



Britten Connections

A guide for
performers and
programmers

by Paul Kildea



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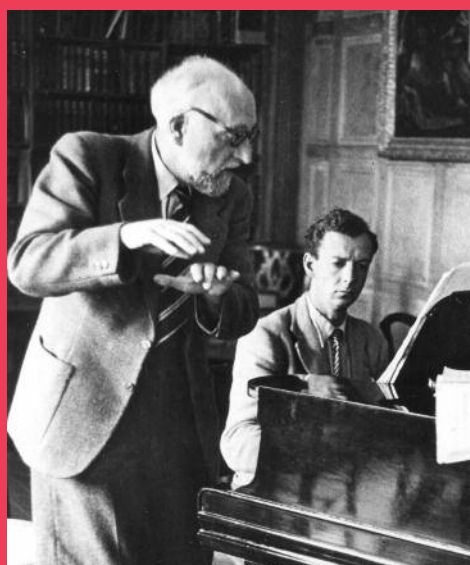
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Front cover: Britten in 1938. Photo: Howard Coster © National Portrait Gallery, London. Above: Britten in his composition studio at The Red House, c1958. Photo: Kurt Hutton. Opposite left: Conducting a rehearsal, early 1950s. Opposite right: Demonstrating how to make 'slung mugs' sound like raindrops for *Noye's Fludde*, 1958. Photo: Kurt Hutton.



The twentieth century's consummate musician

In his tweed jackets and woollen ties, and with his plummy accent, country houses and royal connections, Benjamin Britten looked every inch the English gentleman. This image belied a more modest upbringing in the Suffolk town of Lowestoft, however, where he was born in 1913 to a dentist father and amateur musician mother. Precocious and single-minded, the young Britten was perfectly primed to follow in the footsteps of the preeminent nineteenth-century British composers: a chair in one of the music colleges or universities, perhaps; guest conducting on the oratorio circuit and ever so occasionally with one of the London orchestras, if only he could get over his dislike of the podium; a string of honours and pupils, both of diminishing returns; and a tidy bundle of works, probably not much performed following their initial outings.

The real story, however, was very different. And far more intriguing.

When asked as a boy what he planned to be when he grew up, Britten confidently replied: 'A composer.' 'But what *else*?' was the quite sensible comeback. The adult Britten derided this comment and the cultural philistinism he thought it represented. Yet the fact remains that Britain in the 1920s had no sustained opera culture, no orchestra to rival the Vienna Philharmonic, no real engagement with musical modernism, and no tradition of the composer-conductor dominating the great concert halls and opera houses of the land. The boy's interlocutor was closer to the truth at the time than the adult composer later allowed.

Yet Britten was determined to change this culture of complacency. And for all his evident Englishness, he looked not to his countrymen for inspiration, but to the European giants of the Romantic and post-Romantic age. His childhood fascination with the great symphonies of **Brahms** and the piano music of **Beethoven** were in his teenage years replaced with a wide-eyed appreciation of **Mahler**, a skittish adoration of **Stravinsky**, and huge enthusiasm for **Berg**. Yet it was not only their music that caught his ear. He began to consider also how they had gone about the business of being a composer, and set about emulating them.

He had, of course, a great guide and mentor. The English composer **Frank Bridge** began teaching composition to the teenage Britten at exactly the time that his own musical language was shifting from well-crafted pastoralism to a more modernist dialect. This gentle pacifist had been left distraught by what had taken place on the muddy pastures of France during the First World War, and sought a greater engagement with the Continental ideas swirling about post-war Europe. Britten was a willing and receptive pupil, lapping up the new sounds and ideas Bridge presented to him, finding himself comfortable in his teacher's artistic milieu, improving his craft all the while.

Additionally, he was *such* a child of his time. He may have thought little of most of the performances he heard broadcast by the infant BBC – in his diary he daily took a big stick to the British orchestras and their home-grown conductors, Henry Wood and Adrian Boult in particular, but with Thomas Beecham and Malcolm Sargent faring little better – but he gobbled it up all the same. At the Royal College of Music he hardly bothered with student life and performances: instead he stalked the Queen's Hall and the BBC's Maida Vale Studios and Covent Garden, sharpening his ear and tongue, stitching the disparate works he encountered into a glorious European tapestry. When in 1934 he visited Vienna for the first time the jig was more or less up. Encountering an orchestra of such luminosity, virtuosity and authority, he decided there and then that his adolescent musical instincts were correct: standards were simply too low in Britain. He was going to be not just a full-time composer: with the example of Vienna and Mahler, of Berg and Stravinsky, with Bridge as his mentor and **WH Auden** as his tutor, he was going to be a composer the like of which England had never before produced.

'I wouldn't have thought my sound sensuous, although I love the clear and the resonant. This, I suppose I've learned from Mozart, Schubert, Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Stravinsky and others.'

Britten, 1963

Opposite clockwise from top left: Britten and Aaron Copland, 1949-50. Britten with Dmitri Shostakovich, probably taken during the Festival of British Music in Moscow, May 1963. Britten rehearsing with Yehudi Menuhin for an Aldeburgh Festival recital, 1958. Britten with Ernest Ansermet rehearsing *The Rape of Lucretia* in the Organ Room at Glyndebourne, 1946.





To a degree he became hostage to his own success. He was in his mere early thirties when he composed the two works through which orchestral players, opera lovers, record collectors and children the world over really got to know him: *Peter Grimes* and *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. Some audiences then as now never looked much beyond these two great works – the *Four Sea Interludes* filleted from the former for concert performances, *The Young Person's Guide* a seat-of-the-pants joyride through the different instruments of the orchestra. They were content instead to look upon these pieces and the important song cycles for his partner, the tenor **Peter Pears**, as his signature works. Yet those who used these pieces as a starting point, not an endpoint, discovered a composer of great complexity and moral authority. They discovered, too, a mass of contradictions.

Does youth alone explain how he could compose in the space of a few years works as different as the **Ravel**- and **Wagner**-flecked *Quatre chansons françaises* (1928), the spiky *Sinfonietta* (1932), its debt to **Schoenberg's** first *Kammersymphonie* evident, and his *Simple Symphony* for string orchestra (1934), a plundering of his childhood nursery? How is it possible that only one year separates his showpiece Piano Concerto (1938) from his brooding, slow-burn Violin Concerto (1938–9) – both terrific works with remarkably different characters, the latter comparable to **Berg's** essay in the same genre? Was it fear of youthful indiscretion that made him put away in a drawer his miniature *Young Apollo* (1939) after its first performance? If so, how at exactly the same time did he compose his *Sinfonia da Requiem*, a piece of staggering control and vision, the work by which he knew his voice was fully formed, and those around him knew he had no musical fears?

These works are milestones from one decade alone, when his day job was as a gun for hire, scribbling scores for leftist documentary films and theatre productions, and for altogether more wholesome radio plays. In the 1940s he became more even as a composer, producing a series of orchestral works that deserve a more secure place in the repertory: *Diversions* (1940), his lyrical riposte to **Ravel's** Piano Concerto for the Left Hand; *An American Overture* (1941); *Prelude and Fugue* (1943); and his affecting overture to *Paul Bunyan* (1941). Yet to say that he became more even is not to undervalue the breakout works of the 1930s, his *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* (1937) among them. As a fifty-year-old he observed that the dedicatee and subject of this whip-sharp work for string orchestra had taught him 'that you should find yourself and be true to what you found'. Although Britten worried out loud that perhaps he hadn't quite lived up to Bridge's exacting expectations of him, he nonetheless took this lesson seriously all his life.

Opera dominated his career from the early 1940s onwards, itself an extraordinary occurrence given Britain's musical culture in this period, and it is certainly true that words unlocked in him his great gifts as a storyteller, as the countless brazenly original songs and cycles attest. Yet each genre influenced the other. Techniques he refined in his operas made their way into his instrumental works; in turn, the easy virtuosity of his orchestral writing changed the face of British opera. In the nine years following the 7 June 1945 première of *Peter Grimes*, he composed an additional six operas, including his masterpieces *Billy Budd* (1951) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1954). Yet in this same period he also co-founded the Aldeburgh Festival (with Pears and the librettist/producer Eric Crozier), formed his own opera company, toured the world as a peerless accompanist and conductor, and wrote a string of further works for Pears and other favoured musicians. When in the 1960s he withdrew somewhat from the opera theatre, he dedicated his time to producing some of his greatest instrumental and orchestral works: *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* (1963) and a slew of suites for **Mstislav Rostropovich**; *Cantata misericordium* (1963); *Phaedra* (1975); *String Quartet No. 3* (1975).

