

= Benjamin Britten =

Edward Benjamin Britten , Baron Britten , OM CH (22 November 1913 ? 4 December 1976) was an English composer , conductor and pianist . He was a central figure of 20th @-@ century British classical music , with a range of works including opera , other vocal music , orchestral and chamber pieces . His best @-@ known works include the opera Peter Grimes (1945) , the War Requiem (1962) and the orchestral showpiece The Young Person 's Guide to the Orchestra (1945) .

Born in Suffolk , the son of a dentist , Britten showed talent from an early age . He studied at the Royal College of Music in London and privately with the composer Frank Bridge . Britten first came to public attention with the a cappella choral work A Boy was Born in 1934 . With the premiere of Peter Grimes in 1945 , he leapt to international fame . Over the next 28 years , he wrote 14 more operas , establishing himself as one of the leading 20th @-@ century composers in the genre . In addition to large @-@ scale operas for Sadler 's Wells and Covent Garden , he wrote " chamber operas " for small forces , suitable for performance in venues of modest size . Among the best known of these is The Turn of the Screw (1954) . Recurring themes in the operas are the struggle of an outsider against a hostile society , and the corruption of innocence .

Britten 's other works range from orchestral to choral , solo vocal , chamber and instrumental as well as film music . He took a great interest in writing music for children and amateur performers , including the opera Noye 's Fludde , a Missa Brevis , and the song collection Friday Afternoons . He often composed with particular performers in mind . His most frequent and important muse was his personal and professional partner , the tenor Peter Pears ; others included Kathleen Ferrier , Jennifer Vyvyan , Janet Baker , Dennis Brain , Julian Bream , Dietrich Fischer @-@ Dieskau and Mstislav Rostropovich . Britten was a celebrated pianist and conductor , performing many of his own works in concert and on record . He also performed and recorded works by others , such as Bach 's Brandenburg concertos , Mozart symphonies , and song cycles by Schubert and Schumann .

Together with Pears and the librettist and producer Eric Crozier , Britten founded the annual Aldeburgh Festival in 1948 , and he was responsible for the creation of Snape Maltings concert hall in 1967 . In his last year , he was the first composer to be given a life peerage .

= = Life and career = =

= = = Early years = = =

Britten was born in the fishing port of Lowestoft in Suffolk , on the east coast of England on 22 November 1913 , the feast day of Saint Cecilia . He was the youngest of four children of Robert Victor Britten (1878 ? 1934) and his wife Edith Rhoda , née Hockey (1874 ? 1937) . Robert Britten 's youthful ambition to become a farmer had been thwarted by lack of capital , and he had instead trained as a dentist , a profession he practised successfully but without pleasure . While studying at Charing Cross Hospital in London he met Edith Hockey , the daughter of a junior Home Office official . They were married in September 1901 at St John 's , Smith Square , London .

The consensus among biographers of Britten is that his father was a loving but somewhat stern and remote parent . Britten , according to his sister Beth , " got on well with him and shared his wry sense of humour , dedication to work and capacity for taking pains " . Edith Britten was a talented amateur musician and secretary of the Lowestoft Musical Society . In the English provinces of the early 20th century , distinctions of social class were taken very seriously . Britten described his family as " very ordinary middle class " , but there were aspects of the Brittens that were not ordinary : Edith 's father was illegitimate , and her mother was an alcoholic ; Robert Britten was an agnostic and refused to attend church on Sundays . Music was the principal means by which Edith Britten strove to maintain the family 's social standing , inviting the pillars of the local community to musical soirées at the house .

When Britten was three months old he contracted pneumonia and nearly died . The illness left him with a damaged heart , and doctors warned his parents that he would probably never be able to lead

a normal life . He recovered more fully than expected , and as a boy was a keen tennis player and cricketer . To his mother 's great delight he was an outstandingly musical child , unlike his sisters , who inherited their father 's indifference to music , while his brother , though musically talented , was interested only in ragtime . Edith gave the young Britten his first lessons in piano and notation . He made his first attempts at composition when he was five . He started piano lessons when he was seven years old , and three years later began to play the viola . He was one of the last composers brought up on exclusively live music : his father refused to have a gramophone or , later , a radio in the house .

= = = Education = = =

= = = = Lowestoft = = = =

When he was seven Britten was sent to a dame school , run by the Misses Astle . The younger sister , Ethel , gave him piano lessons ; in later life he said that he remained grateful for the excellence of her teaching . The following year he moved on to his prep school , South Lodge , Lowestoft , as a day boy . The headmaster , Thomas Sewell , was an old @-@ fashioned disciplinarian ; the young Britten was outraged at the severe corporal punishments frequently handed out , and later he said that his lifelong pacifism probably had its roots in his reaction to the regime at the school . He himself rarely fell foul of Sewell , a mathematician , in which subject Britten was a star pupil . The school had no musical tradition , and Britten continued to study the piano with Ethel Astle . From the age of ten he took viola lessons from a friend of his mother 's , Audrey Alston , who had been a professional player before her marriage . In his spare time he composed prolifically . When his Simple Symphony , based on these juvenilia , was recorded in 1956 , Britten wrote this pen @-@ portrait of his young self for the sleeve note :

Once upon a time there was a prep @-@ school boy He was quite an ordinary little boy ... he loved cricket , only quite liked football (although he kicked a pretty " corner ") ; he adored mathematics , got on all right with history , was scared by Latin Unseen ; he behaved fairly well , only ragged the recognised amount , so that his contacts with the cane or the slipper were happily rare (although one nocturnal expedition to stalk ghosts left its marks behind) ; he worked his way up the school slowly and steadily , until at the age of thirteen he reached that pinnacle of importance and grandeur never to be quite equalled in later days : the head of the Sixth , head @-@ prefect , and Victor Ludorum . But ? there was one curious thing about this boy : he wrote music . His friends bore with it , his enemies kicked a bit but not for long (he was quite tough) , the staff couldn 't object if his work and games didn 't suffer . He wrote lots of it , reams and reams of it .

Audrey Alston encouraged Britten to go to symphony concerts in Norwich . At one of these , during the triennial Norfolk and Norwich Festival in October 1924 , he heard Frank Bridge 's orchestral poem The Sea , conducted by the composer . It was the first substantial piece of modern music he had ever encountered , and he was , in his own phrase , " knocked sideways " by it . Audrey Alston was a friend of Bridge ; when he returned to Norwich for the next festival in 1927 she brought her not quite 14 @-@ year @-@ old pupil to meet him . Bridge was impressed with the boy , and after they had gone through some of Britten 's compositions together he invited him to come to London to take lessons from him . Robert Britten , supported by Thomas Sewell , doubted the wisdom of pursuing a composing career ; a compromise was agreed by which Britten would , as planned , go on to his public school the following year but would make regular day @-@ trips to London to study composition with Bridge and piano with his colleague Harold Samuel .

Bridge impressed on Britten the importance of scrupulous attention to the technical craft of composing and the maxim that " you should find yourself and be true to what you found . " The earliest substantial works Britten composed while studying with Bridge are the String Quartet in F , completed in April 1928 , and the Quatre Chansons Françaises , a song @-@ cycle for high voice and orchestra . Authorities differ on the extent of Bridge 's influence on his pupil 's technique . Humphrey Carpenter and Michael Oliver judge that Britten 's abilities as an orchestrator were

essentially self @-@ taught ; Donald Mitchell considers that Bridge had an important influence on the cycle .

