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Introduction

> Underneath the ceaseless speechifying about new starts, the dominant dream is of a Venetian twilight: a golden-grey steady state where staid arts and moderate politics join to preserve the tenor of things English. The true impulse is not really to 'catch up' with the greater, evolving world outside, but to hold one's own somehow, anyhow, and defend the tribe's customs and weathered monuments.[1]

> The story is about a recording engineer who is a frustrated composer. A woman comes to make a recording (with her manager), he falls in love with her and is inspired to write a masterpiece. There are several complications but the story does not have a happy ending—composer does not get woman.[2]

Before the 1950s or so classical or art musicians in Britain were notorious Luddites. Each technical advance or innovation was quickly derided, each threat to the status quo vilified. Part of this was snobbery: many musicians' vision of English culture was incompatible with growing industrialization. A pasture was the minimum constituent of a pastoral symphony—and not one cluttered with tractors. Larks did ascend, but certainly not in inner cities. Music critics were complicit in the promotion of this vision: in 1945 H. C. Colles wrote that 'English musicians must be glad to see their art enshrined in company with "Shakespeare", "The English Public School", "Cricket", and other matters which are part and parcel of our national inheritance'—a list that doesn't mention by name, but surely invokes in spirit, spinsters cycling to church, warm English ale, and the Henley Regatta.[3] The same critic noted in *The Times* that Vaughan Williams's 'Pastoral' Symphony 'speaks like that wide Down country in which, because there is no incident, every blade of grass and tuft of moss is an

[1] Tom Nairn, 'The Politics of the New Venice', *New Society*, 42 (17 Nov. 1977), 352, quoted in Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850–1980* (1981), 161.

[2] Synopsis of one-act opera by Richard Arnell, sent to the EOG for consideration, 9 Nov. 1954. BPL, EOG File 110.

[3] Robert Stradling and Meirion Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance 1860–1940* (1993), 142.

incident'—different from, but at least not incompatible with, Philip Heseltine's mischievous suggestion that the piece depicted 'a cow looking over a gate', and miles away from the darker programme to this symphony—of post-war desolation and destruction—identified by critics today.[4] Music was an important element of England's 'Venetian Twilight'; the antics of Stockhausen had no part to play in the support of tribal customs and weathered monuments.

There was also an intellectual reaction against mass culture and its agents. John Carey suggests that 'the principle around which modernist literature and culture fashioned themselves was the exclusion of the masses, the defeat of their power, the removal of their literacy, the denial of their humanity',[5] and calls on Ezra Pound in his support:

> The artist has no longer any belief or suspicion that the mass, the half-educated simpering general . . . can in any way share his delights . . . The aristocracy of the arts is ready again for its service. Modern Civilization has bred a race with brains like those of rabbits, and we who are the heirs of the witch-doctor and the voodoo, we artists who have been so long the despised are about to take over control.[6]

Pound was writing in 1914—eight years or so before the establishment of the BBC and the introduction of electric recording, but his message is clear: the artist would triumph over the masses and their culture. *Real* culture was the providence of the intellectual elite. It is a great irony that, once formed, the BBC (an organ for the masses) spent much of its time promoting elitist music.

Yet the reactionary approach to new technology in musical circles was not purely the upshot of snobbery. To many, technology posed a real or perceived threat to their livelihood. Thomas Beecham spoke of a musical Armageddon, with audiences depending 'for every kind of music on the radio and musical reproduction by mechanical devices'.[7] The critic Leonid Sabaneev concurred: for 'every living musician we have several hundreds of thousands of mechanical reproducers, which have become the plague of the musical market, especially since their quality has improved and made artistically acceptable', and he predicted that fewer than 10 per cent of cinema musicians would find employment in the age of the 'talkies'.[8] Meanwhile, the Musical Association debated the question of 'Broadcasting and the Future of Music'. Throughout this, many musicians consoled themselves with the knowledge that quartets were still being written for four players and trios for three—but for how much longer? *The Listener* in 1933 published a photograph of the first electrical orchestra, assembled

[4] Robert Stradling and Meirion Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance 1860–1940* (1993), 138, 139.

[5] John Carey, *The Intellectual and the Masses* (1992), 21.

[6] Ezra Pound, 'The New Sculpture', *Egoist* (16 Feb. 1914), quoted in Carey, *The Intellectual*, 72.

[7] See Ch. 2.

[8] Leonid Sabaneev, 'Music and the Economic Crisis', *Musical Times*, 75 (1934), 1076, 1077.

in Berlin at the Radio Exhibition one year earlier. Depicted are two electric pianos, an electric cello, an electric violin, two 'theremins', a broadcast microphone, a 'trautonium', and a 'hellertion'. A respectably attired audience looks on. In 1934 the *Musical Times* published a detailed prophecy, based on this photograph and influenced by Wells's *The Shape of Things to Come*.

