

A black and white portrait of Benjamin Britten, looking slightly to the right. He is wearing a dark sweater over a white collared shirt and a dark tie. The background is a blurred interior with bookshelves.

'...if I were asked to recommend an introduction to Britten...I would unhesitatingly urge this one.'

Daily Telegraph

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

DAVID
MATTHEWS

Britten

David Matthews

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Preface to the 2013 Centenary Edition

At his centenary, Britten's status as one of the great composers of the past century seems secure. There will be performances of his work throughout the year, not only in this country but around the world, for Britten is better known and understood internationally than any of his compatriots. As a writer of opera, he has no rival among his generation. Many composers go through periods of neglect after their death. This never happened to Britten: in contrast, much of his music that was undervalued in his lifetime or had been suppressed, including a number of his early works, has emerged into the light; and several works that had been unjustly criticised – notably *Gloriana* and *Owen Wingrave* – have been re-evaluated.

The first edition of this book was published ten years ago. At the concert to launch the book, a previously unknown work written when Britten was 16, *Two Pieces* for violin, viola and piano, was given its first performance, together with a premiere of a work of mine. *Two Pieces* is only one of many astonishingly accomplished works that Britten wrote when he was studying with Frank Bridge, being introduced to the latest music from Central Europe and eagerly absorbing it, together with the forward-looking music of his teacher. Britten had no interest in getting these works performed in his lifetime – many of them he never heard; but some of them, in particular the *Quatre chansons françaises* and the Double Concerto for violin and viola, have now entered the repertoire. There may be more discoveries to come from his early music, and there are still some mature works that perhaps have not yet found their proper place, for instance the Cello Symphony and the cantata *Phaedra*.

A number of significant books have been published during the last ten years. The six large volumes of Britten's letters – a biography in themselves – are now all in print, as are the early diaries, which show what a severe critic of his contemporaries this precocious teenager was. The recent biography by Imogen Holst includes a diary she kept from 1952 to 1954, when she was Britten's amanuensis. It is a valuable record of Britten's musical thoughts and opinions, which he only discussed openly with close friends. In one conversation he admitted that he thought of himself as perpetually aged 13. This was the time when, to quote the Hardy poem he was to set in *Winter Words*, 'all went well': he was head boy and Victor Ludorum at his preparatory school, pouring out reams of music, including his first orchestral works, and protected from the grown-up world by his mother's devoted love.

In his illuminating study, *Britten's Children*, John Bridcut points out that Britten used boys' voices in almost 30 of his major works, including 12 for the stage. It is one of the most distinctively original sounds in his music. Britten used the boy's voice not only to express his wish to remain in an innocent world, but also to show how innocence was threatened by experience. In many ways Britten was not at home in the adult world, even though some of his best instrumental works – for instance the Violin Concerto, the three string quartets and the Cello Symphony – evince a fully mature response to the world. This response is sometimes a dark and disturbing one, but it is also one of reconciliation and even joy. Britten also takes refuge from the troubles of the world in the realm of sleep: this is wonderfully expressed in his two orchestral songs cycles, the *Serenade* and *Nocturne*, and above all in the opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In his most ambitious confrontation with the world's troubles, the *War Requiem*, Britten offers sleep as the only possible solution: it may be the sleep of death, but it is too a dream of paradise, a vision of unassailable beauty.

It is, above all, Britten's ardent pursuit of innocence and beauty in his music that places it apart from that of his contemporaries, and contributes to its unique quality. We shall be celebrating his unique genius in this centenary year.

David Matthews

Preface

In 1966 I was working as a freelance music copyist and editor in order to finance my intended life as a composer. One of the people who employed me was Donald Mitchell, who had recently established the firm of Faber Music, primarily in order to publish Britten's latest music. In the spring of 1966 Martin Penny, who was preparing the special 'rehearsal score' of *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, fell ill and someone was needed in a hurry to complete the score. I was asked, and was able to finish the job in time. I went to the premiere of the new piece at the Aldeburgh Festival, which took place in Orford Church. After the performance I was introduced to Britten, who said kindly *I hope you enjoyed hearing your notes*. Later that year I incorporated Britten's revisions into the score, and since I seemed to have passed the necessary test of competence I became, over the next four years, an occasional assistant to Britten's regular music assistant Rosamund Strode. Among the tasks I was assigned were preparing the rehearsal score of *The Prodigal Son* and the vocal score of *Owen Wingrave*. I also made a fair copy of the full score of *Owen Wingrave*, with help from my brother Colin, who later took over from me for the vocal score of *Death in Venice*. After Britten's heart operation in 1973, I made the vocal score of *Paul Bunyan* and a reduction for two pianos.

From 1967 to 1970 I also helped with the editing of Britten's music and the works he conducted at the Aldeburgh Festival, for instance *Idomeneo*, of which, in the tradition of Mahler and Strauss, he had made his own edition. I attended many of his rehearsals. I used to go to Aldeburgh to stay for extended periods, and was assigned an office in the former stable buildings beside the Red House, which are now part of the Britten-Pears Library. Most days Britten would call in to say hello; sometimes he would join him for tea, and on one occasion I had supper with him and we talked at length about the contemporary music scene. I think he felt a little isolated from it but still concerned to keep in touch with what was going on. After supper he played me some gramophone records: Kirsten Flagstad singing Sibelius – I remember his enthusiasm for her voice – and the Indian flautist Pannalal Ghosh, whose playing greatly interested him at that time and influenced some of the melodic writing in *The Prodigal Son*.

I was shy and somewhat in awe of Britten – not surprisingly, as he was the first adult composer I had met – and now feel that I could perhaps have made more use of the opportunities I was given. I could have shown him my music, for instance, but didn't. I was somewhat wary of the Aldeburgh scene, and a little afraid of becoming too closely drawn into it. I was also aware, as everyone was, of Britten's hypersensitivity and that one had to be careful not to upset him by venturing any rash opinions. He, I must say, was never anything other than kind, considerate and helpful.

I realise what an extraordinary privilege it was for me to have been an apprentice in his workshop, observing at close hand a great composer solving all the problems of composition and performance in his supremely practical way. It is the best kind of training for a young composer, and this book is in one sense an expression of my gratitude to the man who made it possible.

I should like to thank the staff of the Britten-Pears Library, in particular Nicholas Clark, Elizabeth Gibson and Jennifer Doctor, for their generous help while I was researching the book. I am grateful to the Trustees of the Britten-Pears Foundation and of the Lennox Berkeley Estate for allowing me to quote from copyright material, which is not to be further reproduced without written permission from the Trustees. I owe a great deal to the existing Britten literature, above all to Humphrey Carpenter's full and detailed biography and the two published volumes of Britten's diaries and letters, edited by Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed. The staff at Haus, especially Barbara Schwepcke, were exceptionally understanding and helpful, and Peter Sheppard Skaerved's editorial supervision was invaluable. Mark Doran and Jenifer Wakelyn's contributions to the final text as unofficial editors

were extraordinarily scrupulous and thorough (Mark Doran also wrote the sidebar on Hans Keller). David Harman, Jean Hasse, Colin Matthews, Donald Mitchell and Norman Worrall also read the text and made extremely helpful comments. In addition Judith Bingham, Jonathan Del Mar and Rosamund Storde supplied valuable details.

David Matthews
Hampstead Garden Suburb, January 2000

Note: Britten's spelling remained somewhat uncertain throughout his life – it was one of those habits that he preserved from his boyhood. As well as spelling mistakes, there are characteristic idiosyncrasies such as 'abit'. In the quotations from his letters and diaries, no attempt has been made to correct Britten's text.

A Boy Was Born

Benjamin Britten was born in Suffolk and lived almost all his life in that most easterly county of England. Few 20th-century artists have remained so closely in touch with their roots as Britten. Staying near to where he was born helped him to maintain contact with the childhood world to which he so often returned in his music, and with the sea – a constant stimulus for his life and his work.