= = = Public school and Royal College of Music = = =

In September 1928 Britten went as a boarder to Gresham 's School , in Holt , Norfolk . At the time he felt unhappy there , even writing in his diary of contemplating suicide or running away : he hated being separated from his family , most particularly from his mother ; he despised the music master ; and he was shocked at the prevalence of bullying , though he was not the target of it . He remained there for two years and in 1930 , he won a composition scholarship at the Royal College of Music (RCM) in London ; his examiners were the composers John Ireland and Ralph Vaughan Williams and the college 's harmony and counterpoint teacher , S P Waddington .

Britten was at the RCM from 1930 to 1933 , studying composition with Ireland and piano with Arthur Benjamin . He won the Sullivan Prize for composition , the Cobbett Prize for chamber music , and was twice winner of the Ernest Farrar Prize for composition . These honours notwithstanding , he was not greatly impressed by the establishment : he found his fellow @-@ students " amateurish and folksy " and the staff " inclined to suspect technical brilliance of being superficial and insincere " . Another Ireland pupil , the composer Humphrey Searle , said that Ireland could be " an inspiring teacher to those on his own wavelength " ; Britten was not , and learned little from him . He continued to study privately with Bridge , although he later praised Ireland for " nurs [ing] me very gently through a very , very difficult musical adolescence " .

Britten also used his time in London to attend concerts and become better acquainted with the music of Stravinsky , Shostakovich and , most particularly , Mahler . He intended postgraduate study in Vienna with Alban Berg , Arnold Schoenberg 's student , but was eventually dissuaded by his parents , on the advice of the RCM staff .

The first of Britten 's compositions to attract wide attention were composed while at the RCM : the Sinfonietta , Op. 1 (1932) , and a set of choral variations A Boy was Born , written in 1933 for the BBC Singers , who first performed it the following year . In this same period he wrote Friday Afternoons , a collection of 12 songs for the pupils of Clive House School , Prestatyn , where his brother was headmaster .

= = = Early professional life = = =

In February 1935 , at Bridge 's instigation , Britten was invited to a job interview by the BBC 's director of music Adrian Boult and his assistant Edward Clark . Britten was not enthusiastic about the prospect of working full @-@ time in the BBC music department and was relieved when what came out of the interview was an invitation to write the score for a documentary film , The King 's Stamp , directed by Alberto Cavalcanti for the GPO Film Unit .

Britten became a member of the film unit 's small group of regular contributors , another of whom was W H Auden . Together they worked on the documentary films Coal Face and Night Mail in 1935 . They also collaborated on the song cycle Our Hunting Fathers (1936) , radical both in politics and musical treatment , and subsequently other works including Cabaret Songs , On This Island , Paul Bunyan and Hymn to St. Cecilia . Auden was a considerable influence on Britten , encouraging him to widen his aesthetic , intellectual and political horizons , and also to come to terms with his homosexuality . Auden was , as David Matthews puts it , " cheerfully and guiltlessly promiscuous " ; Britten , puritanical and conventional by nature , was sexually repressed .

In the three years from 1935 to 1937 Britten wrote nearly 40 scores for the theatre , cinema and radio . Among the film music of the late 1930s Matthews singles out Night Mail and Love from a Stranger (1937) ; from the theatre music he selects for mention The Ascent of F6 (1936) , On the Frontier (1938) and Johnson Over Jordan (1939) ; and of the music for radio , King Arthur (1937) and The Sword in the Stone (1939) .

In 1937 there were two events of huge importance in Britten 's life : his mother died , and he met the tenor Peter Pears . Although Britten was extraordinarily devoted to his mother and was

devastated at her death , it also seems to have been something of a liberation for him . Only after that did he begin to engage in emotional relationships with people his own age or younger . Later in the year he got to know Pears while they were both helping to clear out the country cottage of a mutual friend who had died in an air crash . Pears quickly became Britten 's musical inspiration and close (though for the moment platonic) friend . Britten 's first work for him was composed within weeks of their meeting , a setting of Emily Brontë 's poem , " A thousand gleaming fires " , for tenor and strings .

During 1937 Britten composed a Pacifist March to words by Ronald Duncan for the Peace Pledge Union , of which , as a pacifist , he had become an active member ; the work was not a success and was soon withdrawn . The best known of his compositions from this period is probably Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge for string orchestra , described by Matthews as the first of Britten 's works to become a popular classic . It was a success in North America , with performances in Toronto , New York , Boston , Chicago and San Francisco , under conductors including John Barbirolli and Serge Koussevitzky .

= = = America 1939 ? 42 = = =

In April 1939 Britten and Pears sailed to North America , going first to Canada and then to New York . They had several reasons for leaving England , including the difficult position of pacifists in an increasingly bellicose Europe ; the success that Frank Bridge had enjoyed in the US ; the departure of Auden and his friend Christopher Isherwood to the US from England three months previously ; hostile or belittling reviews of Britten 's music in the English press ; and under @-@ rehearsed and inadequate performances . Britten and Pears consummated their relationship and from then until Britten 's death they were partners in both their professional and personal lives . When the Second World War began , Britten and Pears turned for advice to the British embassy in Washington and were told that they should remain in the US as artistic ambassadors . Pears was inclined to disregard the advice and go back to England ; Britten also felt the urge to return , but accepted the embassy 's counsel and persuaded Pears to do the same .

Already a friend of the composer Aaron Copland , Britten encountered his latest works Billy the Kid and An Outdoor Overture , both of which influenced his own music . In 1940 Britten composed Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo , the first of many song cycles for Pears . Britten 's orchestral works from this period include the Violin Concerto and Sinfonia da Requiem . In 1941 Britten produced his first music drama , Paul Bunyan , an operetta , to a libretto by Auden . While in the US , Britten had his first encounter with Balinese gamelan music , through transcriptions for piano duo made by the Canadian composer Colin McPhee . The two met in the summer of 1939 and subsequently performed a number of McPhee 's transcriptions for a recording . This musical encounter bore fruit in several Balinese @-@ inspired works later in Britten 's career .

Moving to the US did not relieve Britten of the nuisance of hostile criticism : although Olin Downes , the doyen of New York music critics , and Irving Kolodin took to Britten 's music , Virgil Thomson was , as the music scholar Suzanne Robinson puts it , consistently " severe and spiteful " . Thomson described Les Illuminations (1940) as " little more than a series of bromidic and facile ' effects ' ... pretentious , banal and utterly disappointing " , and was equally unflattering about Pears 's voice . Robinson surmises that Thomson was motivated by " a mixture of spite , national pride , and professional jealousy " . Paul Bunyan met with wholesale critical disapproval , and the Sinfonia da Requiem (already rejected by its Japanese sponsors because of its overtly Christian nature) received a mixed reception when Barbirolli and the New York Philharmonic premiered it in March 1941 . The reputation of the work was much enhanced when Koussevitzky took it up shortly afterwards .

= = = Return to England = = =

In 1942 Britten read the work of the poet George Crabbe for the first time . The Borough , set on the Suffolk coast close to Britten 's homeland , awakened in him such longings for England that he knew

he must return . He also knew that he must write an opera based on Crabbe 's poem about the fisherman Peter Grimes . Before Britten left the US , Koussevitzky , always generous in encouraging new talent , offered him a \$ 1 @, @ 000 commission to write the opera . Britten and Pears returned to England in April 1942 . During the long transatlantic sea crossing Britten completed the choral works A Ceremony of Carols and Hymn to St Cecilia . The latter was his last large @-@ scale collaboration with Auden . Britten had grown away from him , and Auden became one of the composer 's so @-@ called " corpses " ? former intimates from whom he completely cut off contact once they had outlived their usefulness to him or offended him in some way .