> . . . almost all the instruments were able to deal with intervals even smaller than quartertones: so far from developing acuteness of the listener's ear, however, this led in most instances to a growing casualness of intonation on the part of the performers. . . . As to the effect of electric music on the profession, it was found that the variety of tone and power obtainable from a few instruments was equal to that of an orchestra of about thirty players. Inevitably there was a serious growth of unemployment.[9]

Could technology really be on the side of the musician?

The publisher Ernst Roth thought so. 'It takes many brains and many hands to carry music to the masses,' he writes in his autobiography, before supplying a detailed list. Concert promoters, producers, recording engineers, and film directors choose music for particular projects; concert agents and administrators must negotiate about artists and venues; engineers must design and build radios and gramophones; printers have to make tickets and posters, while a press officer must arrange for their dispatch; and, of course, music publishers must print the music and extract royalties. 'There is no end to what has to be done if music is to be available like drinking-water in a large city, and its material usefulness ensured.'[10]

Its material *usefulness*? Roth was, after all, a publisher: promoting music to performers and audiences was his job. But he was also a cultured musician with established European pedigree—one traditionally less egalitarian than Roth here allowed. In his eyes, music was not autonomous; here was a view which neatly divided composers into two distinct groups—those who wrote in an Ivory Tower and those who wrote for the people.

Composers and performers began to recognize that the current was changing. But such recognition came sooner for some than for others. In the 1950s—as this chapter's epigraph attests—the composer Richard Arnell felt sure enough of an empathetic audience and comfortable enough with the notion of recording technology to devise an opera on the subject, although its unhappy ending was perhaps a gritty moral. Two Grand Old Men of British music, Arthur Bliss and Vaughan Williams, and one Bright Young(ish) Thing, William Walton, wrote symphonic film scores in the 1940s—Vaughan Williams remarking that writing for film was excellent discipline for any composer. Yet many others were unconvinced by the positive side of technology—even when confronted with LP-driven revivals of Mahler, Bruckner, and early music.

[9] Adam Creevy quoted in 'Feste', 'Looking Ahead II', *Musical Times*, 75 (1934), 118.

[10] Ernst Roth, *The Business of Music* (1969), 39.

In this regard, Benjamin Britten was a little unusual. From an early age he demonstrated an enthusiasm for the developing technology. His schoolboy diary is filled with references to recordings or broadcasts he had listened to. At the end of his life he noted (with a nostalgist's eye) the importance of gramophone and radio in his musical education, listing his ten favourite records and the reason for their place in his affections. Brahms's Double Concerto, with Thibaud and Casals, was one, since 'we had this recording at Gresham's, and I used to devise methods of getting hold of it'.The Scherzo of Mahler's Fifth Symphony was another—Britten having heard it 'on the radio from Hilversum in the early thirties; this started a passion for Mahler'; while for a long time, Stravinsky's own recording of his *Symphony of Psalms* was his 'favourite record'.[11] Moreover, Britten was usually quick to notice and act on sudden changes in recording technology. When LPs were introduced in the late 1940s, the composer royalty that had been established for the much shorter 78s was invalid. Britten was one of six co-signatories of a letter to *The Times*, which noted that

> the advent of long-playing records and tape recordings has entirely changed the situation in recent years and we contend that the provisions of section 8 of the [new Copyright] Bill should be confined solely to records whose playing time does not exceed that of the average record available before the long-playing record was introduced—namely, eight minutes or four minutes a record side. This would leave the composer free to agree with the manufacturers of these longer records an equitable royalty commensurate with the playing time of the record.[12]

Keeping abreast of technology ensured that composers avoided being exploited.

It was not only radio, film, and scratchy 78s that were transforming British music in Britten's lifetime. The arrival of the Arts Council in 1945—via several wartime experiments—put patronage into the hands of the government, which had its own aspirations for British cultural identity. The reopening of Covent Garden in the same year represented a serious attempt to develop and sustain a grand-opera tradition in a country without one. A revival of interest in festivals moved music away from metropolitan centres. Improvements in recording technology—most notably the arrival of the LP and of stereo—greatly intensified this mass industry.

Britten was involved in these new market articulators from their beginnings—often influencing their shape and potency. Inevitably his own music was moulded in the process. These two broad, inclusive statements are the basis of this book. Where other musicians spoke of the disastrous consequences of change, Britten

[11] Britten to Amis, 16 Oct. 1973. BPL, BBC Correspondence, 1973. The Mahler performance, with the Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by Bruno Walter, was broadcast on 4 Oct. 1934.

[12] Britten (*et al.*) to *The Times*, 3 Apr. 1956. His co-signatories were Vivian Ellis, Arthur Benjamin, Howard Ferguson, Peter Racine Fricker, and Billy Mayerl.

quickly established relationships with the agents of change. The first of these was with publishing—a prerequisite for any *professional* composer. Britten's dealings with Oxford University Press (and its newly formed music department) and with Boosey & Hawkes in the early 1930s taught him much about markets, royalties, and the economics of music (Chapter 1). In the same period, Britten began exploring wider markets, via the BBC. His work was first broadcast when the Corporation was less than ten years old. The BBC was one of the chief disseminators of Britten's music, but, more importantly, it had a strong influence on the style, shape, and genre of his works in the 1930s (Chapter 2).

