

BRITTEN AND BRITTENITES

BY PETER TRANCHELL

BENJAMIN BRITTEN is still under forty years of age. Is this the right time in his life for the publication of a biography and a study of his works? The question is raised by the appearance of a stout book of 410 pages: 'Benjamin Britten: a commentary on his works by a group of specialists, edited by Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller' (London, Rockliff, 1952, 30s.). With interpretative talent the position is different: the most valuable accounts are those of eye-witnesses, those who actually saw the manner of the great actor or heard the style of the great violinist and recorded their impressions, forthwith. But the composer's significance to the world is something different. The reaction of a man to music composed in his own time is merely a question of taste, no matter how erudite he may be. The most reasonable and scholarly procedure with such music is an analysis and description of its structure and content, without any opinion on its ultimate value. The serious appraisal of a creative artist's work must be left to posterity.

Yes, but that does not altogether rule out an interim judgement. The ultimate evaluation of Britten's music is our grandchildren's concern; but this music was, after all, written to appeal to our ears. Posterity's verdict is of no use to us; and while our opinion of Britten is, in the nature of things, only provisional, it is, after all, that of the people for whom his music was written. In 1840 Spohr was a great composer, and the reaction of his living audience was the real critique, not the sneers of generations to follow. A composer who writes for any ears other than those of his contemporaries is a romantical egoist and a foolish visionary as well. On this basis the spirit of the new Mitchell-Keller book must be approved. It is not final—it does not set out to be. Britten, so in effect the book says, is a great composer—now. It is now that matters to us.

Another thing to be said before holes are picked in it is a word of congratulation to the publishers on its production, as regards both the type of the letterpress and the exquisite clarity of the many musical examples which adorn nearly every page.

Now to consider the contributions individually. The Earl of Harewood starts the ball rolling with a biographical sketch. At once we are aware of a dilemma. Lord Harewood's being a close friend is a factor not altogether favourable to his qualifications for giving us a faithful picture of the composer.

The appreciation of a man's music is often aided by information outside purely musical considerations. The appeal of Berlioz's music, for instance, may gain from what we have been told of his stormy adolescence with its bizarre adventures. Lord Harewood's article informs us that his composer was born in 1913; became musical very early; then took in his stride a preparatory school, Frank Bridge, Gresham's and the R.C.M. We read that he was a Communist during the Spanish civil war and a pacifist during the second World War; that he went to America, came back and now lives according to the following daily routine: Rises at 6 a.m., composes until lunch-time with only a short pause for breakfast; goes sea-fishing or bird-watching in the afternoon, or plays lawn-tennis or entertains his neighbours. But these are mere milestones on a road obviously crowded with other and more important experiences of which we are not told. What of the most important things in a man's life? To have gone into more detail might have embarrassed the subject; but we leave this carefully uninformative article with a sense of disappointment that good breeding and discretion should have got the better of candour.

One of Lord Harewood's paragraphs invites discussion. It is that which refers to Britten's "intensely professional attitude to music", which is said to account for his "acute impatience of hostile criticism". The paragraph goes on to rationalize this impatience. Britten, we read, hates his own—or anyone else's—motives to be misunderstood and his music, therefore, to be criticized from a false point of view. Is this a scholarly or a sensible attitude? Everyone is impatient of hostile criticism—some people because they despise the critic or know him to be wrong, others because they have a sense of inferiority and fear him to be right. But to suggest that a profound, logical, idealistical process is gone through to arrive at this impatience is an exaggeration. In music what is important is the effect—the effect upon a listener during performance. The composer's intention is irrelevant. If he intended a certain result and gained it, then well and good; but if he

failed to gain that result then he has made a mistake or his technique is at fault. The listener cannot be expected to hear a work otherwise than how he actually does hear it, merely because the composer intended something different. In point of fact, no properly written music can be criticized from a wrong point of view, for it has in it its own inescapable clue to the correct standpoint. Lord Harewood fails to make clear that Britten resents criticism not of his own actual music but of other matters.

