

Late Britten

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'Late music' is not always music written in the shadow of death, although our perspective inevitably makes it seem as if that is the case. Contrary to received opinion, Mahler's last works, though death-obsessed, were written in the expectation, or at least hope, that he had many years ahead of him. Berg's elegiac Violin Concerto was written as a memorial for Alma Mahler's daughter, not for himself, although his own death came only weeks after its completion. We think of Mozart's introspective late works as foreshadowing his appallingly early death, but only the Requiem was written in the knowledge that he was not likely to complete it.

Some composers late works show remarkable resilience - Verdi and Janáček writing their greatest operas in old age; Richard Strauss reserving his ninth decade for some of his finest music; Elliott Carter still productive at 103. With others, fated to die relatively young, it is as if what would become their final works were composed in a race against time - Schubert and Beethoven above all. Britten, much older than them both, but in an age when dying at 63 means dying far too young, belongs with them.

For a while after his heart operation in May 1973 he had hoped that he might make a full recovery, but it soon became evident that this was not to be. He recuperated enough to make a number of significant changes to *Death in Venice* in the autumn of that year, as well as making a small Handel arrangement. But the realisation that he would spend the rest of his life as a semi-invalid depressed him, and it was not until the spring of 1974 that he returned to composing by way of reworking a string quartet that he had composed in 1931, while a student at the Royal College.

It was the beginning of what was to become a remarkable late period. In the two years that remained to him he wrote eight significant new works, including such major pieces as *Phaedra* and the Third String Quartet; completed fourteen arrangements of sacred songs and folk songs; arranged his 1950 *Lachrymae* for string orchestra; and made a major revision of his first opera, *Paul Bunyan*. In addition he made plans for a Christmas Sequence, intended as a companion piece to *Noyes Fludde*, and for a large scale *Sea Symphony*. At his death he left unfinished *Praise We Great Men*, sketching less than half of what would have been a substantial cantata. These works were indeed written under the shadow of death, but most of them have a vitality that belies the circumstance of their composition.

For a composer in full health this body of music would have been an impressive achievement. Yet Britten's health was gradually declining : he had the energy to work only for increasingly short periods, had difficulty in physically writing down his music, and was unable to play the piano. This last, though upsetting, was perhaps the least of his problems, as he had never used the piano as a composing tool. But he relied on it to play through what he had written each day - mainly, as he said, in order to fix the music in time rather than to check the notes themselves.

This led him, in the summer of 1975, to ask me if I would play through work in progress, and in this way I was directly involved with all the music composed from *Phaedra* onwards. It was a remarkable experience to see the Third Quartet growing movement by movement, and to sit next to the composer,

playing it for him. In the Finale his left hand was strong enough to play the cello's passacaglia theme throughout. For his last two works, the *Welcome Ode* and *Praise We Great Men*, he was unable to write out a full score himself, and so asked me to orchestrate them from his sketch. He approved the score of *Welcome Ode*; but although I had begun work on the final cantata in November 1976, his fast failing health meant that we were never to work on it together.

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