

Benjamin Britten



Benjamin Britten photo © Angus McBean

A survey of Benjamin Britten's Life and Works Text © courtesy of the Britten-Pears Library 1913-1919 Edward Benjamin Britten was born in the East Suffolk town of Lowestoft in 1913 on 22 November, the feast of Saint Cecilia, patron saint of music. Apart from a few years away, first in London and then in the United States, he made Suffolk his home for most of his life. His father, Robert, was a dentist whose practice was situated on the lower floor of the family house at 21 Kirkley Cliff Road. His mother, Edith, was a keen amateur musician who fully encouraged the children's love of music. Britten was the youngest of four, the others being Robert, Barbara and Beth. He attended South Lodge Preparatory School, very near his home in Lowestoft and there developed what became an enduring love of sport, particularly tennis, swimming and cricket. He was a competent student showing particular skill in mathematics, but his passion was music. His first attempts at composing were made when he was five, although, as he later confessed: "it was the pattern on the paper which interested me and when I asked my mother to play [the music], her look of horror upset me considerably". 1920-1927 At the age of seven Britten started having piano lessons with a near neighbour, Miss Ethel Astle, a teacher at his pre-prep. school, and at the age of ten he began to learn the viola with Mrs Audrey Alston, a professional violist who encouraged her pupil to attend concerts whenever he could. It was at one such concert during the Norfolk and Norwich Triennial Festival that he heard Frank Bridge's orchestral poem *The Sea* and was, in his own words, 'knocked sideways'. Mrs Alston arranged a meeting with Bridge and soon afterwards, during the school holidays of 1927, Britten began composition lessons with him. Britten's creative output was prodigious. As a child he produced a great many works, some of which were of a very high standard. They include a symphony, various other orchestral pieces, works for chamber ensemble, suites for solo piano, drafts for Masses, a symphonic poem *Chaos and Cosmos* and many songs. All these works now form the extensive collection of his juvenilia at the Britten-Pears Library. 1928-1933 In September 1928 Britten went as a boarder to Gresham's School at Holt in Norfolk. Although often homesick he continued to enjoy sport and to write, perform and listen to music at every opportunity, often reading scores in bed. From this time come his settings of poems by Walter de la Mare in *Tit for Tat*, Ford Madox Ford *The Song of the Women: A Wealden Trio*, Hilaire Belloc's *The Birds*, *Quatre Chansons Françaises* (Victor Hugo and Verlaine) and the anonymous 14th Century *A Hymn to the Virgin*. At sixteen Britten won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music and so left Gresham's for London, where he shared a flat with his sister Beth. He studied composition with John Ireland, whom he admired but often found difficult to work with, and piano with the

genial Arthur Benjamin. Although the training he received was a useful supplement to his work with Bridge he was frustrated by a perceived lack of interest in the kind of music that he wished to write. From these three years at the College come his *String Quartet in D major* (1931), the *Phantasy in F minor* for string quintet, the *Sinfonietta op.1* for chamber orchestra, *Phantasy op. 2* for oboe, violin, viola and cello (all 1932) and the choral variations for unaccompanied voices *A Boy was Born op.3* (1933). 1934-1936 *A Boy was Born* was broadcast by the BBC in February 1934, gaining Britten recognition in musical circles as a composer of so much promise that his *Phantasy op. 2* was chosen by the International Society for Contemporary Music for performance at their Festival in Florence that year. Although he was terminally ill, Britten's father urged his son to attend this festival, but died before Britten, summoned by telegram, could get back home. In October 1934 Britten and his mother travelled to Vienna. There he met the music editor Erwin Stein, who later came to England as a refugee and took a position in the music publishing house Boosey and Hawkes, where the director Ralph Hawkes had already signed Britten up as a composer. On his return to England Britten found employment with the General Post Office Film Unit. The Unit's series of documentary films, made by John Grierson, showed aspects of English life, particularly examining the world of industry and the people who worked within it, such as those who mined coal (*Coal Face*) or ensured the delivery of mail (*Night Mail*). Here Britten collaborated with the poet W. H. Auden, who supplied the narrative for some of the films accompanied by Britten's music. Their working relationship extended beyond the G.P.O. When Britten was commissioned to write a work for the Norwich Festival in 1936 he used a text devised by Auden, *Our Hunting Fathers op.8.