



Britten's got talent: The celebrations for the centenary of Benjamin Britten will span the globe

Jessica Duchen says it's the humanity of his works that gives this unlikely British hero a universal appeal

Jessica Duchen, Tuesday 18th December 2012

Who do they think Benjamin Britten is? Mozart? That's the first thought that comes to my mind, gazing at the phenomenal programme of events for the composer's centenary of his birth, which falls in November 2013. It's the most widely celebrated anniversary of any British composer, ever. Few composers worldwide could compete. Wagner and Verdi, whose bicentenaries are both due next year, won't stand a chance.

The UK's musical life will be dominated by Britten while this goes on – his image will even appear on a new 50p coin – and the Britten 100 online diary currently lists more than 1,150 events worldwide, and rising. Britten is the only British composer who has gone truly global, and the international roster of performances, books, films, exhibitions, festivals, broadcasts and commissions proves the point. Russia, where Britten is well-known, will enjoy high-profile commemorations, but anniversary events also pop up in corners of the globe where he is less recognised, among them Chile, Brazil, China, the Palestinian Territories and possibly the Amazonian rainforest.

Britten's artistic appeal and his strength as figurehead for British music are so compelling that he has been excused certain things for which, in another age, he might well have been shredded by the tabloids. He was a pacifist and a conscientious objector during the Second World War; and in an era when homosexuality was still illegal, he enjoyed a publicly accepted relationship with the tenor Peter Pears, whom he got to know in 1937 and for whom he created some of his finest operatic roles. Even his tendency to be attracted to adolescent boys (thoroughly scrutinised in John Bridcut's book and documentary *Britten's Children*) is forgiven – it's worth noting that no charges were ever brought against him. Nevertheless, he can seem an unlikely hero for a country that has virtually a national phobia about paedophiles.

British music has never travelled easily; even Elgar has had an uphill struggle abroad. With Britten, though, it's a different story. His opera *Peter Grimes*, in its first three years from 1945, was performed in a list of top opera houses including Sadler's Wells (and thence on tour around the UK), the Royal Opera House, Antwerp, Brussels, Rome, La Scala, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Mannheim, Hamburg, Berlin, Tanglewood, the Met in

New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Boston, Stanford University, Graz, Basel, Zurich, Brno, Budapest, Paris and Sydney.

"It's incredible," says Richard Jarman, director of the Britten-Pears Foundation, the driving force behind the celebrations (its website, britten100.org, is the centenary central reference point). "Name a British opera apart from Gilbert and Sullivan that had ever been seen beyond these shores. Almost overnight, Britten made the world take British music seriously."

This global reach is a multifaceted matter. In his lifetime, Britten was fortunate to have a range of influential friends and contacts to help spread the word and inspire him to new heights – notably some towering Russian musicians, the pianist Sviatoslav Richter, the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and the composer Dmitri Shostakovich. And he possessed the ability to build a power base that bolstered his reputation and continues to do so today.

Born in Lowestoft, Suffolk, the son of a dentist, Britten was prodigiously gifted from the start. He took private composition lessons with Frank Bridge before progressing to the Royal College of Music in 1930. His mother squashed his dream of studying with Alban Berg, opining that the Austrian genius was "not a good influence". The young "Benjy" could have followed a conventional, unambitious path through the British musical scene, involving academia or the BBC. Instead, he started his career as a jobbing musician, for instance writing film scores – adapting his abilities to whatever the task in hand happened to be.

Paul Kildea, whose new biography of Britten will be published in February, stresses the parochialism that made Britten reject the status quo: "We don't often recognise how poor the musical infrastructure in Britain was during the first decades of the 20th century," he says. "The standard of operatic performance was pretty poor until around 1950; the level of orchestral playing was probably just as low. When Britten travelled to Vienna and heard the Vienna Philharmonic, I think he had a sort of epiphany about the state of music in the UK."

Britten likewise rejected the English pastoral tradition of music – the cruelly nicknamed "cowpat school" – in favour of a pan-European outlook that found him influenced by Debussy, Schoenberg and Berg (from a distance). Crucially, his music retained its ability to communicate with a wide audience at a time when many other composers were losing this in the thickets of avant-garde serialism. Britten instead forged a distinctive individual soundworld: plangent, astringent, spare, and imbued with tremendous humanity.