Having arrived in Britain , Britten and Pears applied for recognition as conscientious objectors ; Britten was initially allowed only non @-@ combatant service in the military , but on appeal he gained unconditional exemption . After the death of his mother in 1937 he had used money she bequeathed him to buy the Old Mill in Snape , Suffolk which became his country home . He spent much of his time there in 1944 working on the opera Peter Grimes . Pears joined Sadler 's Wells Opera Company , whose artistic director , the singer Joan Cross , announced her intention to re @-@ open the company 's home base in London with Britten 's opera , casting herself and Pears in the leading roles . There were complaints from company members about supposed favouritism and the " cacophony " of Britten 's score , as well as some ill @-@ suppressed homophobic remarks . Peter Grimes opened in June 1945 and was hailed by public and critics ; its box @-@ office takings matched or exceeded those for La bohème and Madame Butterfly , which were staged during the same season . The opera administrator Lord Harewood called it " the first genuinely successful British opera , Gilbert and Sullivan apart , since Purcell . " Dismayed by the in @-@ fighting among the company , Cross , Britten and Pears severed their ties with Sadler 's Wells in December 1945 , going on to found what was to become the English Opera Group .

A month after the opening of Peter Grimes , Britten and Yehudi Menuhin went to Germany to give recitals to concentration camp survivors . What they saw , at Belsen most of all , so shocked Britten that he refused to talk about it until towards the end of his life , when he told Pears that it had coloured everything he had written since . Colin Matthews comments that the next two works Britten composed after his return , the song @-@ cycle The Holy Sonnets of John Donne and the Second String Quartet , contrast strongly with earlier , lighter @-@ hearted works such as Les Illuminations . Britten recovered his joie de vivre for The Young Person 's Guide to the Orchestra (1945) , written for an educational film , Instruments of the Orchestra , directed by Muir Mathieson and featuring the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Malcolm Sargent . It became , and remained , his most often played and popular work .

Britten 's next opera , The Rape of Lucretia , was presented at the first post @-@ war Glyndebourne Festival in 1946 . It was then taken on tour to provincial cities under the banner of the " Glyndebourne English Opera Company " , an uneasy alliance of Britten and his associates with John Christie , the autocratic proprietor of Glyndebourne . The tour lost money heavily , and Christie announced that he would underwrite no more tours . Britten and his associates set up the English Opera Group ; the librettist Eric Crozier and the designer John Piper joined Britten as artistic directors . The group 's express purpose was to produce and commission new English operas and other works , presenting them throughout the country . Britten wrote the comic opera Albert Herring for the group in 1947 ; while on tour in the new work Pears came up with the idea of mounting a festival in the small Suffolk seaside town of Aldeburgh , where Britten had moved from Snape earlier in the year , and which became his principal place of residence for the rest of his life .

= = = Aldeburgh ; the 1950s = = =

The Aldeburgh Festival was launched in June 1948 , with Britten , Pears and Crozier directing it . Albert Herring played at the Jubilee Hall , and Britten 's new cantata for tenor , chorus and orchestra , Saint Nicolas , was presented in the parish church . The festival was an immediate success and became an annual event that has continued into the 21st century . New works by Britten featured in almost every festival until his death in 1976 , including the premieres of his operas A Midsummer Night 's Dream at the Jubilee Hall in 1960 and Death in Venice at Snape Maltings Concert Hall in

1973 .

Unlike many leading English composers , Britten was not known as a teacher , but in 1949 he accepted his only private pupil , Arthur Oldham , who studied with him for three years . Oldham made himself useful , acting as musical assistant and arranging Variations on a Theme by Frank Bridge for full orchestra for the Frederick Ashton ballet *Le Rêve de Léonor* (1949) , but he later described the teacher ? pupil relationship as " beneficial five per cent to [Britten] and ninety @-@ five per cent to me ! "

Throughout the 1950s Britten continued to write operas . *Billy Budd* (1951) was well received at its Covent Garden premiere and was regarded by reviewers as an advance on Peter Grimes . *Gloriana* (1953) , written to mark the coronation of Elizabeth II , had a cool reception at the gala premiere in the presence of the Queen and the British Establishment en masse . The downbeat story of Elizabeth I in her decline , and Britten 's score ? reportedly thought by members of the premiere 's audience " too modern " for such a gala ? did not overcome what Matthews calls the " ingrained philistinism " of the ruling classes . Although *Gloriana* did well at the box office , there were no further productions in Britain for another 13 years . It was later recognised as one of Britten 's finer operas . The *Turn of the Screw* the following year was an unqualified success ; together with Peter Grimes it became , and at 2013 remained , one of the two most frequently performed of Britten 's operas .

In the 1950s the " fervently anti @-@ homosexual " Home Secretary , David Maxwell Fyfe , urged the police to enforce the Victorian laws making homosexual acts illegal . Britten and Pears came under scrutiny ; Britten was visited by police officers in 1953 and was so perturbed that he discussed with his assistant Imogen Holst the possibility that Pears might have to enter a sham marriage (with whom is unclear) . In the end nothing was done .

An increasingly important influence on Britten was the music of the East , an interest that was fostered by a tour there with Pears in 1956 , when Britten once again encountered the music of the Balinese gamelan and saw for the first time Japanese Noh plays , which he called " some of the most wonderful drama I have ever seen . " These eastern influences were seen and heard in the ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas* (1957) and later in two of the three semi @-@ operatic " Parables for Church Performance " : *Curlew River* (1964) and *The Prodigal Son* (1968) .

== = 1960s == =

By the 1960s , the Aldeburgh Festival was outgrowing its customary venues , and plans to build a new concert hall in Aldeburgh were not progressing . When redundant Victorian maltings buildings in the village of Snape , six miles inland , became available for hire , Britten realised that the largest of them could be converted into a concert hall and opera house . The 830 @-@ seat Snape Maltings hall was opened by the Queen at the start of the twentieth Aldeburgh Festival on 2 June 1967 ; it was immediately hailed as one of the best concert halls in the country . The hall was destroyed by fire in 1969 , but Britten was determined that it would be rebuilt in time for the following year 's festival , which it was . The Queen again attended the opening performance in 1970 .

The Maltings gave the festival a venue that could comfortably house large orchestral works and operas . Britten conducted the first performance outside Russia of Shostakovich 's Fourteenth Symphony at Snape in 1970 . Shostakovich , a friend since 1960 , dedicated the symphony to Britten ; he was himself the dedicatee of *The Prodigal Son* . Two other Russian musicians who were close to Britten and regularly performed at the festival were the pianist Sviatoslav Richter and the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich . Britten composed his cello suites , Cello Symphony and Cello Sonata for Rostropovich , who premiered them at the Aldeburgh Festival .