If a composer calls his piece a *passacaglia* and it bears no relation to what in current parlance a *passacaglia* is, then he must expect comment on that score. Now Britten's "realizations" of the accompaniments to Purcell's songs, his re-hashing of 'The Beggar's Opera' and of 'Dido and Æneas'—these are the subjects, I suggest, which have aroused most of the hostile criticism so annoying to the composer. But is it not Britten's fault—or his publisher's—in using a word in a sense which is not that commonly accorded it? Again, to talk of a composer's motives in writing the music of an opera is meaningless. Either an opera is dramatic and moving, whether sad or gay, or it is not. No amount of Shavian prolegomena will alter that. The fact that symbolism lies behind the plot, or that experiments in form or style are contained in the music—such things are of no dramatic concern unless they definitely contribute to the dramatic effect.

The rest of the substantial book consists of some twenty chapters about the different categories of Britten's work, sandwiched between two surprising articles by the editors, Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller. Peter Pears writes ably on the vocal music, giving a pleasantly annotated catalogue of the songs and song-sequences. He inclines to attribute absolute virtue to economy, irrespective of context or purpose. It is as well to remember that economy is not always the same thing as beauty, and may be necessitated merely by bankruptcy. George Malcolm writes next on the Purcell realizations—an angry little article which says, in effect, that Britten's realizations are not realizations in the ordinary sense of the word, and that anyone who does not immediately take to the new meaning of the word is a dullard. But is not the very idea that it is correct to write out (and print) a realization, instead of spontaneously improvising it at the keyboard, misleading? And is it serious to say, as Mr. Malcolm does, that "a continuo should be worked out at the keyboard and in terms of keyboard technique"? Worked out! As if one should sit down before the performance poring over the music and working it out! What an approach to the self-respecting musician's art of improvisation! And consider the second phrase: "in terms of keyboard technique". Has anyone ever suggested that a keyboard continuo should be realized in terms of, say, violin technique? or of any other than keyboard technique? Britten's arrangements of Purcell are re-compositions, and should be so entitled. "Realization" is a word that means something else and, since it is tending to become a jargon word, it is hardly candid to use it when it simply is inappropriate.

Hans Redlich writes next on Britten's choral music. Here is an example of his verbiage: "The cycle 'Five Flower Songs' is the work of a consummate virtuoso of composition, less genuinely inspired than 'A Boy was Born', but of unsurpassed mastery in the use of every possible formal device towards the greatest variety of structure and colour within narrow madrigalian limits." What apparently Dr. Redlich really means is that the work with less musical inspiration in it has more technical tricks. It is, he means, a nice piece of note-knitting. But by the end of the sentence he has conveyed the suggestion that the more musical work is only just passable, while the less musical one is preferable by reason of its cleverness. This is accomplished by the use of jargon phrases, "formal device", "variety of structure", "colour" and "narrow limits". In another connection Dr. Redlich cites an example which, he says, "proves that the eighteen-year-old composer had a remarkably clear conception of a new piano style, in that it avoids cloying post-romantic clusters of harmonies and excels in the athletic simultaneity of a motif of piled-up fifths and its augmentation". The example follows, as nice a piece of note-knitting as one could wish. But, passing over the suspect character of such phrases as "clear conception", "new style" and "athletic simultaneity", let us consider the words, "a remarkably clear conception of a new piano style". Does this imply that Britten deliberately adopted a style of composition that was in reality not basically natural to him (or to the piano), following in the wake of Hindemith's equally spare "contrapuntal contours"? I suspect that Dr. Redlich did not mean it so. The phrase "cloying post-romantic clusters of harmonies" is interesting. People who have defective ears, or who are defective in that portion of the brain which analyses and comprehends musical sounds, are naturally averse to music that makes complicated demands on the capacity they do not possess.