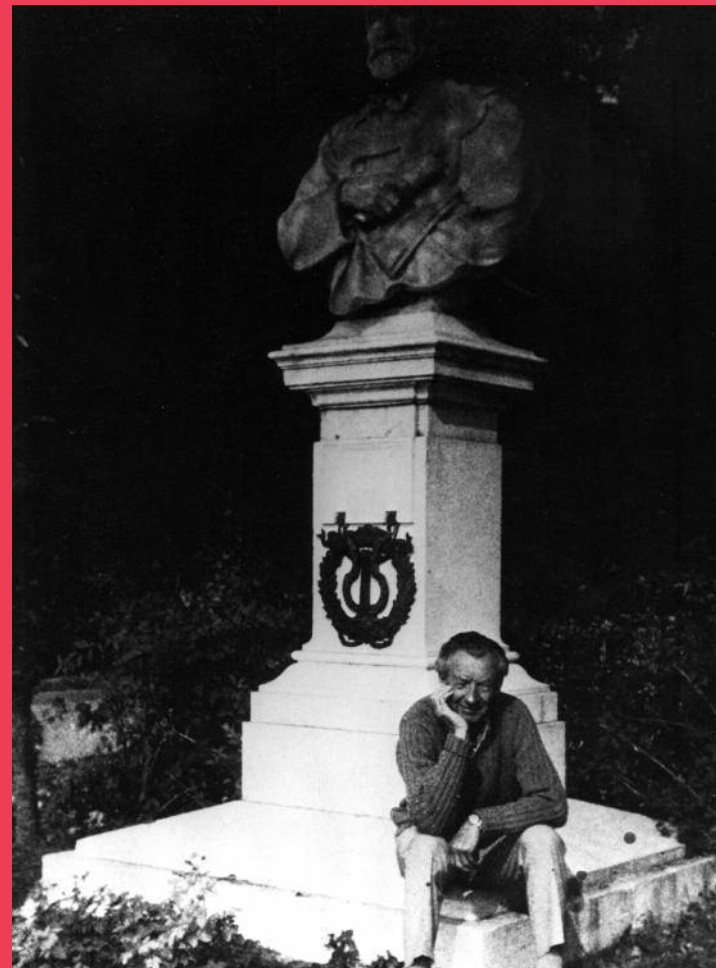
His wartime arrangements of British folk songs (and his late orchestral work, *the Suite on English Folk Tunes*) were not born of the pedagogic and nationalistic impetus that drove **Bartók's** transcriptions and arrangements, but they were nonetheless intended to celebrate Britain's rich folk heritage. If in the same breath they drew a line between Britten and **Vaughan Williams** and his ilk, whose folk arrangements the newcomer considered pious and clumsy in equal measure, so much the better. So too his realizations of **Purcell** and **John Gay**, whose settings Britten thought clothed the English language in the finest cloth. And **John Dowland** too, whose sweet melancholia infuses a number of Britten's instrumental works. Such excavations were responsible for reintroducing much so-called early music into the repertory.

In short, Britten was the twentieth century's consummate musician. His works for film, television, radio, theatre, children, the opera house, the ballet stage, the concert hall and the church chart some of the century's great troubles and preoccupations – from war to sexuality, from morality to religious faith, from loyalty to betrayal. In the decades since his death his music has found even larger audiences, as performers and listeners throughout the world have come to realize his universal appeal. Works that failed or misfired in his lifetime have slowly entered the repertory. Yet there remain virtually unknown works of genius, every bit the peer of the *Four Sea Interludes*. It is the intention of this guide to familiarize and entice musicians with the other side of Britten, a composer of singular vision, brilliance and humanity, who found his true voice as a young man, and spoke with it all his life.



'I want to say here, personally, that Britten has been for me the most purely musical person I have ever met and I have ever known. It always seemed to me that music sprang out of his fingers when he played the piano, as it did out of his mind when he composed.'

Michael Tippett, 1976



Britten connected

Heroes and villains

Some of Britten's childhood heroes became the villains of his adulthood, although not before he had learnt all he could from them. **Beethoven's** piano sonatas and **Brahms's** symphonies informed his youthful musical vocabulary and set him up for encounters with the music he admired all his life: **Mozart, Schubert, Mahler, Schoenberg** (guardedly), **Berg, Stravinsky** (waspishly as time went on) and **Shostakovich**. He admired his contemporaries **Walton, Tippett** and **Berkeley**, although by no means uncritically. **Bridge** was a hero, although not exclusively for his music. In the 1940s in England he encountered the operas of **Verdi**, which he thought brilliant and which helped shape his own dramatic works.

Putting together Britten and **Mozart** (which he played and conducted incomparably) and Britten and **Schubert** on a concert programme is an obvious starting point for any exploration of Britten's musical influences and overlaps. Yet there are many other great pairings.

Hearing Britten and **Mahler** programmed together is often a revelation. The *Nocturne* alongside Mahler's Symphony No. 5; *Phaedra* with Mahler's *Rückert-Lieder*; two early symphonies, Mahler's first and Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem*; *Les Illuminations* with Mahler's Symphony No. 4 (using the same soloist); Britten's *Suite on English Folk Tunes* with Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*; Britten's *Ballad of Heroes* with Mahler's Symphony No. 2; Britten's Violin Concerto or *Sinfonia da Requiem* with Mahler's Symphony No. 7.

Britten and **Shostakovich** are equally good together. *Les Illuminations* programmed with Shostakovich's Symphony No. 14 (dedicated to Britten) contrasts the old Russian's sombre imagery with the young Brit's ecstatic vision. There is something incredibly touching about hearing the *Sinfonia da Requiem* followed by Shostakovich's 'Leningrad' Symphony, written at exactly the same time, while Britten's *Cello Symphony* in a series including the two Shostakovich cello concertos (and both men's works for solo cello) gather together the great works of the twentieth century for this instrument. Britten's complete works for string quartet form a thrilling counterpoint to Shostakovich's works in this genre.

Britten and **Stravinsky** form a great orchestral pairing, the programming chemistry deriving from the men's mutual admiration, competitiveness, stylistic and chronological overlaps, and the occasional disdain they felt for each other. Britten's *Sinfonietta* is a natural bedfellow of Stravinsky's *Symphonies d'instruments à vent* or his Mass. Britten's *Cantata misericordium* is a good companion piece for Stravinsky's *Oedipus rex* or programmed instead of his *Requiem Canticles* or *Canticum sacrum*. Britten's *Noye's Fludde* and Stravinsky's *The Flood* offer fascinating, complimentary treatments of the same biblical story. And programming Britten's Piano Concerto alongside Stravinsky's *Firebird* or *Rite of Spring* presents a riot of rhythmic orchestral energy and momentum.



Early works

A number of pieces composed as Britten was finding his own voice have been released since his death. These include his *Two Portraits* and *Double Concerto* (CD 9), his exquisite miniatures *Quatre chansons françaises* (CD 19), and a number of finely crafted works for string quartet. **Colin Matthews** has overseen these releases, rejecting unsuitable works and editing others as necessary. Matthews took his cue from Britten, though, who in the last years of his life revisited a number of early works, including his *String Quartet in D* (1931) (CD 12), which he edited for performance and publication.

It is fascinating to see Britten's emerging voice in these pieces, as it is to programme them alongside the composers whose influence can be heard in them (see **Heroes and villains**).

Britten and dance

Britten was only seventeen when he composed his first ballet, *Plymouth Town* – a dockside morality tale slightly indebted to **Stravinsky's** *Petrushka* – while his startlingly original *The Prince of the Pagodas* (CD 40), teeming with the music he had recently heard in Bali, is one of the important and neglected scores of his maturity. In between, Britten wrote two other ballets, *Soirées musicales* and *Matinée musicales*, each a witty reworking of **Rossini**, and included substantial dance scenes in his operas *Gloriana* (CD 42) and *Death in Venice*.

Yet dance rhythms and forms also influenced Britten in his non-balletic scores, as his *Cello Suites* attest (CD 16, 26, 7). Enterprising choreographers have long used his music as the basis of their work, from John Cranko's early choreography for *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* to Hans van Manen's classic staging of the same work and Jiří Kylián's choreography for *Sinfonia da Requiem* (CD 10).

There remain, however, many pieces that have rarely been exploited in this way and which would work brilliantly – not least the *Cello Suites*. These include the moody, ecstatic *Violin Concerto* (CD 34); the bravura *Piano Concerto* (CD 18); the *Serenade* (CD 4); the various suites from *Pagodas*; the episodic *Diversions* (CD 2); the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* (CD 11); the *Suite on English Folk Tunes* (CD 28); and his string quartets (CD 12, 41, 23), which dance off the page.

