

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

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It is difficult to divorce the man from his music. There are those who actually believe that if the music is good, so is the man; some go even further and object to any criticism of a composer whose music they admire and, blinded by their own opinions, or prejudice, they will not countenance any evidence of weakness in their musical heroes.

And this intransigence is hypocritical. When a 'favourite composer' is shown to be an immoral and a thoroughly unpleasant character, or if his work is justly criticised for its technical, mechanical, musical or structural faults, some will launch counter attacks refusing to believe the truth. And their attacks are usually ill-informed, academically flawed and false. I have heard 'dedicated music-lovers' censure Bartók, Berg and Stravinsky and other 'moderns' as 'spiky, tuneless, discordant rubbish'. Furthermore, when incontrovertible flaws are proved among the works of their 'revered' composers any purveyor of such truth is savaged.



There are very few works of Britten that I value. Before I knew anything about his personal life I did not like his music. But he was, without doubt, the rudest, most arrogant, conceited and mendacious egotist I, and many others, have ever met. His list of friends rapidly diminished as more people came to realise what he was really like. And, by that, I do not refer to his homosexuality and pederasty, although these are worrying features since so much of his work is sadistically homosexual and also about sexual love an adult male has for a boy and this obsession becomes wearisome.

Our Hunting Fathers Op 8 of 1936 was declared to be his first masterpiece. The words are by Auden and Britten himself and the work is usually introduced innocently as portraying man's relationship with animals. But Britten used to refer to this work as advocating bestiality the next and more exciting stage up from homosexuality – his words, not mine. The awful noises that the singer makes represents a man, or woman, having an orgasm with an animal! Elisabeth Soderstrom recorded this work but when she discovered the real meaning she was horrified!

In 1939 Britten wrote a work for piano and orchestra called Young Apollo based on a full frontal nude of this handsome young man. I quote Britten's words. In his garden he had a sculpture of naked Apollo and used to say, "I like what Apollo has got!"

The Serenade for tenor, horn and strings dates from 1943. We asked Britten to explain why he used this set of performers. He replied, "The tenor is a male singer and the horn represents the penis of another!"

The Rape of Lucretia dates from 1946 and was written for Kathleen Ferrier to sing the title role. It is based on Shakespeare's work of 1594 and tells the story of Lucretia being raped by Sextus Tarquinius son of Tarquin, king of Rome. Lucretia was the wife of Collatinus one of the king's aristocratic retainers. After this violation Lucretia commits suicide and her body is paraded. This results in a full scale revolt against the Tarquins which conflict eventually founded the Roman Empire.

This work was written to hide Britten's homosexuality which, of course, in those days was a crime!

The Canticle 1, My beloved is mine of 1947 is another sexual work from Britten's pen.

More disturbing is Britten's opera *Billy Budd* based on the novel by Hermann Melville which was not published until 1921, thirty years after the author's death. Billy is an illegitimate boy liked by the crew of the HMS *Bellipotent* (that name could have sexual overtones) and is a lovely handsome boy lured into the cabin of Captain Vere for a private intimate session along with John Claggart as well. They would share him. It is all about pederasty.

Britten really fancied beautiful boys. He had them at his home, swam with them and everyone was always in the nude. He abused several and cajoled other boys, usually pubescents to have anal sex with him. He physically hurt many of them in this process. He read of choirboys giving an early performance of a major work by J C Bach which, apparently, was humorous, because they laughed so much that they wet themselves. Britten wanted to conduct this work to reproduce the same effect and when asked why he answered, "Well you know where boys' wee comes from, don't you?"

He once said to some students, including myself, that he sometimes went to church to see the choirboys' 'pretty faces' and to contemplate what was under their cassocks.

He slept with many boys including David Hemming who sang the role of Miles in *The Turn of the Screw*. Britten would say that he only slept with these boys because they were afraid of the dark. When Hemmings voice broke and this was in a performance of *The Turn of the Screw* he finished with him.

Britten wrote explicit love letters to boys including Wolf Scherchen, the son of the great conductor Hermann Scherchen. He would write at the end of the letter of his sexual desire for them, gives lots of kisses and tell the recipient to destroy the letter.

In 1952 he set another canticle *Abraham and Isaac* but his interest was not in the Biblical account of Abraham being prepared to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice but the relationship between an adult man and a boy!

The opera *The Turn of the Screw* is based on Henry James's play. The opera dates from 1954 and while many will say that James's work is a ghost story it is really about a man called Quint who is dead and wants to come back to earth so he can have sex with the boy Miles.

I was present at a dress rehearsal of this work. There was a scene where Miles and Fiona had to jump up and down on a bouncy bed and roll on the bed and generally be high-spirited. Britten insisted that the two children wear short nighties and nothing else and, strangely, this was allowed by the wardrobe department. The conductor tried to prevent this and said the children should wear pyjamas but he was over ruled and so the short nighties were worn and we all saw what we should not have seen. Britten was enjoying this but the conductor stopped the proceedings and with the orchestra walked out.

