Ideology in Britten's Operas

This thematic examination of Britten's operas focuses on the way that ideology is presented on stage. To watch or listen is to engage with a vivid artistic testament to the ideological world of mid-twentieth-century Britain. But it is more than that, too, because in many ways Britten's operas continue to proffer a diagnosis of certain unresolved problems in our own time. Only rarely, as in *Peter Grimes*, which shows the violence inherent in all forms of social and psychological identification, does Britten unmistakably call into question fundamental precepts of his contemporary ideology. This has not, however, prevented some writers from romanticizing Britten as a quiet revolutionary. This book argues, in contrast, that his operas, and some interpretations of them, have obscured a greater social and philosophical complicity that it is timely – if at the same time uncomfortable – for his early twenty-first-century audiences to address.

J. P. E. Harper-Scott is Professor of Music History and Theory at Royal Holloway, University of London. He has published extensively on music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a particular focus on twentieth-century British music.
Music Since 1900

**General editor**  Arnold Whittall

This series – formerly *Music in the Twentieth Century* – offers a wide perspective on music and musical life since the end of the nineteenth century. Books included range from historical and biographical studies concentrating particularly on the context and circumstances in which composers were writing, to analytical and critical studies concerned with the nature of musical language and questions of compositional process. The importance given to context will also be reflected in studies dealing with, for example, the patronage, publishing, and promotion of new music, and in accounts of the musical life of particular countries.

*Titles in the series*

**Jonathan Cross**
The Stravinsky Legacy

**Michael Nyman**
Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond

**Jennifer Doctor**
The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music, 1922–1936

**Robert Adlington**
The Music of Harrison Birtwistle

**Keith Potter**
Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass

**Carlo Caballero**
Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics

**Peter Burt**
The Music of Toru Takemitsu

**David Clarke**
The Music and Thought of Michael Tippett: Modern Times and Metaphysics

**M. J. Grant**
Serial Music, Serial Aesthetics: Compositional Theory in Post-War Europe

**Philip Rupprecht**
Britten's Musical Language

**Mark Carroll**
Music and Ideology in Cold War Europe

**Adrian Thomas**
Polish Music since Szymanowski

**J. P. E. Harper-Scott**
Edward Elgar, Modernist

**Yayoi Uno Everett**
The Music of Louis Andriessen
Ethan Haimo
Schoenberg’s Transformation of Musical Language
Rachel Beckles Willson
Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War
Michael Cherlin
Schoenberg’s Musical Imagination
Joseph N. Straus
Twelve-Tone Music in America
David Metzer
Musical Modernism at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century
Edward Campbell
Boulez, Music and Philosophy
Jonathan Goldman
The Musical Language of Pierre Boulez: Writings and Compositions
Pieter C. van den Toorn and John McGinness
Stravinsky and the Russian Period: Sound and Legacy of a Musical Idiom
David Beard
Harrison Birtwistle’s Operas and Music Theatre
Heather Wiebe
Britten’s Unquiet Pasts: Sound and Memory in Postwar Reconstruction
Beate Kutschke and Barley Norton
Music and Protest in 1968
Graham Griffiths
Stravinsky’s Piano: Genesis of a Musical Language
Martin Iddon
John Cage and David Tudor: Correspondence on Interpretation and Performance
Martin Iddon
New Music at Darmstadt: Nono, Stockhausen, Cage, and Boulez
Alastair Williams
Music in Germany Since 1968
Ben Earle
Luigi Dallapiccola and Musical Modernism in Fascist Italy
Thomas Schuttenhelm
The Orchestral Music of Michael Tippett: Creative Development and the Compositional Process
Marilyn Nonken
The Spectral Piano: From Liszt, Scriabin, and Debussy to the Digital Age
Jack Boss
Schoenberg’s Twelve-Tone Music: Symmetry and the Musical Idea
Deborah Mawer
French Music and Jazz in Conversation: From Debussy to Brubeck
Philip Rupprecht
British Musical Modernism: The Manchester Group and their Contemporaries
Amy Lynn Wlodarski
Musical Witness and Holocaust Representation
Carola Nielinger-Vakil
Luigi Nono: A Composer in Context
Erling E. Guldbrandsen and Julian Johnson
Transformations of Musical Modernism
David Cline
The Graph Music of Morton Feldman
Russell Hartenberger
Performance and Practice in the Music of Steve Reich
Joanna Bullivant
Modern Music, Alan Bush, and the Cold War: The Cultural Left in Britain and the Communist Bloc
Nicholas Jones
Peter Maxwell Davies, Selected Writings
J. P. E. Harper-Scott
Ideology in Britten's Operas
Ideology in Britten’s Operas

