

Going behind Britten's back

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The extraordinary scope of the archive held by the Britten-Pears Foundation, with its cache of something like 800 pieces of juvenilia, along with what amounts to at least 95% of the manuscripts of mature works, including many which were withdrawn or unfinished or have been published posthumously, must be unique for any composer. It's a special privilege to have access to so much material, but it brings with it responsibilities, as well as a number of moral questions.

Just as biographers are often taken to task for burrowing too deeply into the minutiae of an artist's life, and thereby perhaps missing the bigger picture, or misinterpreting the life, so musicologists may be tempted by this extraordinary abundance of new information - especially about the composer's early development - to place undue weight on it, or exaggerate its importance. In addition, because music is not directly accessible in the way that words (or pictures) are, there is the vexed question of whether or not works that the composer might have suppressed should see the light of day in terms of performance, or publication. Since we have at least 700 unperformed works in the archive (most, but by no means all, consisting of juvenilia) this is an important question for us. It's an issue which we need to consider in several different ways.

When a lost manuscript of a composer of several centuries ago resurfaces, no-one is likely to dispute whether or not the music should be performed, even if it adds little or nothing to our understanding of the composer. But we start to feel uneasy when missing or incomplete works are reconstructed - Bach's *St Mark* or *St Luke Passions*, for instance, or Mozart's *Zaide*, or Schubert's five unfinished piano sonatas, or his and Beethoven's more tenuous Tenth Symphonies.

The most significant unfinished piece to have fully entered the repertoire is, of course, Mozart's *Requiem*. There can be very few, if any, who would maintain that it should not be performed at all, as not representative of Mozart's final wishes, but of course there has been controversy for over 200 years about Süssmayr's contribution, both as regards its extent and its competence; and as scholarship has become more focused, different versions have emerged, although none has completely won the day and supplanted the standard editions.

Schubert's Unfinished Symphony is a different case, since it seems just as likely that Schubert was content with it in its incomplete state as that he tried but failed to complete it. Like the Mozart *Requiem*, it has been a repertoire piece from the outset, as has the torso of Bruckner's Ninth Symphony; but here we have a different and tragic state of affairs. It's almost certain that Bruckner not only finished the Finale in sketch form, but completed a much larger proportion than survives in orchestral score. The chaotic dispersal of the manuscript after his death, with his friends appropriating pages of the Finale as souvenirs, means that - unless those missing pages turn up (which is not impossible even now) - the Finale can't be reconstructed in its entirety other than hypothetically. However the recent Samale-Phillips-Cohrs-Mazzuca version is remarkably convincing.

As we move nearer to our own time - with the unlikelihood of discovering, say, a previously unknown Strauss symphonic poem - attention turns to juvenilia or to earlier versions of well known works. Here the record industry, in its insatiable quest for novelty - as long as this doesn't mean recording genuinely new music - has been responsible for unearthing works that might be better forgotten. In many cases the presentation of obscure or immature works unbalances our view of the composer, and gives a false perspective on the work : for instance the recording of all of Dvořák's early quartets; this has particular relevance, as we'll see, to Britten.

In some cases recent revivals of early versions of works that the composer subsequently revised have brought new insights : Sibelius' Violin Concerto and Vaughan Williams' *London Symphony* for instance - where in both instances the original versions are, unusually, more complex than the final ones - have proved to be valid works in their own right, and certainly worth hearing - although no-one would suggest that they should supplant the composers' second thoughts. But this is not always the case, and there is no real need to hear Sibelius' clumsy first attempts at his Fifth Symphony more than once, since the final version is so superior.

Before returning to Britten, I would like to refer to two major works with whose reconstruction I've been closely involved - Mahler's Tenth Symphony and Elgar's Third. My views on Mahler's Tenth are on record elsewhere¹ : if I have any unease about the perception of this work, it is because it can't be emphasised enough that, although it is a symphony that is complete in sketch, without a missing bar, it is very much a work in progress. No amount of reconstruction can reflect what Mahler would have done with it had he lived. For all its beauty and significance it's a very imperfect work, and its audience needs to be fully aware of this state of incompleteness. It is, in Deryck Cooke's words, *not* Mahler's Tenth Symphony, but a performing version of the sketches in the state in which Mahler left them when he died. The waters have in recent years been muddied by alternative versions, most of them simply reworkings of Cooke's pioneering edition, and to my mind lacking validity.

Because Mahler's working method was always to through-compose, we have a complete but imperfect musical argument. With Elgar's Third Symphony we have a patchwork of musical ideas, some ordered, some not, which only the composer could have put together as he intended. This was Elgar's way of working throughout his life. Anthony Payne's great achievement is to have created a framework for these sketches which, to my ears, is totally convincing : *not* Elgar's Third Symphony, but a hybrid work which stands in for it, full of a vitality which belies the received opinion of a composer with nothing left to say.