But I do not believe Dr. Redlich is in the least tone-deaf. He is here obviously attempting to pay a compliment to Britten by disparaging so-called post-romantic music; and his use of derogatory jargon is only too evident. “Cloying...”, he says, forgetting that this remarkably unstable word requires to be used in a particular context and is applicable as an expression of personal taste rather than as a scholastic pronouncement, while, in his aversion to “clusters of harmonies”, he fails to observe that a cluster of contrary rhythms or a cluster of any subtleties after the Britten model may be quite as reprehensible. In this connection I would remark that Britten is just as prone to lay it on with a trowel (though I do not say this is a bad thing) as the Romantics. If they had their harmony, he, for his part, will not leave well alone with device. If he can he will have a conflicting counter-subject, or a far-fetched harmonization of a melody; and this sort of prodigality of clever ideas in composition invites censure just as does any other form of excess.

The best articles now follow: Arthur Oldham’s and Erwin Stein’s on ‘Peter Grimes’, Norman del Mar’s on ‘The Rape of Lucretia’, ‘Albert Herring’ and ‘The Beggar’s Opera’. They are sensible, interesting and easy to read. I recommend musicians to omit the previous pages and start with these. Mr. Stein’s article on ‘Billy Budd’ is the apogee of the book. It attempts to prove nothing, nor does it employ that illegitimate form of musical comparison which seeks to elevate one composer by airily traducing another. It simply points out in a nobly dispassioned way the items of interest in the opera, leaving the summing-up to the reader. Excellent!

Paul Hamburger writes next on the chamber music. He starts quite fairly with general remarks such as this about sonata form: “To the classical demand for strict *integration* in this form has been added a demand for formal, tonal, if not indeed motivic *progression* in the course of a work, of such refined, and quite unprogrammatic, sensitivity that the composer must needs consider each new ‘sonata’ a special case whose form has to be re—created according to the requirements of the material”. But after this truism—which, anyway, applies to all modern music—he goes in for being pseudo-musicological. Themes are labelled, and he revels in formulae which are fatiguing if not inscrutable. He tells us, for instance, that “the complete (*a*) in section A and in the coda is a clearing station between the almost impersonal molecules of the work and the themes that are derived from (*a*) itself. This clears section A of any duplicity: all later developments of it can be definitely, though perhaps unconsciously, heard as either pre- or post-principal subject”. Fascinating! And there is more to learn. On p. 218 appears a modulation map. It looks like a design for central heating or a diagram of the human blood—stream, and is as beautifully contrived as the Hampton Court maze.

Boyd Neel writes on the works for string orchestra, and there are chapters on the symphonies, the concertos and the piano music. An article by Georges Auric on Britten’s piano works reads like a publisher’s dust-cover announcement. The really critical survey of the music in this category is contributed by A. E. F. Dickinson. A rather comical turn follows. Imogen Holst expatiates on Britten and the Young in a manner she must have learnt from Walford Davies. “... the fluttering grace-notes of the two flutes chase each other up to the sudden piercing trill of the piccolo, the oboes’ expressive *pp* alternates with a passionate *ff*, and the clarinets’ agile arpeggios blossom into a mellow *rallentando*”. I am tempted to try my hand at this sort of thing. “But see! Lurking behind yonder bush of autumnal semiquavers, and wearing a dark tritone with a yellow feather in it, we perceive the sinister bassoon. Ah, what does this fierce growling foretell? But with a strident *rubato* he bursts forth, scattering the timid double-basses to left and to right, and plunges into an icy melisma that finishes up at the extreme edge of a perilous *sforzando*.” But Miss Holst forestalls parody. Here she writes “The xylophone’s chromatic contribution encourages the strings to play *col legno*.” Really? Was not the indication marked in the violin parts? I hasten on to Lennox Berkeley’s chapter on the light music, a short but interesting piece of writing, and to William Mann’s on the incidental music, which, too, is a cut above some of the contributions to the book. The volume ends with a list of gramophone records, their qualities described by Desmond Shawe-Taylor.

