



Suffolk tale: Britten at home in Snape in 1946

BOOKS

Cruel intentions

The ruthlessness of a visionary composer.

By Alexandra Harris

Benjamin Britten: a Life in the 20th Century

Paul Kildea

Allen Lane, 688pp, £30

Biography, at the moment, is the new history. A series of biographies in the past few years has viewed the 20th century through the lives and through the eyes of their subjects. Susie Harries justified the sheer enormosity of her life of Nikolaus Pevsner by couching her book as a cultural and political history of modern Britain (and Germany), seen through the prism of one man. Ray Monk did something similar with J Robert Oppenheimer, who had a knack of being “inside the centre” of the century’s great events.

It’s not surprising that Benjamin Britten’s new biographer should want to present his life of Britten as a portrait of a great historical figure intricately connected to his times. Britten’s stock has never been higher, and now, in his centenary year, he is being hailed

as a kind of national hero. The Britten100 website lists no fewer than 1,304 events being staged in celebration; that the fanfares are sounding from Asia to South America establishes Britten as a major international export. He has become a phenomenon almost on the scale of Dickens. As we put concert dates in the diary with relish, many will also want to think carefully about who Britten was, what he has come to stand for and why he matters so much.

There have been calls for a new biography for some time. Britten asked his friend and publisher Donald Mitchell to write a life but Mitchell threw his efforts into the meticulous editing of the diaries and letters. Humphrey Carpenter took over the biographical brief and published his energetic, compellingly

readable book in 1992. Soon, however, critics were pointing to errors and omissions or simply asking for another version of the Britten story to weigh against Carpenter’s.

Twenty years on, the Australian conductor and scholar Paul Kildea, who has served as head of music for the Aldeburgh Festival and as artistic director of Wigmore Hall, is well placed to offer a reassessment. His wise, cautious, challenging book takes issue with the version of Britten in which the composer storms darkly on the margins of the world “at odds with the society in which he finds himself”, as Peter Pears once said of Britten’s best known operatic creation, *Peter Grimes*.

Undoubtedly, Britten was partly Grimes, conscious of being ostracised for both his pacifism and homosexuality. Yet Kildea takes care to show how far Britten’s “art of dissent” came from inside the Establishment. Here was a man who wanted a good seat in the abbey for the coronation, had tea with the royals and appointed himself composer laureate by writing birthday tributes for the Queen Mum. Those who described him in Aldeburgh as a king at his own court used a waspish turn of phrase but Britten liked the analogy, affirming that in former times he would have been a court musician. Not that he confined himself to court. Britten despaired of British musical life as he found it in the 1930s and wanted to change the cultural make-up of a nation. Kildea shows how he achieved that feat.

Part of Kildea’s move away from the mythologised man of corrosive secrets is his emphasis on the practicalities of Britten’s working life – his routines, his methods of collaboration, his dealings with recording studios, his finances. The finances are much in evidence, with regular income summaries provided. At times, it feels as if this biography leaves one better equipped to fill out a retrospective tax return for Britten than to discuss his inner life. It is hard not to skip through the long paragraphs giving breakdowns for his gross earnings, details of agents’ commissions on recital fees, expenses offsetting profit.

And yet it matters that, as a young man living off meagre fees, Britten never asked for help from his well-off mother. He needed to work and to be independent, taking whatever commissions came his way. Later, he could pick and choose but his work ethic remained fierce and there was no relaxing into prosperity. He ran his life, says Kildea, “as he would have run a farm or small business”. Retaining his “impecunious mentality”, Britten chose to live with polished austerity to the end of his life. The wealth he accumulated did not much change his material circumstances but it gave him confidence. Money was an affirmation that in some way he was right.

Britten's journey to the centre of British public life was amazingly rapid and does not seem to have been much hampered by the chattering prejudice that followed wherever he went. He was the favourite composer of the nascent BBC, which aired his work so often that people started to complain. Treating his public role with utmost seriousness, Britten worked avidly to increase professionalism in the industry, to bring high-quality performances to wide audiences and particularly to involve children in music-making of unprecedented ambition. Who else would have scored major works involving mugs slung on a piece of string as an exciting new kind of child-friendly percussion?

Britten valued chamber opera, a form he pretty much invented, for practical as well as aesthetic reasons: these smaller productions could be toured to venues that could never have hosted a full-scale orchestra. His gift, writes Kildea, "was to change the way music is thought about and presented in the country of his birth". This work started early, in the wartime tours he and Pears organised for the Committee for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts; and later, as his fame grew, it was never sidelined.

Work is the great story of Britten's life. While other artists were investigating the subcultures of 1940s London, Britten was in Suffolk, composing. During his few months living in the now legendary Brooklyn house shared by W H Auden, Carson McCullers and the stripper Gypsy Rose Lee (who was busy with her book *The G-String Murders*), Britten despaired at the chaos. That one dabbling with bohemian life was enough to put him off for ever.