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The Thematic Catalogue of Britten's music will comprise a completely open and unexpurgated account of everything he wrote. There will in future be no excuse for the kind of misinformation where, for instance, works are regularly described as having been 'discovered' in the Britten-Pears Library as though they had been previously unknown or unrecognised : in fact the basic listing of works, including juvenilia and unfinished pieces,

was made while Britten was still alive, and at his instigation. Myth and misinformation tends to become attached to 'unknown' works, and especially to the music that I've been discussing - Mozart's *Requiem* most notably, of course; but at the first performance of the three completed movements of Bruckner's Ninth, seven years after his death, the existence of even the sketches for the Finale was deliberately denied. Those musicologists who examined Mahler's Tenth largely failed to grasp the scope of the work, or its scale; there are still some today who wish it had remained in manuscript and unplayed. No-one, before Anthony Payne, thought to look properly through Elgar's sketches; and the announcement of the reconstructed Third Symphony's first performance in 1997 brought forth howls of protest from devoted Elgarians who would have preferred that Elgar's wish that the manuscript should be burned - expressed once only and immediately contradicted - had been carried out.

What is it that can so concern musicologists about unfinished works? I quote the words of a noted authority, on the subject of Mahler's Tenth :

I incline to the view that precisely someone who senses the extraordinary scope of the conception of the Tenth ought to do without adaptations and performances. The case is similar with sketches of unfinished pictures by masters : anyone who understands them and can visualise how they might have been completed would prefer to file them away and contemplate them privately.²

This is none other than Adorno speaking. Elsewhere in his writing on the Tenth he shows that he simply hasn't understood the stage that Mahler had reached with the music; but here he is making a statement that I find abhorrent. It is to my mind unthinkable that musicologists should be able to gloat in private over music that they consider unsafe for ears other than their own. That Adorno goes on to apply the same standards to unfinished works of art only compounds the infamy.

Clearly we have no intention of taking such a line where Britten's music is concerned. But, as custodians of his manuscripts, how should we fulfil our responsibility toward the public? In the first place, we intend, as I've already stated, to be completely open about what we hold, and to make it, in one form or another, as widely available as seems appropriate. Already, as you will probably know, we have made the incomplete Thematic Catalogue freely available on line, and welcome comment and criticism.

But the Foundation is not a body that is concerned only with scholarship : the archive is largely maintained by the royalties that we earn from Britten's music, and we have a consequent duty both to promote that music, and to protect it. We do our best to argue against cuts that opera houses want to make to the music; we are consulted about arrangements; and we don't allow commercial exploitation which we feel is inappropriate. Perhaps most important of all, we have had to take decisions on the publication of music that wasn't published in Britten's lifetime.

So, to return to the question that was implied at the outset : what is our responsibility towards music that the composer did not publish himself, or left incomplete, or withdrew, and which he might well have preferred to suppress?

Of course there is a simple answer - if Britten had wanted to withhold any of his unpublished music then he was perfectly free to destroy it himself while he was alive. Yet this would have been alien to him, since he was an inveterate hoarder, keeping not just all of his early manuscripts - perhaps as much out of nostalgia as for any musical reason - but also everyday things such as cheque stubs, bills, and receipts. He was reluctant to throw anything away, useful or not : he was still using his old school exercise books at the end of his life. Alongside more or less every note of music he ever wrote, from scraps and exercises to full-blown works, we also have the everyday documentation of his life.

Alternatively he could have left an embargo on the performance or publication of this material after his death. Instead he left such decisions to his musical executors, one of whom was Peter Pears, who encouraged the publication of many early works. I suspect, though, that Britten would not have expected anyone to be sufficiently interested in this body of music to trouble with it : anyone who could describe writing such masterpieces as the *Young Person's Guide* as a 'chore', or the *Serenade* as 'not important stuff, but quite pleasant, I think' is not likely to have given too much thought to what posterity might make of his legacy.

Yet even a work as well known as the *Serenade* has a hidden aspect : when Marion Thorpe discovered - and here for once the word 'discovered' is appropriate - the battered manuscript of Britten's setting of 'Now sleeps the crimson petal' for tenor, horn and strings in a suitcase (it had been given to her father, Erwin Stein), it proved not to only to be a strikingly beautiful omission from the *Serenade*, but the missing link between that work and the *Nocturne*, which Britten clearly remembered when he came to write the *Nocturne* 15 years later.