J. P. E. Harper-Scott
Royal Holloway, University of London
For Arnold,
in friendship and admiration
Hannah Arendt . . . is undoubtedly right in the identification of evil with triviality. But I would put it the other way round; I would not say that evil is trivial but that triviality is evil – triviality, that is, as the form of consciousness and mind which adapts itself to the world as it is, which obeys the principle of inertia. And this principle of inertia truly is what is radically evil.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics*
Contents

List of Figures  [page xi]
List of Music Examples  [xiii]
Preface  [xv]

PART I  Mappa Mundi  [1]
1 Defining Ideology  [3]
2 Ideological Narratives  [23]

PART II  THE SHIP OF STATE  [67]
3 From Manifest Violence to its Historical Sediment  [69]
4 The Occultation of History  [111]

PART III  NEW WORLD  [173]
5 Women and Children  [175]
6 A Shadow Falls on Castle Walls  [215]

Bibliography  [303]
Index  [319]
Figures

0.1 Kazimir Malevich, Red House, 1932, Oil on canvas. © Lebrecht Music & Arts. Reproduced with permission. [xvi]
2.1 Analysis of Britten, Owen Wingrave, Act II, scene 1, conclusion. [36]
2.2 Hans Holbein the Younger, The Ambassadors (1533). [46]
2.3 Britten, Owen Wingrave, paradigmatic thematic relations. [49]
2.4 Britten, Owen Wingrave, Owen’s soliloquy, analysis. [60]
4.1 Britten, Billy Budd, Act II, analysis of the ‘mist interlude, first 20 bars (register regularized). [117]
4.2 Britten, Billy Budd, Act II, scene 2, Vere’s testimony and reflexion. [124]
4.3 Britten, Billy Budd, Act II, analysis of the conclusion. [136]
4.4 Britten, Billy Budd, Act I, bb. 13–16. (a) Claggart’s theme with its implied resolution. The same, imagined in (b) Bb major and (c) B minor. [139]
4.5 Britten, Billy Budd, transformations in the Interview Chords. [164]
5.1 Lacan’s second graph of desire (adapted from Écrits, 684). [183]
5.2 Britten, The Turn of the Screw, ‘Malo’ song, analytical graph. [184]
5.3 Britten, The Turn of the Screw, ‘Malo’ song, pitch set. [186]
5.4 Britten, The Rape of Lucretia, Lucretia sleeping, analytical sketch. [208]
5.5 Britten, The Rape of Lucretia, Act II, analytical sketch. [210]
6.1 Britten, Death in Venice, opening note row, showing E-major implications. [290]
6.2 Britten, Death in Venice, analysis of the passage leading up to Aschenbach’s declaration of love. [298]
Music Examples


4.3 Britten, *Billy Budd*, Act I, fig. 33. The opera’s *homo sacer* motive. © 1951, 1952 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd. [150]

4.4 Britten, *Billy Budd*, Act II, the Interview Chords. © 1951, 1952 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd. [160]

5.1 Britten, *The Rape of Lucretia*, the naming of Lucretia, Act I, fig. 18. © 1946, 1947 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd. [198]


