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I

Introduction

Since Benjamin Britten's death in 1976, a great deal has been written about the man and his music, and about what the various writers consider to be the driving motives which directed his creativity. Much stress has been put on the issues of his pacifism and his homosexuality—so much, indeed, that there is a danger of these factors being seen as the only major influences in his work. Professor Philip Brett made his first confident pronouncements on Britten's homosexuality in an article 'Britten and Grimes', which was published in the *Musical Times* in 1977[1] and which he reprinted in revised form in his book *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*.[2] Numerous other writers have found themselves able to speak of these things since Britten's death, and there is a danger that concentration on this area of Britten's persona will allow other equally important motivations to be ignored.

Commentators have occasionally talked in vague terms about what Hans Keller calls the 'central metaphysical region of his mind',[3] but rarely make more than passing reference to Britten's religious beliefs and observances. In *Remembering Britten* Alan Blyth quotes some substantial comments and observations by friends of the composer. Sir Peter Pears says, 'He was religious in the general sense of acknowledging a power above greater than ourselves, but he wasn't a regular church-goer. In his moral attitudes he was Low Church, and therefore inclined to be puritanical.'[4] In the same collection of reminiscences Sir Michael Tippett makes rather firmer claims for Britten as a religious composer: 'We are both of us religious composers, i.e. bound, *religiati*, to a sense of the numinous, but Britten is more properly Christian.'[5] Tippett's statement is amplified by recollections of Murray Perahia: 'Stimulated by a meeting on a Jewish holy day, the two discussed religious beliefs. Perahia asked the composer if he thought of himself as religious. Britten replied that he was certainly Christian in his music. Although he could not accept Church doctrine, he believed in God and a destiny.'[6]

[1] Philip Brett, 'Britten and Grimes', *Musical Times*, 118 (1977), 995.
[2] Philip Brett (ed.), *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*, Cambridge, 1983.
[3] Letter from Hans Keller to the author, 31 August 1983.
[4] Alan Blyth, *Remembering Britten*, London, 1981, 22.
[5] Ibid. 67. [6] Ibid. 172.

Britten's own words frequently indicate a concern for the spiritual dimension in life and in his own music: 'the manner in which you approach the Christian idea delighted me. I used to think that the day when one could shock people was over—but now, I've discovered that being simple and considering things spiritual of importance, produces violent reactions!'[7] That extract from a letter written by Benjamin Britten to Imogen Holst soon after the first performance of *The Rape of Lucretia* suggests that there is a straightforward response to any question which might be posed about Britten's personal faith. The first performance of his third opera was greeted with a good deal of criticism on the part of those people who found themselves confused by a work which was drastically different, in every way, from the universally acclaimed *Peter Grimes* which preceded it only a year earlier. Of all the criticism of this chamber opera, the most strident was from those who found the inclusion of Christian dynamic into the epilogue to be anachronistic and, in some way, rather bogus.[8] Yet it was undoubtedly Britten, rather than his librettist, Ronald Duncan, who insisted on its inclusion. As the Earl of Harewood has commented,

> He [Britten], by the way, suggested putting in the Christian element into *The Rape of Lucretia*. I don't mean that he wrote specially to have the notion that without forgiveness, Christian forgiveness, the drama of *The Rape of Lucretia* is meaningless—but he suggested it, not Ronnie Duncan. Ronnie has told me over the years of that.[9]

The insistence on the Christian message in the work, planned and written in 1945–6, contrasts sharply with the views of those commentators who assert that Britten reacted, in adult life, against the religious observance of his childhood and that he was, ultimately, an agnostic humanist. Sharply divergent views have been expressed by those who were close to Britten with regard to the question of whether he had a continuing religious faith; or whether, as Sir Peter Pears has said, he was an agnostic with a great love for Jesus Christ. Christopher Headington, writing in 1981, would appear to agree: 'In certain moods he may have succeeded in feeling with Wilfred Owen's soldier: *we've walked quite friendly up to death; | Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland* though he could not share the faith of Saint Nicolas (*Lord I come to life, to final birth*).'[10] A number of writers have commented on the strength and narrowness of Britten's moral attitudes. The way he felt unable to remain part of the ménage in America, in which W. H. Auden presided over a somewhat Bohemian rooming house for artists, is indicative of what Christopher Head-