The Britten family lived in the fishing port of Lowestoft, in a house overlooking the North Sea. In later life Britten was to make his home in the nearby town of Aldeburgh, where for some years he had a house right on the seafront. Elias Canetti suggested – surely correctly – that the sea is the national symbol for the English, as the forest is for the Germans. The English landscape may have inspired more music, and landscape painting is perhaps our foremost contribution to the visual arts; yet the sea, which offers, in Canetti's words, 'transformation and danger',¹ has a more potent hold on the English imagination. No composer, not even Debussy, has evoked the sea more powerfully than Britten in his opera *Peter Grimes*, the work that made him famous. Britten's first memory, he told his friend and publisher Donald Mitchell, was *the sound of rushing water*² as he was being born – but can one possibly remember one's own birth? Might he not have been recalling the sound of the sea, the constant background to his childhood?

His family, Britten said, was *very ordinary middle-class*³ – a somewhat misleading remark, as there was nothing ordinary about Britten's childhood. His father, Robert, was a dentist with a successful practice, but he disliked his job and if there had been enough money in the family he would have become a farmer. He was not musical, and would probably have preferred his son to choose another career than the precarious life of a musician; his wife, however, overruled him. In photographs his hooded eyes make him look a little sinister, though he seems to have been a kindly if strict father, who was known to his children as 'Pop', was fond of whisky, played golf and liked to go for long walks. Despite his misgivings about his son's fanatical devotion to music, he was proud of him: he clearly recognised that Benjamin was unusual, and he was not unresponsive to his special qualities. In his diary for 18 August 1928, aged 14, Britten wrote: *Daddy remarks, in the evening, that I will be a terrible one for love, and that when the time comes I will think that my love is different from any other and that it is the love.* Britten writes *REMEMBER* alongside this insightful piece of advice. The letters from 'Pop' to Benjamin and his sister Beth, quoted in her book about her brother, are affectionate, sometimes a little awkwardly expressed.

When Robert Britten was 24 he married Edith Hockey, who was four years older. Hers was the artistic side of the family: her brother Willie became organist of a church in Ipswich and directed the Ipswich Choral Society; another brother was also a church organist, and her sister Queenie was a painter who exhibited at the Royal Academy in London. There were also skeletons in the family cupboard: Edith's father had been born out of wedlock – the family story was that her grandfather had been an aristocrat – and her mother became an alcoholic and spent some of her life in what Benjamin Britten calls 'a home for inebriates'.⁴ Edith was a beautiful woman, as her engagement photograph shows: *such a girl as even I could lose my heart to*,⁵ Britten wrote shortly after her death. Music came to play a central role in her life. She was a keen amateur singer, who sang with the Lowestoft Music Society, for which she acted as Secretary. The choir gave concerts at the Evangelical church which she attended regularly, though her husband did not. She also loved to perform at home, singing songs by Schubert and Roger Quilter among others, with 'Beni' accompanying her. She also played piano duets with him, as she was a capable pianist. Her voice was mezzo-soprano and, as Britten's boyhood friend Basil Reeve noticed (and his sister Beth agreed), uncannily similar in tone to that of Britten's partner

in adult life, the tenor Peter Pears.

Edith's fourth and last child, Edward Benjamin (his first name was soon dropped), was born on 2 November 1913, the day consecrated to St Cecilia, patron saint of musicians. He was a lovely boy with blue eyes and golden curly hair, and he became his mother's favourite. His health was never robust: at the age of three months he almost died of pneumonia, and he had a congenitally weak heart that was ultimately responsible for his premature death. He did not sleep well, and Edith often had to sing him to sleep. It is almost impossible to exaggerate the importance of this archetypal maternal practice to Britten's psyche and to his later artistic development. In adult life, Britten was never entirely able to trust the outside world. How many of us can, one might ask? Yet Britten's uneasiness was extreme, and his music reveals it: his world is a place of danger and often of terror, where innocence is readily corrupted. There can be temporary reassurance in beauty and in love, but sleep is the only sure place where security and trust may be regained. The image of sleep as a refuge is something that Britten returns to again and again in his music: in the *Serenade*, the *Nocturne*, the *War Requiem*. The idyllically happy ending of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is possible because the opera is a dream. In all these works it is the singing voice that brings balm, and especially the voice of Peter Pears, who in many ways took on the maternal role in Britten's life after her death.

Edith had been disappointed that her other children, Robert, the eldest of the four, and the two sisters Barbara and Beth, had shown no special aptitude for music, though Robert had learnt the violin. Benjamin was different. He started playing the piano, he said, *as soon as I could walk*,⁶ and was soon improvising experimentally and trying to write down what he played. His mother helped him to learn the rudiments of piano technique, and at seven he began formal lessons with Miss Ethel Astle, one of the mistresses at his first school. He quickly showed great talent as a pianist, and started to compose in earnest. Edith did all she could to encourage him. Many successful children benefit from an ambitious mother, and few mothers have been so ruthlessly ambitious as Mrs Britten. She completely dominated Benjamin's early life; as Basil Reeve observed, she was '*determined* that he should be a great musician'.⁷ She would soon be telling friends that her son would be 'The Fourth B' after Bach, Beethoven and Brahms (and perhaps she was right). Because Britten was the centre of her attention, the object of her most fervent love, he soon came to believe that he was special, someone around whom the world should revolve.

At the age of eight he was sent to a nearby preparatory school, South Lodge, as a day boy. Most of the other pupils were boarders. Britten enjoyed learning mathematics, which was taught by the headmaster, Thomas Sewell, and was enthusiastic about games, especially cricket; but he was shocked by the spectacle of other boys being beaten (he mostly managed to stay out of trouble himself). For his ninth birthday his Uncle Willie gave him Stainer and Barrett's *A Dictionary of Musical Terms*, and soon afterwards his attempts at composing became more sophisticated. Among his first proper compositions was a set of 'Twelve Songs for the Mezzo Soprano and Contralto Voice'; they include a setting of Burns's 'O that I had ne'er been married', and 'Beware' to words by Longfellow. It is a little disconcerting to find the texts of both these songs are warnings against women. 'Beware' was clearly an important song for Britten, since he copied it out a number of times. The two stanzas that Britten set are as follows:

I know a maiden fair to see,
Take care!
She can both false and friendly be,
Beware! Beware!
Trust her not,
She is fooling thee!

She has two eyes, so soft and brown,
Take care!
She gives a side-glance and looks down,
Beware! Beware!
Trust her not,
She is fooling thee!

No doubt his mother sang these words with her son at the piano; one wonders what she made of them. They are a telling reflection of the intensity of the mother–son relationship, which must have contained hate as well as love. The avowals of love from Britten’s side are plain to see: one of his earliest surviving letters (from November 1923) is signed *With tons and cwts and lbs and ozs of packages of Love, Your own tiny little (sick-for-Muvver) BENI*.⁸ Later letters read even more like those of a lover: *You will come, won’t you darling, when the snow has gone and when I am better and allowed to go out with you? Please, please, do!*, Britten pleads in a letter from his public school in February 1929, a letter which is signed *your worshipping, adoring loving (etc) son*.⁹ Edith in turn demanded much from her son: a weekly ritual was to play duets every Sunday afternoon on the piano in the upstairs drawing room (the room that Mr Britten called ‘Heaven’). There was a special prescribed piece: the *Siegfried Idyll*, the song of love that Wagner had composed as a present for his wife Cosima shortly after the birth of their son Siegfried. It was re-enacted as a love duet between Britten and his mother. At this time, and for many years afterwards each of them was the centre of the other’s emotional life. It hardly needs to be said that Mrs Britten was powerfully influencing the course of her son’s emotional development and very likely his sexuality, although the consequences would not become apparent until much later.