In 1959 another British composer was asked to write an opera on Shakespeare's *Midsummer's Nights Dream*. Britten jumped in and prevented this and said he was going to set it. He was asked he was so keen to set it and he replied, "Well there is Bottom and Puck but I think Puck is wrongly spelt!"

The work that engendered much criticism was the *War Requiem* of 1962. The second world war was in Britten's mind and early performances were conducted by Germans which many thought was out of order. But the final pages are a homosexual love duet which Britten eventually admitted was so!

The poem is by Wilfred Owen which ends with the line *Let us sleep now* which Britten repeats over and over and over again. Even those who accept homosexuality complained that this was overkill and not suitable for a requiem and they were right.

It seems that Britten could not leave homosexuality and pederasty alone and in the *War Requiem* there is a boys choir!

Thomas Mann wrote *Death In Venice* and it was published in 1912. Gustav von Aschenbach is a man in his fifties who becomes obsessed with a beautiful boy and wants to undress him, look at him and have sex with him. Someone has said, "This is another work which Britten set to music because he was obsessed with filth!"

Britten explained that the Greeks got it right. Although they had wives they had boys as well for sexual pleasure. Britten was known as the patron saint of homosexuals. He was a saint because he was born on St Cecelia's Day!

He was both a draft-dodger and a coward. He and Peter Pears fled to the USA to avoid the Second World War but later, when there was talk of their being called up to the US Army they engaged in fantastic manoeuvres to secure military exemption before returning to England. What was even more despicable was that they ousted three dedicated women from CEMA, later known as the Arts Council of Great Britain, in order to take their places. This they did by innuendo and character assassination. I have seen the letters that Britten wrote. They are libellous.

He was a crude and vulgar man. I have twice seen him actually pose to emit wind knowing that many people were about. This is a fact known to many people. For example, many have recounted John Ireland objecting to the hero-worship of Britten and how people hung on his every word often with a microphone in hand ... "Even if he farts, they'll record it!"

Another of Britten's despicable acts was when he was conducting a rehearsal with an orchestra in which most of the cellists were young ladies. Apparently they were having difficulties with a passage and Britten lost his temper and shouted at them, "What have you got between your legs... bloody Tampax?"

Sir Lennox Berkeley was a kind and gentle man. At the beginning he was friendly with him and they collaborated on *Mont Juic* together. Latterly, Lennox would say that Ben was impossible. Norman Del Mar, a very competent conductor and likeable man, was sacked from the Aldeburgh Festival because he was a 'traitor' to Britten for daring to conduct 'other' British music. The harpsichordist, Viola Tunnard, was scheduled to take part in 'the first performance of one of Britten's works and in 'the final rehearsal stage found out that she had cancer and told Britten who retorted, "Well, you'll have to do the best you can. I can't get anyone else now".

His furore with his publishers, Boosey & Hawkes, is well known. He always said that the printing and publishing of his work should have preferential treatment and he became incensed if Stravinsky was given priority ... and when Boosey's were printing something by Lully, Britten was enraged for weeks ... literally!

He would not take criticism, not even the gentlest or most courteous kind. When a conductor pointed out an obvious error in a Britten score, Britten was irate and abused this conductor. His egocentric attitude is further shown in his forming of the Aldeburgh Festival which was for the promotion of his own music. It was his church and he was god! And, to get on with Britten, you had to fall down and worship him.

As to his music it is often contrived and derivative. Some of his orchestration is poor as a study of *The Young Person's Guide* will reveal. Latterly his work became increasingly facile, arid and sterile. There was no real development throughout his career whereas, for example, Vaughan Williams's nine symphonies are all different from each other. And, to add to this, Britten criticised Beethoven and Brahms as amateurs Yet he adored Schubert liking the 'femininity' in his music. When it was put to Britten that Schubert was a frequenter of brothels and, in fact, died of syphilis, Britten replied, "He had some fun dying ... but I wonder if he ever buggered a boy".

As long ago as 1950, Constant Lambert posed the dilemmas of musicians' integrity by their association with questionable qualities such as homosexuality, cowardice and abuse of fellow musicians. For example Britten was profoundly upset by the Aldeburgh Festival's commission from several composers in 1953 for a composite work on Sellinger's *Round*. Searle's variation was the most interesting and exciting. Britten hated being upstaged.

