

## The Prince of the Pagodas

Written for the Royal Ballet production in 2013

Britten, usually the most fluent of composers, took longer to write *The Prince of the Pagodas* than any other of his major works. Announced at the beginning of 1954 for performance in the autumn of 1955, the deadline was shifted three times before the ballet finally came to the stage in January 1957.

Part of the problem was the need to write so much music without using words : Britten's output since the early 1940s had centred largely on the voice, including no less than seven operas. But he was also disconcerted to find himself somewhat cast adrift in a world with which he was unfamiliar. He got on well with John Cranko, who had been the choreographer for the dance elements in *Gloriana* in 1953, and he embraced the scenario for *The Prince of the Pagodas* enthusiastically. But once he had started work, the collaboration that Britten had envisaged, and which he had always enjoyed with his librettists, never materialised.

Cranko, feeling that his detailed synopsis, complete with precise timings, was enough, simply left Britten to get on with the music. The composer was, as Sir John Tooley later commented, writing it 'in a bit of a vacuum'. He said himself that he 'didn't want to be the person who dictated the length of the music. I wanted the choreographer to tell me'. This, of course, Cranko believed that he had done. But the music took the scenario in new directions which Cranko never seemed to be around to advise on. When at last he heard it his reaction was that '[Britten's] imagery was so strong that the entire choreography had to be revisualized'.

Thus the two men were all the time tending to pull in different directions, and the result was never likely to be wholly satisfactory to either of them. Britten did his best to be helpful, making many cuts (though most of them were minor) and agreeing to conduct the first few performances – something he had never intended to do. After 20 or so performances in its first year the ballet only reappeared intermittently, and was dropped from the repertoire after 1960. Although Cranko was to mount other productions elsewhere, he too eventually abandoned it; while Britten showed little interest in the music for the rest of his life.

Fortunately he recorded the score shortly after the first performance with the Royal Opera House orchestra, although with many extensive cuts (largely dictated by the length of long-playing records). It was, however, the only major work which remained unpublished at his death and which he could not be persuaded to look at. His friendship with Cranko, initially warm and close, faded away : their only subsequent collaboration, on the opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1960, was not a success.

There was one exception to Britten's turning his back on the ballet : he responded enthusiastically to a letter from the director of the Kirov Ballet in 1971, and endorsed changes both to the scenario and to the music. But it was the only time : when Kenneth MacMillan visited him in the 1970s, a meeting brokered by John Tooley, there was little or no encouragement from the composer for a revival.

Britten's reaction to his own music was often coloured by the circumstances of the first performance. His operatic collaboration with W H Auden, *Paul Bunyan*, was withdrawn after its New York première in 1941. When he was persuaded to allow excerpts of the opera to be performed, shortly

before his death, he was amazed by the strength of the music. It is hard to believe that the same would not have been the case had *The Prince of the Pagodas* been revived. For in spite of all the tribulations of its coming to birth, this is a stunning score, brimful of some of the most exhilarating and colourful music he was ever to write.

In spite of the lack of words, composing to specific timings and situations was nothing new to Britten : in the 1930s he had served an invaluable apprenticeship by composing for documentary films, something he achieved with remarkable flair and versatility. This skill was to carry him through the first act of *Pagodas* and half of the second; but the music for the second scene eluded him, and the score that he'd hoped at this stage might be delivered before a planned 5 month world tour towards the end of 1955 had to be put back further. However it was this tour that proved to be a catalyst : his encounter on the island of Bali with the music of the gamelan prompted a telegram to Ninette de Valois in January 1956 with the words ' Confident ballet ready for midSeptember love Britten'.

More than 10 years earlier Britten had come across Indonesian gamelan music through his friendship with the ethnomusicologist Colin McPhee in the USA. But although he had almost immediately begun to incorporate some of its elements into his own music, the encounter in the flesh was a revelation : 'The music is *fantastically* rich', he wrote in a letter to Imogen Holst, 'melodically, rhythmically, texture (such *orchestration*!!) and above all *formally*. It is a remarkable culture.' For the ballet he was able to recreate the distinctive soundworld of the gamelan by using exclusively Western percussion instruments, a tour-de-force of orchestration; and gamelan music pervades the second scene of Act 2, which he began work on with renewed enthusiasm immediately after his return from the tour. Even then the September deadline could not be met - hardly surprising in view of the wealth of invention necessary to complete Act 3. But he was able to deliver the finished piano rehearsal score in August 1956.

Just as Cranko had compiled his scenario from various sources so Britten followed earlier examples of narrative ballet, in particular *Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty*. Tchaikovsky is clearly the model for the sheer melodic inventiveness of the music, almost unprecedented in Britten's output. Yet for the purposes of dance the music is sometimes almost too inventive. Comparing Cranko's proposed timings with the music that Britten actually composed shows that he nearly always wrote more than was expected of him - the most extreme example being the 1st scene of Act 2, where Cranko's suggested 14 minutes is matched by Britten's 26 minutes (if played uncut). In the 2nd scene of Act 3 the sheer dynamism of the music makes it in places almost undanceable - Britten was clearly optimistic about the energy levels needed, in particular in the second of the two pas de deux. But his sense of pacing and movement - uncanny for a ballet ingenu - never let him down musically.

For a score that is so vivid that it cries out to be played in the concert hall, *The Prince of the Pagodas* has made surprisingly little impression on the orchestral repertoire. Britten made only one suite from the ballet, published as *Pas de Six* (it consists of most of the final dances from Act 3) but neither that nor the various suites that others have compiled have gained much of a foothold. In 1989 Oliver Knussen recorded the complete ballet, revealing the music's full power for the first time. I was able to give Kenneth MacMillan a copy of the recording before it was released, and he was so struck by it that he reinstated a number of the cuts that he had been intending to make. He felt, then, that it was a work in progress; but he was unable to make the revisions he had hoped to in 1992.

As Jan Parry points out in her note, this revival takes a radical look both at MacMillan's choreography

and Britten's score : although there is much beautiful music that has been omitted, or used in unexpected ways, the substance of it remains untouched, and allows a singular ballet to come to life again. This remarkable work continues to challenge and provoke.

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