Britten in love

Britten's partnership of almost forty years with the tenor Peter Pears resulted in some of the most extraordinary and important vocal music of the last century. From 'Being Beauteous', the sublime, suggestive movement of *Les Illuminations* (CD 25), to the late works *Death in Venice* and *Sacred and Profane*, Pears' voice and artistry was never far from Britten's mind. Other works expressly dedicated to Pears include the *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, the second and fourth *Canticles*, and the touching 'Second Lute Song of the Earl of Essex' from *Gloriana*. Yet there were so many implicit dedications – from all the great opera roles to works such as *Serenade* (CD 4) and *Nocturne* (CD 31), the remaining three *Canticles*, *Winter Words*, *Songs from the Chinese*, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente*, *Who are these Children?* and *A Birthday Hansel*. He was never a gay-rights campaigner, but many of his works celebrate homosexual love, however coded, so he was certainly a gay pioneer.

Whose achievement in the last century can possibly compare to Britten's? **Janáček** and **Richard Strauss**, certainly, both of whom were inspired by women to write some of the great female songs and roles of the twentieth century, bookends to Britten's works for the male voice. (Britten had a score of 'old magician's' *Der Rosenkavalier* to hand as he wrote *Peter Grimes*.) Britten knew little Janáček, although the two composers complement each other very well – both in the sounds they make and their social obsessions. Programming Strauss's orchestral songs with Britten's *Spring Symphony* (CD 44) makes clear the connection – much as the older man's *Tone Poems* sit well alongside the younger man's *Piano Concerto* (CD 18) or *Cantata academica* (CD 1).

Britten and popular music

Blessed with an astute mimic's ear, Britten first drew on popular music for his own work in the 1930s. Auden had demonstrated the power of parody in his poetry, and Britten responded immediately in a string of incidental scores and cabaret songs for the theatre, the latter making their way into the concert repertoire. In addition to the well-known *Cabaret Songs* there are the settings collected in *The Red Cockatoo & other songs*, which are almost as effective. The folksy ballads in *Paul Bunyan* and the beautiful, poised 'Inkslinger's Love Song' are essays in a popular style, while *Peter Grimes* contains one of the great dance-band scenes in the entire operatic literature – equal to that in **Berg's** *Wozzeck*. Britten's *Clarinet Concerto* (CD 14) was conceived for one of the best jazz soloists of the century, **Benny Goodman**, which makes it a sibling of **Bartók's** *Contrasts* (1940), written at Goodman's behest for violin, clarinet and piano. More recently **Baz Luhrmann** harvested the very end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the single *Now Until the Break of Day*, while **Jeff Buckley's** haunting arrangement of Britten's *Corpus Christi Carol* still has currency.

Britten had a kindred spirit in **Francis Poulenc**, who mined popular French music for his songs and parodies, as did **Darius Milhaud** and **Maurice Ravel**. Britten's songs in many ways prefigure **William Bolcom's** whip-smart cabaret miniatures, while his chamber textures complement **Kurt Weill's** music of the 1920s and 1930s. (Daryl Runswick's arrangement of Britten's *Cabaret Songs* for voice and cabaret band emphasizes this connection.) Britten's friend **Dmitri Shostakovich** made his own forays into popular music in the 1930s, as evident in his jazz suites and his two piano concertos. **Bernstein** took Shostakovich's cue in the 1940s and 1950s, writing some terrific jazz-fused music for full orchestra. **Hindemith** and **Krenek** experimented with jazz idioms in their art music at around the same time that **George Gershwin** was plundering the new sounds of his country for his big concert works and, soon enough, his opera *Porgy and Bess*.

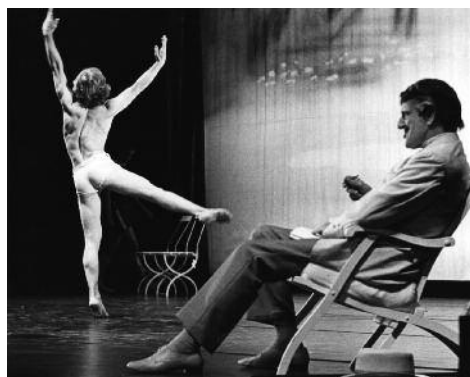
Britten's night music

The world of night and dreams captivated Britten from a fairly young age, and he wrote some of the most affecting nocturnes penned since **Chopin's** time. Quite apart from the named works (*Moderato and Nocturne*, *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal*, *Nocturne* (CD 31), *Night Piece*, *Um Mitternacht*, *Nocturnal after John Dowland*), the stillness and potential of night infuses many of his scores, including *On This Island*, *Diversions* (CD 2), *Movements for a Clarinet Concerto* (CD 14), *Serenade* (CD 4), *Four Sea Interludes*, *A Charm of Lullabies* and *Lachrymae* (CD 8).

Who are the other great composers of night music? **John Field**, naturally, whose nocturnes influenced many nineteenth-century Romantics, **Liszt** and **Schumann** among them. **Mendelssohn's** incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of the most celebrated examples of orchestral nocturnal music, an achievement **Debussy** equalled in his *Trois nocturnes*, influenced to a degree by **James Whistler's** evocative night paintings. The first movement of **Shostakovich's** *Violin Concerto No. 1* is a nocturne, composed in 1947–8, at exactly the same time Britten was writing his moonlight-flecked *Spring Symphony* (CD 44).

'Night and Silence, these are two of the things I cherish most.'

Britten, 1969



'Honestly you are the greatest artist that ever was ... What have I done to deserve such an artist and man to write for?'

Britten writing to Pears, 1974



Children

No other composer in the last century wrote so often and so inventively for children. From his early settings of Walter de la Mare (Three Two-Part Songs) to his late, harrowing *Children's Crusade* (CD 36), Britten created a body of exceptional works of varying difficulty and scale. His *Friday Afternoons* (CD 43) are playful, skittish songs, while his *Ceremony of Carols* is a showpiece for children's voices. *Missa brevis* is full of dance tunes and spiky dissonances, whereas his setting of Psalm 150 is a demonstration of his great practicality, a work scored more or less for whatever instruments are to hand. Boys' voices are at the heart of the *Spring Symphony* (CD 44), *War Requiem*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Saint Nicolas*, although increasingly children's voices are used in these works to great effect. *The Little Sweep* is a touching children's opera, as is *Noye's Fludde* (CD 29), while his late *Welcome Ode* is a spritely work for young voices and orchestra.

Britten and war

A staunch pacifist from childhood, Britten from the mid-1930s onwards used his music as a soapbox to protest against the iniquity of war. The artistic crowd with which he walked did much the same, and so Britten cut his teeth writing scores for anti-war films and plays. Such ideas soon enough seeped into his concert music, including the brilliant, freewheeling *Our Hunting Fathers* (CD 5) and its slighter follow-up (although still teeming with ideas and anger), *Ballad of Heroes* (CD 35). There is also, of course, his powerful *Sinfonia da Requiem* (CD 10). In addition to his extraordinary public protest of 1962, *War Requiem*, and his television opera *Owen Wingrave*, Britten composed a handful of anti-war works, including *Who are these Children?* and *Children's Crusade* (CD 36). It is also difficult to listen to *Peter Grimes* without discerning the sounds and savagery of warfare.

Unlike **Elgar's** imperialistic oratorios from the First World War, none of this music dates. Like other wartime works – **Haydn's** *Missa in tempore belli*, **Shostakovich's** 'Leningrad' Symphony, **Tippett's** *A Child of Our Time*, **Prokofiev's** so-called 'War Sonatas' – and those elegies to a lost friend or epoch – **Bridge's** Piano Sonata, **Schoenberg's** *A Survivor from Warsaw*, **Penderecki's** *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*, **Strauss's** *Metamorphosen* and valedictory *Vier Letzte Lieder* – Britten invested his works with a universal message, timeless in its resonance.

Britten in America

Britten lived in North America between 1939 and early 1942, most of it spent in New York or on Long Island. The people and music he encountered there had a huge impact on his own compositions. In this period he wrote *Canadian Carnival* (CD 20), *An American Overture* (CD 38), *Paul Bunyan* and its terrific, discarded overture, later orchestrated by Colin Matthews. In addition, he planned the clarinet concerto that Matthews later conjured so well from his sketches. All of these works are infused with the open-plain sounds **Copland** was then exploring in his own music.

In America he also completed *Les Illuminations* (CD 25), a return to the French language of his childhood *Quatre chansons françaises* (CD 19), and composed his *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*. **Auden** egged him on in his choice of texts and poets, although the shy composer also realized it was easier to express certain thoughts in a foreign tongue. No such disguise was needed for his settings of folksongs from France, Ireland and the Southern Appalachians in this period and later: these were just good material, which he transformed in versions for voice and piano and in his artful arrangements for voice and **Mozartian** orchestra.