* for a symphonic song cycle for high voice and orchestra. Ostensibly about animals in their relationship to human beings, this speaks just as strongly against the inhumanity that both composer and poet saw in the emergence of Nazism. Other compositions at this time reflected Britten's versatility. The *Simple Symphony op.4* of 1934 comprised themes from some of his juvenilia, also in 1934 came the *Suite for violin and piano op.6*; the twelve songs of *Friday Afternoons, op. 7* (1935) were written for Friday afternoon music at his brother's school, Clive House, Prestatyn, and in 1936 he composed the music for the feature film *Love from a Stranger*, based on a short story by Agatha Christie and starring Ann Harding and Basil Rathbone. 1937-1938 1937 began sadly for Britten. In January his sister Beth caught influenza, and infected her mother, who had been nursing her. Weakened by the illness, Mrs Britten died of a heart attack. On 27 April his friend, the writer Peter Burra, was killed in a plane crash. Burra had owned a small cottage at Bucklebury and it fell to Britten and one of Burra's closest friends, the young singer Peter Pears, to sort out his papers. The two men soon formed a strong friendship that grew into a life-long personal and artistic partnership. The young composer had been devastated by his mother's death, but Edith Britten had left her son sufficient money to enable him to buy a disused windmill in the Suffolk village of Snape, on the river Alde. This was converted into a suitable residence by Beth Britten's future father-in-law, the architect Arthur Welford, and Britten moved in in 1938. The lower floor housed a drawing room with a grand piano, the upper floor a bedroom and balcony from which Britten could see the river and a long established maltings building. At the Old Mill he was host to many friends such as the composers Lennox Berkeley and Aaron Copland, the writers W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, as well as Peter Pears. 1939-1940 The enormous success of the *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge op.10*, which were

composed for the Boyd Neel Orchestra to perform at the 1937 Salzburg Festival, had increased Britten's national and international standing, but despite this Britten felt frustrated and disillusioned by the lack of musical perception in the English establishment. In 1939 he and Peter Pears followed Auden and Isherwood across the Atlantic, giving a number of concerts in Canada before moving south through the States, intending to reach Hollywood where there had been the tentative offer of a film commission. On the way Pears wrote to a German emigrée friend, Elizabeth Mayer, asking if they might visit. This led to the Mayers offering them a room in their own home, a small cottage in the grounds of the hospital run by Dr Mayer on Long Island. When war broke out in September 1939 Britten and Pears wanted to return to England, but were told they would be more valuable if they stayed in the States and increased sympathy for Britain there. After the USA entered the war they tried again for visas to return home, but had such difficulty in gaining these that their 'short stay' lasted until March 1942. During this American period Britten wrote the Violin Concerto, op.15 which was premiered in New York in 1940 by Antonio Brosa and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. Other instrumental works included Young Apollo, op.16, a tour-de-force for piano, string quartet and string orchestra, the Canadian Carnival op.19, both of 1939, and the Sinfonia da Requiem, op. 20 of 1940. This was composed in memory of his parents although commissioned to celebrate the 2,600 Anniversary of the Founding of the Japanese Empire. It was not, however performed at the Japanese celebrations, ostensibly because of its Christian content. Late in 1940 Britten and Pears moved for a while into a house in Brooklyn Heights, New York City with a number of other artistic figures, headed by W. H. Auden who then collaborated with Britten on the operetta Paul Bunyan, op. 17, based on the American folk tale of a giant lumberjack who founded the nation. Although it found great favour with its audiences at the time, this work was largely discarded by both Auden and Britten until, near the end of his life, Britten made a revised version which was staged at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1976. __1941-1944__ Before leaving England in 1939 Britten had set a number of poems for high voice and orchestra by the French poet Arthur Rimbaud under the collective title Les Illuminations, op. 18. The first performances were given by the Swiss soprano Sophie Wyss, but Britten was beginning increasingly to write vocal music for Pears to perform, and in 1941 he recorded Les Illuminations in Canada with Pears taking the vocal part. The same year saw the composition of String Quartet No.1 in