

English Music in the 20th Century

Edward Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

Benjamin Britten, in full, **Baron Britten of Aldeburgh**, leading British composer of the mid-20th century, whose operas were considered the finest English operas since those of Henry Purcell in the 17th century. He was also an outstanding pianist and conductor.

Britten composed as a child and at the age of 12 began several years of study under the composer and teacher Frank Bridge. He later studied under John Ireland and Arthur Benjamin at the Royal College of Music in London and, while there, composed the set of choral variations *A Boy Was Born* (1933; revised, 1958). He then worked as a composer for the radio, theatre, and cinema, coming into close contact with the poet W.H. Auden. In 1937 his *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, for string orchestra, won him international acclaim.

From 1939 to 1942 he was in the United States, where his first work for the stage, the operetta *Paul Bunyan* (1941; libretto by Auden), was performed. A commission by the Koussevitzky Foundation led to the composition of his opera *Peter Grimes* (1945; libretto by M. Slater after George Crabbe's poem *The Borough*), which placed Britten in the forefront of 20th-century composers of opera. His later operas include *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946); the comic *Albert Herring* (1947); *Billy Budd* (1951; after Herman Melville); *Gloriana* (1953; written for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II); *The Turn of the Screw* (1954; after Henry James); *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960); *Owen Wingrave* (television, 1971); and *Death in Venice* (1973; after Thomas Mann).

With the church parable *Curlew River* (1964), his conception of musical theatre took a new direction, combining influences from the Japanese Noh theatre and English medieval religious drama. Two other church parables, *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966) and *The Prodigal Son* (1968), followed. An earlier church-pageant opera, *Noye's Fludde* (1958), made use of one of the medieval Chester mystery plays. *The Rape of Lucretia* marked the inception of the English Opera Group, with Britten as artistic director, composer, and conductor. This undertaking gave rise to the Aldeburgh Festival (founded 1947), which became one of the most important English music festivals and the centre of Britten's musical activities.

Preeminent among Britten's nontheatrical music are his song cycles. Among those that established his stature as a songwriter are (for voice and piano) *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* (1940; written for the tenor Peter Pears, his life partner and artistic collaborator), *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne* (1945), *Winter Words* (1953), and *Hölderlin Fragment* (1958); and (for voice and orchestra) *Our Hunting Fathers* (1936; text by Auden), *Les Illuminations* (1939; text by Arthur Rimbaud), and *Serenade* (1943).

Britten's largest choral work is the *War Requiem* (1962) for choir and orchestra, based on the Latin requiem mass text and the poems of Wilfred Owen, who was killed in World War I. Other choral works include the *Hymn to St. Cecilia* (1942; text by Auden), *Ceremony of Carols* (1942), *Rejoice in the Lamb* (1943), *St. Nicolas* (1948), *Spring Symphony* (1949), and *Voices for Today* (1965; written for the United Nations' 20th anniversary).

Among his principal instrumental works are the *Simple Symphony* for strings (1925); three string quartets (1941, 1945, and 1976); concerti for piano and for violin; *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1945); and *Symphony in D Major for Cello and Orchestra* (1963), written for the Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich.

Britten's operas are admired for their skilful setting of English words and their orchestral interludes, as well as for their dramatic aptness and depth of psychological characterization. In chamber operas such as *The Rape of Lucretia* and the church parables, he proved that serious music theatre could flourish outside the opera house. His continual willingness to experiment with modern musical styles, forms, and sonorities and with new theatrical environments proved extremely fruitful.

Britten was created Companion of Honour in 1953 and was awarded the Order of Merit in 1965. In June 1976 he was created a life peer, the first musician or composer to be elevated to the peerage.