Any of these works programmed alongside **Copland's** symphonies and orchestral works, or those of the more expressly modernist **Samuel Barber** and **Charles Ives**, helps highlight the debt Britten felt to the American sounds and ideas he encountered in this incredibly fruitful period. Moreover, some of the basic principles of the Eastern music Britten heard in America and later in the Far East also influenced the **American minimalist composers** in the second half of the century. To hear these works programmed together is a fascinating experience.

Britten's travels elsewhere

Britten first visited the Continent as a twenty-year-old and in the final year of his life made a short trip to Bergen. In between he travelled to a great number of countries in a handful of continents, absorbing their culture and music. Even those countries that foxed or disappointed him left their mark on his music.

The greatest seismic shift in his compositions followed his 1955/56 travels through East Asia. He had known of Balinese music since meeting the composer and ethnomusicologist **Colin McPhee** early in his time in America, and used these magical sounds in *The Turn of the Screw* – much as **Debussy** incorporated them into his works after encountering gamelans at the Paris World exhibition in 1889. Hearing these sounds in the flesh, though, overwhelmed him and spurred him on to new heights in his ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas* (CD 40). These sounds and harmonies helped shape and colour all his remaining stage works to a greater or lesser extent.

Britten's *Songs from the Chinese* were also composed in the wake of his Asian travels, although these represented more Britten's general interest in other cultures than direct exposure or tribute to the music of China. The same cannot be said of *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente*, his only setting of German text (apart from the song *Um Mitternacht*)

and his nod towards **Schubert** – whose larger cycles greatly influenced Britten's own song cycles – and the German Lieder he played so incomparably.

In Japan he encountered traditional Noh theatre and was hugely impressed by the economy of means and the disproportionate impact of the drama. These dramas and their music percolated away for some years, finally revealing their influence in Britten's 1964 Church Parable *Curlew River* and its two successors. The Japanese story had been transformed to an English setting, but so many other aspects of the original drama remained. More, the orchestral economy displayed in the Japanese theatre – a few traditional instruments – chimed with Britten's desire to pare down his music to its most basic elements, which characterized his style more and more as the 1960s progressed.

In this same period Britten became intimate with the cellist **Mstislav Rostropovich**, who introduced him to the music and customs of Russia and Armenia. Britten's **Pushkin** song cycle *The Poet's Echo* is only one consequence of this strong friendship and exposure to Soviet culture.

'The symphony orchestra ... has become to the twentieth century what the virtuoso singer was to the eighteenth. In skill and quality of sound, as is now universally recognized, the great American orchestras have no superior.'

Britten, 1942

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 LSE R.O. Case No. L21074 Date 3 - MAY 1943
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 Date of Birth 22-11-1913
 Holder's Signature Benjamin Britten
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 * (b) registered conditionally in the Register of Conscientious Objectors.
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Programming tips for selected Britten works

Orchestral

Canadian Carnival (Kermesse Canadienne)

op. 19 (1939) 14'
(CD 20)

A product of Britten's travels to North America, infused with the French Canadian folksongs he heard in the Laurentians, *La perdriole* and *Alouette* among them. Notwithstanding these local influences, this effective concert opener is a close relative of the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, which was already occupying Britten's thoughts. It works brilliantly in concert as a curtain-raiser to the larger works of **Copland** or **Ives**.

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timp.perc(2)—harp—strings
Boosey & Hawkes

Sinfonia da Requiem

op. 20 (1940; rev. 1940) 20'
Three movements
(CD 10)

A key work in Britten's development, full of **Mahlerian** effects, brilliant brass fanfares, a trudging funeral march, and virtuosic orchestral writing. Dedicated to the memory of his parents, its programme is equally that of the catastrophe of the war that was then engulfing Europe and the Pacific. It has a cumulative power to it, resolving in the third movement in a radiant apotheosis. A good alternative or complement in concert to **Shostakovich's** symphonies.

3(III=picc & bass fl), 3.3(III=cl in Eb),
alto sax (*ad lib.*), 3—6 (V, VI *ad lib.*), 3.3.1—
timp.perc(4)—2harps
(II *ad lib.*)—pft—strings
Boosey & Hawkes

An American Overture

(1941) 10'
(CD 38)

Left behind in America when the composer returned to England in early 1942, unperformed and forgotten, *An American Overture* is Britten's tribute to his adopted country. In it he juxtaposes his friend Aaron Copland's open-prairie sounds with the orchestral techniques he had perfected in his *Sinfonia da Requiem*. An apt counterpoint to the music of **Copland**, **Bernstein** and **Ives**.

3(III=picc), 3.3(III=bass cl), 3—4.3.3.1—
timp.perc(2)—2harps(II *ad lib.*)—cel(=pft
ad lib.)—strings
Faber Music

Men of Goodwill

(1947) 8'
Variations on a Christmas Carol

An orchestral rhapsody on 'God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen', with variations that do not wander too far from home, but which nonetheless demonstrate Britten's considerable flair in this genre.

3(III=picc), 2.2.2—4.2.3.1—timp.perc(2)—
harp—strings
Faber Music

Symphonic Suite 'Gloriana'

op. 53a (1953) 26'
For orchestra and tenor solo (*ad lib.*),
in four movements
Text: Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex
(CD 42)

Determined not to give up on *Gloriana* without a fight (a conviction vindicated in recent decades), Britten fashioned this suite from the opera soon after its troubled premiere, incorporating the plangent, lyrical 'Lute Song' and the 'Courtly Dances' – thrilling orchestral show pieces, full of Elizabethan sounds and instrumental colours.

3.3.3.3—4.3.3.1—timp.perc(4)—
harp—strings

The tenor voice in the second movement may be replaced by an oboe
Boosey & Hawkes

Pas de six from 'The Prince of the Pagodas'

op. 57a (1956) 12'
(CD 40)

The Prince of the Pagodas is a Britten's longest orchestral work, a dazzling score influenced by the music the composer encountered on his recent travels through South East Asia. A good substitute on concert programmes for the **Stravinsky** ballets and an interesting point of comparison to the same composer's neo-classical works.

3(III=picc), 3.3(III=cl in Eb), 3—4.3(III=tpt in D), 3.1—timp.perc(2)—harp—pft—strings
Boosey & Hawkes



The Building of the House

op. 79 (1967) 6'

Overture with or without chorus

Text: Psalm 127, adapted by Imogen Holst
(CD 22)

Full of the sounds that would soon enough characterize *Death in Venice*, this concert opener, with its simple chorale enveloped in breathless, rhapsodic violin writing, was written for the 1967 inauguration of the concert hall at Snape Maltings. It is an unknown gem, its impact equally strong whether the chorale is played by organ or sung by choir.

Chorus (SATB) (*ad lib.*)—2.2.2.2—2.2.0.1—
timp.perc—org (*ad lib.*)—strings
Faber Music

**Suite on English Folk Tunes
'A time there was ...'**

op. 90 (1974) 14'

Five movements
(CD 28)

A late work that nonetheless recreates the freewheeling optimism of Britten's orchestral works of the 1940s, when the composer first discovered the brilliance and potential of English folksong. It is full of open-stringed folk dances, the sounds of pipe and tabor, and a final movement of pure **Mahlerian** melancholy, a composer it would sit next to brilliantly in concert. Its dedication to the memory of the free-spirited **Percy Grainger** is fitting.

2(II=picc).2(II=ca).2.2—2.2.0.0—
timp.perc(2)—harp—strings
Faber Music

Concertos**Double Concerto**

(1932) 25'

For violin, viola and orchestra,
in three movements
(CD 9)

From the same year as his opus 1, Britten's Double Concerto is a mature showpiece for solo violin and viola. Its **Mozartian** orchestra reinforces the concerto's classical structure, although the harmonic language is all Britten's. A neo-classical work, in which fanfare-like horn solos punctuate spinning-top solo lines, from a time in Britten's life when **Stravinsky's** music had captured his imagination, only months before **Berg's** music would do the same.

2(II=picc).2.2.2—2.2.0.0—
timp.perc—strings
Chester Music Ltd

Temporal Variations

(1936) 15'

For oboe and string orchestra, in nine
movements (orch. Colin Matthews)
(CD 33)

Colin Matthew's evocative orchestration of the work's piano accompaniment – seeped in the style of Britten's own string writing of the mid-1930s – has introduced a new concerto into the repertory, a welcome substitute in concert for **Strauss's** Oboe Concerto, composed nine years later.

Faber Music

Piano Concerto

op. 13 (1938; rev. 1945) 33'

For piano and orchestra,
in four movements
(CD 13)

A virtuosic showcase for Britten as soloist as much as composer, with the influence of **Prokofiev's** successful essays in this genre – and **Liszt's** before him – keenly felt. Younger pianists, such as Steven Osborne and Dejan Lazic, have in recent years championed the piece, convinced it is unjustly neglected.

