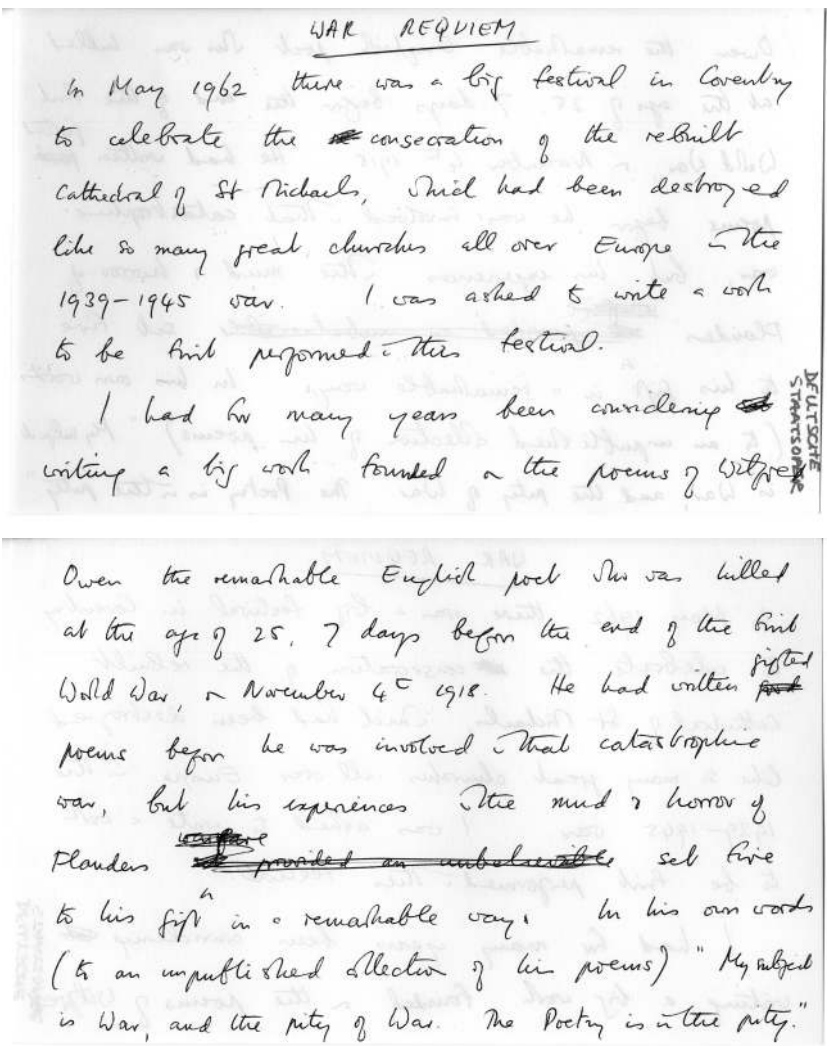
Prologue



WAR REQUIEM

In May 1962 there was a big festival in Coventry to celebrate the consecration of the rebuilt Cathedral of St Michaels, which had been destroyed like so many great churches all over Europe in the 1939–1945 war. I was asked to write a work to be first performed at the festival.

I had for many years been considering writing a big work founded on the poems of Wilfred Owen the remarkable English poet who was killed at the age of 25, 7 days before the end of the first World War, on November 4th 1918. He had written gifted poems before he was involved in that catastrophic war, but his experiences in the mud & horror of Flanders provided an unbelievable set fire to his gift in a remarkable way. In his own words (in an unpublished collection of his poems) "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity."

DEUTSCHE STAATSOPER

Figure P.1 Britten, account of the *War Requiem* for the Deutsche Staatsoper. Courtesy of Britten Pears Arts Archive, *GB-ALb*

Positioning Britten

Vicki P. Stroeher and Justin Vickers

In Benjamin Britten (1913–76), we find a man who occupied vastly different roles within his life as a composer. In the mid-1930s, he developed from a young, 'clever' wunderkind with a bewilderingly large catalogue of juvenilia into a professional composer of piece work for the GPO Film Unit, produced alongside the emerging corpus of his first 'serious' compositions. In the early 1940s, he became an expat in America, fulfilling a commission for the operetta *Paul Bunyan*, written with W. H. Auden for Upper West Side college student-artists at Columbia University while continuing to pursue major commissions and performances. Acceding to a pull to return to his homeland in wartime England, he made public with his opera *Peter Grimes* a decidedly nativist intention to 'restore to the musical setting of the English language a brilliance, freedom, and vitality that have been curiously rare since the death of Purcell'.[1] The work launched him in 1945 into the international pantheon of composers. He composed and arranged a body of works that intentionally courted an association with Purcell thereafter. He wrote a canon of song cycles that would be enviable as the product of any 'song composer', all the while producing a string of operas – including a new genre of 'chamber opera'. His seminal *War Requiem* follows in their dramatic wake, as do his Church Parables and the five Canticles. But, although Britten's focus was on the voice, he did not shy away from composing for instruments, including orchestra, string quartet, and the solo violoncello works for Rostropovich. With his creative output, he resisted – if not intentionally – any sort of neat categorisation into a single niche. Yet he developed and cultivated an exploration of his own *oeuvre* that remained true to his artistic ideals. Unswayed by compositional fashion, he absorbed into his musical dialectic aspects of the world