Recorded Example 'Now sleeps the crimson petal' (reproduce first page of the score)

It is time to look in more detail at the archive itself, and what it contains. How have we dealt with it in the past, and how do we intend to deal with it in the future?

In the case of juvenilia the scope of what we hold is so huge that it is here that we have to exercise the most discretion. While everything will eventually be made accessible, the vast majority is never likely to be published. This applies just as much to the early piano pieces and songs as to the string quartets, a medium which Britten didn't tackle for the first time until the relatively late age of twelve. Over the next six or seven years he wrote ten works for quartet in all, including six full-length quartets. Only one of these (the Quartet in D of 1931) was published in his lifetime (in fact towards the end of his life, in 1974); one (in G major from 1927) was given its first performance at a concert as part of this study day; another, in F major, from 1928, was published 10 years ago; but the remaining unpublished works, while they might be given an airing, are unlikely to go any further. Although the proportion of ten early quartets to only three mature ones is fascinating, our considered opinion is that to publish or record 'the complete quartets' would give a false perspective. The vast array of works for solo piano contrasts even more strongly with the two works published in his lifetime. We've toyed with the idea of a 'piano marathon', presenting the entire corpus, but this essentially entertaining rather than scholarly project would be as far as it would go : very few of these abundant but not very significant works will ever be seen

in print.

The borderline between juvenilia and maturity is a fine one, but the *Sinfonietta*, as Britten's Opus 1 - work number 746 in the Thematic Catalogue - obviously marks a boundary. But even that boundary isn't a clear one, since it's already the twenty third work in chronological order in the Catalogue of Published Works compiled in 1999. Ten of the twenty two works that precede it were published in Britten's lifetime - either works that he didn't feel at the time warranted an opus number (there are over one hundred of these in this Catalogue, as opposed to the ninety five to which he gave opus numbers), or which he revised and published much later. From the time of the *Sinfonietta* - his final year at the Royal College in 1932/33 - there is a number of substantial works, any of which could have become Opus 1, but which he abandoned. These include the *Double Concerto* for violin and viola, fully composed though never orchestrated - a work that is very similar in structure to the *Sinfonietta*, but nearly twice its length; the F minor *Phantasy* for String Quintet, which won the 1932 Cobbett Prize and was widely performed and broadcast, but not published until 1983; and the five movement suite for string quartet which went under the title of 'Go play, boy, play', reworked many times between 1933 and 1936, most of it performed at the time, but never reaching a final form. From 1936 also come the posthumously published *Temporal Variations* for oboe and piano, but here we're well into Britten's early maturity, with *Our Hunting Fathers* and the *Frank Bridge Variations* either side of it, and the disappearance of such a major work after only one performance is inexplicable.

Moving on into a period that is well documented, we have four categories of what might be called 'unauthorised' works : 1) first versions of works subsequently revised; 2) works that were withdrawn by the composer (in several cases having already been given opus numbers; 3) works which were abandoned and left in an unfinished state; and 4) finished works which were performed but not given opus numbers nor published at the time.

The first category can be further subdivided : works that were later substantially revised, like the *Piano Concerto*, its original third movement replaced seven years later; *Billy Budd*, reduced ten years after its first performance from four acts to two; or *The Rape of Lucretia*, whose libretto and music were both quite substantially reworked shortly after the first performance. Several of these have been subsequently performed again in their original versions. Alongside these there are works - like the *Serenade* - for which more music was written than was actually used : they are almost exclusively vocal works, like *Les Illuminations*, which was originally planned to have four additional movements, or *Winter Words*, or *Who are these Children*, for both of which Britten sketched additional songs. Most of these have now been published, but with the injunction that they should be performed separately, not as if they were part of a supposedly 'original' song cycle. This music is, in most cases, no less inspired than the published work, but simply didn't 'fit' when it came to making the final choice.

The second category - of withdrawn works - includes both music that seems to have been withdrawn largely for personal reasons, like *Young Apollo*, written as a portrait of Wulf Scherchen, the love of Britten's early life, or the *Occasional Overture* written for the inauguration of the Third Programme in 1946, but given a poor performance under one of Britten's least favourite conductors, Adrian Boult. The *American Overture*, composed in

1941 as an earlier *Occasional Overture* - was not so much withdrawn as forgotten, as Britten denied all knowledge of it until shown the manuscript in 1972, even though he had given it an opus number at the time. The opera *Paul Bunyan* was withdrawn because it needed revision, but also no doubt because Britten was hurt by the very adverse criticism at its first performance in 1941, and because of his increasingly difficult relationship with its librettist, W H Auden. When Britten revised it in 1974 he gave it the opus no. 17, which had earlier been assigned to another withdrawn piece, the choral settings of Gerard Manley Hopkins under the title *A.M.D.G.* Although at least four songs from the seven intended for the work were performed in the early 1940s, the work as a whole was never completed, and one of the settings is even crossed out in the sketch. Since Britten declined to publish it when asked in the 1970s, its eventual publication in 1988 was somewhat questionable.