One of the best known of Britten 's works , the *War Requiem* , was premiered in 1962 . He had been asked four years earlier to write a work for the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral , a modernist building designed by Basil Spence . The old cathedral had been left in ruins by an air @-@ raid on the city in 1940 in which hundreds of people died . Britten decided that his work would commemorate the dead of both World Wars in a large @-@ scale score for soloists , chorus , chamber ensemble and orchestra . His text interspersed the traditional Requiem Mass with poems

by Wilfred Owen . Matthews writes , " With the War Requiem Britten reached the apex of his reputation : it was almost universally hailed as a masterpiece . " Shostakovich told Rostropovich that he believed it to be " the greatest work of the twentieth century " .

In 1967 the BBC commissioned Britten to write an opera specially for television . Owen Wingrave was based , like *The Turn of the Screw* , on a ghost story by Henry James . By the 1960s Britten found composition much slower than in his prolific youth ; he told the 28 @-@ year @-@ old composer Nicholas Maw , " Get as much done now as you can , because it gets much , much more difficult as you grow older . " He did not complete the score of the new opera until August 1970 . Owen Wingrave was first broadcast in Britain in May 1971 , when it was also televised in Austria , Belgium , Denmark , France , Germany , Ireland , the Netherlands , Norway , Sweden , Switzerland , the USA and Yugoslavia .

= = = Last years = = =

In September 1970 Britten asked Myfanwy Piper , who had adapted the two Henry James stories for him , to turn another prose story into a libretto . This was Thomas Mann 's novella *Death in Venice* , a subject he had been considering for some time . At an early stage in composition Britten was told by his doctors that a heart operation was essential if he was to live for more than two years . He was determined to finish the opera and worked urgently to complete it before going into hospital for surgery . His long @-@ term colleague Colin Graham wrote :

Perhaps of all his works , this one went deepest into Britten 's own soul : there are extraordinary cross @-@ currents of affinity between himself , his own state of health and mind , Thomas Mann , *Aschenbach* (Mann 's dying protagonist) , and Peter Pears , who must have had to tear himself in three in order to reconstitute himself as the principal character .

After the completion of the opera Britten went into the National Heart Hospital and was operated on in May 1973 to replace a failing heart valve . The replacement was successful , but he suffered a slight stroke , affecting his right hand . This brought his career as a performer to an end . While in hospital Britten became friendly with a senior nursing sister , Rita Thomson ; she moved to Aldeburgh in 1974 and looked after him until his death .

Britten 's last works include the *Suite on English Folk Tunes " A Time There Was "* (1974) ; the *Third String Quartet* (1975) , which drew on material from *Death in Venice* ; and the dramatic cantata *Phaedra* (1975) , written for Janet Baker .

In July 1976 , the last year of his life , Britten accepted a life peerage ? the first composer so honoured ? becoming Baron Britten of Aldeburgh in the County of Suffolk . After the 1976 Aldeburgh Festival , Britten and Pears travelled to Norway , where Britten began writing *Praise We Great Men* , for voices and orchestra based on a poem by Edith Sitwell . He returned to Aldeburgh in August , and wrote *Welcome Ode* for children 's choir and orchestra . In November , Britten realised that he could no longer compose . On his 63rd birthday , 22 November , at his request Rita Thomson organised a champagne party and invited his friends and his sisters Barbara and Beth , to say their goodbyes to the dying composer . When Rostropovich made his farewell visit a few days later , Britten gave him what he had written of *Praise We Great Men* .

Britten died of congestive heart failure on 4 December 1976 . His funeral service was held at Aldeburgh Parish Church three days later , and he was buried in its churchyard , with a gravestone carved by Reynolds Stone . The authorities at Westminster Abbey had offered burial there , but Britten had made it clear that he wished his grave to be side by side with that , in due course , of Pears . A memorial service was held at the Abbey on 10 March 1977 , at which the congregation was headed by Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother .

= = Personal life and character = =

Despite his large number of works on Christian themes , Britten has sometimes been thought of as agnostic . Pears said that when they met in 1937 he was not sure whether or not Britten would have described himself as a Christian . In the 1960s Britten called himself a dedicated Christian , though

sympathetic to the radical views propounded by the Bishop of Woolwich in *Honest to God* . Politically , Britten was on the left . He told Pears that he always voted either Liberal or Labour and could not imagine ever voting Conservative , but he was never a member of any party , except the Peace Pledge Union .

Physically , Britten was never robust . He walked and swam regularly and kept himself as fit as he could , but Carpenter in his 1992 biography mentions 20 illnesses , a few of them minor but most fairly serious , suffered over the years by Britten before his final heart complaint developed . Emotionally , according to some commentators , Britten never completely grew up , retaining in his outlook something of a child 's view of the world . He was not always confident that he was the genius others declared him to be , and though he was hypercritical of his own works , he was acutely , even aggressively sensitive to criticism from anybody else .

Britten was , as he acknowledged , notorious for dumping friends and colleagues who either offended him or ceased to be of use ? his " corpses " . The conductor Sir Charles Mackerras believed that the term was invented by Lord Harewood . Both Mackerras and Harewood joined the list of corpses , the former for joking that the number of boys in Noye 's Fludde must have been a delight to the composer , and the latter for an extramarital affair and subsequent divorce from Lady Harewood , which shocked the puritanical Britten . Among other corpses were his librettists Montagu Slater and Eric Crozier . The latter said in 1949 , " He has sometimes told me , jokingly , that one day I would join the ranks of his ' corpses ' and I have always recognized that any ordinary person must soon outlive his usefulness to such a great creative artist as Ben . " Dame Janet Baker said in 1981 , " I think he was quite entitled to take what he wanted from others ... He did not want to hurt anyone , but the task in hand was more important than anything or anybody . " Matthews feels that this aspect of Britten has been exaggerated , and he observes that the composer sustained many deep friendships to the end of his life .

= = = Controversies = = =

= = = = Boys = = = =

Throughout his adult life , Britten had a particular rapport with children and enjoyed close friendships with several boys , particularly those in their early teens . The first such friendship was with Piers Dunkerley , 13 years old in 1934 when Britten was aged 20 . Other boys Britten befriended were the young David Hemmings and Michael Crawford , both of whom sang treble roles in his works in the 1950s . Hemmings later said , " In all of the time that I spent with him he never abused that trust " , and Crawford wrote " I cannot say enough about the kindness of that great man ... he had a wonderful patience and affinity with young people . He loved music , and loved youngsters caring about music . "

It was long suspected by several of Britten 's close associates that there was something exceptional about his attraction to teenage boys : Auden referred to Britten 's " attraction to thin @-@ as @-@ a @-@ board juveniles ... to the sexless and innocent " , and Pears once wrote to Britten : " remember there are lovely things in the world still ? children , boys , sunshine , the sea , Mozart , you and me " . In public , the matter was little discussed during Britten 's lifetime and much discussed after it . Carpenter 's 1992 biography closely examined the evidence , as do later studies of Britten , most particularly John Bridcut 's *Britten 's Children* (2006) , which concentrates on Britten 's friendships and relationships with various children and adolescents . Some commentators have continued to question Britten 's conduct , sometimes very sharply . Carpenter and Bridcut conclude that he held any sexual impulses under firm control and kept the relationships affectionate ? including bed @-@ sharing , kissing and skinny dipping ? but strictly platonic .