D, op.25, dedicated to Mrs Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, the benefactor and friend of Frank Bridge. While in America Britten composed music for several distinguished soloists in addition to the Violin Concerto for Brosa. These were Scottish Ballad op.26 for the pianist duo Ethel Bartlett and Rae Robertson who gave its first performance on 28th November 1941 at the Music Hall, Cincinnati and Diversions, op.21 for Piano (Left Hand) and Orchestra commissioned by Paul Wittgenstein who gave the first performance with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra on the 16th January 1942; Britten began, but unfortunately never completed, a clarinet concerto for Benny Goodman which was eventually edited and orchestrated by Colin Matthews as the Movement for Clarinet and Orchestra premiered by Michael Collins at the Barbican Hall in March 1990. In 1941, inspired by E. M. Forster's article in The Listener, 'George Crabbe: the Poet and the Man' and Crabbe's narrative poem The Borough, Britten began to consider the possibility of writing an opera based on the character of Peter Grimes, an idea that was given focus when he received a generous commission to write an opera from the conductor Serge Koussevitzky. It is the story of a fisherman who is suspected by his fellow

townsfolk of murdering his young apprentices. Grimes's only sources of consolation are the love offered to him by the school teacher Ellen Orford and the help of Captain Balstrode. At last, in March 1942 the longed-for visas were obtained and Britten and Pears returned to England on the Swedish cargo ship Axel Johnson. It was a hazardous voyage as the ship's funnel caught fire and the rest of the convoy had to leave the Axel Johnson to the mercy of an Atlantic dominated by Nazi submarines. During the voyage Britten completed A Ceremony of Carols, op.28, a setting of ten ancient carol texts for treble voices and harp first performed on 5 December at Norwich Castle, and the Hymn to St Cecilia, op.27 for unaccompanied mixed voice chorus, with words by Auden. On their arrival in England Britten and Pears registered as conscientious objectors. Although exempt from military service, they were under obligation to support the war effort through the use of their musical abilities. This meant recital tours for the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) to many remote and sometimes dangerous places as well as Britten's composing activities and Pears's involvement as a singer with the Sadler's Wells opera company. __1945-1947__ Peter Grimes, with a libretto supplied by Montagu Slater, was completed in February 1945 and premiered on 7 June at Sadler's Wells Theatre with Pears singing the title role and Joan Cross as Ellen Orford. The work heralded a renaissance in British opera, paving the way for a whole generation of composers, as well as firmly establishing the path that Britten himself would now follow as a composer. Peter Grimes soon established itself as the most important opera by an English composer since Purcell's Dido and Aeneas, written 250 years earlier. In the same year Britten was commissioned to write the music for a Ministry of Education film on the instruments of the orchestra. For this he wrote a set of variations and fugue based on Purcell's theme from the theatre music for Abdelazar: The Moor's Revenge. These he called The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra, op.34. Peter Grimes had proved a costly undertaking and Britten realised that for opera to be more readily produced and to succeed financially smaller forces must be used. He, John Piper and Eric Crozier now formed a chamber company, the English Opera Group. Two quite different works The Rape of Lucretia, op.37 (1946), which Britten wrote with the librettist Ronald Duncan, and Albert Herring, op.39 (1947) with a libretto by Eric Crozier, were premiered by the EOG at Glyndebourne. Lucretia had its basis in Livy's History of Rome and the play Le Viol de Lucrece by André Obey. The opera retells the story of the wife of Collatinus, who kills herself after the Etruscan prince Tarquinius has raped her for a bet. The role of Lucretia was taken by the contralto Kathleen Ferrier and shared with Nancy Evans. Herring was adapted from a short story by Guy de Maupassant and re-set in the imaginary Suffolk village of Loxford to tell of a young man, dominated by his mother, who is crowned May King when it becomes clear that no girl in the village is sufficiently virtuous to be a May Queen. Albert, emancipated after some rum-laced lemonade, declares his independence by going on a pub crawl. __1948-1950__ It was during an EOG tour 'half-way between the Holland Festival and the Lucerne Festival' that Peter Pears suggested, 'Why not make our own Festival?' Such an event would encompass not only music but also poetry, drama, lectures and exhibitions of art and literature. By 1947 Britten had moved from the Old Mill at Snape to a house on the sea front in the nearby town of Aldeburgh. A few doors down from this house in Crabbe Street is the Jubilee Hall and this accommodated many of the concerts of this new venture. Other venues used over the years were Aldeburgh's Parish Church and Baptist chapel, and further afield the churches of Blythburgh, Orford and Framlingham. A week-long