5.3 Britten, *The Rape of Lucretia*, Act II, B–C resolution, ’It is not all’. © 1946, 1947 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd. [212]

6.1 Britten, *Curlew River*, the Madwoman’s narrative. © 1964 by Faber  

xiii
xiv  

Music Examples

Music. Reproduced by permission of the publishers.  [232]

6.2  Britten, *Curlew River*, tutti after fig. 49. © 1964 by Faber Music. Reproduced by permission of the publishers.  [234]

6.3  Britten, *Curlew River*, Te lucis fantasy (*nanori* music), fig. 5. © 1964 by Faber Music. Reproduced by permission of the publishers.  [244]

6.4  Britten, *Curlew River*, The Madwoman’s lament, fig. 81. © 1964 by Faber Music. Reproduced by permission of the publishers.  [270]


Preface

Some Notes on ‘Subjects’, the Universal, and the Particular

Figure 0.1 shows Kazimir Malevich’s 1932 painting, Red House, which is reproduced in colour on the cover of this book. It is an image of some indeterminacy. The house could be on the coast, separated from a choppy sea by a white shingle beach. (It could be Aldeburgh. It could be the Red House!) Or it could be on the land, separated by a black tarmac road and empty white space from the sky. In the blank wall of the house, looking like a red Suprematist rectangle, there are no windows to allow us to see in or to allow the occupants to see out, at us looking at them. Nor are there any identifying marks that enable us to identify this as a particular house. Neither the landscape nor the weather nor the building itself nor its occupants or observers can be reduced to any particular existence. They are all universal, all caught up in a communal being-in-the-world. Like the faceless peasants or sportsmen whom Malevich painted at the same time, the house shows how the everyday and ordinary may be elevated by collective spirit. Britten’s operas, like this painting, lie elementally open to analytical interpretation; and like this painting, the particularities of each opera quickly become, after a period of reflexion, indeterminate, shifting, and slippery. Ultimately, what appears on the surface to be a particular tale about an individual’s suffering, sinning, or redemption, reveals itself to be more universal, a reflexion not just on an individual but on a social totality: a work, that is, that is shot through with ideology.

With a focus on the operas of Britten, this book is more particular than my last, The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism (which was in essence a general theory), but it addresses the problem of the universalism of music no less directly, and in important ways it builds on the foundations of the earlier book. In choosing to examine the ideological themes that I do in this book, I inevitably have to shine an interrogative light not only on Britten’s representation of ideology but also of our society’s continued embroilment in it.

In this book I shall have frequent recourse to the philosopher Alain Badiou’s theory of the event, and the logically possible ‘subjective responses’ to it, and

---

1 Sad to say, it is not. In any case, the Red House that Britten lived in is not on the coast.
Preface

for readers who are unfamiliar with the theory – which, though complex and multi-faceted, is not made useless by a fairly simple presentation – I shall give a brief summary of it here, where it may easily be referred to as the need arises. Badiou is a highly political philosopher, and a mathematically inclined one. For both reasons he is feared and loathed, and attempts are frequently made to ridicule his thinking. I shall discuss what he means by an event in Chapter 2, but what it occasions is three responses from assemblages that he calls ‘subjects’. Subjects are not individual persons, and so to speak not ‘things’ at all, but of course really, empirically, factually existing people like Beethoven or Galileo do become involved in the process of ‘subjectivation’. They do so by forming a body: in science and art, this is a ‘result’ of some kind (a law, theory, set of principles), or a work (symphony, concerto, sonata). The three subjects go by the names faithful subject, reactive subject, and obscure subject.²

The Faithful Subject

This 'revolutionary' subject:
1. discerns a truth in some kind of trace (e.g. the emancipation of dissonance)
2. forms part of a body which is committed to the instantiation of the eventual truth (e.g. some post-tonal musical works)
3. is an operation which produces a new present in which the truth will have been manifested (e.g. a world in which tonality is no longer the sole controlling principle in musical composition)