Now I must say something that has been troubling me all along. To what part of the public is the book addressed? I come to the conclusion it is addressed to no one: it is simply a labour of love. On the one hand it is hardly up to the standard of a text-book; on the other hand, the elaborate style of the contributions and the price may preclude it from the favour of the average layman, while the intelligentsia will probably prefer to spend its money on actual scores rather than the ruminations of the composer’s friends. As a readable appreciation for the benefit of Tom, Dick and

Harry it fails by trying to be too scholarly and technical. Many of the contributors have spoiled their efforts by fallacious methods of criticism, and in the attempt to be profound have fallen into incoherent verbiage. The two editors, in particular, have failed both to make clear their motives and to attain the ends the average reader would hope they had in mind.

Mr. Mitchell's chapter, 'The Musical Atmosphere', is an oppressive piece of writing. Let us look into one element of this essay. Mr. Mitchell says: "Britten's Englishry is of the profoundest significance for the musical culture of Europe and ourselves." What does he mean? Is not Britten's music of significance as music, apart from his being an Englishman? Or does the writer imply that foreign cultures are loth (or eager) to assimilate Britten's music because it is redolent of a character alien to them? It seems to me that this is just a noble empty phrase to justify Mr. Mitchell's unprofitable occupation of tracing nationality in an art which nowadays derives from such a hotchpotch of sources that it is incapable of such analysis. The whole chapter is largely concerned with saying that Britten is an Englishman or, at times, an European. In trying to define Britten's peculiarly English quality Mr. Mitchell tells us it has not the same English quality as "the modality of Vaughan Williams; the occasionally rhapsodic folk-song style of Holst or Bax; the bluff geniality of Elgar; the pantheistic impressionism of Delius". Well, we all know that folk-song has a pretty cosmopolitan character, and the modes were by no means a national monopoly; and while we know that Elgar and Delius were Englishmen, we still acknowledge their debt to Franck and Grieg.

When Mr. Mitchell comes to the point of defining Britten's "Englishry" he apologizes for being unable to think of the right words. He, however, settles for this: "Britten's Englishry may be ascribed to two creative tendencies. First, the exploration and exploitation of a whole emotional territory which has otherwise been undiscovered; and secondly a gift for the musical *vernacular*." What wonderful jargon! "Emotional territory"! Surely the only emotions evoked by music are those experienced by the listener. Does this discovery of "new territory" mean that Britten evokes in a listener emotions never previously evoked by music? Is it a new emotion, or a set of virgin listeners? Or is it a new method of evoking an old emotion? Whatever it is, how can we be sure? Then: "a gift for the musical vernacular". Does this mean that Britten's music, though composed by him, sounds like a traditional English folk-song or hymn-tune? Or does it imply that he has a democratic knack of appealing to the man in the street?

The next paragraphs tell us, in connection with the new emotional territory, that Britten's childlike quality, his special "innocence of spirit", appeals to "the child in the child and the child in the adult". "Britten", says our author, swapping horses in mid-stream, "has created a unique department of feeling which, in its turn, has created new textures and new musical ideas. For example, in the Spring Symphony's 'The Driving Boy' the newness of the *sound* alone is startling". But surely, to startle a listener by "newness of sound" is an age-old trick. To startle the listener in the traditional way can scarcely be called exploring a new emotional territory, nor incidentally has it very much to do with "the child in the adult". The old are just as susceptible to shock as the young. Why not say that Britten appeals to the senility in people?