= = = = Cause of death = = = =

A more recent controversy was the statement in a 2013 biography of Britten by Paul Kildea that the

composer 's heart failure was due to undetected syphilis , which Kildea speculates was a result of Pears 's promiscuity while the two were living in New York . In response , Britten 's consultant cardiologist said that , like all the hospital 's similar cases , Britten was routinely screened for syphilis before the operation , with negative results . He described as " complete rubbish " Kildea 's allegation that the surgeon who operated on Britten in 1973 would or even could have covered up a syphilitic condition . Kildea continued to maintain , " When all the composer 's symptoms are considered there can be only one cause " . In The Times , Richard Morrison praised the rest of Kildea 's book , and hoped that its reputation would not be " tarnished by one sensational speculation ... some second @-@ hand hearsay ... presenting unsubstantiated gossip as fact " .

= = Music = =

= = Influences = = =

Britten 's early musical life was dominated by the classical masters ; his mother 's ambition was for him to become the " Fourth B " ? after Bach , Beethoven and Brahms . Britten was later to assert that his initial development as a composer was stifled by reverence for these masters : " Between the ages of thirteen and sixteen I knew every note of Beethoven and Brahms . I remember receiving the full score of Fidelio for my fourteenth birthday ... But I think in a sense I never forgave them for having led me astray in my own particular thinking and natural inclinations " . He developed a particular animosity towards Brahms , whose piano music he had once held in great esteem ; in 1952 he confided that he played through all Brahms 's music from time to time , " to see if I am right about him ; I usually find that I underestimated last time how bad it was ! " .

Through his association with Frank Bridge , Britten 's musical horizons expanded . He discovered the music of Debussy and Ravel which , Matthews writes , " gave him a model for an orchestral sound " . Bridge also led Britten to the music of Schoenberg and Berg ; the latter 's death in 1935 affected Britten deeply . A letter at that time reveals his thoughts on the contemporary music scene : " The real musicians are so few & far between , aren 't they ? Apart from the Bergs , Stravinskys , Schoenbergs & Bridges one is a bit stumped for names , isn 't one ? " ? adding , as an afterthought : " Shostakovitch ? perhaps ? possibly " . By this time Britten had developed a lasting hostility towards the English pastoral school represented by Vaughan Williams and Ireland , whose work he compared unfavourably with the " brilliant folk @-@ song arrangements of Percy Grainger " ; Grainger became the inspiration of many of Britten 's later folk arrangements . Britten was also impressed by Delius , and thought Brigg Fair " delicious " when he heard it in 1931 . Also in that year he heard Stravinsky 's The Rite of Spring , which he found " bewildering and terrifying " , yet at the same time " incredibly marvellous and arresting " . The same composer 's Symphony of Psalms , and Petrushka were lauded in similar terms . However , he and Stravinsky later developed a mutual antipathy informed by jealousy and mistrust .

Besides his growing attachments to the works of 20th century masters , Britten ? along with his contemporary Michael Tippett ? was devoted to the English music of the late 17th and early 18th centuries , in particular the work of Purcell . In defining his mission as a composer of opera , Britten wrote : " One of my chief aims is to try to restore to the musical setting of the English Language a brilliance , freedom and vitality that have been curiously rare since the death of Purcell " . Among the closest of Britten 's kindred composer spirits ? even more so than Purcell ? was Mahler , whose Fourth Symphony Britten heard in September 1930 . At that time Mahler 's music was little regarded and rarely played in English concert halls . Britten later wrote of how the scoring of this work impressed him : " ... entirely clean and transparent ... the material was remarkable , and the melodic shapes highly original , with such rhythmic and harmonic tension from beginning to end " . He soon discovered other Mahler works , in particular Das Lied von der Erde ; he wrote to a friend about the concluding " Abschied " of Das Lied : " It is cruel , you know , that music should be so beautiful " . Apart from Mahler 's general influence on Britten 's compositional style , the incorporation by Britten of popular tunes (as , for example , in Death in Venice) is a direct inheritance from the older

composer .

== Operas ==

The Britten @-@ Pears Foundation considers the composer 's operas " perhaps the most substantial and important part of his compositional legacy . " Britten 's operas are firmly established in the international repertoire : according to Operabase , they are performed worldwide more than those of any other composer born in the 20th century , and only Puccini and Richard Strauss come ahead of him if the list is extended to all operas composed after 1900 .

The early operetta *Paul Bunyan* stands apart from Britten 's later operatic works . Philip Brett , in Grove 's article on Britten , calls it " a patronizing attempt by W H Auden to evoke the spirit of a nation not his own in which Britten was a somewhat dazzled accomplice " . The American public liked it , but the critics did not , and it fell into neglect until interest revived near the end of the composer 's life .

Britten 's subsequent operas range from large @-@ scale works written for full @-@ strength opera companies , to chamber operas for performance by small touring opera ensembles or in churches and schools . In the large @-@ scale category are *Peter Grimes* (1945) , *Billy Budd* (1951) , *Gloriana* (1953) , *A Midsummer Night 's Dream* (1960) and *Death in Venice* (1973) . Of the remaining operas , *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946) , *Albert Herring* (1947) , *The Little Sweep* (1949) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) were written for small opera companies . Noye 's *Fludde* (1958) , *Curlew River* (1964) , *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966) and *The Prodigal Son* (1968) were for church performance , and the secular *The Golden Vanity* was intended to be performed in schools . *Owen Wingrave* , written for television , was first presented live by the Royal Opera at Covent Garden in 1973 , two years after its broadcast premiere .

Music critics have frequently commented on the recurring theme in Britten 's operas from *Peter Grimes* onward of the isolated individual at odds with a hostile society . The extent to which this reflected Britten 's perception of himself , pacifist and homosexual , in the England of the 1930s , 40s and 50s is debated . Another recurrent theme is the corruption of innocence , most sharply seen in *The Turn of the Screw* .

Over the 28 years between *Peter Grimes* and *Death in Venice* Britten 's musical style changed , as he introduced elements of atonalism ? though remaining essentially a tonal composer ? and of eastern music , particularly gamelan sounds but also eastern harmonies . In *A Midsummer Night 's Dream* the orchestral scoring varies to fit the nature of each set of characters : " the bright , percussive sounds of harps , keyboards and percussion for the fairy world , warm strings and wind for the pairs of lovers , and lower woodwind and brass for the mechanicals " . In *Death in Venice* Britten turns Tadzio and his family into silent dancers , " accompanied by the colourful , glittering sounds of tuned percussion to emphasize their remoteness . "

As early as 1948 the music analyst Hans Keller , summarising Britten 's impact on 20th @-@ century opera to that date , compared his contribution to that of Mozart in the 18th century : " Mozart may in some respects be regarded as a founder (a ' second founder ') of opera . The same can already be said today , as far as the modern British ? perhaps not only British ? field goes , of Britten " . In addition to his own original operas , Britten , together with Imogen Holst , extensively revised Purcell 's *Dido and Aeneas* (1951) and *The Fairy @-@ Queen* (1967) . These " realisations " brought Purcell , who was then neglected , to a wider public , but have themselves been neglected since the dominance of the trend to authentic performance practice . His 1948 revision of *The Beggar 's Opera* amounts to a wholesale recomposition , retaining the original melodies but giving them new , highly sophisticated orchestral accompaniments .