series of concerts, exhibitions and lectures was arranged and in June 1948 the first Aldeburgh Festival of Music and the Arts took place. One of the works performed that year was Britten's new cantata Saint Nicolas op.42, written to celebrate the centenary of Lancing College, Pears's old school. This work is scored for tenor solo, chorus, semi-chorus, four boy singers and string orchestra, piano duet, percussion and organ. Eric Crozier wrote the text, which chronicles the life of the saint, and Britten invites the audience to join in the hymns 'All creatures that on earth do dwell' and 'God moves in a mysterious way' which occur respectively at the conclusion of each part of the Cantata. The next year Britten and Crozier worked together on 'an Entertainment for Young People' called Let's make an Opera, part of which survives as the opera The Little Sweep, op.45. This is the story of Sam, who escapes from life as a child chimney-sweep through the resourcefulness of a group of children to whose house he is sent to work. It received its first performance at the 1949 Aldeburgh Festival. __1951-1953__ Britten's last collaboration with Crozier came in 1951 when E. M. Forster joined them in writing a large-scale opera to mark the Festival of Britain. Billy Budd, op.50, based on the novella by Herman Melville, calls for a large cast of male singers and chorus and tells the story of an ill-fated young foretopman accused of mutiny, from the point of view of his Captain, Edward Vere. In 1960 the opera was revised, condensing the original four acts into two. The coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 was the occasion that prompted Britten's next opera Gloriana, op.53. The Queen's cousin the Earl of Harewood had recently read Lytton Strachey's Elizabeth and Essex and suggested to Britten the story of Queen Elizabeth I's turbulent relationship with Robert Devereux as the basis for an opera. The libretto was written by William Plomer who included in the text excerpts from speeches made by Elizabeth I and the poem 'Happy were he' by the Earl of Essex. Despite its imaginative re-creation of 16th century court life on stage, the opera was not well received by its first audience of court dignitaries and politicians, though later audiences in that first season gave it the same wide acclaim as it received ten years later at its revival. At the Leeds Festival of October 1953 Britten and Pears's recital included the premiere of a new song cycle Winter Words op.52, setting of poems by Thomas Hardy. These evoke the landscape and moods of a West Country winter – such as the burial of the village choirman and a scene between a manacled convict and a boy with a violin on a train station at night. __1954-1956__ Britten returned to chamber opera in 1954 with an adaptation of Henry James's ghost story of a Governess who battles with two spirits (one, the former Governess, Miss Jessel, the other the recently deceased valet Peter Quint) for the souls of two children, The Turn of the Screw, op.54. The librettist was Myfanwy Piper, wife of the artist John Piper, who had designed many of the sets and costumes for the earlier operas. There are only seven singing parts (the tenor usually sings both the Prologue and the role of Quint) and the orchestra is small, but this brilliant piece of theatre fully succeeds in depicting the drama and suspense of James's original tale. The opera was first performed at the Teatro La Fenice, Venice, with David Hemmings as Miles, Pears as Quint and Jennifer Vyvyan as the Governess. In 1955 Britten and Pears, with their friends the Prince and Princess of Hesse and the Rhine, toured the East, including a visit to the island of Bali where Britten was fascinated by the sound of the gamelan orchestra. The aural impact was profound and in 1956 partly inspired his three-act ballet The Prince of the Pagodas, op.57, choreographed by John Cranko. Although written in a western idiom, the high proportion of percussion instruments in the orchestra, and the way in which these are used,

