

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913-1976)

A Personal Recollection By Osian Ellis

It is quite unusual to find a great composer who actually loves the harp and enjoys writing for it. Such a person was Benjamin Britten. During the last three years of his life, while he was very ill after an unsuccessful heart operation, I saw him often as I rehearsed for concerts and recordings with tenor Peter Pears, his companion and friend for forty years. Ben (as we affectionately called him) became partially paralyzed, and he learned laboriously to write on his knee. His music inactivity depressed him, but as his powers returned he felt useful once more, and we were presented with his *Canticle V*, a startling, imaginative and rhythmic setting of T.S. Eliot's early poem *The Death of St. Narcissus*. Then in 1975 came the lyrical *Birthday Hansel*, seven Scottish songs—linked and kaleidoscopic, lilting, eerie, stormy, dancing—to words of the Scottish poet, Robert Burns. The song-cycle was commissioned by Queen Elizabeth as a gift (hansel) for her mother's 75th birthday in August 1975. It gives a dazzling demonstration of what a composer of genius can do with the harp, from the exquisite lyricism of *My Early Walk*, the amusing counterpoints of *Wee Willie Gray*, to the brilliant and witty evocation of a Scots reel in *Leezie Lindsay*.

Occasionally, Ben, as a relaxation, would take 17th century songs by Purcell, Blow or Pelham Humphrey (published originally with just a bass line), and he would make a realization for the harp; or he would present us with new arrangements of old folk songs for tenor and harp, some of which we have still to perform in public. Indeed, I teased him one day, accusing him of producing these songs like crossword puzzles, and he countered: "Ah, but I enjoy writing for the harp—it's much more rewarding than working out crosswords."

Britten brought fresh invention into harp composition. At first sight, some of it might look quite impossible. Yet, on further investigation my reluctant fingers would conquer another hurdle, and harp technique would be further extended, and, no doubt, accepted as normal by the next generation of student harpists.

In 1969 Ben asked me to introduce a program at his Aldeburgh Festival; he wanted to call it "Artist's

Choice." I was to choose the program and the musicians who would play with me, and he said coyly: "You can, of course, commission a new work for the harp from any composer whom you care to mention!" Eventually there appeared in the post the *Harp Suite in C major*. His accompanying letter, I think, is most illuminating:

Here is the *Suite*. I hope it works. I feel it is rather 18th century harp writing, but somehow it came out that way. I have put in pencil pedallings—but they were only there to help me in working things out, and just rub them out if they get in the way! I haven't done anything about string positions where you play on the string, nails etc., because I know you'll have *beautiful* suggestions yourself. If there are any things which simply aren't any good (I mean harpistically, not musically), just send them back as *returned work*. Dear Osian, if it amuses you at all, I shall be very pleased. It isn't very profound, but it was written rather in reaction to a very grisly piece for Save the Children Fund [this was the tragic *Children's Crusade* for children's voices and instruments], and I wrote it with the greatest joy and thinking of its creator. Love to you all, Ben.

Could any composer be more modest than this? I reproduce this letter to show his nature as a composer and as a person—shy, reticent, warm, considerate, and generous.

Britten was a wonderful conductor to play under. No one else could better conduct his music, nor the music that he himself loved—Bach, Mozart, Schubert, Schumann, Mahler, Elgar, and Tchaikovsky. Indeed, he was invited to conduct the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, and Wagner operas at Bayreuth, but he declined, for he was happy only when working with musicians whom he knew and called each by his own name—almost unheard of with any other maestro. (Not only would he remember our names, he would also know the names of our wives and children—a feat that I envied, particularly as I have the habit of going blank on names whenever I have to introduce acquaintances to each other.)

He will be remembered not only as a great composer and conductor. He was, in years gone by, an eloquent interpreter of Mozart's piano concertos, a highly sensitive player in chamber music, and an unsurpassed accompanist in song recitals, usually with Peter Pears for whom he wrote so many song-cycles as well as many operatic roles. Listening to Ben accompanying a Schubert song-cycle, I sometimes felt that Schubert himself was there composing the music spontaneously. One sensed that he had a great affinity towards Schubert, and on one occasion he related a vivid dream of meeting Schubert in a wine-cellar in Vienna; he told Schubert how his music was being played and loved all over the world in spite of the passage of time. Schubert was most surprised but also very pleased. Ben also spied Beethoven in the cellar, but he was in a corner all alone! I suspect that Britten had no great love for the piano as a virtuoso medium, for his sensitive playing converted the piano into more than a musical instrument—into a veritable orchestra in fact. His subtle touch and phrasings would produce echoes of flutes, clarinets, violas or even strident trumpets.

As Peter Pears and I prepared for concerts and recordings, Ben would volunteer helpful advice and offer criticism for which we were grateful. Contrary to expectation, his presence at recording sessions of his own music was a great stimulus. I shall ever be grateful to him for his advice when I gave the first performance of the *Harp Suite* at Aldeburgh. Ben knew that the performance was being broadcast and recorded, and he himself suffered intensely from pre-concert nerves. Just before I went on to play his new piece he said: "Good luck! I would like you to know that there is nothing that pleases me more than to have someone improvising my music. So if you feel that way inclined, please feel free!" He was very kindly telling me that if I had a memory lapse he would not mind, and I should go on improvising. He so put me at my ease that I did not have to follow his kind invitation.