== Song cycles ==

Throughout his career Britten was drawn to the song cycle form . In 1928 , when he was 14 , he composed an orchestral cycle , *Quatre chansons françaises* , setting words by Victor Hugo and Paul Verlaine . Brett comments that though the work is much influenced by Wagner on the one hand and

French mannerisms on the other , " the diatonic nursery @-@ like tune for the sad boy with the consumptive mother in ' L 'enfance ' is entirely characteristic " . After he came under Auden 's influence Britten composed Our Hunting Fathers (1936) , ostensibly a protest against fox @-@ hunting but which also alludes allegorically to the contemporary political state of Europe . The work has never been popular ; in 1948 the critic Colin Mason lamented its neglect and called it one of Britten 's greatest works . In Mason 's view the cycle is " as exciting as Les Illuminations , and offers many interesting and enjoyable foretastes of the best moments of his later works . "

The first of Britten 's song cycles to gain widespread popularity was Les Illuminations (1940) , for high voice (originally soprano , later more often sung by tenors) with string orchestra accompaniment , setting words by Arthur Rimbaud . Britten 's music reflects the eroticism in Rimbaud 's poems ; Copland commented of the section " Antique " that he did not know how Britten dared to write the melody . Matthews judges the piece the crowning masterpiece of Britten 's early years . By the time of Britten 's next cycle , Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo (1942) for tenor and piano , Pears had become his partner and muse ; in Matthews 's phrase , Britten wrote the cycle as " his declaration of love for Peter " . It too finds the sensuality of the verses it sets , though in its structure it resembles a conventional 19th @-@ century song cycle . Mason draws a distinction between this and Britten 's earlier cycles , because here each song is self @-@ contained , and has no thematic connection with any of the others .

The Serenade for Tenor , Horn and Strings (1943) sets verses by a variety of poets , all on the theme of night @-@ time . Though Britten described the cycle as " not important stuff , but quite pleasant , I think " , it was immediately greeted as a masterpiece , and together with Peter Grimes it established him as one of the leading composers of his day . Mason calls it " a beautifully unified work on utterly dissimilar poems , held together by the most superficial but most effective , and therefore most suitable symphonic method . Some of the music is pure word @-@ painting , some of it mood @-@ painting , of the subtlest kind . " Two years later , after witnessing the horrors of Belsen , Britten composed The Holy Sonnets of John Donne , a work whose bleakness was not matched until his final tenor and piano cycle a quarter of a century later . Britten 's technique in this cycle ranges from atonality in the first song to firm tonality later , with a resolute B major chord at the climax of " Death , be not proud " .

Nocturne (1958) is the last of the orchestral cycles . As in the Serenade , Britten set words by a range of poets , who here include Shakespeare , Coleridge , Keats , Shelley , Tennyson and Wilfred Owen . The whole cycle is darker in tone than the Serenade , with pre @-@ echoes of the War Requiem . All the songs have subtly different orchestrations , with a prominent obbligato part for a different instrument in each . Among Britten 's later song cycles with piano accompaniment is the Songs and Proverbs of William Blake , composed for the baritone Dietrich Fischer @-@ Dieskau . This presents all its poems in a continuous stream of music ; Brett writes that it " interleaves a ritornello @-@ like setting of the seven proverbs with seven songs that paint an increasingly sombre picture of human existence . " A Pushkin cycle , The Poet 's Echo (1965) , was written for Galina Vishnevskaya , and shows a more robust and extrovert side of the composer . Though written ostensibly in the tradition of European song cycles , it draws atmospherically on the polyphony of south @-@ east Asian music . Who Are These Children ? (1969) , setting 12 verses by William Soutar , is among the grimmest of Britten 's cycles . After he could no longer play the piano , Britten composed a cycle of Robert Burns settings , A Birthday Hansel (1976) , for voice and harp .

= = = Other vocal works = = =

Nicholas Maw said of Britten 's vocal music : " His feeling for poetry (not only English) and the inflexions of language make him , I think , the greatest musical realizer of English " . One of the best @-@ known works in which Britten set poetry was the War Requiem (1962) . It intersperses the Latin requiem mass , sung by soprano and chorus , with settings of works by the First World War poet Wilfred Owen , sung by tenor and baritone . At the end the two elements are combined , as the last line of Owen 's " Strange meeting " mingles with the In paradisum of the mass . Matthews describes the conclusion of the work as " a great wave of benediction [which] recalls the end of the

Sinfonia da Requiem , and its similar ebbing away into the sea that symbolises both reconciliation and death . " Other works for voices and orchestra include the Missa Brevis and the Cantata academica (both 1959) on religious themes , and the late cantata Phaedra (1975) , a story of fated love and death modelled on Handel 's Italian cantatas .

Smaller @-@ scale works for accompanied voice include the five Canticles , composed between 1947 and 1974 . They are written for a variety of voices (tenor in all five ; counter @-@ tenor or alto in II and IV and baritone in IV) and accompaniments (piano in I to IV , horn in III and harp in V) . The first is a setting of Francis Quarles 's 17th century poem " A Divine Rapture " , and according to Britten was modelled on Purcell 's Divine Hymns . Matthews describes it as one of the composer 's most serene works , which " ends in a mood of untroubled happiness that would soon become rare in Britten 's music " . The second Canticle was written in 1952 , between Billy Budd and Gloriana , on the theme of Abraham 's obedience to Divine Authority in the proffered sacrifice of his son Isaac . " Canticle III " from 1954 is a setting of Edith Sitwell 's wartime poem " Still Falls the Rain " , composed just after The Turn of the Screw with which it is structurally and stylistically associated . The twelve @-@ note cycle in the first five bars of the piano part of the Canticle introduced a feature that became thereafter a regular part of Britten 's compositional technique . The fourth Canticle , premiered in 1971 is based on T. S. Eliot 's poem " Journey of the Magi " . It is musically close to The Burning Fiery Furnace of 1966 ; Matthews refers to it as a " companion piece " to the earlier work . The final Canticle was another Eliot setting , his juvenile poem " Death of Saint Narcissus " . Although Britten had little idea of what the poem was about , the musicologist Arnold Whittall finds the text " almost frighteningly apt ... for a composer conscious of his own sickness " . Matthews sees Narcissus as " another figure from [Britten 's] magic world of dreams and ideal beauty " .

= = = Orchestral works = = =

The Britten scholar Donald Mitchell has written , " It is easy , because of the scope , stature , and sheer volume of the operas , and the wealth of vocal music of all kinds , to pay insufficient attention to the many works Britten wrote in other , specifically non @-@ vocal genres . " Maw said of Britten , " He is one of the 20th century 's great orchestral composers ... His orchestration has an individuality , incisiveness and integration with the musical material only achieved by the greatest composers . " Among Britten 's best @-@ known orchestral works are the Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge (1937) , the Sinfonia da Requiem (1940) , the Four Sea Interludes (1945) and The Young Person 's Guide to the Orchestra (1945) . The Variations , an affectionate tribute to Britten 's teacher , range from comic parodies of Italian operatic clichés and Viennese waltzes to a strutting march , reflecting the rise of militarism in Europe , and a Mahlerian funeral march ; the piece ends with an exuberant fugal finale . The Sinfonia moves from an opening Lacrymosa filled with fear and lamentation to a fierce Dies Irae and then to a final Requiem aeternam , described by the critic Herbert Glass as " the most uneasy ' eternal rest ' possible " . Mason considers the Sinfonia a failure : " less entertaining than usual , because its object is not principally to entertain but to express symphonically . It fails because it is neither picturesquely nor formally symphonic " . The Sea Interludes , adapted by Britten from the full score of Peter Grimes , make a concert suite depicting the sea and the Borough in which the opera is set ; the character of the music is strongly contrasted between " Dawn " , " Sunday Morning " , " Moonlight " and " Storm " . The commentator Howard Posner observes that there is not a bar in the interludes , no matter how beautiful , that is free of foreboding . The Young Person 's Guide , based on a theme by Purcell , showcases the orchestra 's individual sections and groups , and gained widespread popularity from the outset . Christopher Headington calls the work " exuberant and uncomplicated music , scored with clarity and vigour [that] fits well into Britten 's oeuvre . " David Matthews calls it " a brilliant educational exercise . "

