late in his life, in a 1971 television interview with John Culshaw on the program *Music Now*, on the occasion of *Owen Wingrave*'s first broadcast. Asked by Culshaw to comment on the prominence in his works of “the theme of the individual against the community,” Britten responds, “I think it must be something that interests me very deeply. I’m never aware of having a set idea . . . but it does quite clearly fit into the *Grimes*, *Albert Herring*, *Lucretia* – a feeling of the innocence betrayed, perhaps.” This interview is included in *Owen Wingrave*, The Britten–Pears Collection (Decca, 2009).

³⁵ On religious themes in Britten's music, and on Britten's personal beliefs and relationship with the Church, see Graham Elliott, *Benjamin Britten: The Spiritual Dimension* (Oxford University Press, 2006).