reveals the influence of the gamelan. The story concerns a princess who is courted by four kings but eventually falls in love with a young prince whom she has released from a spell. __1957-1960__ The eastern tour also influenced a song cycle written in 1957 for Pears and the guitarist Julian Bream – a series of Chinese poems translated by Arthur Waley, Songs from the Chinese, op.58. In this same year Britten and Pears exchanged residences with the artist Mary Potter who, for a number of years had lived in The Red House, adjacent to the Aldeburgh golf course. Despite the purchase in 1970 of a cottage in the village of Horham, to which Britten went from time to time to compose in greater peace and quiet, The Red House was to be their home for the remainder of their lives. Mediaeval drama and Shakespeare were the sources for Britten's next major vocal works. In 1958 he and Colin Graham adapted the Chester Miracle Play Noyes' Fludde. This became op.59 – a work in which the orchestra includes recorders, and the percussion section is augmented by handbells and china mugs slung on strings. This, with the cast of Mr and Mrs Noye, their sons and their wives and a large contingent of animals and birds, allowed the involvement of many of the local schools and amateur music societies as well as professional musicians. As with Saint Nicolas the work includes hymns for audience participation: 'Lord Jesus think on me', 'Eternal Father, strong to save' and 'The spacious firmament on high'. In 1959 Britten and Pears adapted the text of A Midsummer Night's Dream for the opera of that name, op. 64, cutting away a third of the original play and adding one line only: 'compelling thee to marry with Demetrius'. The orchestration evokes a dream-like, ethereal world, but the composer is also always aware that this is a comedy and so the music reflects the humour as well as the legendary background of Shakespeare's play. The character of Puck (a speaking role) is associated with a brisk trumpet voluntary. __1961-1969__ There is a sharp contrast between the comic writing for A Midsummer Night's Dream and the setting of the Missa pro Defunctis which Britten entitled War Requiem, op.66. This was composed for the consecration of the rebuilt St Michael's Cathedral, Coventry, the original building having been almost totally destroyed during World War II. Britten incorporated into his setting of the Roman liturgy poems by the First World War poet, Wilfred Owen. The result is a work for large forces (soprano, tenor and baritone soloists, chorus, orchestra, chamber orchestra, boys' choir and organ) which resounds with the composer's own intense commitment to peace. By the mid-1960s the Aldeburgh Festival had found a new, much larger, main concert venue in the Maltings which had been part of Britten's surroundings when he lived at Snape. In 1966 the building was leased, underwent a significant conversion into a concert hall and on 2 June 1967 was formally opened by the Queen at the beginning of the 20th Aldeburgh Festival. Two years later, on the first night of the 1969 Festival, a fire destroyed this beautiful building so that only the shell of the outer walls remained. Everyone rallied to help at this disaster. Concerts scheduled for the Maltings were resited in local churches and by the next June the hall had been rebuilt and was ready for the Queen to return to re-open it at the first concert of the Festival of 1970. Everyone rallied to help at this disaster. The scheduled concerts were, with one exception, re-sited in local Churches and by the next June the hall had been rebuilt and was ready for the Queen to return to re-open it at the first concert of the 1970 Festival. Partly in response to the restrictions of space at Aldeburgh's Jubilee Hall which made opera performance difficult, Britten embarked in 1964 on an opera specifically for church performance. The creative influences here stem from his fascination with the mediaeval miracle plays and the Noh tradition which he had seen in Japan. Whilst there the composer had

attended a performance of Sumidigawa, the drama of a madwoman's search for her dead son. Britten and William Plomer adapted this story as Curlew River, op.71, the first of three Church 'Parables' which were all premiered in Orford Church. The second, The Burning Fiery Furnace, op.77 recounts the Biblical story of three Israelites, thrown into a furnace for their refusal to worship Nebuchadnezzar's image of gold but saved from death by God. The third (1968) retells Christ's parable The Prodigal Son, and was inspired in part by Britten's encountering Raphael's The Return of the Prodigal in the Hermitage. Plomer provided the texts for all three works. The Prodigal Son was dedicated to the composer Dmitri Shostakovich, who was later to dedicate his own Fourteenth Symphony to Britten. Many musicians were among Britten's friends and numerous pieces were composed especially for them. In 1960, through selecting his intended soloists for the War Requiem, he made the acquaintance of the Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and his wife, the soprano Galina Vishnevskaya. They became great friends and the song cycle to Pushkin texts, The Poet's Echo, op. 76 (1965) was composed for them both; for Rostropovich Britten also wrote the Cello Sonata in C, op.65, three suites for solo cello (op. 72, 1964; op.80, 1967; op.87, 1974) and the Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, op.68 (1963). Julian Bream, who accompanied Pears on