2(I,II=picc).2(II=ca).2.2—4.2.3.1—
timp.perc(2)—harp—strings
Boosey & Hawkes

Violin Concerto

op. 15 (1939; rev. 1950, 1954, 1965) 31'

For violin and orchestra,
in three movements
(CD 34)

A work of real originality and fantasy. Less hidebound by structural conventions than the Piano Concerto, the Violin Concerto represents a real milestone in Britten's development. The orchestral sound world is new and assured, the solo writing brilliant and idiomatic, and the cumulative impact is considerable. Little wonder Janine Jansen is a recent and enthusiastic champion of the work (as she is of the Double Concerto). A stunning, welcome alternative on concert programmes to the better known **Shostakovich, Berg** and **Sibelius** concertos.

3(II,III=picc).2(II=ca).2.2—4.3.3.1—
timp.perc(2)—harp—strings
Boosey & Hawkes

Young Apollo

op. 16 (1939) 10'

For piano, string quartet
and string orchestra
(CD 27)

Written in the final flushes of love or infatuation, *Young Apollo* uses a line from **Keats's Hyperion** as a classical disguise: 'and lo! from all his limbs Celestial Glory dawn'd: he was a god!' It is a slight yet muscular, radiant piece, and counts pianist Paul Lewis among its fervent advocates.

Faber Music

Diversions

op. 21 (1940; rev. 1950, 1954) 30'

For piano (left hand) and orchestra
(CD 2)

A set of variations on a theme, commissioned by the one-armed pianist **Paul Wittgenstein**, *Diversions* boasts a remarkably diverse collection of styles and moods. There is a touch of **de Falla's** *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* to the 'Nocturne', and the example of **Ravel's** concerto for the same forces is never far away.

2(II=picc).2(II=ca).2.alto sax(*ad lib.*).3—
4.2.3.1—timp.perc(3 or 2)—
harp—strings
Boosey & Hawkes

Movements for a Clarinet Concerto

(1942) 18'

For clarinet and orchestra, in three
movements (orch. Colin Matthews)
(CD 14)

Britten commenced work on this concerto in his final months in America, intending it for the exceptional musician **Benny Goodman**. **Colin Matthews** has fashioned a 'what might have been' from Britten's sketches, an unmistakably Brittenesque score of the period, full of poised solo writing and a still, nocturnal slow movement of considerable beauty. A great counterpoint to **Mozart's** Clarinet Concerto, and would be a good fit in a programme featuring the last century's jazz-inspired composers.

2.2.1(=bass cl).2—4.2.3.0—
timp.perc—harp—strings
Faber Music

Symphony for Cello and Orchestra

op. 68 (1963; rev. 1964) 34'

For cello and orchestra,
in four movements
(CD 11)

Although a showpiece for the cello soloist, this is nonetheless a tightly constructed symphonic essay, with much of the work's power to be found in the orchestral writing. The final passacaglia – spelled out with great invention by the orchestra – is a barnstorming marriage of ground bass and theme and variations. The relatively slim scoring harks back to that of the great Romantic cello concertos, to which this is a worthy successor. A good alternative to concertos by **Schumann, Dvořák, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Saint-Saëns** and **Elgar**.

2(II=picc).2.2(II=bass cl).2(II=dbn)—2.2.1(=ten
trbn).1—timp.perc(2)—strings
Boosey & Hawkes

Lachrymae

op. 48a (1950; rev. 1970; orch.1976) 15'

For viola and small string orchestra
(CD 8)

Another Britten meditation on a song by **Dowland**, this is an extraordinarily touching and affecting set of variations. Its *coup de théâtre* is in placing the theme at the end of the piece, following the many hints and snippets along the way, which is stated with regal simplicity. Britten took much care over the virtuosic solo writing: it was his own instrument, after all. It counts the **Walton** and **Bartók** concertos as its siblings.

strings (senza vn I)
Boosey & Hawkes

'Stravinsky once said that one must work perpetually at one's technique. But what is technique? Schoenberg's ... is often a tremendous elaboration. My technique is to tear all the waste away; to achieve perfect clarity of expression, that is my aim.'

Britten, 1963



Chorus and orchestra

Ballad of Heroes

op. 14 (1939) 15'
For tenor (or soprano) solos, chorus (SATB) and orchestra, in three movements
Text: Randall Swingler, W.H. Auden (CD 35)

Unjustly neglected, *Ballad of Heroes* is an eloquent testimony to both the period in which it was written and Britten's style and preoccupations at the time. The influence of **Mahler** is strong throughout, although the closest connection – not least through its opening funeral march and subsequent dance of death – is with Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem* of the following year.

3(II=picc).2.ca(=ob III).2.cl in Eb.2.dbn(=bn III)—4.2.3.1—timp.perc(2)—harp—strings
Off-stage (*ad lib.*): 3tpt, sd
The work may be performed in a reduced orchestration
Boosey & Hawkes

Spring Symphony

op. 44 (1949) 45'
For soprano, contralto and tenor solos, chorus (SATB), boys' choir and orchestra, in four movements
Text: Anon., Spenser, Nashe, Peele, Clare, Milton, Herrick, Vaughan, Auden, Barnfield, Blake, Beaumont, Fletcher (CD 44)

A riotous reaffirmation of Britten's roots, the *Spring Symphony* combines all of Britten's favourite things: fine English poetry, soloists for him to spoil, boys' voices. It is an uncompromisingly joyful work, with none of the fustiness that characterizes many English oratorios from the first half of the century, and with a final movement every bit as thrilling as that of *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. A fitting (English) alternative to **Orff's** *Carmina Burana*.

3(III=picc and alto fl).3.3.3—4.3.3.1.cow-horn—timp.perc(4)—2harps—strings
Boosey & Hawkes

Cantata academica, carmen basiliense

op. 62 (1959) 21'
For soprano, alto, tenor and bass solos, chorus (SATB) and orchestra
Text: from the charter of Basle University and by Bernhard Wyss (in Latin) (CD 1)

An occasional work, written to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Basle University, *Cantata academica* effortlessly transcends the circumstances of its commission. It is a dramatic piece, in which many ideas of the *War Requiem* are tried out, with conspicuous impact.

2(II=picc).2.2.2—4.2.3.1—timp.perc(4)—2harps—pft(=cel *ad lib.*)—strings
Boosey & Hawkes

Cantata misericordium

op. 69 (1963) 20'

For tenor and baritone solos, small chorus (SATB), string quartet and orchestra
Text: Patrick Wilkinson (in Latin) (CD 30)

From the same stable as the *War Requiem*, the *Cantata misericordium* is another of Britten's many parables. Written for the centenary of the Red Cross, this dramatic telling of the biblical story of the Good Samaritan was intended in part as a strong rejoinder to the century's catastrophic anti-Semitism. A powerful piece, full of beautiful, often plaintive writing for chorus and soloists, *Cantata misericordium* contains striking resonances with **Stravinsky's** Latin works.

timp—harp—pft—strings
Boosey & Hawkes

Praise We Great Men

(1976) 8'
For soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor and bass solos, chorus (SATB) and orchestra
Text: Edith Sitwell (CD 24)

An unfinished fragment when Britten died, *Praise We Great Men* was subsequently crafted into a surprisingly vibrant piece by **Colin Matthews**. It is a poised setting of **Sitwell's** poem, encased in exquisite orchestral details.

3(II, III=picc).2(II=ca).2(II=bass cl).2—4.2.2(or 1).o—timp.perc(2)—harp—pft—strings
Faber Music

Solo voice and orchestra

Quatre chansons françaises

(1928) 13'
For high voice and orchestra
Text: Victor Hugo, Paul Verlaine (in French) (CD 19)

Delicate, sometimes ecstatic songs by a precocious teenager, hued with the sounds of **Wagner**, the colours of **Debussy**, and the poetic rhetoric of **Mahler**, but unmistakably the work of Britten. It works especially well when programmed alongside these influential composers.

2.1.3(II=cl in A, III=bass cl).2—4.o.o.o—perc—harp—pft—strings
Faber Music

Our Hunting Fathers

op. 8 (1936; rev. 1961) 27'
Symphonic cycle for high voice and orchestra
Text: Anon, Thomas Ravenscroft, W.H. Auden (CD 5)

Britten's breakaway orchestral song-cycle – 'my Op. 1 alright' as he said at the time – a meditation on humankind's relationship with animals, full of ageless political bite, and virtuosic orchestral writing that prefigures the *Sinfonia da Requiem*. Equally strong when performed by tenor or soprano, the cycle was Britten's first concert-hall collaboration with **Auden**, his dramatic, lyrical response to 1930s Continental modernism and politics. Works brilliantly in concert alongside the expressionist scores of **Berg** and **Schoenberg**, and the more political symphonies of **Shostakovich**.

