

Working with Britten

Written in 2012 for the Wigmore Hall's Britten series

At a distance of 40 years it is difficult to distinguish between the genuine memories I have of working for Britten from all that I have learned since then. To have been a part of the life of such a great musician now seems remarkable : at the time, although I knew that the experience was something both unexpected and out of the ordinary, it was also what I did for a living. A composing career seemed a long way off, and I worked principally as a copyist and music editor. And I had already had the experience of working, if indirectly, with another composer - from 1964 collaborating with Deryck Cooke on the reconstruction of Mahler's 10th Symphony, an unparalleled opportunity for gaining insight into a composer's mind.

The request, in the spring of 1972, that I take over the preparation of the vocal score of *Death in Venice* came out of the blue; although by this time I had already undertaken several tasks for Britten, following on from my brother David, who had spent much time in Aldeburgh in the late 1960s. Graham Johnson, who was to be Peter Pears' rehearsal pianist for the opera, had started working on the vocal score at Britten's request; but he found it too difficult to keep pace with the speed of Britten's composing. So *Death in Venice* became a major part of my life from then until the publication of the full score in 1979, three years after Britten's death.

Although the intense work of preparing the vocal score did not involve a great deal of direct communication with Britten, the deteriorating state of his health meant that he needed help with the full score, which I worked on under his supervision in the spring of 1973. He had been advised to have a thorough medical examination as soon as the score was finished, and this revealed that the immediate replacement of a heart valve was essential. But the outcome was not happy : the procedure failed, in that all that was achieved was a stabilization of his heart which allowed him only another three and a half years of life, with a greatly reduced capacity for work.

After the operation he was unable to be involved with the the rehearsals and first performance of the opera at Snape, although in the autumn he was well enough to make revisions and to attend its performance at the Royal Opera House. It was the first time I had seen him for several months, and he appeared much better than I had expected. But at the recording sessions for *Death in Venice* in the spring of 1974, at The Maltings, I was shocked to see how much weaker he seemed.

Nevertheless he returned to composing during 1974, first reworking a string quartet he had written in 1931 while studying at the Royal College, followed by *Canticle V* , *The Death of Saint Narcissus* , and the orchestral *Suite on English Folk Tunes* 'A time there was . . . '. I was closely involved with editing these works, but the scores were prepared by Britten's indefatigable assistant Rosamund Strode.

Britten was able to continue writing during the early part of 1975, but by the summer he had reached an impasse. His health was not improving, and he needed more direct help. Although he had never composed at the piano, he had always played through his sketches, in order, as he told me, to 'fix them in time'. He had two large-scale works in mind, and he asked me to play through the music as he wrote it. These works were *Phaedra*, the cantata based on Robert Lowell's version of Racine's *Phèdre*, composed for Janet Baker; and the Third String Quartet, written for the Amadeus Quartet.

The experience of seeing these pieces evolve was unforgettable : for *Phaedra* I had to prepare the vocal score from Britten's full score sketch - a much more difficult task than I had been faced with for *Death in Venice*. And then I had to play it for him - as a mediocre pianist this was a major challenge for me, although Britten was able to help out with his still strong left hand. He had not quite made up his mind how the piece was going to end, and to be asked which version I thought was better was not

easy to answer.

Working on the Third Quartet was even more daunting, both in trying to get my fingers around the string textures, and in responding to Britten's almost anxious questions about the work. At one stage he thought of calling it a 'Divertimento', a typically self-disparaging way of describing what was so clearly a deep and subtle work. (I did not know then that in 1943 he had described the *Serenade* as 'not important stuff, but quite pleasant'.)

In the last year of his life there were at first no new works - he concentrated on arrangements, including folk songs for Peter Pears to sing with the harpist Osian Ellis. He had made plans to write a Sea Symphony, and a Christmas Sequence as a companion piece to *Noyes Fludde*, but neither of these progressed beyond the selection of texts. However in the summer of 1976 he did manage to compose a work for children, a *Welcome Ode* for the visit of the Queen to Ipswich in 1977, which he asked me to orchestrate for him. And left unfinished at his death a choral work, *Praise We Great Men* (setting a poem written for him by Edith Sitwell), intended for Rostropovich's first season as conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra of Washington. We discussed how we were to work on this on the last occasion I was to see him, just over a month before his death; I completed the orchestration of the fragment two months later.

Did I really sit at the piano with this great composer and play for him music that he was no longer able to play himself? Hard to believe, just as I find it difficult to accept that there are now so many active musicians for whom Britten is a more distant figure than, say, Richard Strauss is to me. The profound impression left by working for him, and my continuing involvement with his music, are things for which I cannot be anything but deeply grateful.