

What inspired Benjamin Britten?

Before Benjamin Britten's Aldeburgh Festival gets underway again, Jessica Duchen takes a trip to the Suffolk coast to work out what so inspired the composer

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Listening to the music of Benjamin Britten at Aldeburgh is a little like listening to Mozart in Salzburg. Both composers have become part and parcel of their home towns' brand identity, for better or worse. It's tempting to think that one can sense the surroundings through the music - bracing mountain air and intimate cafés for the Austrian, glacial seas and gloomy East Anglian skies for the Brit.

There, however, the resemblance ends. Mozart loathed his native city and left it at the first opportunity, but Britten, born in nearby Lowestoft, adored Aldeburgh and made it his home for much of his life, with his partner and muse, the tenor Peter Pears. Before moving to The Red House, which is now a museum, they lived in Crag House, right on the shingle beach. Here Britten wrote some of his greatest works, many of which are bound up with the locale, the sea, an insularity natural to this corner of Suffolk, and a Britishness that has nothing to do with quaint Victorian pomposity or even 20th-century gritty realism. Instead, it is distant, spare and objective: introverted, tormented, yet delivered with the chilly eye of a perfectionist.

Peter Grimes, arguably Britten's greatest opera, is set in Aldeburgh itself; his children's opera *The Little Sweep* takes place in a mansion near Aldeburgh, and the comedy *Albert Herring* in neighbouring Loxford, while the devastating *Billy Budd* plays out its tragedy on a ship. But inspiration goes further than the stories of his operas: there's a searing, knife-edge quality to such abstract works as the broodingly powerful *Violin Concerto* and the *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, a virtuoso creation for string orchestra that cannot help but recall the elemental power of nature in a place where the chill and the quiet can turn a creative mind inwards.

Britten founded the Aldeburgh Festival with Pears and the writer and producer Eric Crozier in 1948, initially to provide a home for the English Opera Group, their

touring company. Today it remains an annual celebration not only of the composer, but also his successors. New music has always been a vital part of its programme, and since 1999 the festival has been under the artistic directorship of Thomas Adès, only in his mid-thirties but already one of the UK's most celebrated composers.

Its principal venue is the Snape Maltings concert hall. Converted from a malting house in the late 1960s (it burned down several years later and was reconstructed in 1970), it boasts a vaulted roof and a bare brick-and-wood interior - an accumulation of atmosphere in which one half expects Britten and Pears to stroll onto the stage at any moment.

Building work is in progress to create a second, more intimate performance space and a new rehearsal room. The Snape Maltings complex already houses the Britten-Pears Young Artists Programme, a centre for advanced musical studies that offers courses in the likes of chamber music and opera writing. And the festival spills over into other locations, notably the tiny Jubilee Hall in Aldeburgh, the event's original performance space back in the Forties.

Britten might not recognise today's Aldeburgh, though. Instead of the fishing village that was home to Peter Grimes, the little town is fast becoming a chichi retreat, popular with wealthy second-homers. The high street boasts organic food cafés and craft, designer fashion and antique outlets, and in the bookshops you can often see a photo of Britten frowning from a cover in the window.

Whether Britten and the festival are responsible for Aldeburgh's sea change, as poor old Mozart has been for Salzburg, or whether it's the increased accessibility of the place since the A12's expansion, this patch of the east coast has much to offer today's audiences. Still, the festival isn't just for international music tourists or London's cognoscenti fancying a country break; the local community is constantly involved and the festival's initiatives include free events on the beach and a venue established in 2000, the Pumphouse, focusing on experimentation, spontaneity and the nurturing of young talent. It's the kind of thing of which Britten would have approved.

But the wind from the sea has not changed. It sweeps along the exposed coast, over the Sizewell nuclear power station and over the graves, side by side in the local churchyard, of Britten and Pears. It whistles past the Britten memorial on the beach - a pair of giant steel scallop shells by Maggi Hambling, which caused controversy among the local populace when they were erected in 2003. The shells bear words from Peter Grimes: "I hear those voices that will not be drowned."

Aldeburgh in summer is not the place at its most characteristic. Off season, this can feel like the land that global warming forgot, the ever-likely encroachment of nature just as hostile as it would have been in Britten's day. The tragedy is that

global warming has not forgotten Aldeburgh at all. In a century or two, chances are that the sea will win and Aldeburgh may be subsumed.

In this country, Britten's status has become almost saintly. A critical view of him or his work is almost unheard of and the more awkward sides of his life story have escaped public censure, including his alleged friendships with young boys and his fleeing of the country as a conscientious objector during the Second World War (he went to America; his friend Michael Tippett, who shared his views, went to jail). His individual voice can, like Aldeburgh itself, feel cold, isolated and grim; the listener can be almost shocked by the combination of rawness and precision in its self-revelation.

The hard-hitting critic Hans Keller delivered a startling description of Britten's music in 1952. "It is an established fact that strong and heavily repressed sadism underlies pacifist attitudes," he wrote. "About the vital aggressive element in Britten's music... there cannot be the faintest doubt... What distinguishes Britten's musical personality is the violent repressive counter-force against his sadism."

The composer responded to this bizarre and possibly politically inspired remark with good humour. But in one respect, Keller was right: Britten's music has hidden teeth, as powerful and threatening as the sea. Violence and its repression are vital forces in Peter Grimes, Billy Budd, The Turn of the Screw (the latter at Glyndebourne in August) and Death in Venice, now at the ENO and to be produced at the Aldeburgh Festival this summer for the first time in many years. Even such soul-searching instrumental pieces as the Suites for solo cello and the String Quartets might not otherwise possess half their power - just as without the violence of nature that must be held at bay, Aldeburgh might be no more than a pretty but rather placid seaside town.

The Aldeburgh Festival celebrates its 60th anniversary this year, and audiences will have a chance to reassess Britten for themselves amid music that ranges from the Italian Renaissance to contemporary sounds from Adès, Nicholas Maw, Per Nørgard and a celebration of Luigi Nono. As ever, the Festival is like no other and is well worth a trip to the Suffolk coast.

Aldeburgh Festival (www.aldeburgh.co.uk; 01728 687110), 8 to 24 June