The present is the distinctive creation of the faithful subject. In science it will be a new enlightenment, manifested as a theory that can account for the new truth (heliocentrism, general relativity). In artworks it is a new intensity of expression, an artistic configuration enriched by the inbreaking of new possibilities for mediating expression and form (the emancipation of the dissonance emerging not as a mere artefact of convention but as a subjective necessity unfolding in a newly heightened drama within a body of musical works). The faithful subject is revolutionary because it exhibits a high degree of 'fidelity' to the truth. It subordinates the body entirely to the production of the present, heedless of the cost. The subordination of a body of artworks to the faithful production of a present from the trace of a truth can lead to ridicule or rejection (Beethoven's late quartets, Schoenberg's free atonal music after 1908, Stockhausen's Gesang der jünglinge). But more often than not it is met in the situation by a moderate reaction, a realistic response in the form of the second subjective operation.

The Reactive Subject

This 'realistic subject':
1. denies that the truth which it discerns in the trace is realistic
2. distances itself from the faithful subject as a means of denying the reality of the discerned truth
3. is an operation which produces an extinguished present in which the truth is accommodated to existing modes of understanding

The reaction does not come as an attempted reinstatement of the old and the abolition of the new; the reaction denies but it does not destroy, and it remains productive. The reactive subject is the majority response to an event. If in music the faithful subject is embodied in works which declare a new world of artistic communication, the reactive subject is embodied in works which adopt some of the new expressive possibilities but accommodate them to existing formal archetypes. The musical reactive subject in the period of modernism might recognize the expressive value of the emancipation of dissonance
as something which can enable a response to a contemporary new subjective necessity; but the extended tonality of the handed-down forms from the romantic period is not (as in the case of the faithful subject) reconstructed from the bottom up, emerging from the nature of the musical material itself. There is a heightened freedom, but not an emancipation, of melody and harmony, so that, for instance, a tonic chord might comfortably accommodate non-tonic elements. The new expressive intensity of the faithful subject is therefore directly referenced, perhaps on the surface of the music, only to be set aside, differentiated from the goals of the piece, so that the body of works does not submit to the same dangerous advocacy of the radical new present, and the reactive subject may enjoy some of the chic of progressiveness without any of the attendant dangers of losing an audience in the concert hall. Although the extinguished present of the reactive subject is still a production of something new (Badiou calls them ‘reactive novelties’), its energetic denial of the trace of the truth clears the way for the final subjective response.

The Obscure Subject

This ‘ideological subject’:

1. affirms and endorses that there is a hegemonic Body of supreme, transcendent power
2. flatly denies both that there is any validity at all in the trace and that it is legitimate for any body to affirm such a trace
3. is an operation which examines and destroys the new present brought into being by the faithful subject

The obscure subject conceives the creation of the present as altogether impossible, base, fallacious, and unacceptable for intellectual or moral reasons. Structurally it is recognized by its blank refusal of the present. In order to appeal to an uncontaminated, pre-evental form of appearance, the obscure subject proposes a pure and transcendent Body, that is to say a Body conceived as if it were natural and eternal, morally neutral, obviously ‘right’, and not a product of history or cultural relations of power (all of which claims are ideological). The assertion of this immaculate Body eradicates both the trace and the body of the faithful subject. So, the seventeenth-century trace of the truth of heliocentrism, and Galileo, the most famous part of the body that bore it, yielded an obscure response from Pope Urban VIII, whose Inquisition extracted a recantation under threat of torture and then placed the scientist under house arrest for the remaining decade of his life. The idea and its spokesperson are thus negated by the assertion of the Body, and the present of a new enlightenment is ‘occulted’ by the exigencies of the subjective operation. In
modernity, the obscure subject's principal goal has, time and again, in every sphere of human activity, been the maintenance of the influence of capital and the centuries-long process that has led us close to the commodification of everything: this is its fundamental ideological commitment, however much it may vary the means of achieving it. Thus one finds the obscure subject not only in the development from nineteenth-century 'trivial music' to twentieth-century 'popular music', or in the historically parallel shift in focus from sheet music to sound recording as the favoured commodity form, but also in the mechanization of compositional process. To a subject such as this, claims to transcendence and emancipation make absolutely no sense.