Britten was invariably stimulated to write for particular musicians whom he knew. Several operatic roles were designed for his singer friends, and their skills, virtues and idiosyncracies would be reflected in their music. Similarly, instrumentalists—players like Rostropovich on the cello or Julian Bream playing the guitar—would inspire him to create pieces that were tailored to their musicianship and technique. Even in the orchestra he would compose with the sounds of his friends in mind: Richard Adeney's ethereal flute, James Blades' imaginative percussion, and Cecil Aronowitz's dark viola timbre. In the 1960s Britten developed a new vein of opera with performances at Orford Church of the three church parables: *Curlew River*, *The Burning Fiery Furnace* and *The Prodigal Son*. These church operas were based on the concept of medieval miracle plays, with highly original scoring for the

six or seven players who themselves took part in the opera (in the guise of monks). In *The Burning Fiery Furnace* the harpist "doubles" on a Celtic or minstrel harp while marching in procession with the other instrumentalists as Nebuchadnezzar calls upon his people to bow before the golden image. The harp was tuned to D flat for its bright and merry contribution, with the 3rd octave D tuned to natural to add a little spice and astringency. Ben recalled the little harp from a performance a year or two before of Gluck's *Orfeo* where I had used it for its one appearance as an *obbligato* instrument.

I expect we all have our own individual "harp-moments" from Britten's operas or orchestral music which we recall with pleasure, or sometimes with embarrassment if we have encountered near-disasters in performances. Musically and dramatically one remembers, for instance, the nocturnal scene in Act I of the *Rape of Lucretia*, where the repeated notes of the harp seem to articulate the very stillness of the night. Or the first scene below decks in *Billy Budd*, where the harp—of all unlikely instruments, but in the event, totally convincing—evokes the enclosed, masculine world of the officers. Again, in *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach's meditation in Act I, "Mysterious Gondola," is virtually a harp song. Later, in the penultimate scene of the opera, Aschenbach, sick and alone in Venice, sings hauntingly, to lamenting harp and piano, of Socrates' farewell to Phaedrus, recalling the socratic dilemma of the poet who can perceive beauty only through the senses—the route of his own downfall.

In the *War Requiem* the harp appears in the chamber orchestra with the tenor and baritone soloists. Britten was very apologetic about the chromaticism of the low chords in the first song, *What passing bells*, which demands some nimble pedalling. I found the passage easier if I allowed my left foot to wander across to the E pedal occasionally. Beautiful to listen to, though difficult to play, is the *obbligato* harp, weaving delicate filigreed patterns around Coleridge's *Beauteous Boy*, in the *Nocturne* for tenor, strings and seven *obbligato* instruments. This was the first piece that I played for Britten; he had heard me playing in *The Ceremony of Carols* in Westminster Cathedral in January 1959, and consequently invited me to record the *Nocturne* a few months later. Then followed in 1960 his opera *A Midsummernight's Dream*. This called for two harps, but after five days of rehearsal, my colleague collapsed with a nervous breakdown—this was on the day of the dress rehearsal. All I could suggest was that we copy the second harp into my part: Britten copied Act I, I worked on Act II, and Imogen Holst on Act III. The ink was barely dry as we started the dress-rehearsal that evening. Fortunately, it was a success, and all the performances during that season were accomplished with just one harp.

Benjamin Britten was the first British composer

to capture and hold the attention of musicians and audiences the world over. His professionalism was outstanding, whether as composer, conductor, pianist, or director of the Aldeburgh Festival and the English Opera Group. He composed for the grand and for the humble—his last completed work was a song for school-children. He was a high-minded and high-principled person, impatient of pomp and hypocrisy; his absolute artistic honesty was dictated by his faith, as was his contempt for power and violence. Britten's art, whether sacred or secular, was essentially religious and specifically Christian in inspiration. There has never been a greater Protestant composer since Bach and Handel. His music is accessible to all, and the themes and idioms are recognizably continuous with the great music of the past. Furthermore, it can unite classes and

nations as well as centuries and generations. Whatever his ultimate standing in twentieth century music, no audience can become indifferent to the suspense of *Turn of the Screw*, to the poetry of the *Serenade* for tenor, horn and strings, to the sheer fun and brilliance of *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, or to the intense conviction of the *War Requiem*, perhaps the most popular serious composition of the mid-twentieth century, admired and much performed the world over.

Some of us had the privilege and immense pleasure of working with Ben; we sorely miss his warmth and his friendship, but his humanity and his music sing and ring out in ever-widening waves from the shores of his beloved Aldeburgh through the oceans of this world.



Benjamin Britten (left), Osian Ellis (center), and Peter Pears in rehearsal. (1970)