2(II=picc).2(II=ca).1.cl in Eb(=bass cl).alto sax.2—4.2.3.1—timp.perc(2)—harp—strings
Boosey & Hawkes

Les Illuminations

op. 18 (1939) 21'/30'
For high voice and string orchestra, with three extra songs (orch. Colin Matthews): 'Phrase', 'Aube', 'À Une Raison'
Text: Arthur Rimbaud (in French) (CD 25)

Exquisite miniatures, drawn together as a cycle for soprano or tenor and string orchestra, in which Britten pays tribute once more to the sounds and colours of French music and language. Matthews slipped on Britten's shoes for his recent orchestration of three poems sketched and then discarded by the composer to produce these stand-alone orchestral songs. A great alternative or counterpoint to **Berlioz's** *Les nuits d'été*.

Boosey & Hawkes

Serenade

op. 31 (1943) 24'/27'
For tenor, horn and strings, with one extra song: 'Now sleeps the crimson petal'
Text: Charles Cotton, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, William Blake, Anon., Ben Jonson, John Keats (CD 4)

On home territory now after *Les Illuminations*, Britten's tribute here is to England's great poets and pastoral traditions. It is a showpiece equally for tenor and horn, each playing off the other with great wit and beauty.

Boosey & Hawkes

Fourteen Folk Songs

(1942–1955) 16'
Arranged for voice and orchestra
Texts in English and French (CD 6)

Few of those who admire Britten's folksong arrangements know the composer's own orchestral versions, in which the humour and colour of the piano accompaniments are taken to a completely new level. These are great encores, obviously, but also work well as a programmed bracket of songs.

Boosey & Hawkes

A Charm of Lullabies

op. 41 (1947) 12'
For mezzo-soprano solo and orchestra (arr. Colin Matthews)
Text: William Blake, Robert Burns, Robert Greene, Thomas Randolph, John Philip (CD 17)

A welcome addition to a relatively small repertory. **Colin Matthews** has crafted Britten's five lullabies for mezzo-soprano and piano into a unified orchestral cycle. A good alternative to **Elgar's** ubiquitous *Sea Pictures*.

2.2.2(II=bass cl).2—2.o.o.o—harp—strings
Boosey & Hawkes

Nocturne

op. 60 (1958) 25'
For tenor solo, seven obligato instruments and string orchestra
Text: Shelley, Tennyson, Coleridge, Middleton, Wordsworth, Owen, Keats, Shakespeare (CD 31)

Britten's bookend to his earlier *Serenade*, in which the world of sleep, dreams and nightmares is charted with great drama. The cycle's connection to **Mahler** is formalized in its dedication to his widow Alma, yet the great composer's musical footprints are ever discernable. Orchestral musicians love playing this: each obligato instrument forms a perfect colloquy with the voice.

fl, ca, cl, bn, hn, harp, timp—strings
Boosey & Hawkes

'No, no; you great composer, I little composer.'

Dmitri Shostakovich



Phaedra

op. 93 (1975) 15'
Dramatic cantata for mezzo-soprano
and small orchestra
Text: Robert Lowell, after Racine's *Phèdre*
(CD 13)

Phaedra could rightly be considered Britten's final opera – a short work, in which the death of the incestuous, mythological Phaedra, wife of Theseus, is played out in real time. The work's debt to the Baroque cantata is apparent, not least in the recitatives accompanied by harpsichord, yet its language shows Britten at his most vital and lyrical, one eye on **Schoenberg's** *Erwartung*. It works brilliantly in concert alongside **Handel** and **Bach**.

timp.perc(2)—hpd—strings
Faber Music

Works involving children

Friday Afternoons

op. 7 (1934) 22'
Twelve children's songs with
piano accompaniment
Text: Anon., Thackeray, Taylor,
Udall, Walton, Farjeon
(CD 43)

A collection of varied miniatures, each of which demonstrates Britten's great empathy with children and their voices.

Boosey & Hawkes

Noye's Fludde

op. 59 (1958) 50'
For adults' and children's voices, children's
chorus (SATB), chamber ensemble and
children's orchestra
Text: from the Chester Miracle Play
(CD 29)

A touching retelling of the biblical story of Noah, to be performed by children and adults, with powerful interventions from the audience.

Professional ensemble: trbl recorder—
timp—pft (four hands).org—string quintet

Amateur/children's orchestra: desc rec
(2 parts), trbl recs—bugles in B♭—
12 handbells in E♭—perc—strings

Boosey & Hawkes

The Golden Vanity

op. 78 (1966) 17'
Vaudeville for boys and piano
Text: Colin Graham, after the
old English ballad
(CD 21)

A children's *Billy Budd*, *The Golden Vanity* is a work of great charm and pathos. It is not difficult to sing, yet it packs a musical and dramatic punch.

Faber Music

Children's Crusade

op. 82 (1969) 19'
Ballad for children's voices
and orchestra
Text: Bertolt Brecht (German and
English, trs. Hans Keller)
(CD 36)

It is a bleak landscape these fifty-odd Polish orphans tread. It is 1939, and their country and families have been destroyed by war. They set off in search of peace, yet their journey is marked by starvation, a criminal trial, and a funeral: adult territory not so far from **Golding's** *Lord of the Flies*. There are strong solo parts for children, and the ingenious orchestral sounds – of war, of dogs barking – round out this atmospheric tale. There is simply no other piece like it for children.

6 solo perc—tutti perc—2pft—
chamber or electronic org

Faber Music

Chamber music

Britten's works for string quartet chart his development as a composer. It's all there – from the continental preoccupations in his *Quartettino* (1930), to the emergence of Britten's own unmistakable voice in his first string quartet (1941) and his debt to **Purcell** in his second (1945), to his String Quartet No. 3, written one year before his death, a restless, troubled, profound work.

The suites for solo cello were a product of a more confined period in the composer's life, yet they too show a marked evolution in his thinking.

The chamber works have remarkably varied lives these days – from the complete quartet cycle performed by the Belcea and Brodsky quartets at the Aldeburgh Festival in 2002, to their appropriation as ballet scores. They are dramatic, virtuosic, visual, often profound essays in their genres.

Quartettino

(1930) 16'
For string quartet,
in three movements
(CD 32)

Faber Music

Phantasy in F minor

(1932; rev. 1932) 11'
For string quintet (2 vn, 2va, vc)
(CD 37)

Faber Music

Alla marcia

(1933) 3'
For string quartet
(CD 15)

Faber Music

Three Divertimenti

(1933–1936) 12'
For string quartet
(CD 3)

Faber Music

String Quartet No. 1 in D

op. 25 (1941) 26'
Four movements
(CD 12)

Boosey & Hawkes

String Quartet No. 2 in C

op. 36 (1945) 31'
Three movements
(CD 41)

Boosey & Hawkes

Sonata in C

op. 65 (1961; rev. 1961) 18'
For cello and piano,
in five movements
(CD 39)

Boosey & Hawkes

First Suite for Cello

op. 72 (1964) 22'
(CD 16)

Faber Music

Second Suite for Cello

op. 80 (1967) 22'
Five movements
(CD 26)

Faber Music

Third Suite for Cello

op. 87 (1971; rev. 1974) 22'
Nine movements
(CD 7)

Faber Music

String Quartet No. 3

op. 94 (1975; rev. 1975) 28'
Five movements
(CD 23)

Faber Music

'When Phaedra arrived, I was overwhelmed by its passion and feeling. Even more awesome was to collaborate with the composer on it, to create the interpretation in his presence. That moment is mine for ever.'

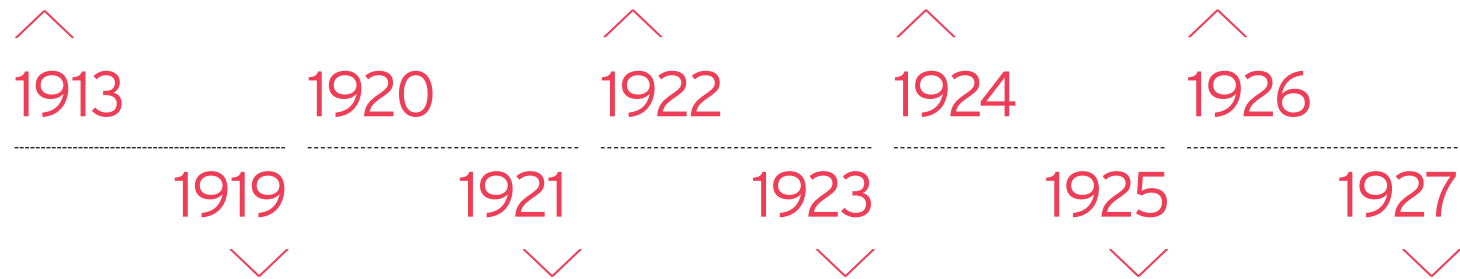


Britten's family home in Lowestoft: 21 Kirkley Cliff Road. The ground floor was his father's dental surgery.