His experience as a practical musician probably helped, according to the composer Sally Beamish, who is writing a new work in tribute to Britten for the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields and is also a violist: "Being a player himself, of both an orchestral instrument and piano, he understood what it took to perform, and he rejoiced in his players' response," she says. "It meant a lot to him that people seemed to enjoy playing his works. He was incredibly practical and he reinvented himself in every score he wrote."

The film-maker and writer John Bridcut, author of *Essential Britten* as well as *Britten's Children*, points out that the composer belonged to a generation that was jettisoning tradition. "Still, he found topics in his operas that spoke to people and had a modern

resonance. And he had a musical language that connected with earlier masterpieces – not least in his sense of pace, drama and timing on stage, which owes much to Verdi."

Though he composed in many different genres, Britten remained perhaps first and foremost a composer of opera. He worked with excellent librettists, notably Myfanwy Piper, WH Auden and E M Forster, and dealt with social issues that have never dated: cruelty to children, repressed homosexuality and the eternal struggle of the individual against society. That in itself made it easier for his music to cross borders.

But there was an extramusical element to Britten's international success story: that gift for building powerbases. Partly that was a function of his personality. He was, according to Kildea, a perfectionist and rather a control freak, slow to trust others and preferring to give performances only under conditions he could determine himself. "This," Kildea says, "is why Britten founded the English Opera Group with a group of trusted colleagues in 1945, instead of working to develop a relationship on a more ambitious scale with the new opera company at Covent Garden." Sometimes, he suggests, Britten could be his own worst enemy.

But his drive for control had positive consequences long-term. He encouraged Donald Mitchell to found Faber Music specifically to publish his works – yet this also paved the way for future composers to be signed up, printed and promoted. Similarly the Aldeburgh Festival, founded by Britten, Eric Crozier and Pears, has been immeasurably valuable to the musical life of the UK as a whole. And the Britten-Pears Foundation, also started by the composer, is alive and well – and investing £6.5m in the centenary celebrations.

Without the support of that power-base, might Britten be less well-known today? It's possible. The cellist Matthew Barley, who will be travelling the UK with 100 events in an Around Britten tour of the solo cello suites, suggests that Britten's oeuvre is yet to find its true level. "I've been in love with Britten's cello suites forever," he says, "but I don't think all of his output is equally great. No composer, not even Beethoven, had a complete output of works that are all equally great. Perhaps Britten is slightly overplayed in the UK – we tend to perform anything and everything. Time does an excellent editing process with a composer's works: usually only the best survive. This hasn't yet had a chance to happen with Britten."

Nevertheless, there's no denying the power of Britten at his best – especially his operas. He has become the most performed opera composer born in the 20th century and the quality of such works as Peter Grimes, Billy Budd and The Turn of the Screw has only become more evident with the passing of time.

"When you hear Britten's music... you become aware of something dark," the conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein once commented. "There are gears that are grinding and not quite meshing, and they make a great pain." Barley picks up on that quote, remarking: "He's spot-on. And isn't that a perfect description of us all?"

In the end, that deep humanity is what gives Britten his universal appeal – enabling his music not only to be admired the world over, but also to be loved.

More information about Benjamin Britten and the centenary celebrations: britten100.org

10 INTERNATIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

- Brazilian premiere of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', São Paulo (March 2013)
- 'Peter Grimes' performed on the beach during the Aldeburgh Festival (June 2013)
- Royal Opera House: 'Gloriana', new production by Richard Jones (June 2013)
- Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics give joint performance of the 'War Requiem' in Berlin conducted by Sir Simon Rattle (June 2013)
- Choir of London tours the Palestinian Territories (August 2013)
- Israeli premiere of 'Curlew River', Tel Aviv (September 2013)
- Focus on Britten at Tanglewood and Aspen Festivals, USA (August 2013)
- Opera North devotes entire season to Britten operas (from September 2013)
- Moscow Festival of Britten includes Russian premiere of 'Death in Venice' at Moscow Conservatoire and an exhibition at the Pushkin Museum (November 2013)
- 75,000 schoolchildren in the UK sing 'Friday Afternoons' simultaneously on Britten's centenary (22 November 2013)