Despite his long school day – from 7:30 in the morning until 8 at night – by the age of 11 Britten was producing enormous quantities of music, at first mostly for piano solo. In 1934 he selected a few of these early pieces and rewrote them for strings to make his *Simple Symphony*, and much later, in 1970, he had ‘Five Walztes’ published (he preserved the child’s spelling). Otherwise, in adult life he was quite nonchalant about his early compositions. These soon became more ambitious: from March 1925 to July 1926 he worked intermittently on a large-scale mass for soloists, chorus (often in eight parts) and an accompaniment which at first is a piano reduction but by the Credo has become a short score with instrumental indications. The Mass fills four notebooks: at the end of the fourth – in the middle of the Credo – it suddenly stops. The skilful choral writing had resulted from hearing his mother’s choir and studying vocal scores of pieces she was singing, such as Handel’s *Messiah* or Stainer’s *Crucifixion*; his knowledge of the repertoire at this time was almost entirely derived from scores he saw and played through, as there was no gramophone or wireless in the house. He had, however, also begun viola lessons in 1923 with Audrey Alston, a friend of Mrs Britten. Mrs Alston played in a string quartet in Norwich; Britten went to some of their concerts and on 30 October 1924 he attended his first orchestral concert, at the Norwich Triennial Festival, where he heard a piece by a living British composer, Frank Bridge’s *The Sea*, and in his own words he was knocked

Frank Bridge (1879–1941) began as an English Romantic like his contemporaries Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) and Holst (1874–1934). *The Sea* (1910) is a fine example of this early manner. In the next few years he developed his musical language towards a more progressive style that took into account the harmonic innovations of Debussy, Ravel and Scriabin, and later of Schoenberg, Berg and Bartók. In the mid-1920s probably no English composer was as alive as Bridge to the latest continental developments, and Britten’s progressive stance as a teenager was almost entirely due to Bridge’s influence. Besides *Enter Spring*, his major mature works include *Oration* (1930) for cello and orchestra – a passionate protest on behalf of the dead of the First World War – and the Third and Fourth String Quartets. Bridge was also a fine viola player and an accomplished conductor.

sideways.¹⁰ It is telling that it should have been a work inspired by the sea that so affected him; an interesting note that three of Britten's *Four Sea Interludes* in *Peter Grimes* correspond to movements in Bridge's work. This opens with a depiction of a calm sea, with evocative phrases for violins, woodwind and harp, like Britten's 'Dawn'; its third movement is called 'Moonlight' and the finale is an evocation of a storm.

The next Triennial Festival, in 1927, was the occasion for the premiere of Bridge's orchestral masterpiece *Enter Spring*. Britten was again present, and he was introduced to Bridge, who was staying with the Alstons. Bridge had only to talk to Britten for a few minutes before he realised that the boy was quite exceptional. Britten showed him some of his music and Bridge, greatly impressed, suggested that he should come to London during his school holidays for composition lessons with him, and for piano lessons with his friend Harold Samuel, who taught at the Royal College of Music. Despite some opposition from Britten's parents – his father in particular was suspicious of Bridge's flamboyant personality – it was agreed that Britten would begin lessons in the Christmas holidays. Samuel began one of the classic musical apprenticeships, and a deep friendship that continued until Bridge's death in 1941. He and his wife Ethel had no children, and Britten soon became a substitute son for them. Bridge's letters, witty and wise, testify to the warmth of the relationship. Britten's side of the correspondence is unfortunately lost. Bridge was a demanding teacher: his lessons were long and, as Britten recalled, *often I used to end these marathons in tears; not that he was beastly to me, but that the concentrated strain was too much for me.*¹¹ Bridge's method was to *play every passage slowly on the piano and say, 'Now listen to this – is this what you meant?'... And he really taught me to take as much trouble as I possibly could over every passage, over every progression, over every line.*¹²

Britten's studies with Bridge soon bore fruit. Although Beethoven and Brahms were to remain his chief musical gods throughout his teenage years (and Beethoven well into his twenties), the 14-year-old, encouraged by his teacher, was now getting to know the music of contemporary composers and beginning to explore a more advanced musical idiom. In the past two years he had been writing orchestral music in earnest: between April 1926 and the time he met Bridge he had composed two large-scale overtures, five *Poèmes*, a *Suite fantastique* for piano and orchestra, a Symphony in G minor for huge orchestra including eight horns and oboe d'amore (117 pages of full score in five weeks of term-time at South Lodge, during which he also composed two of the *Poèmes*!) and a Brahmsian Lisztian symphonic poem, *Chaos and Cosmos*. Two more orchestral pieces were composed in the first months of 1928, and show the influence of Bridge's orchestral writing.

None of these works, however, is quite as remarkable as the *Quatre chansons françaises* he wrote in the summer of 1928 as a wedding anniversary present for his parents. Romantic world-weariness, a common enough symptom of adolescence, is expressed here in a sophisticated and exquisite imagined way. In April he had heard a recording of Debussy's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* and bought the score of Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro*; his new-found interest in those composers encouraged him to set the French language, which he does with assurance. It also gave him a model for an orchestral sound, though some of his sonorities are also quite original, for instance his use of piano and harp together. The harmony veers off in places towards what sounds like Bergian Expressionism (Bridge probably had a score of *Wozzeck* that Britten had seen). In his setting of Hugo's 'L'enfance', where a mother lies dying while her five-year-old son innocently sings (a very Brittenish subject, though somewhat morbid one in the context of a piece written for his parents' anniversary), Britten weaves French nursery rhyme in and out of the texture in a very Debussyian way; the final song, Verlaine's 'Chanson d'Autonne', ends with a *Tristanesque* cadence on the word 'morte' in the *Liebestod* closing key of B major (notated by Britten as C flat). Britten owned thirteen Wagner miniature scores at this time, and his enthusiasm for Wagner, and for *Tristan* especially, went on for some years. *He*

the master of us all,¹³ he wrote in 1933. Was it because he soon outgrew this late-Romanticism that he made no attempt to have these extraordinary songs played during his lifetime? They were not performed until 1980, but they have since taken their place in the repertory as an example of youthful genius almost equal to that of Mozart and Mendelssohn.

Britten's largely happy time at South Lodge School now came to a close. He had ended up as head boy and *Victor Ludorum* (champion at games), though he blotted his copybook by writing an end-of-term essay on 'Animals' which turned into an attack on hunting and went on to condemn all forms of aggression, especially war. The essay was the first statement of his lifelong commitment to pacifism which had been stimulated by talking to Bridge about the First World War; it shocked his teachers and he received no marks. In September 1928 he became a boarder at a public school about 50 miles from his home, Gresham's School at Holt, in Norfolk, to which he had won a music scholarship. The poet WH Auden and Stephen Spender and the composer Lennox Berkeley had all been pupils there. Gresham's was quite progressive for its day: boys were not forced to join the Officers' Training Corps (and so Britten did not) and the music department was well established, with a school orchestra and regular chamber concerts. In spite of this, Britten was immediately and seriously unhappy. The *swearing and vulgarity*¹⁴ of his fellow pupils disgusted him, and he took a dislike to the music master Walter Greatorex, who criticised his piano playing and was scornful of his love of Beethoven. Greatorex little realised what heresy he was committing. This was the boy who after listening to the Kreisler recording of the Violin Concerto had written in his diary: *Oh! Beethoven, thou art immortal! has anything ever been written like the pathos of the 1st & 2nd movements, and the joy of the last?*, and for whom the gift from his parents of the full score of *Fidelio* on his sixteenth birthday was a *real letter day*¹⁶ in his life. Britten in turn was highly critical of Greatorex. His diary, which he had begun at the beginning of 1928 and which he continued with daily entries for the next nine years, contains a number of caustic comments about him: *how ever the man got the job here I cannot imagine. His idea of rhythm, logic, tone, or the music is absolutely lacking in sanity.*¹⁷ (It is worth noting that this was a view markedly different from that of both Spender and Auden: the latter thought he was a musician 'of the first rank'¹⁸ and compared his playing of Bach on the organ to Albert Schweitzer.) Greatorex's attitude was no doubt influenced by his resentment that Britten was going elsewhere for piano and composition lessons; what is more, the precocious confidence of Britten's musical opinions must have been a threat to his authority.