He had a curious relationship with Sir William Walton. Britten commissioned *The Bear* from Walton in the mid 1960s. But this was typical of Britten's egocentricity. He was god doing a mere mortal a favour and earning the veneration of the public for giving such wonderful support to other composers. If you read the correspondence between the two you will see that it is fulsome and like two cats manoeuvring against each other; it is awkward and insincere. A few years later Walton wrote his *Improvisation on an Impromptu* of Britten at the time when he was not having the publicity or success that Britten was and thought this work might bring him back into favour. It will be remembered that Walton had used other composers' themes before and at least three times been in the Law Courts as a consequence. Walton was mischievous ... Britten was malicious. While it is true that Walton, like Elgar, wanted to be in the company of the aristocracy, he did not toady to royalty as did both Britten and Elgar.

Hans Keller spoke for all honest musicians when he said that Britten was not a nice person. He had a bad attitude on many things. He denigrated Wagner for his anti-Semitism yet said himself that he hated the Jews and said that the Arab tanks in the 1967 war should have run down every Jew in sight, women and children included.. But it was not only to royalty that he toadied. He did it to exemplary performers such as Richter and Rostropovich not for their benefit, or for any mutual benefit, but exclusively for his own.

He had no real sense of opera For example, where can you find any passionate or sensual music in any of his romantic scenes?

He had tried to take over Glyndebourne where he and Peter Pears were known as 'The Royal Family'. Because he could not always get his own way a rift developed between him and John Christie of Glyndebourne. Conceited Britten said he could 'create something better than Glyndebourne or Bayreuth' and so Aldeburgh was born!

I have always been impressed with his *Sinfonia da Requiem* yet even this work is insincere. It is dedicated to his father whom Britten did not like. It was commissioned by the British Council on behalf of a foreign power to celebrate their dynasty. It was later revealed that this was the 2600th year of the Japanese dynasty. They were incensed at the music as it was neither appropriate nor suited to their culture and they took it as an insult.

When Britten was created a life peer in 1976 he took this as justification for his arrogant behaviour. He was not so much Lord Britten of Aldeburgh but Lord of Britain. This encapsulated his appalling attitude of, 'I am British music and thou shalt have no other Lord but me'. One must express grave doubts about honours lists. If a footballer can receive a knighthood and 'pop' stars like Paul McCartney and Elton John receive such honours when they advocate drugs, rebellion against society and other immoral traits also, it ridicules not only the whole concept of such honours but also the country itself failing to set it a good standard and thereby, perhaps, encouraging crime.

Britten was narcissistic and, curiously, his fifth canticle, which dates from 1974, is entitled *The Death of Narcissus* ... and this after a serious heart operation the previous year.

Michael Kennedy refers to Britten as a genius, a superb conductor and that he won the devoted admiration of the artists for whom he wrote. That simply is not true, and is merely Kennedy 'calling the faithful to worship' at Britten's shrine ... as he also does for Elgar.

Britten was ruthless, self-opinionated and thoroughly obnoxious. When Sir William and Lady Walton visited his home



in Aldeburgh, Lady Susanna was told by Britten that the tenor Peter Pears lived with him in the same house and she discovered that there was only one bed and it was a double! She naively asked where Pears slept. More to the point was the fact that Britten's only lasting friend and admirer was Pears who was also his lover! Even Pears found Britten tiresome and childishly petulant.

But you will say that we are not to judge the man but rather assess his art, his music. And yet the man and his music cannot be separated as we have seen. We cannot assume that a decent man writes decent music but there may be a case, however, that an indecent or unpleasant man can compose correspondingly poor music. As with Elgar the appellation of a great composer does not rest on the quality of his music but with the extravagant and intensive promotion of it.

Britten's music became increasingly anaemic and loveless. It was spiritually dead a long time before his actual death. It lacked commitment and relevance, his works became a collection of corpses. His 1953 coronation opera, *Gloriana*, was commonly referred to as the *Twilight of the Sods*, whereas his first operatic 'success', *Peter Grimes* (1945) tells the story of a fisherman self-inflicted with paranoia and pederasty. It is, without doubt, a portrait of the composer himself.

It is Britten's preoccupation with homosexuality, anal sex and paedophilia that stains his work with incontinence. *Death in Venice* is a self-advertisement; perhaps it is a call for pity highlighting both his immoral defects as well as his need. He espoused the false piety of middle-class Anglicanism where he believed he could conceal his many sexual deviations and gain some respectability.

The comedian, Dudley Moore, mimicked Pears and Britten to perfection with a clever musical sketch called *Little Miss Britten* in which he demonstrated Pears's ghastly nasal sound and Britten's affected accompaniment. Auden had called Britten the 'white hope of British music'. By the age of 40 he was saddled with a cult status and ridiculously called the 'English Mozart'. He was also perversely bracketed with Mahler. He despised both Elgar and Vaughan Williams. But one thing is certain, Vaughan Williams will continue to outshine him.

I wish to disavow any claim that this article is biased and cite, in refutation, my reaction to Sir Michael Tippett. I have studied his scores and find real evidence of superb craftsmanship but I am not a lover of much of his music.

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