[1] Benjamin Britten, '*Peter Grimes*', in PK*BM*, 50.

around him – and the musico-historical world which preceded him – folding these keenly personal utterances into his ongoing desire for communion with the audience. And although there exist moments when Britten's distinct language may have rhymed or harmonised with the works of his contemporaries, such instances, if rather complex, were never entirely pervasive.

Positioning Britten within the twentieth-century world he occupied is a task that falls now to history and to scholars. The inquiry, in Britten's case, can draw on an unusually broad field of archival resources. With access now at an unprecedented zenith, scholars may choose to engage with the vast primary sources held in the Britten Pears Arts Archives in Aldeburgh, Suffolk. The holdings include compositional sketches and drafts, autograph manuscripts, fair copies and revisions; reams of correspondence and the internal memoranda of the institution Britten built around him; and, reels of audio and video recordings of that very industry. The archive also preserves an increasingly comprehensive collection of programmes and newspaper documentation of critical reception across a lifetime of performances of Britten's music. From the archives came the foundational volumes to which any Britten scholar must turn. These include the essential contributions of Donald Mitchell, Philip Reed, and Mervyn Cooke's six volumes of selected letters to and from the composer, replete with introductory essays and richly detailed footnotes; John Evans's edition of the diaries of young Britten through 1938; and more recently, the complete 365 extant letters printed in *My Beloved Man: The Letters of Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears* edited by Vicki P. Stroeher, Nicholas Clark, and Jude Brimmer. In 1999, Paul Banks edited *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*. In the 2000s, the then Britten–Pears Foundation began creation of the online Britten Thematic Catalogue, a database of all of Britten's extant works, including juvenilia. As it relates to 'hearing' Britten's voice and reading his multivalent perspectives on a myriad of topics, Paul Kildea's edited collection of *Britten on Music* is invaluable. Donald Mitchell's and John Evans's *Pictures from a Life* and Lucy Walker's centenary volume *Britten in Pictures* offer more personal pictorial glimpses into the composer's life, just as Judith LeGrove's *A Musical Eye: The Visual World of Britten and Pears* speaks generously of the couple's passion for art collecting and patronage. The biographies of Kildea, Neil Powell, Christopher Mark, David Matthews, Humphrey Carpenter, and Michael Kennedy each offer distinctive perspectives on a life rich in sources and cultural context.

Among the bibliographic citations for this volume and throughout the essays, readers will find a full complement of the voices in Britten scholarship today. Sources contemporary with Britten are a prominent feature of the framing contexts contributed by individual chapter authors. Inside these pages, one can often read and engage with Britten's era contemporaneously, using what would now be considered primary source materials that reflect the thinking of his time. For example, published sources by writers such as F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, or T. S. Eliot, reflect efforts in the service of a national cultural revival following the upheaval of the first and second world wars.[2] Britten was at the forefront of such efforts and looked to find his own peculiarly English identity. Additionally, a number of the books in Britten's own collection – held jointly with Peter Pears – dot the landscape, as do autobiographies, memoirs, and other 'tell-all' books by the composer's friends and colleagues (and former friends and colleagues). As with any work penned long after the events narrated, one recognises the motivations and biases of the individuals involved. Britten was notoriously rigid in the performance and pursuit of his art and could be rather quick-tempered with others lacking the effort he desired, or indeed if they disagreed openly or contradicted his opinions (publicly or privately). Just as significantly, one recognises Britten's own predilections for 'corpsing' those who were no longer deemed useful to him; this, too, is covered in the pages that follow. Without casting any aspersions on the composer, his fellow performers, working colleagues, or friends, we only wish to caution the reader against taking any account as 'gospel'. If the retrieval of so many contexts for an artist's *oeuvre* reveals anything, it is surely that careful consideration and close reading of these valuable primary sources are in order.

An expanse of resources can be found in the volumes that were published during the composer's lifetime, some of which received input from Britten himself. These include Donald Mitchell's and Hans Keller's *Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on His Works from a Group of Specialists* (1953) and Anthony Gishford's collection *Tribute to Benjamin Britten on His Fiftieth Birthday* (1963). To further mark Britten's fiftieth birthday, Boosey & Hawkes published *Benjamin Britten: A Complete Catalogue of His Works*. For the composer's sixtieth, *Benjamin Britten: A Complete*

[2] F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1933); T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1949).