Britten longed for home and for the beloved mother who had sent him away. It is now that his letters to her rise to a new pitch of intimacy and painful intensity. His diary too – which until its last few years is mostly an unemotional record of things done – underlines his loneliness. Shortly after the start of the new term in January 1929, he became ill with 'flu and spent much of the term in the sickroom. He was finally sent home to recuperate, and the day after returning to school he recorded: *spend probably one of the most miserable days in all my life. Lying in bed in the dormetry, feeling absolutely rotten. Yearning for home and everybody there. Am sick once in morning. Why did they send me back, to go to bed directly?*¹⁹ It is hard not to draw the conclusion that the prolongation of his illness was to a certain extent psychologically motivated. By remaining ill he could be certain of attracting the care and attention he sought. And he could read books as well as write music: bed was his favourite place to work. During this particular illness, he read Elizabeth von Arnim's *Caravan* and Victor Hugo's *The Toilers of the Sea* and Scott's *Rob Roy*. He composed a *Rhapsody* for string quartet, his most 'advanced' piece to date, which caused him much trouble. His music was now similar in style to the chamber pieces that Frank Bridge was writing, such as the Third String Quartet and the *Rhapsody Trio* for two violins and viola – a work that much later, in 1966, Britten was responsible for seeing into print.

More chamber works followed, each more radical than its predecessor. Several of these pieces were for Britten to play during the holidays with his friends Basil Reeve (piano) and Charles Coleman (violin). The *Two Pieces* for violin, viola and piano, composed in November and December 1929, are atonal in places. In his diary for 29 November he wrote: *I am thinking much about modernism in art. Debating whether Impressionism, Expressionism, Classicism etc. are right. I have half decided on Schönberg. I adore Picasso's pictures.*²⁰ A few months later, hearing a *marvellous Schönberg concert*²¹ on the radio, which included a performance of *Pierrot lunaire*, he is more positive about the controversial composer. It was just at this time (April 1930) that he was writing his *Quartettino* for string quartet, which marked almost the fullest point he reached, though it is still centred on C sharp, the note on which it begins and ends. His later music would sometimes employ both a high level of dissonance and a blurring of tonality (for instance the grinding climax of the first movement of the *Spring Symphony*, or the first movement of the Third Quartet) but, with one small exception, no complete piece would ever be so thoroughly chromatic as this. Schoenbergian modernism, the language of an isolated and anguished prophet, was for a while an appealing path for the ultra-sensitive, lonely schoolboy, conscious of the superiority of his taste and abilities to those of his so-called elders and betters.

He was not using this highly chromatic language exclusively. At the same time as these experimental pieces, he wrote a *Hymn to the Virgin* for unaccompanied chorus which is more characteristic of his mature style. He composed it in a few hours while recovering from another bout of illness, and it was one of the pieces accepted by his first publisher, Oxford University Press. No should his two years at Gresham's be seen in an entirely negative light. His school friend David Layton remembers him as being much happier than his diary would suggest, and an enthusiastic participator in school games.²² In his second year Britten took a more active part in the school musical life, playing the viola in Saturday chamber music concerts, giving solo piano recitals to great acclaim; finally having one of his more adventurous pieces played in public, a Bagatelle for violin, viola and piano, with Britten playing the viola and Greatorex, no less, the piano. These concerts, however, were no substitute for the chamber music he played in his holidays with Basil Reeve and Charles Coleman, and home was still the refuge he longed for. Britten was due to take his School Certificate at the end of his sixth term, and it was clear to him that after this he could stand no more of Gresham's.²³

A way out presented itself: in May 1930 the Royal College of Music in London offered a music scholarship and Britten entered for it. He sent a portfolio of recent compositions, including two vocal works which were later published: a song, 'The Birds', to words by Hilaire Belloc, and *A Wealden Trio* for female voices, a setting of a poem by Ford Madox Ford. After an anxious few weeks of waiting, he was asked to come to London for an examination. He found the written examination on compositional techniques very easy, and was interviewed in the afternoon by Ralph Vaughan Williams, John Ireland and a harmony and counterpoint teacher, Sydney Waddington, who according to Ireland thought it wasn't 'decent'²⁴ that an English public schoolboy should be writing music like this – a remark that foreshadows much of the criticism of Britten that was to come. They nevertheless awarded him the scholarship, somewhat to Britten's surprise. A few weeks later he left school, having passed his Certificate and collected a number of prize books that he had chosen himself, including scores of Strauss's *Don Quixote* and Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*. Perhaps he finally realised that the school that raised no objections to his choice of the latter wasn't such a bad place after all. His diary records: *I am terribly sorry to leave such boys as these*²⁵... *I didn't think I should be so sorry to leave.*²⁶ And yet, the day after he arrived home, he was to write the *ne plus ultra* of his modernist pieces, a short, untitled *not-too-nice piece for Viola Solo*²⁷ (it has now been published as *Elegy*

Go, Play, Boy, Play

It should not come as a surprise that Britten found the Royal College a disappointing place. *The attitude of most of the RCM students was amateurish and folksy*, he wrote in 1959. *That made me feel highly intolerant.*²⁸ His later memories were no doubt coloured by an overall feeling that the College had not done justice to his talent. Certainly he had reason to complain that only two pieces of his – Phantasy string quintet and the *Sinfonietta* – were played publicly there during his three years as student. And the College offered no sense of liberation from his schoolboy life, as a university might have done; it seemed more like a continuation of it, and consequently Britten's growing up was delayed for another three years – and more.

The Royal College of Music in Kensington had in fact been founded in 1883 to provide a more thoroughly professional training than the older Royal Academy. The Academy had produced few noteworthy composers in recent years, whereas Vaughan Williams, Holst, Ireland, Bridge and Tippett had all attended the College in the first 40 years of its existence. So despite Britten's criticism, it was still almost certainly the best institution on offer. Bridge had probably made the wisest comment in a thoughtful letter he wrote to Britten shortly before he went to the RCM – a letter in which he recommended John Ireland as a composition teacher: 'Personally I think an institution only helps one to find one's feet'.²⁹

Harold Samuel had recommended RO Morris, a notable teacher of counterpoint who was at the time giving private postgraduate lessons in fugal technique to Tippett; but Bridge, who had been Ireland's contemporary at the College, suggested that it would be preferable to 'plump for a living composer whose activities are part of the present-day outlook with a heavy leaning towards tomorrow's!' He added: 'I think you may have to do a certain amount of work to sharpen up your technique, which may appear to you, at first, as being a retrograde step.'³⁰ Ireland duly became Britten's composition teacher and, as Bridge had prophesied, he immediately set Britten to work on exercises in strict counterpoint and fugue, and then got him to write a mass in the style of Palestrina. But he was not a very reliable teacher: he failed to turn up for their first lesson, and when Britten later visited his house the puritanical boy was shocked by the squalor of Ireland's Bohemian life. He told his sister Beth that he would sometimes find Ireland still in bed, with a hangover, and on one occasion *he was quite drunk... foully so.*³¹ Britten admired some of Ireland's works at first, though he soon became critical, and ended up (as did Frank Bridge) more or less writing him off.