Unlike his English predecessors such as Elgar and Vaughan Williams , and composers from mainland Europe whom he admired , including Mahler and Shostakovich , Britten was not a classical symphonist . His youthful jeux d 'esprit the Simple Symphony (1934) is in conventional symphonic structure , observing sonata form and the traditional four @-@ movement pattern , but of his mature works his Spring Symphony (1949) is more a song cycle than a true symphony , and the

concertante Cello Symphony (1963) is an attempt to balance the traditional concerto and symphony . During its four movements the Cello Symphony moves from a deeply pessimistic opening to a finale of radiant happiness rare for Britten by this point . The composer considered it " the finest thing I 've written " .

The Piano Concerto (1938) was at first criticised for being too light @-@ hearted and virtuoso . In 1945 Britten revised it , replacing a skittish third movement with a more sombre passacaglia that , in Matthews 's view , gives the work more depth , and makes the apparent triumph of the finale more ambivalent . The Violin Concerto (1940) has virtuoso elements , but they are balanced by lyrical and elegiac passages , " undoubtedly reflecting Britten 's growing concern with the escalation of world hostilities . " Neither concerto is among Britten 's most popular works , but in the 21st century the Violin Concerto has been performed more frequently than before , both in the concert hall and on record .

Britten 's incidental music for theatre , film and radio , much of it unpublished , was the subject of an essay by William Mann , published in 1952 in the first detailed critical assessment of Britten 's music to that date . Of these pieces the music for a radio play , The Rescue , by Edward Sackville @-@ West , is praised by the musicologist Lewis Foreman as " of such stature and individual character as to be worth a regular place alongside [Britten 's] other dramatic scores . " Mann finds in this score pre @-@ echoes of the second act of Billy Budd , while Foreman observes that Britten " appears to have made passing allusions to The Rescue in his final opera , Death in Venice .

= = = Chamber and instrumental works = = =

Britten 's close friendship with Rostropovich inspired the Cello Sonata (1961) and three suites for solo cello (1964 ? 71) . String quartets featured throughout Britten 's composing career , from a student work in 1928 to his Third String Quartet (1975) . The second Quartet , from 1945 , was written in homage to Purcell ; Mason considered it Britten 's most important instrumental work to that date . Referring to this work , Keller writes of the ease with which Britten , relatively early in his compositional career , solves " the modern sonata problem ? the achievement of symmetry and unity within an extended ternary circle based on more than one subject " . Keller likens the innovatory skill of the Quartet to that of Walton 's Viola Concerto . The third Quartet was Britten 's last major work ; the critic Colin Anderson said of it in 2007 , " one of Britten 's greatest achievements , one with interesting allusions to Bartók and Shostakovich , and written with an economy that opens out a depth of emotion that can be quite chilling . " The Gemini Variations (1965) , for flute , violin and piano duet , were based on a theme of Zoltán Kodály and written as a virtuoso piece for the 13 @-@ year @-@ old Jeney twins , musical prodigies whom Britten had met in Budapest in the previous year . For Osian Ellis , Britten wrote the Suite for Harp (1969) , which Joan Chissell in The Times described as " a little masterpiece of concentrated fancy " .

= = = Legacy = = =

Britten 's fellow @-@ composers had divided views about him . To Tippett he was " simply the most musical person I have ever met " , with an " incredible " technical mastery ; some contemporaries , however , were less effusive . In Tippett 's view Walton and others were convinced that Britten and Pears were leaders of a homosexual conspiracy in music , a belief Tippett dismisses as ridiculous , inspired by jealousy at Britten 's postwar successes . Leonard Bernstein considered Britten " a man at odds with the world " , and said of his music : " [I] f you hear it , not just listen to it superficially , you become aware of something very dark " . The tenor Robert Tear , who was closely associated with Britten in the latter part of the composer 's career , made a similar point : " There was a great , huge abyss in his soul ... He got into the valley of the shadow of death and couldn 't get out " .

In the decade after Britten 's death , his standing as a composer in Britain was to some extent overshadowed by that of the still @-@ living Tippett . The film @-@ maker Tony Palmer thought that Tippett 's temporary ascendancy might have been a question of the two composers ' contrasting personalities : Tippett had more warmth and had made fewer enemies . In any event this was a

short @-@ lived phenomenon ; Tippett adherents such as the composer Robert Saxton soon rediscovered their enthusiasm for Britten , whose audience steadily increased during the final years of the 20th century . Britten has had few imitators ; Brett describes him as " inimitable , possessed of ... a voice and sound too dangerous to imitate " . Nevertheless , after his death Britten was lauded by the younger generation of English composers to whom , in the words of Oliver Knussen , he became " a phenomenal father @-@ figure " . Brett believes that he affected every subsequent British composer to some extent : " He is a key figure in the growth of British musical culture in the second half of the 20th century , and his effect on everything from opera to the revitalization of music education is hard to overestimate . "

Whittall believes that one reason for Britten 's enduring popularity is the " progressive conservatism " of his music . He generally avoided the avant garde , and did not challenge the conventions in the way that contemporaries such as Tippett did . Perhaps , says Brett , " the tide that swept away serialism , atonality and most forms of musical modernism and brought in neo @-@ Romanticism , minimalism and other modes of expression involved with tonality carried with it renewed interest in composers who had been out of step with the times " . Britten defined his mission as a composer in very simple terms : composers should aim at " pleasing people today as seriously as we can " .

= = Pianist and conductor = =

Britten , though a reluctant conductor and a nervous pianist , was greatly sought after in both capacities . The piano accompanist Gerald Moore wrote in his memoirs about playing at all the main music festivals except for Aldeburgh , because " as the presiding genius there is the greatest accompanist in the world , my services are not needed " . Britten 's recital partnership with Pears was his best @-@ known collaboration , but he also accompanied Kathleen Ferrier , Rostropovich , Dietrich Fischer @-@ Dieskau , James Bowman and John Shirley @-@ Quirk , among others . Though usually too nervous to play piano solos , Britten often performed piano duets with Clifford Curzon or Richter , and chamber music with the Amadeus Quartet . The composers whose works , other than his own , he most often played were Mozart and Schubert ; the latter , in Murray Perahia 's view , was Britten 's greatest idol . As a boy and young man , Britten had intensely admired Brahms , but his admiration waned to nothing , and Brahms seldom featured in his repertory .

Singers and players admired Britten 's conducting , and David Webster rated it highly enough to offer him the musical directorship of the Covent Garden Opera in 1952 . Britten declined ; he was not confident of his ability as a conductor and was reluctant to spend too much time performing rather than composing . As a conductor , Britten 's repertory included Purcell , Bach , Haydn , Mozart and Schubert , and occasional less characteristic choices including Schumann 's Scenes from Goethe 's Faust ; Elgar 's The Dream of Gerontius and Introduction and Allegro ; Holst 's Egdon Heath and short pieces by Percy Grainger .