Catalogue of His Published Works was released jointly by Boosey & Hawkes and Faber Music. Both catalogues were edited by Donald Mitchell, the composer's publisher and friend.[3] In these two instances, Britten was able to annotate corrections and deliver them directly to Mitchell. Eric Walter White, a long-time advocate for the composer's interests within the Arts Council, also completed initial studies of the composer's works and biography.[4] White's considerable expansion of his first two offerings became *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas* (1970), covering all of the operas preceding *Death in Venice*. The draft for White's last volume was commented upon candidly by the composer himself in marginalia and conversations with the author. Thus there exists, within the small contribution of early Britten scholarship, work that benefited from direct communication with its subject. (This can, naturally, direct readers towards – or away from – 'court'-approved topics of coverage.) The only other pair of consistent discussions of Britten's music – apart from considerable coverage in contemporary journals and periodicals – were the large-format liner notes accompanying LP releases of Britten's recordings and the increasingly informative notes or essays found in the Aldeburgh Festival programme books. Offering quite distinct treatment, music critics writing about Britten's music leading up to and concurrent with the premieres of his works often explored the works at length.

In conceiving this volume, we were rewarded by the richness of Britten's engagement with his contemporaries in music, art, literature, and film, British musical institutions, royal and governmental entities, and religious organisations. Moreover, his own entrepreneurial spirit led to both the founding of the interconnected English Opera Group and the Aldeburgh Festival of Music and the Arts. Britten possessed a strong historicist streak, but he also fundamentally understood that connections to a British musical past greatly enhanced his own work and reputation. He engaged consistently with his musical predecessors and the nation's folk music despite an early anti-isolationist stance. It was Vaughan

[3] It is notable that both of Britten's publishers – past and present – came together for the publication of this catalogue. On rivalries between Boosey & Hawkes and Faber Music, see Nicholas Clark, 'From Boosey & Hawkes to Faber Music: Britten Seeks a "Composer's Place"', in SV*BBS*, 405–28. Paul Banks edited the more comprehensive *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works* (Aldeburgh: The Britten–Pears Library, 1999), marking what will likely be the last print catalogue for the composer despite its still-incomplete nature.

[4] Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: A Sketch of His Life and Works* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1948; second edition revised and enlarged, 1954). This volume was also published in German editions.

Williams who wrote in 1931 while grappling with the subject of an English musical heritage: 'If our music is of any value it must strike roots down into its native soil'.[5] Britten – ever more inclined to his rootedness in the Suffolk countryside after a brief sojourn in the United States – was in good company. His English identity can be found in the music of Purcell; in the sometimes edgy, sometimes subjective, and, nearly always, political poetry of W. H. Auden; in the 'hard' pastoral writings of George Crabbe and Thomas Hardy; in the metaphysical poems of John Donne and George Herbert; in the quasi-religious poetry of T. S. Eliot and Christopher Smart; and in the cultural products of the English people. It is a complicated identity, full of contradictions and incongruities in his music, his choices, and his personality.

Despite these seeming incompatibilities – and perhaps further contributing to them – one of Britten's chief aims was declared with the 1947 announcement of the formation of the English Opera Group: 'We believe the time has come when England, which has never had a tradition of native opera, but has always depended on a repertory of foreign works, can create its own operas'.[6] The obvious holes in this statement range from the self-evident to the self-serving, yet also reveal the intentions of a composer and his co-founders – artist and designer John Piper and author and director Eric Crozier – to establish the very thing that they needed and then trumpet its presence. A significant corpus of English opera notwithstanding, Britten & Co. established with this neo-historical proclamation – whether good or bad, inherently right or wrong – a precedent for themselves, a claim to which they could point in all future publicity. And while the English Opera Group would tour the nation and the globe, their territory was not urban, but rather the Saxon fishing village of Aldeburgh, where, in 1948, Britten, Pears, and Crozier founded the Aldeburgh Festival. The coastal and inland locales throughout Suffolk formed the much-beloved venues that hosted performances from the most intimate to the grandest counterparts, and every conceivable experiment in between. For nearly the first two decades, the Festival contented itself with these sites, including the Jubilee Hall in Aldeburgh, which was improved incrementally until its 1959 expansion in time for the first performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The great journey towards a permanent home for the Festival ended in 1967, with the architectural

[5] Ralph Vaughan Williams, 'Introduction to *English Music*', in *Vaughan Williams on Music*, ed. David Manning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 61–2.
[6] See *LFAL* III, L537n4: 243–4.

restoration and establishment of the Snape Maltings Concert Hall out of nineteenth-century industrial buildings.