His piano teacher at the College was Arthur Benjamin (1893–1960), a composer too, known today principally for his *Jamaican Rumba*, but whose comic opera *The Devil Take Her* earned warm praise from Britten. Benjamin was a friendly Australian and the two got on well immediately, even though Benjamin was critical of Britten's playing technique and soon told him that he was not cut out to be a solo pianist: *how I'm going to make my pennies Heaven only knows,*³³ was Britten's diary comment. Benjamin was right in that Britten never did become a professional soloist, although in 1938 he did give the first performance of his Piano Concerto. He became, of course, an accompanist of the highest quality, one of the finest there has ever been. Britten always remained on good terms with Benjamin; he dedicated his light-hearted piano suite *Holiday Diary* to his teacher and in the 1934 letter in which he suggests the dedication he offers *Infinite thanks for what you are doing & have done for me.*³⁴

Apart from weekly lessons with his teachers, Britten was largely free to compose and practise, and in the evenings to go to concerts, some of them at the adjacent Royal Albert Hall. For his first year he lived in a boarding house in Bayswater,

John Ireland (1879–1962) studied piano with Frederic Cliffe and composition with Charles Stanford at the Royal College of Music, where he taught composition from

across the park from the College, *rather a nice place but rather full of old ladies*,³⁵ then in September 1931 he moved to new lodgings a few minutes' walk from the RCM, sharing them with his sister Beth, who was learning dressmaking. His other sister Barbara was also in London, working as a health visitor, and Britten saw a lot of her too. Ben and Barbara were both members of the English Madrigal Choir, in spite of his bass voice being somewhat uncertain – the only one of his musical attributes that was not outstanding. Singing madrigals seems to have had an immediate influence on his music: the first major chamber piece he wrote at the College was a string quartet in D major whose lyrical melodic lines are in striking contrast to his recent experiments in Expressionism, and which he was to have published in revised form shortly before his death.

In his diary comments on concerts he often expresses irritation with his English contemporaries and predecessors. He had always found Elgar dull, and nothing he heard in these days made him change his mind. He did finally come to terms with Elgar towards the end of his life, conducting the *Introduction and Allegro* at the 1969 Aldeburgh Festival and recording *The Dream of Gerontius* with Peter Pears in 1971. Hearing Vaughan Williams's *Tallis Fantasia*, he found it *v. beautiful (wonderfully scored)*,³⁶ but had little good to say about anything else of his. Bax's *November Woods* bored him (*not much November about it*).³⁷ His huge admiration for Brahms, whom through his teenage years he had ranked second only to Beethoven, gradually waned, perhaps under the influence of fellow RCM students. By July 1934 he could write in his diary of Vaughan Williams' *Benedicite* *music which repulses me as does most of Brahms (solid, dull)*.³⁸

But he was also hearing all kinds of stimulating new music: Stravinsky's *Sacre du printemps* on his first hearing was *bewildering & terrifying. I didn't really enjoy it, but I think it's incredibly marvellous & arresting*,³⁹ and his *Symphony of Psalms* was *Marvellous ... the end was truly inspired*.⁴⁰ A performance of Schoenberg's *Erwartung* under the composer's baton was baffling (*could not make head or tail of it*),⁴¹ but Walton's *Viola Concerto* was *a great turning point in my musical life*,⁴² as he wrote in a 1963 letter to Walton.

His foremost discovery at this time, however, was Mahler, who was to become one of his most kindred spirits. Another was Schubert: in both composers he would have sensed the child's vision to which the music always reaches back. An affinity with Mahler is already apparent in the nine-year-old Britten's 'Beware': although he could not possibly have heard any of his music at that time, it sounds astonishingly like an early Mahler song, even ending with the classic Mahlerian device of the major triad fading to a minor one. His first actual encounter with Mahler's music was a performance of the Fourth Symphony (the shortest) at a BBC Promenade Concert in September 1930, just before he started at the College, and on which he commented laconically in his diary: *Much too long, but beautiful in pts.*⁴³ Twelve years later, he wrote about that first experience, perhaps with the hindsight of now knowing the work very well: *the scoring startled me. It was mainly 'soloistic' and entirely clean and transparent. The colouring seemed calculated to the smallest shade, and the result was wonderfully resonant ... the material was remarkable, and the melodic shapes highly original, with such rhythmic and harmonic tension from beginning to end. After that concert, I made every effort to hear Mahler's music*.⁴⁴ A few months later he bought a score of the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* and heard the work at a BBC Symphony Orchestra concert in May 1931 (*Lovely little piece exquisitely scored – a lesson to all the Elgars & Strausses in the world*).⁴⁵ He probably studied other

1920 to 1939. Besides Britten his pupils included Alan Bush and EJ Moeran. Ireland's music has a distinctive English feeling, nourished by his attraction to particular places and landscapes, especially in Sussex where he lived at the end of his life. His orchestral music includes the tone poems *The Forgotten Rite* (1913) and *Mai-Dun* (1910–1) and the Piano Concerto (1930), written for Helen Perkin, whom Britten referred to in his diary as *Ireland's star & best comp. pupil*,³² and with whom Ireland was in love at the time.

Mahler orchestral scores at the RCM that summer: his ballet score *Plymouth Town*, composed in the autumn of 1931 but never performed in his lifetime, shows the influence of Mahler in its orchestration; at one point Britten asks the oboes and clarinets to play ‘bells up’ – an indication he could only have seen in Mahler’s symphonies.

Letter to Henry Boys (1910–1992), 29 June 1937:

It is now well past midnight & society dictates that I should stop playing the Abschied. Otherwise I might possibly have gone on repeating the last record indefinitely – for ‘ewig’ keit of course.

It is cruel, you know, that music should be so beautiful. It has the beauty of loneliness & of pain: of strength & freedom. The beauty of disappointment & never-satisfied love. The cruel beauty of nature, and everlasting beauty of monotony.

And the essentially ‘pretty’ colours of the normal orchestral palette are used to paint this extraordinary picture of loneliness. And there is nothing morbid about it. The same harmonic progressions that Wagner used to colour his essentially morbid love-scenes (his ‘Liebes’ is naturally followed by ‘Tod’) are used here to paint a serenity literally supernatural. I cannot understand it – it passes over me like a tidal wave – and that matters not a jot either, because it goes on for ever, even if it is never performed again – the final chord is printed on the atmosphere.

Perhaps if I could understand some of the Indian philosophies I might approach it a little. At the moment I can do no more than bask in its Heavenly light – & it is worth having lived to do that.

He soon changed his mind about the Fourth Symphony’s length, and this became a favourite Mahler work of his, which he eventually conducted at the 1961 Aldeburgh Festival (a performance that survives in a BBC recording). But the piece that was to make the greatest impression on him was *Das Lied von der Erde*. He first heard this on the radio in February 1936, and the inadequacy of the performance and his irritation at its being sung in English still *couldn’t dim the beauties of the heavenly work. Was there ever such a touching Lebewohl as this? This music makes one think furiously more than any other today.*⁴⁶ The impact of the ‘Abschied’ from *Das Lied* in particular may be heard in *Our Hunting Fathers*, which he was writing at the time. The lean, chamber scoring in *Das Lied* was a continuing influence, right up to *Death in Venice*. *Das Lied* too, with its settings of Chinese poetry, its use of pentatonic scales and, in the ‘Abschied’, of heterophony, was Britten’s first contact with the oriental world and a profound musical response to it, which was to have huge repercussions in his later life. In 1937 he bought the famous Bruno Walter live recording with the Vienna Philharmonic, and wrote an extraordinarily insightful letter about it to his friend Henry Boys.