In 1946, one year after the enormous success of *Peter Grimes*, Britten formed his own opera company in collaboration with Glyndebourne's John Christie. His operas for this company and for the breakaway English Opera Group wonderfully illustrate the economics of genre, and paint a picture of Britten as impresario—a decidedly un-English role for a composer to adopt (Chapter 3). Overlapping with the works composed for the EOG were his grand operas *Billy Budd* and *Gloriana*. Written with Arts Council funding for Covent Garden, these two pieces pose a number of disturbing questions about varying official perceptions of British culture, and the role of the artist in this culture (Chapter 4).

The Aldeburgh Festival, established in 1948, increasingly became the principal forum for Britten premieres. As with the EOG, economic parameters shaped the product (Chapter 5). In the 1960s Britten retreated to Aldeburgh and new supply patterns developed: music was premiered at the Festival, broadcast by the BBC, published by Boosey & Hawkes or the new Faber Music, recorded by Decca, and quickly put on the market. The huge success of the *War Requiem* recording changed Britten's popular and critical reputation. Here was a potent symbol of the power of technology (Chapter 6).

Britten was, therefore, a modern, professional composer—much more so than Michael Tippett, his contemporary. Although his music *sounds* more modern, Tippett was far happier playing the Bohemian, only managing to get *A Child of Our Time* performed, and his reputation launched, once Britten had pulled the manuscript out from a desk drawer. This is both a wonderful image and an apt metaphor: Britten the opportunist and door-opener.

This approach to Britten's life and music only tells a small part of the story of this great musician. Moreover, it threatens the notion of autonomy in music: surely the actual product is more important than the process? Of course it is, but ever since Philip Brett first wrote about *Peter Grimes*, this actual process has demanded and received careful attention.[13] Brett has looked for and identified aspects to

[13] See Brett, 'Britten and *Grimes*', *Musical Times*, 118 (Dec. 1977).

this process that are barely touched upon in this book. Yet the two approaches are complementary rather than contradictory.

In his 1997 Proms Lecture Brett spoke of both product and process: 'Britten's artistic effort was an attempt to disrupt the center that it occupied with the marginality that it expressed.'[14] It is an extraordinary sentence, in nineteen words saying so much about Britten, about the composer of *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, *Owen Wingrave*, and *Death in Venice*. In the same lecture Brett talked about a life of conflicts and paradoxes, of friends unceremoniously dumped and walks with the Queen Mother. But the basis of these paradoxes, he argued, was Britten's desire to subvert *and* educate. Pacifism was a zealous commitment of Britten's, but it was also a cypher for other passions that Britten could not then speak of—primarily his sexuality. For *Wingrave* to be broadcast on BBC television, its explicit message as shocking and unpalatable in the late 1930s, when much of Britten's ideas about art and society were formulated, as its *implicit* meaning was in the late 1960s when the opera was conceived, was a remarkable feat. Yet such subversion needs energy, commitment, and organization—of this Brett was certain:

> 'All a poet can do is to warn' is the conclusion of the Wilfred Owen epigraph on the cover of the score of the *War Requiem*. But in order to warn, or do anything else, the poet/artist has to be heard. What North America may have taught Britten and Pears, then, was that to work for centrality at home would ultimately be more artistically and therefore politically effective than marginality abroad—as a means of articulating a message to society from that margin where Britten, at least, alway imagined he lived, as countless tales of his depression and darkness attest.[15]

In order to warn, or do anything else, the poet/artist has to be heard. This is why Britten's 'centrality' was so vital: we are usually dismissive or suspicious of lone prophets. For a message to be received, it has to be well packaged. This was a lesson he learnt at Auden's feet and insistence in the 1930s. Auden moreover, picking up Wilfred Owen's baton that had been swept aside in the 'peace' and recriminations following the First World War, was certain of the responsibility of artists to use their position to warn or educate, especially in the lead-up to the Second World War:

> All I have is a voice
> To undo the folded lie,
> The romantic lie in the brain
> Of the sensual man-in-the-street
> And the lie of Authority
> Whose buildings grope the sky:
> There is no such thing as the State
> And no one exists alone;

[14] Philip Brett, 'The Britten Era' (1997). [15] Ibid.

> To the citizen or the police;
> We must love one another or die.[16]

The 'voice' and the 'lie' were intrinsic to Britten's music from the 1930s onwards. The discovery of that voice will not be explored in this book; the forums by which Britten made certain that this voice was heard will be. The organizations that are explored in the following chapters—the relationships that Britten forged with the brokers of power (the market articulators)—of course signify one composer's determination to understand and (as far as possible) control the market place. But they should also be thought of in terms of Britten's determination to use his voice to redress the marginal status assigned him by his sexuality, his pacifism, his politics, and his sensitivity to injustice.

[16] Auden, 'September 1939', in Edward Mendelson (ed.), *The English Auden* (1986), 397. See also Kildea, 'Britten, Auden and "Otherness"', in Mervyn Cooke (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* (1999).