= = Recordings = =

Britten , like Elgar and Walton before him , was signed up by a major British recording company , and performed a considerable proportion of his output on disc . For the Decca Record Company he made some monaural records in the 1940s and 1950s , followed , with the enthusiastic support of the Decca producer John Culshaw , by numerous stereophonic versions of his works . Culshaw wrote , " The happiest hours I have spent in any studio were with Ben , for the basic reason that it did not seem that we were trying to make records or video tapes ; we were just trying to make music . "

In May 1943 Britten made his debut in the Decca studios , accompanying Sophie Wyss in five of his arrangements of French folk songs . The following January he and Pears recorded together , in Britten 's arrangements of British folk songs , and the following day , in duet with Curzon he recorded his Introduction and Rondo alla burlesca and Mazurka elegiaca . In May 1944 he conducted the Boyd Neel string orchestra , Dennis Brain and Pears in the first recording of the Serenade for Tenor , Horn and Strings , which has frequently been reissued , most recently on CD .

Britten 's first operatic recording was *The Turn of the Screw* , made in January 1955 with the original English Opera Group forces . In 1957 he conducted *The Prince of the Pagodas* in an early stereo recording , supervised by Culshaw . Decca 's first major commercial success with Britten came the following year , with *Peter Grimes* , which has , at 2013 , never been out of the catalogues since its first release . From 1958 Britten conducted Decca recordings of many of his operas and vocal and orchestral works , including the *Nocturne* (1959) , the *Spring Symphony* (1960) and the *War Requiem* (1963) . The last sold in unexpectedly large numbers for a classical set , and thereafter Decca unstintingly made resources available to Culshaw and his successors for Britten recordings . Sets followed of *Albert Herring* (1964) , the *Sinfonia da Requiem* (1964) *Curlew River* (1965) , *A Midsummer Night 's Dream* (1966) , *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1967) , *Billy Budd* (1967) and many of the other major works . In 2013 , to mark the anniversary of Britten 's birth , Decca released a set of 65 CDs and one DVD , " *Benjamin Britten ? Complete Works* " . Most of the recordings were from Decca 's back catalogue , but in the interests of comprehensiveness a substantial number of tracks were licensed from 20 other companies including EMI , Virgin Classics , Naxos , Warner and NMC .

As a pianist and conductor in other composers ' music , Britten made many recordings for Decca . Among his studio collaborations with Pears are sets of Schubert 's *Winterreise* and *Die schöne Müllerin* , Schumann 's *Dichterliebe* , and songs by Haydn , Mozart , Bridge , Ireland , Holst , Tippett and Richard Rodney Bennett . Other soloists whom Britten accompanied on record were Ferrier , Rostropovich and Vishnevskaya . As a conductor he recorded a wide range of composers , from Purcell to Grainger . Among his best @-@ known Decca recordings are Purcell 's *The Fairy @-@ Queen* , Bach 's *Brandenburg concertos* , *Cantata 151* , *Cantata 102* and *St John Passion* , Elgar 's *The Dream of Gerontius* and Mozart 's last two symphonies .

= = Honours , awards and commemorations = =

State honours awarded to Britten included Companion of Honour (Britain) in 1953 ; Commander of the Royal Order of the Polar Star (Sweden) in 1962 ; the Order of Merit (Britain) in 1965 ; and a life peerage (Britain) in July 1976 . He received honorary degrees and fellowships from 19 conservatories and universities in Europe and America . His awards included the Hanseatic Goethe Prize (1961) ; the Aspen Award , Colorado (1964) ; the Royal Philharmonic Society 's Gold Medal (1964) ; the Sibelius Prize (1965) ; the Mahler Medal (Bruckner and Mahler Society of America , 1967) ; the Léonie Sonning Music Prize (Denmark , 1968) ; the Ernst von Siemens Prize (1974) ; and the Ravel Prize (1974) .

Prizes for individual works included UNESCO 's International Rostrum of Composers 1961 (for *A Midsummer Night 's Dream*) ; and for the *War Requiem* Grammy Awards 1963 ? Classical Album of the Year , Best Classical Composition by a Contemporary Composer and Best Classical Performance ? Choral (Other than Opera) ; the BRIT Awards 1977 ? Best Orchestral Album of the past 25 years ; and the Grammy Hall of Fame Award 1998 .

The Red House in Aldeburgh , where Britten and Pears lived and worked together from 1957 until Britten 's death in 1976 , is now the home of the Britten @-@ Pears Foundation , established to promote their musical legacy . In Britten 's centenary year his studio at the Red House was restored to the way it was in the 1950s and opened to the public . The converted hayloft was designed and built by H T Cadbury Brown in 1958 and was described by Britten as a " magnificent work " . In June 2013 Dame Janet Baker officially opened the Britten @-@ Pears archive in a new building in the grounds of the Red House .

A memorial stone to Britten was unveiled in the north choir aisle of Westminster Abbey in 1978 . There are memorial plaques to him at three of his London homes : 173 Cromwell Road , 45a St John 's Wood High Street , and 8 Halliford Street in Islington . In April 2013 Britten was honoured by the Royal Mail in the UK , as one of ten people selected as subjects for the " Great Britons " commemorative postage stamp issue .

Other creative artists have celebrated Britten . In 1970 Walton composed *Improvisations on an Impromptu of Benjamin Britten* , based on a theme from Britten 's *Piano Concerto* . Works

commemorating Britten include Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten an orchestral piece written in 1977 by Arvo Pärt , and Sally Beamish 's Variations on a Theme of Benjamin Britten , based on the second Sea Interlude from Peter Grimes ; she composed the work to mark Britten 's centenary . Alan Bennett depicts Britten in a 2009 play The Habit of Art , set while Britten is composing Death in Venice and centred on a fictional meeting between Britten and Auden . Britten was played in the premiere production by Alex Jennings .

Tony Palmer made three documentary films about Britten : Benjamin Britten & his Festival (1967) ; A Time There Was (1979) ; and Nocturne (2013) .

= = = Centenary = = =

In September 2012 , to mark the composer 's forthcoming centenary , the Britten @-@ Pears Foundation launched " Britten 100 " , a collaboration of leading organisations in the performing arts , publishing , broadcasting , film , academia and heritage . Among the events were the release of a feature film Benjamin Britten ? Peace and Conflict , and a centenary exhibition at the British Library . The Royal Mint issued a 50 @-@ pence piece , to mark the centenary ? the first time a composer has featured on a British coin .

Centenary performances of the War Requiem were given at eighteen locations in Britain . Opera productions included Owen Wingrave at Aldeburgh , Billy Budd at Glyndebourne , Death in Venice by English National Opera , Gloriana by The Royal Opera , and Peter Grimes , Death in Venice and A Midsummer Night 's Dream by Opera North . Peter Grimes was performed on the beach at Aldeburgh , opening the 2013 Aldeburgh Festival in June 2013 , with Steuart Bedford conducting and singers from the Chorus of Opera North and the Chorus of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama , described by The Guardian as " a remarkable , and surely unrepeatable achievement . "

Internationally , the anniversary was marked by performances of the War Requiem , Peter Grimes and other works in four continents . In the US the centennial events were described as " coast to coast , " with a Britten festival at Carnegie Hall , and performances at the New York Philharmonic , the Metropolitan Opera and Los Angeles Opera .