

## ENTR'ACTE

Vol. VI, Number 3, March, 1991

**Next Meeting: 7:00 p.m. March 11, 1991**

**Room 1028 (Music Lounge), Music Building**

Editor: Arthur Canter

30 Brookfield Drive

Iowa City, IA 52245

### Letter from the Editor

I have heard from many of you, and it appears that I should keep on with the editorship of **Entr'Acte**. The response was almost overwhelming. This past month has confronted us with the problem of keeping focused on the ordinary things of daily life and the enjoyment of cultural events while there was a Gulf War going on. But now we can devote full attention to such trivial events as opera, concerts, etc. Apropos of this you will note how such matters were regarded in England in wartime--see below in the biographical sketch of Britten.

### Report of the Meeting of February 11, 1991

There were announcements regarding Music School programs, a Composers Workshop, and the recipe column that Johanna Beers will do in the Press-Citizen relating to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. We had two guests address the group and answer questions: Peter Alexander, Director of Arts Center Relations, reviewed what ACR can do, problems in dealing with newspapers, etc. Mary Louise Plautz, Education Coordinator of Arts Outreach, described some exciting projects that will involve high school students from around the state in events associated with the spring opera (see **Miscellaneous: Needs** at end of newsletter). In Hancher lobby this spring there will be a display of designs and costumes from the Opera and Theater costume/design shop. Mona Shaw indicated that only main-floor tickets will be sold for the spring opera. Next meeting of Supers will be Monday, March 11.

### Benjamin Britten: A Biographical Sketch

We already know much about Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the recent issue of Arts Iowa has a good summary of the Britten opera based on the play. It is probably safe to assume that most readers of **Entr'Acte** know little about Britten, a complex person whose creative contributions are only beginning to be appreciated as more of his works are recorded and appear in concerts and on the opera stage.

Edward Benjamin Britten was born at Lowestoft, Suffolk, England by the North Sea. His father was a dental surgeon, his mother a fine amateur singer. As a boy Britten showed precocious musical talent and interest. He started to compose at age five. He was taught piano and viola. By the time he finished preparatory school at age 14, he had already written ten piano sonatas, six string quartets, three suites for piano, an oratorio, and dozens of songs. He had also taken composition lessons from Frank Bridge, the composer, during school holidays. At age 16 he won an open scholarship in composition at the Royal College of Music, London.

He was rather unhappy and frustrated at the College. As he later is said to have put it, "When you are immensely full of energy and ideas, you don't want to waste your time being taken through elementary exercises in dictation," but he remained at the College for three years.

Britten was determined to earn his living by composing when he became of age the year after he left the College. In 1935 he joined the GPO Film Unit to compose incidental music for the documentary films produced by that group. It was at the GPO Film Unit that he met W. H. Auden, the poet, who was four years his senior and a graduate of the same public school Britten had attended before entering the College. The poet had an important influence on Britten in giving him a deeper appreciation of the beauty of poetry and an awareness of the problems with combining words with music. The two collaborated on various films. Britten composed music for two Auden/Isherwood verse plays, and Auden provided the texts for two of Britten's song cycles. Britten received a number of commissions for theater and radio work over the next several years.

By 1939 the deteriorating political situation in England, as well as in Europe, and the impending war led a number of English artists, including Auden and Isherwood, to leave for the United States. Later that year Britten, feeling "muddled, fed-up and looking for work, longing to be used" (his own account), left England with his close friend Peter Pears, the tenor. (Theirs was an intimate relationship that was to last 40 years.) They went first to Canada and then to the United States, joining the group of English artist emigrés. Britten completed several major works during his first year in

the United States. He resumed work with Auden and collaborated with him for an operetta, *Paul Bunyan*, produced at Columbia University in May, 1941. However, by 1942 Britten was homesick for England, and he and Pears left America in March, sailing to England on a small Swedish cargo boat which took a month to make the perilous Atlantic crossing at this period of World War II. During the voyage Britten completed his cantata *Hymn to St. Cecilia* to the text Auden had written for him and composed *A Ceremony of Carols* for treble voice and harp.