It should be emphasised that Britten was in the vanguard of Mahler lovers in the England of the 1930s: most of the critics then, and the public, had no time for this ‘tolerable imitation of a composer’,⁴⁷ as Vaughan Williams called him – a situation that continued right up to the centenary of Mahler’s birth in 1960, after which there was a dramatic change. Britten must have been sad that he could never convince Frank Bridge about the worth of Mahler’s music: *We are in complete agreement over all – except Mahler! – though he admits he is a great thinker,*⁴⁸ he wrote in his diary in March 1936. During his RCM years he saw a great deal of Bridge, whom he still considered his real teacher: they often went to concerts together and compared notes on new pieces they heard. In June 1931, the 17-year-old Britten made his first visit to the Bridges’ weekend cottage at Friston, near Eastbourne in Sussex: he played tennis, enjoyed the surrounding downland countryside and met their next-door neighbour, the artist Marjorie Fass, who became a friend and confidante. He made a few friends among his fellow students, notably Remo Lauricella, a violinist, and Bernard Richards, a cellist: he played piano trios with the two of them. One friendship, with a fellow bass in the English Madrigal Choir, Paul Wright, led to his meeting with Iris Lemare, a conductor, and Anne Macnaghten, the leader of an all-female string quartet, who together with the composer Elizabeth Lutyens founded the Macnaghten-Lemare Concerts. From the beginning of 1932 these concerts presented new British works at a tiny theatre in Notting Hill Gate. Since the RCM students seemed largely unable to cope with Britten’s music, the Macnaghten-Lemare Concerts were a compensating opportunity for him.

the second series they played his Phantasy Quintet for strings, which had won the Cobbett Prize – an annual award for chamber pieces endowed by Walter Cobbett, a rich businessman and amateur musician – and also received a College performance (*bad – but I expected worse*);⁴⁹ three Walter de Mare part-songs, the first work of his to get into print; and most importantly, the first public performance of his *Sinfonietta*, which Britten designated, finally, as his Opus 1, and dedicated to Bridge.

The *Sinfonietta*, composed in a little under three weeks during June and July 1932, is the culmination of all the chamber pieces he had been writing throughout his teens. Its scoring – for wind quintet plus string quintet – is quite similar to that of Schoenberg's First Chamber Symphony, which Britten pays homage with the rising horn motif near the start. Schoenberg also served as the model for Britten's thematic economy and the way he develops and transforms his material throughout the piece, yet stylistically Schoenberg's influence is hardly discernible. The second movement, like much of the music that Britten was writing while he was at the College, has an English pastoral feeling about it, though it is more tightly composed than Ireland or Vaughan Williams. The tarantella finale is the most Brittenish movement, the first outstanding example of those hectic dances in his early music that seem to display nervous rather than physical energy. The *Sinfonietta* has a cool, steely brilliance that perhaps excites more admiration than affection. Those early critics who (to his intense annoyance) characterised Britten's music as 'clever but superficial' were mistaken, although they had a point. It is perhaps because Britten at this time had a restricted emotional life that much of his early music lacks real warmth: he was still the brilliant boy who had yet to grow up.

His Opus 2, the Phantasy for oboe and string trio, is a more immediately attractive and incisive work than the *Sinfonietta*, perhaps because its manner, though equally skilful, is less self-conscious. The Englishness of the *Sinfonietta*'s slow movement is also apparent in the Phantasy's central section of music for string trio of considerable tenderness and finesse. This manner was not to be pursued any further, unlike the shadowy march music that begins the Phantasy. Britten became rather obsessed with the march form over the next few years.

His next project was a large-scale suite for string quartet called *Alla Quartetto Serioso*, to which he gave the whimsical subtitle '*Go, play, boy, play*' – a quotation from *The Winter's Tale*. There was no programmatic connection with Shakespeare: Britten probably just liked the words for their association with school – the piece was to have been a series of portraits of school friends and evocations of school activities. He finished four of the projected five movements (one of them only sketched), and these gave him considerable trouble as he worked on them intermittently over three years, from 1933 to 1936. He replaced the original 'Alla marcia' (which was later reborn as 'Parade' in *Les Illuminations*) with a more forceful march full of Bartókian glissandi. The three completed movements were performed at a Macnaghten-Lemare concert in December 1933, rather against Britten's wishes; he was unhappy enough to leave the concert without thanking Anne Macnaghten and the quartet. In their final state they were played by the Stratton Quartet at the Wigmore Hall in 1936 as *Three Divertimenti*, where they were received *with sniggers and pretty cold silence*.⁵⁰ This was enough to make Britten lose faith in the work altogether, as on several other later occasions. Throughout his life Britten was to combine extremes of self-confidence and self-doubt, and the latter could so easily prevail over the former. His fine *Temporal Variations* for oboe and piano, however, which received a single performance later in 1936, was put back on the shelf not because of bad reviews but, apparently, because of a disagreement with one of the players.

Even though he abandoned *Go, play, boy, play*, it was an important stepping stone. Its school associations may be backward-looking, yet much of its music points forward. The March is inherently dramatic, and its fanfares anticipate *Les Illuminations*; the waltz in the second movement is n

simply a waltz but a study of the form: a 'waltz'. The idea of the 'character piece' was again something that became important to him in his post-RCM years.

Britten's attitude to modernism fluctuated. In February 1933, at the Queen's Hall with Frank Bridge, he heard Schoenberg's *Variations for Orchestra* conducted by the composer, and found the piece *rather dull* (an astonishing remark!), *but some good things in it*.⁵¹ He adds, tantalizingly, *Me Sch.* In interval without further comment. At the end of 1933, when he had passed the Associateship of the RCM with his accustomed ease and had been awarded a £100 travelling scholarship, he hoped to go to Vienna to study with Alban Berg. Frank Bridge would certainly have encouraged him to do so. Britten had been impressed both by the *Lyric Suite* (*astounding ... The imagination & intense emotion of this work certainly amaze me*)⁵² and the *Three Fragments from Wozzeck* which he had heard earlier in the year, and would probably have known other Berg pieces from scores. In 1963 he described what happened next: *... when the College was told, coolness arose. I think, but can't be sure, that the director, Sir Hugh Allen, put a spike in the wheel. At any rate, when I said at home during the holidays, 'I am going to study with Berg, aren't I?' the answer was a firm 'No, dear.'* Pressed, my mother said, *'He's not a good influence', which I suspect came from Allen. There was at that time an almost moral prejudice against serial music – which makes one smile today! I think also that there was some confusion in my parents' minds – thinking that 'not a good influence' meant morally, not musically. They had been disturbed by traits of rebelliousness and unconventionality which I had shown in my later school days.*⁵³ What kind of composer Britten would have become if he had studied with Berg is impossible to say. Certainly he remained attached to Berg's music all his life. He was deeply affected by Berg's premature death in 1935: *I feel it is a real & terrible tragedy – one from which the world will take long to recover from,*⁵⁴ he wrote to Marjorie Fass. He attended the premiere of Berg's Violin Concerto at the ISCM Festival in Barcelona in 1936 and found it *just shattering*;⁵⁵ on buying the score later that year he wrote in his diary *My God what a sublime work!*⁵⁶

The truth is that even though Britten was more thoroughly aware than almost any of his contemporaries of the Schoenbergian revolution and had himself become quite adept in a virtual atonal style, he was destined to be a tonal composer who, more than any other, would prove the truth of Schoenberg's assertion that there was plenty of good music still to be written in C major – and do so at a time when many composers' belief in tonality was faltering. The best and most personal music he was composing as a student is the most openly diatonic. In his later music he would occasionally flirt with Schoenbergian serialism by using a 12-note row as a constructive device – in *The Turn of the Screw*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Cantata Academica*, *Owen Wingrave* and *Death in Venice* – but whereas the intention of Schoenberg's 12-note method was to move completely beyond tonality, Britten's rows always have strong tonal implications. The main work he was writing during 1933, *A Boy Was Born*, inhabits a world as far from Berg and from Schoenbergian Expressionism as it is possible to imagine. In various pieces written over the previous ten years, Britten had been working out a fresh relation to the English choral tradition. Lately, as a singer in the English Madrigal Choir and the Carlyle Singers to which he also belonged, the relation had become an active one. *A Boy Was Born* sets a sequence of (mostly medieval) poems on the theme of Christmas, in the form of a then and six variations. With the sound of the all-male English cathedral choir in mind, Britten employed treble voices for the first time, thus inaugurating a whole series of works in which boys take part. The use of voices is one of the most distinctive features of his sound world. At this time Britten was still practising Christian, so the words he set had real meaning for him. The music is certainly inspired and sounds consistently new and fresh, nowhere more so than in the fifth variation, a combination of Christina Rossetti's 'In the Bleak Midwinter' and the 16th-century Corpus Christi Carol. The passage where the boys enter with 'He bare him up, he bare him down / He bare him into an orchard brown'

a flowing 12/8 over the women's gently dissonant overlapping phrases on the words 'snow on snow' the moment when, at the age of 19, Britten reveals himself as a true genius instead of (merely!) remarkable talent.