The third category - of abandoned works - is the smallest, since very few projects that Britten undertook (as opposed to works that were planned but never begun - these too will feature in the Catalogue) were left incomplete, particularly after Britten returned to the UK in the 1940s. Some were actual victims of the transatlantic crossing : he had to leave behind the manuscripts both of the *Clarinet Concerto* he was writing for Benny Goodman, and of the sketches for a 'Sonata for Orchestra'. Other abandoned works include a piece for four horns and strings intended as a memorial for Dennis Brain; and a set of piano variations from 1965 intended as a follow-up to the *Night Piece* written as a test piece for the 1963 Leeds Piano Competition.

This is where I have to hold up my hand, as in May 2008 we recorded not only the *Clarinet Concerto*, in a reconstruction which I've put together from various sources - including the *Sonata for Orchestra* - but also the Dennis Brain piece, the piano variations, and three of the songs composed for but not included in *Les Illuminations*. Since I have had a hand in editing and preparing for publication not just these, but a large proportion of the music that has appeared since Britten's death, I have to take no small measure of responsibility in answering the moral question that I posed at the beginning.

I'm well aware of the accusation that has been made from time to time that the Britten Estate, in turning out posthumous works, has not so much been mining the archive as scraping the barrel. While this criticism tends to come from those who have no idea of quite how big the barrel is, I'm not so blinkered as to think that every note of Britten's is uniquely deserving of being presented to the public eye, and remain concerned that not all of the music that has been published posthumously has equal validity. But there is one aspect of Britten of which very few will be aware : even where the appearance of an unfinished or sketched work gives the impression of being scrappy and unformed, closer examination will reveal that it was thought through in nearly every detail. Consequently there's very little of what might be called reconstruction involved, and remarkably few editorial decisions that need to be made. This applies even to the early works that have been published - the *Quatre chansons françaises* from 1928, for instance, are printed almost exactly as Britten wrote them down - the orchestral detail, for someone who had barely heard an orchestra, is remarkable, and the only aspect that needed adjusting was Britten's rather poor knowledge of French inflection. But this was a work of which the composer made a careful fair copy, as a gift for his parents. On the other hand I can remember looking through the boxes of juvenilia many years ago with Rosamund Strode,

and hardly giving a second glance to a folded piece of manuscript written in thick smudged pencil. When we finally examined it it turned out to be a piece for solo viola - Britten's own instrument - of remarkable intensity, and complete in the sketch. It's dated 1 August 1930, so it was possible to check Britten's diary entry to find that this was the day after he left school at the age of 16, when he wrote 'I didn't think I should be so sorry to leave.' The manuscript has no title, but it was published in 1985 as *Elegy*.

Recorded Example 'Elegy' (reproduce first page of the score)

Would Britten have approved of works that he had put to one side being revealed for all to see? Probably not. But would anyone argue, given the archive that we have charge of, that we should not make it as accessible as we can? This does not mean publishing or recording everything - far from it - but so long as this 'unauthorised' music is given its proper perspective, it can only add to our overall understanding of the composer. I have to admit myself to a particular fascination with the hidden workings of composers, and have learned far more from pursuing this path than from analysis, whose insights by comparison can sometimes seem a little cold and clinical - something Britten himself is known to have felt. He would have been somewhat dismayed at the idea of a study day being devoted to him, especially one focusing on the juvenilia - 'here was no Mozart I fear', he wrote, in typically disparaging tone, in the introduction to a collection of his early piano pieces³ - but I can't help feeling that he would also have been secretly pleased.

I have omitted to describe the fourth category of 'unauthorised' works, yet this category - juvenilia aside - is the largest of all, comprising the incidental music, ranging through the many film scores from the 1930s to the theatre and radio scores which he continued to write copiously until the late 1940s, when opera writing and festival running left him no spare time for such activities. When these works are included, along with the almost equally large body of arrangements of music by other composers, the Thematic Catalogue will run to more than eleven hundred items. There is a lot of work to be done.

¹ 'The Tenth Symphony' in *The Mahler Companion*, ed. Mitchell and Nicholson, OUP, 1999

² 'Mahler. A Musical Physiognomy', University of Chicago Press, 1992

³ *Five Walzes*, Faber Music, 1970