

Biography: Benjamin Britten

Adapted by Diana Weir

born 1913, Lowestoft, UK; died 1976, Aldeburgh, UK

Known as the foremost English composer of the 20th century, Benjamin Britten was a child prodigy. He started to write music at age four, began formal music studies at the age of 11, and by 12 had composed a dozen large-scale works. In 1930 he entered the Royal College of Music and, by the age of 21, was earning his keep as a composer for film, radio and theatre. In his early 20s, Britten was a member of a group of left-wing intellectuals, led by the poet W. H. Auden. It was Auden who encouraged his interest in theatre and wrote the libretto for Britten's first operetta, *Paul Bunyan* (1941).

In 1942, Britten and his lifelong partner Peter Pears settled in a fishing village on the east coast of Britain. It was this landscape that encouraged Britten to compose *Peter Grimes* (1944/45), the dramatic story of an outcast fisherman. The opera premiered with Peter Pears in the title role and was hailed as the first great British opera since the time of Henry Purcell in the 1640s.

Britten never lost his childlike sensibilities, and was fond of writing works for children's choirs. These works include the very popular *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1946), one of the most popular scores for children's music education; *The Little Sweep* (1949), an opera for children in three acts; and *A Ceremony of Carols* (1942), a set of songs written for children's voices.

Britten continued to conduct and write a variety of symphonic pieces while composing several operas over the next 15 years. *Billy Budd* was a larger scale opera commissioned for the Festival of Britain in 1951. This opera, along with *The Turn on the Screw* (1954), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), *Owen Wingrave* (1971), and *Death in Venice* (1973), touch on the themes of the individual versus society and the violation of innocence. For example, Britten's *Peter Grimes* is a

disturbing look at a social outcast who is extremely proud and independent yet deeply insecure. Britten confronts the audience by showing the intolerance and insensitivity towards those who are different. He never lost the belief that art could convey fundamental truths about the world.

Britten himself was a lifelong outsider: a pacifist during the Second World War even at the height of the bombing of Britain. Britten was also homosexual at a time when such a life was a criminal offence. Even as a musician, Britten was outside the norm because his work was more advanced than other British composers. By elevating the use of English as a language to be sung and clarifying the text through the music, his works were very accessible. Britten was highly respected during his own lifetime and is one of the few 20th-century composers whose operas are regularly performed throughout the western world.

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Below: The Canadian Opera Company presents A Midsummer Night's Dream (co-production with Houston Grand Opera), 2009. Photo: Felix Sanchez (HGO)