[7] Imogen Holst, *Britten*, 3rd edn, London, 1980, 40.
[8] Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas*, London, 1970, 46.
[9] Interview between the author and the Earl of Harewood, 22 February 1983.
[10] Christopher Headington, *Britten*, London, 1981, 147.

ington has noted: 'He was, after all, entirely un-Bohemian and even Puritan, seeming quite consciously to have sought to live "decently" and free of scandal.'[11] It must be acknowledged, however, that a strong moral sense does not imply a deeply Christian personality, and while most commentators have remarked on the moralistic side of Britten's nature, they do not all ascribe it to a strong Christian conviction. Philip Brett lays great emphasis on the potency of homosexual orientation and he approaches *Peter Grimes* as an allegory of the homosexual condition.[12] This is not, however, the primary viewpoint of all his contributors, and he does include in his book an essay written in 1972 by Peter Garvie, in which the writer makes a claim for a very definite Christian dimension in *Peter Grimes*.[13]

Garvie does not go so far as to claim that Grimes's situation is a Christian allegory: rather he sees the Christian theme in terms of its rejection by the various factions in the opera—even the composer—and this he sees as distinguishing this work from Britten's other works.

> What seems to be missing in *Peter Grimes*, and is persistently present in Britten's later music, is the sense of redemptive continuity. This continuity, a sense of meaning beyond the act, is usually expressed in Christian terms, but it may also be found as a secular transformation, an accord of the human and natural worlds within the creative imagination. (The *Nocturne* and A *Midsummer Night's Dream* are good examples.) It is tempting to think of *Peter Grimes* in terms of the end as an end, and to wonder whether it was its moral implications that forced Britten to find a response. The treatment of Christianity in *Peter Grimes* seems to bear that out. Whether it is the socially binding Anglicanism of the Rector or the evangelical zeal of Methody Boles, it is uninfluential for good. It does nothing to heal Peter or his community. The death of Peter is not in the true meaning of the term 'a sacrifice'; it does not 'make sacred'.[14]

Almost thirty years after Britten's death, public attitudes to the private lives of distinguished personalities have changed almost beyond recognition. Public reticence, which was generally observed in comments about the lives of such personalities, is, in this less deferential age, almost unknown. Britten himself would almost certainly have been appalled at the revelation and speculation in which Humphrey Carpenter has indulged in his biography of the composer. At best he would have considered it material which was irrelevant to an appreciation and understanding of his music; at worst it would have seemed sensational and quite contrary to his view that people should 'behave properly and not betray one another'.[15]

[11] Ibid. 35. [12] Brett, *Britten: Peter Grimes*. [13] Ibid. 172.
[14] Ibid. 177. [15] Blyth, *Remembering Britten*, 23.

If there is any justification in the torrent of printed speculation and revelation concerning Britten's sexual and emotional nature, then there must also be every justification for looking at the 'things spiritual'[16] in Britten's work.

Most commentators have been cautious in their treatment of the spiritual side of Britten's nature, but one of his earliest biographers, Eric Walter White, makes sweeping claims for Britten's religious condition: 'His religious beliefs are central to his life and his work. As a devout and practising Christian, he has been keen, whenever possible, to work within the framework of the Church of England, and many of his compositions have been planned accordingly.'[17] This statement is difficult to equate with the known facts, for Britten was not, for a large part of his adult life, a regular churchgoer—but it might be wrong to assume that White equates churchgoing with the life of a practising Christian. Perhaps, with the example of Crabbe's churchgoing people of *The Borough* in mind, he takes a directly opposite view! Such an interpretation would be more consistent with the views of Sir Peter Pears, and it is a clue to the spritual drives which supported and directed the composer.

Part I of this book examines Britten's early life and the strong presence which the Church had in his childhood and adolescence. It shows the way in which certain spiritual influences were first manifested in his life, and which, like the more specifically musical 'themes' that Donald Mitchell has noted, are capable of being traced through Britten's life. Part I includes comment from two churchmen who were influential in Britten's life, as well as a chapter devoted to the observations and influence of Sir Peter Pears.

Part II examines a wide range of the composer's music which can be seen to have a spiritual dimension. The specifically liturgical music forms a relatively small part of Britten's output, and it has not received wide critical notice in the way that the large-scale works have done. This music is examined here, and it is shown to possess important musical characteristics in common with the bigger works. The four chapters headed 'Parable Music' examine a wide range of Britten's works (including some of the operas) which can be seen to have a spiritual dimension.

[16] Holst, *Britten*, 40. [17] White, *Britten*, 91.