Born in Lowestoft on 22 November, feast day of St Cecilia.

First World War 1914-18. Lowestoft bombed from sea and air during the war.

Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*



Earliest attempt at composition: a song entitled 'Do you no that my Daddy has gone to London today'.

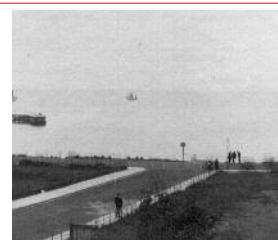
Treaty of Versailles signed.

Elgar, Cello Concerto



Britten playing the piano at home, aged around 7.

Starts piano lessons with Miss Ethel Astle at his pre-prep school in Lowestoft.



View from the upstairs of Britten's family home in Lowestoft, looking out across the North Sea, 1922.

Receives Stainer and Barrett's *Dictionary of Musical Terms* for his ninth birthday, and makes immediate use of it in his own music.

1922

Is 'knocked sideways' hearing Frank Bridge's orchestral suite *The Sea* in Norwich.

Death of Puccini.

Sibelius, *Symphony No. 7*

Janáček, *The Cunning Little Vixen*

1924

Passes Grade VIII piano exam with honours, and receives edition of Beethoven Piano Sonatas as a birthday present from Miss Astle.

General Strike in Britain.

Puccini, *Turandot*

1926



Britten in 1927-28 with his parents, to whose memory he later dedicated *Sinfonia da Requiem*.

Is introduced to Frank Bridge, who agrees to give him composition lessons.

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) established by Royal Charter.

Holst, *Egdon Heath*

Bridge, *Enter Spring*



Britten, aged 14, at the home of Frank Bridge in 1928, at work on a composition exercise. Drawing by Marjorie Fass.

Quatre chansons françaises

Begins keeping a detailed diary. Ahead of first lesson with Bridge draws up a list of 160 compositions to date. Enters Gresham's School in Norfolk, boarding away from home.

Schoenberg, *Variations for Orchestra*

1928



The Royal College of Music, London, around 1930.

Quartettino

Leaves Gresham's and wins scholarship to Royal College of Music (RCM) in London.

Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*

1930



Some of the pocket scores through which the teenage Britten expanded his musical horizons. Photo: Nigel Luckhurst.

Hears *The Rite of Spring* in a BBC broadcast, finding it 'bewildering and terrifying. I didn't really enjoy it, but I think it's incredibly marvelous & arresting'.

Phantasy, Double Concerto

Three Two-part Songs published by Oxford University Press, Britten's first published work.

Shostakovich, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*

Bartók, *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*

Father dies in Lowestoft while Britten is attending International Society of Contemporary Music (ISCM) festival in Florence. Later visits Vienna and meets Erwin Stein.

Start of Spanish Civil War. Germany occupies Rhineland.

BBC TV inaugurated.

1932

Alla marcia

Phantasy Quartet, op. 2, included in a BBC concert of contemporary music, Britten's first broadcast work. Completes studies and leaves RCM.

Gershwin, *Porgy and Bess*

Join the staff of the GPO Film Unit. Signs publishing contract with Boosey & Hawkes. Attends ISCM Festival in Barcelona months before Civil War.

Shostakovich, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*

1934

Friday Afternoons, op. 7

Starts working for the GPO Film Unit, writing music for documentary films. Meets WH Auden.

Nuremberg Laws passed in Germany. Italy invades Ethiopia.

Gershwin, *Porgy and Bess*

Our Hunting Fathers, op. 8; *Temporal Variations*

Join the staff of the GPO Film Unit. Signs publishing contract with Boosey & Hawkes. Attends ISCM Festival in Barcelona months before Civil War.

Start of Spanish Civil War. Germany occupies Rhineland.

BBC TV inaugurated.

Bartók, *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*

1936



Britten with Frank and Ethel Bridge in Paris, 1937.

Mother dies. Buys the Old Mill, Snape, with legacy and has it converted. Gets to know Peter Pears while helping to sort out the effects of Peter Burra, a mutual friend killed in a plane crash.





Britten with Paul Wittgenstein.



Britten at the Old Mill, Snape.



Programme book for the first Aldeburgh Festival.



Britten and Pears in Venice, September 1954.



Britten and Peter Pears in Bali, 1956.

Piano Concerto, op. 13
Moves into the Old Mill, where Aaron Copland is an early visitor. Begins regular performing partnership with Pears.
The Anschluss in Austria.

Sinfonia da Requiem, op. 20; *Diversions*, op. 21
Committee for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) set up to improve British morale during wartime.

(Sketches used in) Movements for a Clarinet Concerto
Returns to England with Pears and registers as a Conscientious Objector.

Begins the composition sketch of *Peter Grimes* at the Old Mill.

The Rape of Lucretia premieres at Glyndebourne.
CEMA becomes the Arts Council, set up to distribute public money to the arts independently of the government.
Copland, *Symphony No. 3*

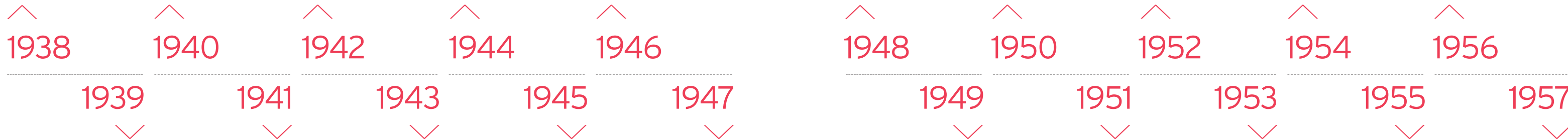
With Pears and Eric Crozier establishes the Aldeburgh Festival of Music and the Arts.

Lachrymae, op. 48a
Start of the Korean War.

NBC televises *Billy Budd*: Britten's first opera to be broadcast on television.
US tests hydrogen bomb and UK announces that it has an atomic bomb.
Cage, 4'33"

The Turn of the Screw premiere in Venice.
Boulez, Le marteau sans maître

Visits Japan and Bali during a tour of the Far East, and is impressed by Noh theatre and gamelan music.



Britten on the deck of the *SS Ausonia*, May-June 1939.



Britten with WH Auden in New York



Britten with Kenneth Green, Eric Crozier and Reginald Goodall at Sadler's Wells Theatre during preparations for the premiere of *Peter Grimes*, 1945.



Britten at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam after the premiere of *Spring Symphony* at the 1949 Holland Festival.

Ballad of Heroes, op. 14; *Violin Concerto*, op. 15; *Young Apollo*, op. 16; *Les Illuminations*, op. 18; *Canadian Carnival*, op. 19
In May, sets sail with Pears for North America on the *SS Ausonia*, arriving in Quebec. When Britain declares war on Germany, the pair - by then in the US and a couple - are advised to remain.

String Quartet No. 1 in D, op. 25; *An American Overture*
Writes first opera, *Paul Bunyan*, with libretto by WH Auden.
Attack on Pearl Harbour brings US into WWII.
Shostakovich, Symphony No. 7, dedicated to the besieged Leningrad
Tippett, A Child of Our Time

Serenade, op. 31
Gives wartime recitals with Pears and others for the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA).

String Quartet No. 2 in C, op. 36
Premiere of *Peter Grimes*, 7 June. Visits, and performs at, liberated Belsen concentration camp with Yehudi Menuhin, 27 July.

War in Europe ends, May. US drops atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, August.

A Charm of Lullabies, op. 41; *Men of Goodwill*
Moves to Aldeburgh, buying Crag House on the seafront overlooking the North Sea. Co-founds the English Opera Group.
Partition of India.

Spring Symphony, op. 44
Mao Zedong proclaims the People's Republic of China.

Billy Budd commissioned as part of the Festival of Britain.
Festival of Britain celebrates the end of post-war austerity. London's Royal Festival Hall opens on the South Bank.

Symphonic Suite 'Gloriana', op. 53a
Coronation opera *Gloriana*.
Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.
Death of Stalin.

Communist countries sign Warsaw Pact.



Britten playing tennis at The Red House.

Premiere of *The Prince of the Pagodas*. Moves to The Red House, Aldeburgh.
Russian Sputnik satellite launched.
Bernstein, *West Side Story*
Stockhausen, *Gruppen*





Britten conducting a rehearsal of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Aldeburgh's Jubilee Hall.



Britten with Sviatoslav Richter in The Red House garden.



