



Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music

By Neil Powell

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This spellbinding centenary biography by Neil Powell looks at the music, the life, and the legacy of the greatest British composer of the twentieth century

Benjamin Britten was born on November 22, 1913, in the East Suffolk town of Lowestoft. Displaying a passion and proficiency for music at an early age, to the delight of his mother, Edith, a talented amateur musician herself, he began composing music when he was only five years old. After studying at the Royal College of Music, Britten went on to write documentary scores for the General Post Office Film Unit, where he met and collaborated with the poet W. H. Auden.

Of more lasting importance was Britten's introduction in 1937 to the tenor Peter Pears, who was to become the inspirational center of his emotional and musical life. Their partnership lasted nearly four decades, during a dangerous time when homosexuality was illegal in England. Conscientious objectors, Britten and Pears followed Auden to America before the war began in 1939. While there, they joined the extraordinary Brooklyn ménage of George Davis, Louis MacNeice, and Paul Bowles.

Eventually intense homesickness, provoked in part by George Crabbe's poem "Peter Grimes," drove the pair home to East Anglia in 1942 and gave Britten the inspiration for his finest opera. Throughout his career, Britten did not want modern music to be just for "the cultured few" and instead always composed his music to be "listenable-to." The shared quotidian lives of Britten and Pears unfold in this intimate biography and the story of two men who created a truly remarkable legacy.

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Benjamin Britten (1913–76) is acknowledged to be the greatest English composer since Henry Purcell (1659–95), one of the greatest twentieth-century composers, and the greatest operatic composer after Puccini. Powell’s centenary biography doesn’t echo all those assessments so much as it is completely uninterested in disputing them. It is a deeply sympathetic and appreciative work that represents Britten’s life as one of constant composition, performance, and labor for the life of music, the last including, most saliently, founding the prestigious Aldeburgh Festival on the Suffolk coast, where he was born and lived the preponderance of his days. The phenomena of that coast—the sea, the wind, the isolation—informed and animated his music, as Powell often reminds us as he discusses each major piece of it. Britten’s other chief inspiration was his love for the tenor Peter Pears, who shared with Clara Schumann the rare distinction of premiering nearly all the finest music of a composer of Olympian stature because he, like she, was the master-musician life-partner of a musical genius. Shy and insecure, Britten yet also accomplished a nonmusical feat that Powell calls his third “enduring” legacy. He and Pears showed that a homosexual couple could “live decently and unapologetically.” There are and will be other important biographies of Britten. That any of them will manifest a more intelligently affectionate appreciation of him seems unlikely. --Ray Olson

Review

“Powell also writes insightfully about the relationship between the music and the texts Britten used...[and] offers elegant descriptions of Britten's music and the Suffolk countryside that inspired it.” *?New York Times Book Review*

“Most of what you might want to know about Britten can probably be found, entertainingly phrased, in Mr. Powell's book” *?Michael Feingold, Wall Street Journal*

“[Powell]...is best on the music.” *?Washington Post*

“Powell's close readings of Britten's choice of texts become a layer of biographical illustration in themselves... Powell brings out Britten's intuitive feel for how language can both conceal and reveal -- a lifelong artistic concern.” *?Boston Globe*

“The book offers some interpretive wonders when it comes to the composer's many settings of poetry..” *?Slate*

“In this powerful biography, Powell pays eloquent tribute to Britten's musical genius.” *?PW, starred review*

“A deeply sympathetic and appreciative work...There are and will be other important biographies of Britten. That any of them will manifest a more intelligently affectionate appreciation of him seems unlikely.” *?Booklist, starred review*

“As pleasurable as hearing Britten's music for the first time: familiar, but new and rich enough to keep you coming back.” *?Kirkus*

“Finally, an intimate and spellbinding biography of one of the 20th century's most prolific and gifted composers.” *?Examiner.com*

“What Benjamin Britten heard, or performed himself, what he was reading, whom he met; and above all the environment are so fundamental to Britten's imagination as a composer. In this lovingly detailed biography Neil Powell takes one right back to the people, the music, and Suffolk, England. The artistic and personal collaboration between Peter Pears and the composer is an intrinsic part of any portrait of Britten. The atmosphere in which they met, the world they were able to create together; is also wonderfully described. In addition to learning more about scores with which I am familiar, this book makes me want to go back and hear and play though much of Benjamin Britten's other music.” *Philip Schneidman, Director of the Little Opera Theater of New York*

About the Author

Neil Powell is the author of biographies on George Crabbe and Kingsley and Martin Amis, as well as seven collections of poetry. He has contributed to numerous journals and newspapers, including *The Guardian* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. Powell now lives in Aldeburgh, where Britten lived for the last thirty years of his life.

Users Review

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