both lute and guitar, was the dedicatee of the solo guitar piece Nocturnal after John Dowland, op.70 of 1963 and Osian Ellis of the Suite for Harp, op.83 (1969). Other works composed during this prolific decade testify both to Britten's industry and his sense of responsibility as an artist in the international community. They include the Cantata Misericordium written for the Red Cross, Voices Today for the United Nations, the Children's Crusade for Save the Children, and his last major voice and piano cycle Who are these Children? with its central pacifist theme. ___1970-1976___ Never afraid of a new challenge, Britten accepted a commission from the BBC to compose his first opera to be written specifically for television. Working again with Myfanwy Piper, he adapted another Henry James story Owen Wingrave, op.85 (1970). This is the tale of a young man who renounces his military training to embrace pacifism, much to the horror of his family and his fiancée. Owen frees himself from his ancestors' military tradition but accepts the challenge to spend the night in the haunted room at his family seat of Paramore. In the morning he is found there, dead. Next to Suffolk it may be said that Britten loved and felt most at home in Venice. For many years Thomas Mann's novella Death in Venice had intrigued him as a possible opera plot and in 1973 he set to work on this with Myfanwy Piper for a third and final time as his librettist. There are only three principal solo voices in the opera: that of the novelist Aschenbach (tenor), the Traveller (baritone), who also sings the multiple roles of Elderly Fop, Hotel Manager, Barber, Gondolier, Leader of the Players and the Voice of Dionysius, and a counter-tenor who provides the Voice of Apollo. There are a chorus, mimes and dancers, the chief solo dancers being Tadzio, the boy whom Aschenbach sees as incarnate perfection, and his mother, 'the lady of the pearls'. In the music for these the gamelan influence is again clearly heard. The opera was premiered at Snape Maltings on the 16th of June during the 1973 Aldeburgh Festival. Pears, the opera's dedicatee, sang the demanding role of Aschenbach but the composer was too frail to be present. By 1973 Britten's health had deteriorated considerably. In the spring of that year he underwent an operation to replace a heart valve, but this was not completely successful. His career as accompanist and conductor ceased completely, but with constant medical supervision and the help of a devoted staff he was still able to compose. Final works include the Suite on

English Folk Tunes op.90 A time there was... of 1974, an orchestral suite that takes its name from the final song of Winter Words, and the dramatic cantata Phaedra, written for Janet Baker. These received their first performances at the 1975 and 1976 Aldeburgh Festivals. Britten had long been the recipient of numerous awards and honorary degrees. In 1976, after years of refusing a personal accolade he now at last accepted 'for music' an honour from the Queen, who on 12 June of that year created him a Life Peer, 'Baron Britten of Aldeburgh in the County of Suffolk'. In September 1976 his String Quartet No.3, op.94, written in the autumn of 1975, was played to him privately by the Amadeus Quartet in the library at The Red House. Its first public performance was given in the Maltings at Snape a fortnight after Britten's death on 4 December, 1976. Britten's funeral service was held at the Aldeburgh Parish Church on 7 December 1976. The service was led by the Lord Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, the Right Reverend Dr. Leslie Brown who had visited the composer shortly before his death. Dr. Brown caught the essence both of Britten's modesty and the general impact of his music on the world when he proclaimed in his address: 'Ben will like the sound of trumpets, though he will find it difficult to believe they are sounding for him'. The composer's friends Bob and Doris Ling, caretakers of the Maltings, paid their own tribute to the composer by lining his grave in the churchyard with rushes gathered from the riverbank at Snape. Britten's music is undoubtedly his greatest lasting memorial, and his legacy continues also in the Aldeburgh Festival and the Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme which he founded. A poignant visual memorial to the composer is to be found in the church at Aldeburgh. It is a stained glass window representing scenes from the three Church Parables which was designed by his friend John Piper and interpreted in glass by Patrick Reyntiens in 1979. The window's three images, the Father welcoming back his prodigal son, a curlew descending toward the river, and the salvation of the three Israelites from the Burning Fiery Furnace reflect not only Britten's triumph as a musician but also his belief in the power of peace. Vist <http://www.brittenpears.org/> for a fully illustrated and interactive version of this text.