Britten conducting a rehearsal of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Aldeburgh's Jubilee Hall.



Britten with Peter Pears, his partner for nearly four decades, towards the end of the composer's life. Photo: Victor Parker.

Noye's Fludde, op. 59;
Nocturne, op. 60

Premiere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, written to celebrate the extension of the Jubilee Hall as a larger venue for the Aldeburgh Festival.

War Requiem premiere in the new Coventry Cathedral.

Cuban missile crisis.

The Beatles, 'Love Me Do'

First Suite for Cello, op. 72

Premiere of *Curlew River*. Conducts Cello Symphony in Moscow.

Nelson Mandela jailed in South Africa.

The Golden Vanity, op. 78

Cultural revolution announced in China.

Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Protests in London against Vietnam War.

Birtwistle, *Punch and Judy*

Shooting of Kent State students protesting against US invasion of Cambodia.

Henze, *El Cimmaron*

Nixon visits China.

Suite on English Folk Tunes, op. 90

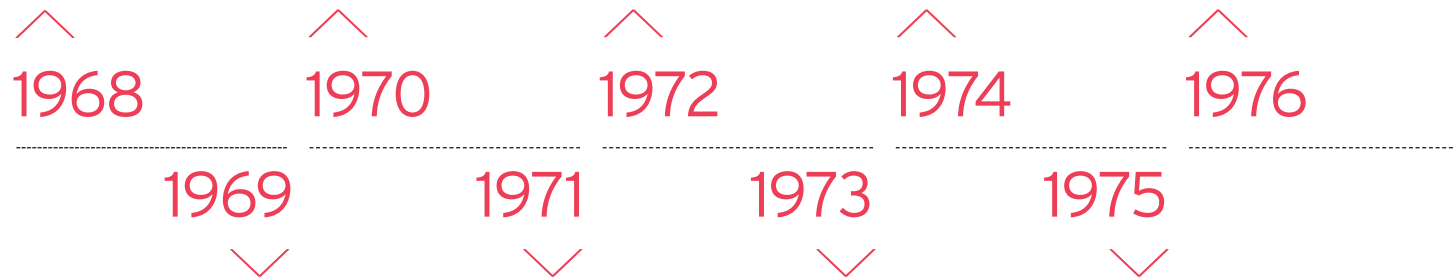
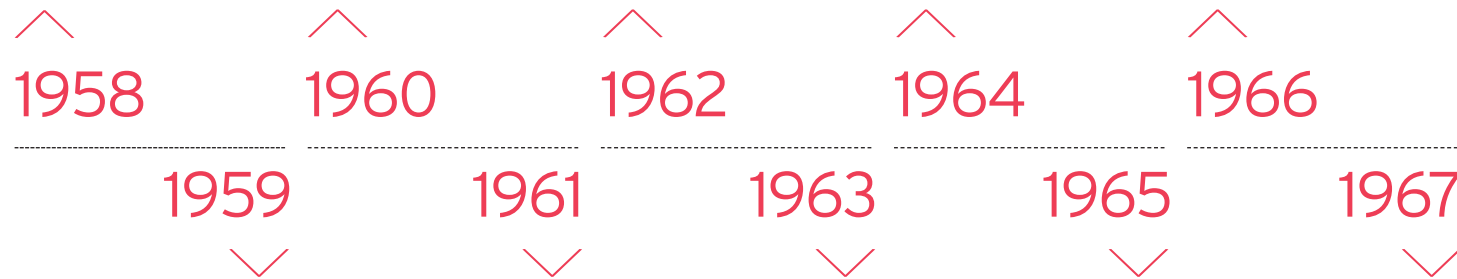
Pears' Metropolitan Opera debut in *Death in Venice*.

Resignation of Richard Nixon over Watergate.

Rostropovich and family go into exile in the US.

Praise We Great Men

Created a Life Peer, Baron Britten of Aldeburgh, in June; dies at home in The Red House, 4 December.



Cantata academica, carmen basiliense, op. 62

Cuban revolution.

Sonata in C, op. 65

First visit to Aldeburgh by Mstislav Rostropovich and Galina Vishnevskaya.

Construction of Berlin Wall.



Britten rehearsing with Mstislav Rostropovich at the Festival of British Music in Moscow.

Holidays with Pears in Armenia as guests of Rostropovich and Vishnevskaya.

Faber Music established.



Britten at Snape Maltings conducting a rehearsal for the premiere of *The Building of the House*. Photo: Hans Wild.

Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, op. 68; *Cantata misericordium*, op. 69

Visits USSR for the Festival of British Music. Fiftieth birthday celebrations.

Assassination of John F Kennedy.

Tippett, *Concerto for Orchestra*

The Building of the House, op. 79; *Second Suite for Cello*, op. 80

Snape Maltings Concert Hall opens as a new venue for the Aldeburgh Festival. Queen Elizabeth II opens the Concert Hall and visits The Red House.

Homosexuality becomes legal in UK.

Children's Crusade, op. 82

Snape Maltings Concert Hall badly damaged by fire on the eve of the Aldeburgh Festival.

Neil Armstrong sets foot on the moon.

Maxwell Davies, *Eight Songs for a Mad King*

Shostakovich, *Symphony No. 14*

Third Suite for Cello, op. 87

Owen Wingrave, an opera commissioned for television, is broadcast on BBC2.

Completes the full score of *Death in Venice*, but misses the premiere during the Aldeburgh Festival, convalescing after heart surgery.

Sydney Opera House opened by Queen Elizabeth II.



Britten in Venice, in a wheelchair pushed by William Servaes, 1975. Photo: Rita Thomson.

Phaedra, op. 93; *String Quartet No. 3*, op. 94

Final visit to Venice, where he completes the *String Quartet No. 3*.

End of Franco's rule in Spain. Surrender of Saigon to North Vietnamese forces.

CD sampler tracks

- 01 Cantata academica, carmen basiliense** op. 62
Part I Bonorum summum omnium
London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus/George Malcolm
Decca 475 6040
- 02 Diversions** op. 21
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Steven Osborne/BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra/Ilan Volkov
Hyperion CDA67625
- 03 Three Divertimenti**
2 Waltz
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- 04 Serenade** op. 31
5 Hymn
Ian Bostridge/Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Simon Rattle
EMI Classics 558 0492
- 05 Our Hunting Fathers** op. 8
3 Dance of Death
Ian Bostridge/Britten Sinfonia/
Daniel Harding
EMI Classics 56534
- 06 Oliver Cromwell (Nursery Rhyme from Suffolk)**
Ian Bostridge/Britten Sinfonia/
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- 07 Third Suite for Cello** op. 87
6 Fuga: Andante espressivo
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- 08 Lachrymae** op. 48a
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- 09 Double Concerto**
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2 Dies irae: Allegro con fuoco
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- 13 Phaedra** op. 93
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II Michael Collins/Northern Sinfonia/
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NMC D140
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- 17 A Charm of Lullabies** op. 41
5 The Nurse's Song
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- 21 The Golden Vanity** op. 78
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- 22 The Building of the House** op. 79
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- 23 String Quartet No. 3** op. 94
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- 24 Praise We Great Men**
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- 25 Les Illuminations** op. 18
3a Phrase
Felicity Lott/English Chamber Orchestra/Steuart Bedford
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- 27 Young Apollo** op. 16
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Peter Pears/Boys from Emanuel School Wandsworth/Orchestra and Chorus of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden/Britten
Decca 475 6040

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Paul Kildea

Paul Kildea is a conductor who has written extensively on Benjamin Britten and twentieth-century music and culture. His books include *Selling Britten: music and the market place* and *Britten on Music* (both OUP). Penguin Press will publish his major new biography of Britten in time for the composer's 2013 centenary. He is a former Head of Music at the annual festival founded by Britten in Aldeburgh, Suffolk, and former Artistic Director of London's Wigmore Hall.

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Selected further reading

www.brittenpears.org for full details of all Britten's published works, biographical information and much more.

The Faber Pocket Guide to Britten John Bridcut (Faber and Faber, 2010).

Britten David Matthews (Haus Publishing, paperback 2003).

Benjamin Britten: A Biography Humphrey Carpenter (Faber and Faber, new edition 2003).

Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten 1928-1938 Dr John Evans (Faber and Faber, paperback 2010).

Britten on Music Paul Kildea (OUP, paperback 2008).

Britten's Children John Bridcut (Faber and Faber, paperback 2007).

February House Sherill Tippins (Pocket Books, paperback 2006).

Selected DVDs

Benjamin Britten - A Time There Was Tony Palmer (1979). Released on DVD by Tony Palmer Films, 2008.

The Hidden Heart - A Life of Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears Jake Martin (2001). Released on DVD by EMI Classics, 2008.

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