

Eric Sams

Benjamin Britten, 1913-1976

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"I'm sorry you had to die/ To make me sorry/ You're not here now", said Kingsley Amis of his father. That must be even truer of those father-figures, the national heroes. They can never be properly esteemed in their lifetimes, because public applause must await the final curtain. Then comes a massive and fulsome funeral ovation complete with eulogies designed to compensate for their own previous absence. That is why obituarists are not an oath, and obsequies tend to be obsequious.

For Lord Britten the time began out of joint. He was born just before the first world war, and started on his campaign as a composer just before the second. Then his earliest sorties became caught in a crossfire from Right and Left. When his collaboration with Auden, *Our Hunting Fathers*, was first performed in 1938 it seems to have puzzled or scandalised the actual hunting fathers in the audience, the squires from the shires who approved only of the title. By following Auden to America early in 1939 and staying there until 1942, Britten courted expulsion not only from every right-thinking men's club but also by the Left Book Club. Much had been expected of a young progressive who had composed a *Ballad of Heroes* in honour of



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British members of the International Brigade. To be pacific from across the Atlantic was a disappointing reaction, probably prompting ironic allusion to another early title: *Advance, Democracy (unaccompanied)*. His convictions were upheld by a tribunal as sincere according to their lights. But lesser lights, especially those who were more combatant if less competent, were decidedly put out. Such hostilities continued after the war, as Britten became increasingly prolific, prominent and prosperous.

in all this, the innocent victim closely resembled the heroes of the musico-dramatic works by which he will be remembered. Like them too he was flayed skinless by his own vulnerability. Biographers have testified to his long memory for real or fancied slights; a thoughtless remark or a trifling censure could nettle and sting him for a lifetime. Elgar had to endure the same purgatory of the super-sensitised and dedicated artist in an uncaring or hostile environment; it was like being pegged out on an ant-hill. One cause was the continuing dearth of firm-rooted musical tradition. Another was the propensity of the populace (as already pointed out by Pepys) to be always laughing and jeering at anything that seemed strange. Serious English opera, and the company it kept, must have seemed very strange indeed. The predictable outcome was a certain estrangement from the Establishment, both musical and general. And of course there was a defensive reaction from Britten and his entourage, with black looks, books and perhaps even listings. In the ensuing skirmishes the cutting and bruising were fairly superficial. But the decisive factor was surely that Britten and his music were almost invariably in the friendliest of alliances with ordinary music-lovers, regardless of critical or other factions. At first sight this seems surprising. Britten's art avowedly expresses human feeling; but its relation to the game of life as commonly played is very far from evident. Compare personal experience to a round of solo in which fate deals out the cards in the four customary suits: love, money, friends and work (or as one might say, hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades). On this analogy, Britten is not so much playing the game as telling fortunes, with a

markedly different and indeed wicked pack of cards, composed of the Beaten Boy, the Fool, the Hanged Sailor, and so on, These were really the same card, which kept on turning up, as if forced or palmed, throughout the musico-dramatic works. Their protagonists always embody agonies; they are regularly raped, corrupted, derided, deserted, drowned, whipped and even pickled, in ways that seem to invite parody. No wonder one of them sings "Please don't send me up again". All their features wear the same expression of injured innocence. The unsympathetic analyst might infer a case-history of sado-masochistic Narcissism. But the discerning opera-goer has always known that the musical utterance is brave, generous, outgoing, inspiring and durable.

Its typical lyric style, with dissonance and thin-textured scoring, often featuring solo instruments, and with special emphasis on percussion, is almost a sonorous image of individual emotion standing alone in a harsh hairshirt of penitential sheet. The composer's voice does indeed speak of pain or evil; but what it has to say can be construed as good news for modern man. First it announces that contemporary music can be immediately accessible to all; its themes and idioms are recognisably continuous with the great music of the past. Secondly, and more surprisingly, it can unite classes and nations as well as centuries and generations. The reason is surely that all Britten's art, whether sacred or secular, is essentially religious and specifically Christian in inspiration. Has there been any greater Protestant composer since Bach and Handel?

Naturally Britten was a born Anglican; and the theology of his operas is that of C. S. Lewis. Distress and tension are necessary preludes to peace and release. Pain is not merely salutary but actively Salvationist; it is (as Lewis said, in his own sonorous metaphor), "the megaphone through which God shouts at a deaf world". So the great Britten scores help to pierce the oto-sclerosis of moral nerve-fibre. Affliction is portrayed as beneficial to the suffering hero because it leads to submission of the self and hence to a state of grace. It is also beneficial to the other characters in the drama, because it arouses their compassion. The audience can derive and enjoy both these benefits, and is thus twice blessed. The whole performance, stage and auditorium, is a microcosm of the real world.

Such an analysis might at least help to explain the observed gamut of reactions from flat rejection to joyous acceptance, with every possible overtone of dissent and schism, even among adherents. What cannot be denied is Britten's dominion in space and time, greater than that of any other British composer. Like religion, it extend from the universal to the individual. Britten has the widest range of verbal sources of inspiration, drawn from all languages, all styles, all periods. Similarly, he has also the widest range of musical sources and resources. To take only one example, his own vocal writing is remote and even alien from the Lied tradition; yet of that tradition he is an absolute master, as his records as an accompanist prove. Even the great Poulenc said, "*Après Ben je renonce à jouer Schubert*". He is thus an internationally acknowledged figure. But he also represents nationhood and community. The people are ubiquitous in his opera plots and choruses, his folksong strains, traditional influences and popular melodies. The music creates and serves its own Sunday school of instruction and delight for the young, its own community centre of festival and jubilee. Above all it celebrates individual friendship and love.

With so much life left in so much music there can be no question of speaking of its composer in the past tense. On the contrary: he is now all future. From the day of his death the world will begin in earnest to celebrate his birthdays.