As editors, we collated a broadly conceived array of contexts to offer an historically motivated illumination for discrete yet interlocking aspects surrounding the composer's life, music, and work. We approached his milieu from vantage points that could adequately represent the fullness of Britten's position in the twentieth century. The five major areas of inquiry are: his relationships with Peter Pears and with his close friends, mentors, and colleagues; musical life in Britain; his interactions with previous and contemporary generations of composers; his choreographer, librettists, stage designers, and directors; and lastly, the sociocultural, religious, and political era in which he lived and composed. This volume is not comprehensive. However, the ensuing chapters are flint, of sorts, to spark the reader's own exploration of each of the varied contexts surrounding Britten presented herein. The composer was occupied with groundbreaking projects that intersected with a remarkable range of individuals, institutions, and philosophical and ideological tenets. We have endeavoured to capture as many of these as possible, knowing well that some topics may have gone untouched.

One trend that emerged in the following chapters concerns the composer's self-perceived place and deep sense of responsibility to society and all that entails. After having met W. H. Auden in July 1935, the composer became increasingly aware of the social responsibility of those involved in the cultural life of the nation. At the time, Auden held strong views regarding the symbiotic and psychological relationship between creator and consumer, writing (with John Garrett): 'A universal art can only be the product of a community united in sympathy, sense of worth, and aspiration; and it is improbable that the artist can do his best except in such a society'.[7] Art was to be a truth-teller, that '[taught] man to unlearn hatred and learn love'.[8] Yet Auden later abandoned his position, reaching the conclusion that cultural products had little to offer: 'Artistic truth is incorrigible – for what is, is – but of no practical value'.[9] Britten, however, never abandoned his sense of moral responsibility as an artist nor his desire to see music enjoy an elevated position in England. He

[7] W. H. Auden, 'Introduction to *The Poet's Tongue*', reprinted in *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse*, vol. 1: 1926–1938, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 107.
[8] Auden, 'Psychology and Art To-day', in *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse*, vol. 1: 104.
[9] Auden, 'Lecture Notes', reprinted in *Prose*, vol. 2: 1939–1948, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

wanted to effect change in the way that music and musicians were viewed by audiences and institutions. Britten sought to sacralise the role of the composer's relationship to society as a human being in the service of his other 'fellow creatures'.[10] But even as the composer and artist gave to society, there was a reciprocal need. As composer, Britten felt strongly that he was writing music for use, to be performed and heard, 'that his art […] be accepted as an essential part of human activity, and human expression'. As artist, he '[demanded] that he […] be accepted as a genuine practitioner of that art and consequently of value to the community'.[11]

Writing in 1999, Mervyn Cooke noted, 'it remains an uncomfortable fact that – in his native country, at least – a small but vociferous body of commentators still seeks to denigrate Britten's self-evidently significant artistic achievements' and observed the 'persistence of […] of bigoted views' of Britten and his music long after the composer's death and in light of his firmly established national and international reputation.[12] During the centenary of the composer's birth in 2013, these debates were reignited in the press and fanned by the court of public opinion on social media and in online comments. An editorial in *The Guardian* on the hundredth anniversary of Britten's birth which sought to establish his credentials as 'a man of the left' garnered numerous comments, both positive and negative.[13] Although a few observers defended Britten's musical stature or contrarily professed not to understand the appeal of his music, the vast majority relitigated titillating allegations about Britten's personality and biography. No stranger to backhanded talk, the composer would have been aggrieved that some discussions of his music had taken a back seat to gossip. Yet his repulsion to the subject was presciently foregrounded in *Peter Grimes*, as the borough sings: 'Now is gossip put on trial' (Act II, sc. i). The notion that his music – so self-consciously written for society – might have been mired in controversy would surely have set the composer on his heels.

Now in Britten's second century, his music continues to be performed and his perspectives, works, and relationships remain the subject of academic research. Britten always esteemed what he referred to as a 'holy triangle' in relation to music: the concomitant marriage of listener,

[10] 'The Moral Responsibility of the Artist Towards His Fellow Man', in PK*BM*, 311.
[11] BB*AA*, 16.
[12] Mervyn Cooke, 'Introduction', in MC*CCBB*, [1].
[13] 'Benjamin Britten at 100: Voice of the Century', *Guardian*, 22 November 2013. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/22/benjamin-britten-100-centenary (accessed 2 February 2021).

performer, and composer. He prized the 'conversations' that take place in the ritualised spaces of performance and recital halls and in the private and public places used for the purpose of making music. Britten, who placed a special value on 'occasional' music, doubtless would have been pleased to know that his works still find resonance with society today. Important scholarly volumes and contributions are yet to be made – some imminently forthcoming – on a broad range of subjects. Neither Britten's music nor Britten scholarship are completed.

Figure P.2 Britten and Pears in Brooklyn Heights, New York, United States (c. 1940). Photographer: unidentified. Courtesy of Britten Pears Arts Archive, *GB-ALb*