His sister Beth remembered the well-ordered intensity with which he worked on *Grimes* in Snape. He was "at his studio desk by 9am at the latest, remaining until 1pm; a walk after lunch, during which more of the music was mapped in his head and sometimes sung, to the amusement of passing villagers; three more hours at his desk". Coming home from a trip to Australia, Britten prepared to get back to his strictly organised life: "My destiny is to be in harness and to die in harness."

Kildea gets as close as he can to the genesis of the operas: the painstaking work on *Grimes*, the rapid drafting of *Billy Budd*, the audacious pencil notes in a Penguin copy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the manuscript for Gustav von Aschenbach's recitative "like plainsong notation in a medieval psalter". It's clear that Britten was ruthless in the cause of his work. His biographers have long addressed the dismaying subject of his "corpses" – Britten's word (according to the vengefully embittered Eric Crozier) for the series of people with whom he collaborated

and then unceremoniously rejected. Montagu Slater was dropped; E M Forster was told he didn't understand music; Auden had a letter returned to him in shreds. Myfanwy Piper must have been fearless: by the time she was asked to write the libretto for *Owen Wingrave*, she might justifiably have felt like Anne of Cleves, wondering how violently she would meet her end. There was to be no rift in this case but Britten's friends knew about his capacity for cruelty and Britten himself – insistently exploring the workings of cruelty in his operas – knew most of all.

It is probably not the corpses that will trouble readers most in this centenary year. In these times of deep anxiety about paedophilia, people will ask inevitably – and rightly – "What about the boys?" Fortunately, the public inquiry into Britten's past has already taken place. Carpenter was assiduous in tracking down the ageing men who had once been admired by Britten and questioning them about their experience. There was no suggestion from any quarter that Britten had ever interfered physically with a boy. John Bridcut's superb 2006 book *Britten's Children* considered the more troubling aspects alongside the brilliance of Britten's work with children and the inspiration he provided for thousands. Kildea does not have much to add but, in helping us towards more nuanced understandings of Britten's infinitely subtle, questing, questioning operas, he helps us to think again about Tadzio and Aschenbach, Miles and Quint, Grimes and the nameless apprentice.

Kildea's verbal explorations of the music are done with level-headed sensitivity leavened by a quirky lightness of touch and he knows that criticism can give meaning to the overall applause. Shifts are caught with nice economy, such as the move from the "plump" *Gloriana* to the "fine-featured" *Winter Words*; musical essays appear on Britten's use of fugue, his responses to Purcell, his "night works" in the 1960s. For all his careful analyses, Kildea

is not above calling the vocal solos in *Cantata Academica* simply "scrumptious".

As you might expect from a practising conductor, Kildea writes a good deal about performance. The idiosyncrasies of particular recitals and stagings, the electric mood in a concert hall, the kind of clapping at the end – all get high billing here. What was it like to hear Britten's first public performance with Pears at Wigmore Hall in 1942 or to walk into a rehearsal just before the opening of *Peter Grimes*? Testing acoustics, we go from the "glossy yet precise" sound of Snape Maltings to the "boomy splendour" of Long Melford Church where Britten recorded Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* for the BBC.

Conductors, naturally, come in for scrutiny, with Kildea lamenting the move away from the style Britten represented towards "monumental, hawkish, superhuman" music-making in an age of stereophonic sound. Gradually, he builds a picture of what Britten most valued in performance: "There had to be space around a chord, and harmony had to be allowed to speak with its own rhetoric. He appreciated an almost feminine sensibility in performance, in which even the smallest detail was attended to, the architecture of any piece underlined cumulatively, not through grand and empty gestures."

Britten worked obsessively right to the end. Told that he needed urgent heart surgery, he waved the doctors away and told them he must finish *Death in Venice* first. Frail, exhausted, driven by imperative, he wrote the death songs of Aschenbach. According to Kildea, when at last his heart was opened up, it was found to be ravaged by syphilis, a disease he had probably been carrying since 1940. (The cardiologist who cared for Britten during this period has recently cast doubt on this revelation.) Wondering how far we can talk about "late style" in Britten and how far his situation was comparable with that of the syphilitic Schubert writing his extraordinary late sonatas, Kildea poses the unanswerable question: "Would he have gone on composing for years with the skill, vision and youthfulness exhibited in these late works, or was it only his clattery old heart and the portents of mortality that so focused his mind?" Britten's days were numbered but, as we approach his 100th birthday in November, he looks likely to become one of art's immortals. There is nothing simple about the legacy of this troubled, touchy, nervy, visionary man but that is precisely why it will endure. ●

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Sea change: Britten's house in Aldeburgh, 1949

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