He dedicated the work to his father, who was ill with lymphatic cancer, though this was not yet diagnosed. The BBC, who were already aware of Britten's potential, recorded the piece for broadcasting. Victor Hely-Hutchinson, one of many composers on the Corporation's music staff (Britten had described his *Carol Symphony* as *utter bilge*⁵⁷ after hearing it on the radio in December 1932), had written in a memorandum in June 1933: 'I do whole-heartedly subscribe to the general opinion that Mr Britten is the most interesting new arrival since Walton, and I feel we should watch his work very carefully.'⁵⁸ The broadcast of *A Boy Was Born* took place on 23 February 1934. By a remarkable and significant coincidence, this was the day of Elgar's death.

Coldest Love Will Warm to Action

At the beginning of 1934 Britten was 20 and his formal education was over. He was back in the family house in Lowestoft, determined to begin his career as a professional musician. He had one publisher and was soon to switch to another: Ralph Hawkes of Boosey & Hawkes agreed to take over the *Sinfonietta* and the Phantasy Quartet from OUP. They were to publish all his subsequent music until the 1960s. Faced with the responsibility of earning his living, however, Britten found himself in a creative block. On 3 January he wrote to his composer friend Grace Williams, whom he had met through the Macnaghten-Lemare concerts: *I cannot write a single note of anything respectable at the moment, and so – on the off chance of making some money – I am dishing up some very old stuff (written, some of it, over ten years ago) as a dear little school suite for strings.*⁵⁹ This was the *Simple Symphony*, which he conducted with an amateur orchestra in Norwich in March. At the end of the month he set off with a school friend from South Lodge, John Pounder, for the International Society of Contemporary Music Festival in Florence, where his Phantasy was being played by its dedicatee, Leo Goossens, and members of the Griller Quartet. In Florence he met the conductor Hermann Scherchen who was to have conducted the *Sinfonietta* in Strasbourg the previous year (the performance was cancelled) and his 14-year-old son Wulff; they were staying in the same pensione as Britten and Pounder. Britten made a day trip to Siena with the Scherchens; during a rainstorm he and Wulff shared a mackintosh, and a rapport immediately sprang up between them that was to assume much greater significance a few years later.

The following day he received a telegram from his mother summoning him home: ‘Pop not so well’. In fact Robert Britten had already died of a cerebral haemorrhage: he was 57. His father’s death brought Britten even closer to his mother. In the weeks following the funeral he stayed with her at the school where his brother Robert was now headmaster, in Prestatyn, North Wales. He began writing a set of songs with piano for the boys to sing, which was published as *Friday Afternoons* – Friday being the day on which Robert took singing practice. The world of children and school was still his only real subject; he was cocooned in his sequestered adolescence. But the vein of simple lyricism he was cultivating – as in the delightful ‘Sailing’ from the *Holidays Suite* – was perhaps the truest of his voices. In looking back over his boyhood pieces in order to put together the *Simple Symphony*, did he realise that his ability to invent unselfconscious melody – which he still possessed – was his most precious gift?

In October he and his mother went to Vienna, via Basel and Salzburg. Britten had hoped to meet Schoenberg in Vienna, but he was away. He did, however, meet Erwin Stein, an editor at Universal Edition who ten years later was to become his personal editor at Boosey & Hawkes and a loyal supporter of his music. Stein had been a pupil of Schoenberg and was a Mahler disciple; he and Britten would have had much to discuss. Britten was enchanted with Vienna, and especially with its opera. He immersed himself in Wagner: *The five hours of [Die Meistersinger] didn’t seem as many minutes; the incredible vitality, richness: lovely melody, humour, pathos in fact every favourable quality,*⁶⁰ he wrote in his diary. While in Vienna he began his Suite, Op 6, for violin and piano, one of the most brilliant and accomplished of his early works. There are several Viennese features: the totally chromatic style of the Introduction continues his fascination with Schoenberg, while the finale is an elaborate and showy Waltz. In between come a March – a scintillating example of this favourite form – and a beautiful Lullaby, Britten’s first great evocation of sleep’s healing power.

WH Auden (1907–1973) was the outstanding English poet of his generation. His first volume of poems was published in 1930 and from then on he had a huge influence on his contemporaries, who included Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis and Louis

MacNeice. His poetry of the 1930s, drawing on insights from, amongst others, Freud and DH Lawrence, dealt with all aspects of contemporary life, using intensely individual imagery to express universal truths. He moved to New York in 1939 and took US citizenship in 1946. Auden's later poetry does not have the same immediacy and force as his earlier work (the Christianity that he espoused from the 1940s tended to soften its edge), but is always wide-ranging in scope and innovative in its language. With Chester Kallman, Auden wrote opera librettos for Stravinsky (*The Rake's Progress*, 1951) and Henze (*Elegy for Young Lovelace*, 1959, *The Bassarids*, 1963). In 1972 he returned to England, where he was given a cottage in the grounds of Christ Church, Oxford, his old college. Since 1957 he had spent his summers in Austria, and he died in Vienna in September 1973.

Returning to England, he was soon living once again in London. Here he found a temporary solution to his career problem. As a result of a recommendation by the BBC, he was approached at the end of April 1935 by the General Post Office's Film Unit to write music for a documentary film called *The King's Stamp*, about the making of a special stamp for King George V's Silver Jubilee. The film was directed by the painter William Coldstream. Despite misgivings about what he called *the Godforsaken subject*, Britten accepted the job. He was now something of a cinema aficionado, and he had an immediate understanding of what was needed. Over the next year and a half he would write music for 25 films, the majority short documentaries, but also one feature film, *Love from a Stranger*. The GPO Film Unit, for whom most of his scores were written, was a group of young artists and intellectuals, headed by John Grierson, the noted documentary film-maker. Almost all of them held the strong left-wing opinions prevailing at the time. The unit encouraged innovation, and Britten was only too willing to experiment with sound effects in devising his incidental music. His next assignment after *The King's Stamp* was *Coal Face*, a film about miners at work. WH Auden was approached to write some words for Britten to set, and the two of them met at the Downs School in Colwall in Herefordshire, where Auden taught. *Auden is the most amazing man, a very brilliant and attractive personality*,⁶¹ Britten recorded in his diary. Britten seemed very young to Auden, who was six years older than him, but Auden soon recognised his exceptional musicality and included him in the 'gang' of artists, who under Auden's leadership were to take on the world. He, Spender and Cecil Day Lewis were the gang's designated poets, Christopher Isherwood was the novelist, Coldstream was the painter, and Britten now became the composer. Auden took Britten to the Westminster Theatre to see the Group Theatre's productions of his plays *The Dance of Death* and *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (the latter co-written with Isherwood), and introduced Britten to members of the gang, including Isherwood and his Group Theatre friends, the director Rupert Doone and his partner, the designer Robert Medley. In fact virtually all the gang were homosexual or bisexual. It was essentially through his friendship with Auden, which soon became a close one, that Britten finally came to acknowledge the fact that he was homosexual himself.

Underneath the abject willow,
Lover, sulk no more;
Act from thought should quickly follow:
What is thinking for?
Your unique and moping station
Proves you cold;
Stand up and fold
Your map of desolation.

Bells that toll across the meadows
From the sombre spire,
Toll for those unloving shadows
Love does not require.
All that lives may love; why longer
Bow to loss
With arms across?
Strike and you shall conquer.