In this book I shall often locate Britten, his characters, his critics, and his early twenty-first-century receivers at different points on this theoretical map, so that I can draw out the political effects of certain apparently 'innocent' or 'meaningless' aesthetic and critical particulars.

Acknowledgements

As is always the case in the production of a book, many hands other than the author's have helped behind the scenes. I cannot recall every conversation that has spurred on a new thought, or which has enabled me to formulate a useful concrete example to help me to make an abstract point, and can only hope that, if I neglect to mention anyone who ought to have been credited, I will be forgiven. I do not blame them for any shortcomings that it will definitely have. (Blame those on the Tory government, which have been disgusting and outraging me throughout the period of composition.)

I owe particular thanks to Jess Williams and Lucy Caton, who provided invaluable help as I drafted the funding application which enabled me to find the time, at last, to write this book. I am also grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and to members of its Peer Review Council (even the grumpy third reviewer), for judging my project worthy of funding. I thank the Music Department at Royal Holloway, University of London, and successive Heads of Department Stephen Downes and Julie Brown, for granting me permission to apply in the first place, and to give me the space to write the book up in the latter stages of the funding period. Daria Wallace (at Lebrecht), Mike Williams (at Boosey), and Bruce MacRae (at Faber) were wonderfully helpful with the cover image and the permissions for music examples. Kate Brett, Eilidh Burrett, Lisa Sinclair, and Barbara Docherty at CUP were extremely generous with their time and advice, and made the entire process from commissioning to publication a breeze.
Preface

I am grateful to Nick Clark at the Britten Pears Foundation for making researching at the new archive by the Red House such an excellent experience, and to Erica Wren, a volunteer at the archive, who told me things about Britten that the archives alone do not clarify. For conversations about Britten and other things, which helped me to think better thoughts for the book, for offering encouragement, and in several cases for reading parts of the monster, I issue thanks as heartfelt as they are alphabetical to Robert Adlington, Seth Brodsky, Sarah Collins, Lindsay Edkins, Nicole Grimes, Björn Heile, Julian Horton, Michael J. Kelly, Lawrence Kramer, Elizabeth Eva Leach, Jeremy Llewellyn, Emily MacGregor, Diana McVeagh, Chris Mark, Ian Pace, Arthur Rose, Philip Rupprecht, Emily X. X. Tan, Roy Westbrook, and Charles Wilson. For keeping me on my toes and out of trouble while writing it, as well as for reading and mercilessly criticizing parts of the book, I thank the PhD students I supervised while on sabbatical: Oliver Chandler, Rebecca Day, William Fourie, Michael Graham, Christopher Kimbell, Rachel McCarthy, Nathan Mercieca, Sarah Moynihan, and Frankie Perry. Among fellow speakers at the 'British Music and Europe in the Age of Brexit' conference held at Duke University in November 2017, I particularly benefited from discussions with Byron Adams, Christopher Chowrimootoo, Daniel M. Grimley, Imani Mosely, Nina Penner, and Danielle Ward-Griffin. I also thank my colleagues in the Music Department at RHUL, and especially Geoff Baker, Mark Berry, Helen Deeming, and Julian Johnson, for being wonderful colleagues, great friends, and always stimulating interlocutors on music, politics, and philosophy. I also thank Duncan Ferguson for persuading me, years ago, to develop an interest in Britten in the first place.

Finally, for reading and offering invaluable critical comments on everything in this book, for the generous outpouring of his immense learning both in print and in person (where it can be laced with even greater wit), and for years of friendship and support, I thank Arnold Whittall, redundant as it may seem, given that without his contribution musicological scholarship on music since 1900 would be more or less unthinkable.