Mr. Mitchell wishes to praise Britten for his "harmonic poise—refusal to be harried by a 'modern' conscience into nervous rhythms or a debilitating chromaticism". He goes on: "One of the main problems of the contemporary composer has been the inhibited attitude towards or downright fear of a largely diatonic idiom. Walton is a good example of a composer who almost aggressively attempts to suppress or, at least, disguise his diatonic tendencies—hence his often self-destructive rhythms and his frequently cloying chromaticisms." Is Mr. Mitchell here suggesting that music is an abstract, that it has a value quite apart from its impression on a listener? Well, it is not and it has not. Music is a sequence of sounds intelligible to a listener. The listener makes the sense out of it, according to his own experience; and as to whether the music is diatonic or not, the listener decides for himself. To us Europeans of this century all music is of necessity basically diatonic, because of our musical upbringing and environment. Even so-called atonal music is written by and intended to be heard by men habituated to apply the classical formula of tonality to all music. For Mr. Mitchell to suggest that Walton or anyone else attempts to "disguise" the diatonic element in his music simply will not do. The element is there quite plainly, and is all-important for our enjoyment. Walton's music is—as is anyone's, for that matter—merely an elaboration and extension of the formula that existed previously (not a concealment of it), and it

would be meaningless to the listener were he not able to apply the classical formula while listening. As much goes for Schönberg's music, too.

Before I leave this curious chapter let me quote from it some examples of its musicological jargon:

Britten's perfectly stable Europeanism resulted in a creative freedom which enabled him to make full and uninhibited use of all he had learned from 17th-century English Rhetoric.

It is of prime importance to understand *the extra-chronological relationship of Mahler to Stravinsky in so far as they stand in relation to a common unifying factor—Britten*, even if it is the attraction and common features of opposites.

Britten's proportions and projected chromaticism is evidence of the truly classical spirit which informs so much of his music and underlies his aristocratic attitude to style.

The concluding chapter is written by Hans Keller. For some psychological reason he reaches the conclusion that Purcell is Britten's father, one of the two having a superego identification with the other. We are then told that Britten somehow is Mozart, their obvious common characteristic being youthful maturity.

Mr. Keller continues:

And if it be objected that Britten is actually cold and empty and superficial, we who find a warmth and a rich deep content in his music have, at least, this to be said in our favour: while one does not usually find things that are not there, one often does not find things that are. I would suggest that both composers [Mozart and Britten] sublimate not only their depths but also their heights, i.e., they even sublimate their sublimity.

For those who like this sort of thing Mr. Keller deals it out in profusion.

One saddening thing about the more pretentious of these Britten essays is the use of jargon-words, not for their preciseness of expression, but for their modishness, their smartness. And similarly with many of the preferences and the admirations. Britten is likened, on very slender points of similarity, to Purcell and Mozart, and is said to be in the line of descent from Mahler, Berg, Schönberg and Milhaud. Is it pure coincidence that these names should be in fashion this season?

It would be easy to name quite a different set of composers with whom Britten has just as much affinity—Verdi and Puccini, and then Stravinsky, Holst and Walton. But these, at the moment, are not so fashionable. Supposing I were to write that the "Investigation" fugue in 'Albert Herring' is—not only on account of its portrayal of bumbledom and self-important busybodies, but also because of its musical shape—obviously derived directly from the bogus counterpoint of the Scribes and Pharisees in Massenet's 'Marie Magdeleine', I should be frowned on. It would be perfectly valid criticism, but it is not the smart thing just now to mention Massenet.

I suspect, in a similar spirit, the way in which the Lydian fourth and the Æolian seventh are dragged in to describe certain quirks of Britten's. But if you remember that Britten got the Lydian fourth from Rutland Boughton, who had got it from Debussy, who had got it from Gounod and Tchaikovsky, who had probably got it from Berlioz, then the Lydian fourth loses some of its lustre—it becomes, after all, not so very modish. Why, even Beethoven uses the Lydian fourth in the Pastoral Symphony!

It remains for me to offer to the subject of this hero-worship my condolences that the book should not have been better written and that he should have been the victim of so inopportune an outburst of noble intentions.

Cambridge University Library Tranchell/9/3/12