For the time being, his friendships with boys and young men were still quite innocent. He formed a strong attachment to a teenager, Piers Dunkerley, who had been at South Lodge School, and took him to films and plays. But Britten's puritanism and the continuing inhibiting presence of his mother presumably combined to prevent any amorous intentions he might have had from going further. (Dunkerley was later to become a Captain in the Royal Marines during the Second World War. In 1959 he committed suicide. He was one of the four dedicatees of the *War Requiem*.) Meanwhile Auden whose attitude to sex was cheerfully and guiltlessly promiscuous, encouraged Britten to be more open about his inclinations, at first without success. A poem Auden sent to Britten, 'Night covers up the rigid land' might appear

Geese in flocks above you flying

Their direction know;

Brooks beneath the thin ice flowing

To their oceans go;

Coldest love will warm to action,

Walk then, come,

No longer numb,

Into your satisfaction.

W H Auden)

suggest that he was in love with him – though at the time Auden was deeply in love with someone else. Another poem Auden wrote for Britten, ‘Underneath the abject willow’ spells out his advice with eloquent directness. Britten set both these poems to music, ‘Underneath the abject willow’ for two voices and piano in a detached and almost flippant manner that seems like a mild reproof to Auden’s earnestness.

Assuming the didactic role he was accustomed to take with his friends, Auden also acted as Britten’s intellectual advisor.

Britten’s politics changed from a fairly unthinking conservatism to an emotional commitment to socialism and especially pacifism, which he was to retain for the rest of his life. His diary entries at this time become filled with despairing comments on Italy’s aggression in Abyssinia and the Spanish Civil War. He found Auden and his friends intimidating at times, as his March 1936 diary also reveals. *They [Auden, Isherwood and Coldstream] are nice people – but I am not up to the mark tonight, feeling dazed, stupid & incredibly miserable – & so leave them at 9.0 with a* *overwhelming inferiority complex & longing for bed.*⁶² It was hard for him to acknowledge that in his own way he was quite Auden’s equal, and that both of them in fact had a similar cast of mind – which is why their collaboration over the next few years was so fruitful; but it was also perhaps why, at the point when Britten realised that he needed to be more independent, the relationship faltered.

Britten’s first important collaboration with Auden was the GPO film *Night Mail*, for which Auden provided the famous lines beginning ‘This is the night mail crossing the border, Bringing the cheque and the postal order’. Britten took his task of imitating train noises very seriously (as a boy, he had been a keen train-spotter). He spent an evening beside the railway line at Harrow, and tried to reproduce on an assortment of improvised percussion instruments the sounds he had heard. The percussionist at the recording session was James Blades, who was to go on working with Britten on a variety of innovative percussion effects until the end of the composer’s life. The film (like *Coal Face* a milestone in the history of the documentary) was a success with the audience when first shown in March 1936.

By this time Auden and Britten were working on a more ambitious project: an orchestral song-cycle for the Norwich Triennial Festival that autumn. This was *Our Hunting Fathers*, in which poems about animals were used metaphorically to lament in general the misguided notions of human superiority that had led mankind to its present sorry state; and to make a particular comment on the current political situation, where the strong were brutally persecuting the weak. Britten does this most pointedly in Thomas Ravenscroft’s ‘Hawking the Partridge’, retitled ‘Dance of Death’, a hunting piece in which he juxtaposes two of the hawks’ names, ‘German’ and ‘Jew’ in a way that no perceptive listener could fail to understand. Two recent discoveries particularly affected the music: Mahler’s *Lied von der Erde*, and a contemporary of Britten’s who had also been influenced by Mahler and Shostakovich. Britten had attended a concert performance of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* in March and wrote an admiring account of it in his diary: *I will defend it through thick & thin against these charges of ‘lack of style’... The ‘eminent English Renaissance’ composers sniggering in the stalls was typical. There is more music in a page of MacBeth than in the whole of their ‘elegant output!’*⁶³ The immediate impact of *Lady Macbeth* can be heard in the brass band piece *Russian Funeral* which Britten wrote for the Communist composer Alan Bush and the London Labour Chorus Union, and whose main theme is coincidentally a Russian folksong that Shostakovich was later to use in his 11th Symphony. Mahler’s influence on *Our Hunting Fathers* is most obviously heard in ‘Messalina’, with its lamenting high woodwind lines, and also in the closing ‘Epilogue and Funeral March’; but the xylophone ostinato that creeps through the texture of the latter is clearly indebted

Shostakovich, as is some of the satirical tone of the music.

The premiere of *Our Hunting Fathers* in September 1936 was an ordeal for Britten. He conducted and at the first rehearsal with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, some of the musicians misbehaved disgracefully. Sophie Wyss, the soprano soloist, recalled how during 'Rats Away!' – a medieval imprecation on a plague of rats, set by Britten as a wild *Allegro con fuoco* – the players 'ran about pretending they were chasing rats on the floor!'⁶⁴ Things improved in Norwich the next day, and the performance went fairly well. The audience was polite but clearly discomfited. They had already found the new piece in the first half of the concert unsettling; Vaughan Williams's *Five Tudor Portraits*, with its uncharacteristically bawdy Skelton text. After this, Auden's provocative words and the apparently bizarre new sounds of Britten's music must have thoroughly upset them. Even Frank Bridge was doubtful, and Mrs Britten, who had heard relatively little of her son's recent music, commented to a friend: 'Oh, I do hope Ben will write something that somebody will like.'⁶⁵

Britten had already played through 'Rats Away!' to his mother on the piano and was secretly pleased that she thoroughly disapproved of it, as he was now half-consciously trying to break away from her influence. She had turned to Christian Science, the sect founded by Mary Baker Eddy who believed that illness could be cured by prayer. Britten found this inimical, and he himself had given up church attendance since his conversion to left-wing politics.

Britten had reason to be proud of *Our Hunting Fathers*: it is a score of extraordinary virtuosity, and it is hard to believe this was the first orchestral music of his own he had ever heard played. Despite its mixed reception, the performance must surely have boosted his confidence. He was, however, in retreat from the provocative stance he and Auden had taken. Mrs Britten had hit on a partial truth: he did want to be liked. *Épater le bourgeois* was a temporary need, but he would soon be glad to win the middle classes over to his side.

In October he moved with Beth to a new London flat in the Finchley Road, and returned to writing film and theatre music. He wrote, in a few days, a score to the feature film *Love from a Stranger* starring Basil Rathbone; its title music was influenced by Mahler's Fifth Symphony (as was the late storm music from *Peter Grimes*). There was a room in the flat for his mother to stay in when she was visited, and in the new year, when both he and Beth fell ill with 'flu, his mother came to nurse them, only to fall ill herself. Barbara now took charge, and a professional nurse was engaged when first Beth and then Mrs Britten developed pneumonia. While Benjamin recovered and Beth was now out of danger, Edith's condition deteriorated rapidly. On 31 January 1937 she had a heart attack and died. 'Nothing one can do eases the terrible ache that one feels,'⁶⁶ he wrote in his diary, with a curious use of the impersonal pronoun. But he was certainly devastated, and it was a long time before he fully recovered from the shock, especially as he also blamed himself for some time afterwards for being the indirect cause of her fatal illness. Yet his mother's death was also a great liberation for him.

On 5 March 1937, just over a month after her death, his diary records: *I lunch with David Green [an architect friend, also from Lowestoft] who is very decent – & he emphasizes the point (very truly) that now is the time for me to decide something about my sexual life. O, for a little courage!* We cannot tell for how long he had known he was homosexual, but it would appear that his response to his mother's obsessive love had effectively barred him from sexual feelings towards other women. In 1915 Freud noted a common pattern among the homosexuals he had observed: 'in the earliest years of their childhood, [they] pass through a phase of very intense but short-lived fixation to a woman (usually their mother), and ... after leaving this behind, they identify themselves with a woman and take themselves as their sexual object. That is to say, proceeding from a basis of narcissism, they look for a young man who resembles themselves and whom they may love as their mother loved them.' Whether or not Freud's observation is universally true, Britten's sexual development seems to have

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