Back in England Britten ran into difficulties because of his failure to serve in the military. However, as a known pacifist, he was granted exemption as a conscientious objector and was allowed to work in composition provided he also performed as a pianist at special wartime concerts promoted by CEMA (Council for Encouragement of Music) all over England. [Is there a lesson to be learned in the United States from this?--Ed.] Over the next several years Britten arranged to have performed his own works that he had brought back with him from America and began working on his new opera, *Peter Grimes*. The first performance of the opera on June 7, 1945, marked the return of the Sadler's Wells Opera Company. The success of *Peter Grimes* with Peter Pears in the title role brought international attention to the composer. Dissension at Sadler's Wells Theatre regarding their operatic policy led a group of the opera company's artists, including Britten and Pears, to leave the company and form their own small-scale company. The composer agreed to help the group get started and wrote *The Rape of Lucretia*, an opera that required the services of the eight singers and twelve instrumentalists making up the group. The opera was given at Glyndebourne in the summer of 1946. The opening was a success, and the company decided to call themselves the English Opera Group (EOG).

The next year they put on another Britten comic opera at Glyndebourne, *Albert Herring*. EOG took both operas to two festivals in Europe, and in the course of the tour they decided to hold a festival at home in Aldeburgh, England, where Britten and Pears resided. Thus was born the Aldeburgh Festival in 1948, and it became an annual event. Now Britten's life followed a fairly regular pattern. He received frequent commissions and was able to work on operas as he wished. In 1955 he and Pears made an extended tour of the Far East. In the 1960's Britten befriended a number of Russian musicians, including Shostakovich, whose music Britten greatly admired, and Rostropovich and Richter, both of whom were invited to perform periodically at an Aldeburgh Festival. The Russians, in return, had high regard for Britten's music, and a Britten Festival was held in the USSR (Armenia) in 1963.

In the spring of 1973 Britten was hospitalized for a heart condition for which he underwent surgery. The treatment was only partially successful, resulting in a sharp curtailment of the composer's activities. In 1976 Britten was created a life baron and thereafter could assume the life style and title of Lord Britten of Aldeburgh, but he died on December 4, 1976, having had very little opportunity to enjoy the honor bestowed upon him.

Benjamin Britten's operas and dates of first performances: *Paul Bunyan*, May 5, 1941; *Peter Grimes*, June 7, 1945; *The Rape of Lucretia*, July 12, 1946; *Albert Herring*, June 20, 1947; *The Beggar's Opera*, May 24, 1948; *The Little Sweep*, June 14, 1949; *Billy Budd*, December 1, 1951; *Gloriana*, June 8, 1953; *The Turn of the Screw*, September 14, 1954; *Noyes Fludde*, June 18, 1958; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, June 11, 1960; *Curlew River*, June 13, 1964; *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, June 9, 1966; *The Prodigal Son*, June 10, 1968; *Owen Wingrave*, May 18, 1971; and *Death in Venice*, June 16, 1973.

### More on Benjamin Britten

Peter Pears, reminiscing about Britten, noted how Britten had enjoyed accompanying his mother on the piano while she sang. He liked to sing, too, but had a poor opinion of his own voice. He liked to play the viola in local quartets. From his negative experiences with Auden's writing scripts before he had a chance to review them, Britten learned that he had to discuss every step of a work with his librettists and to work closely with them in the preparation of his operas.

Lord Harewood noted that Britten was wholly gregarious and articulate with his friends but found communication very difficult with those he either did not know or who were not on his side on controversial issues. Before an appearance as a piano soloist Britten suffered such extreme bouts of nerves that he was unable to eat before the concert. He felt inhibited by what he himself described as psychosomatic illnesses. He was considered a man of great charm, but he was basically insecure. In his later years he avoided contact with other people to the point of being obsessive in his desire to be left alone except by his closest friends. He could be punitively moralistic and suffered from an "aggressive pacifism" that turned many people off. He could not accept the fact that he was a celebrity. Hardly a vocal line in his works fails to have some meticulous instruction as to how it



should be performed. He was very particular about his clothes. Shirts were specially made for both Britten and Pears by Austin Reed, and the housekeeper had to wash them at home. His heart surgery left him profoundly depressed, and he fretted continually about his disability.

**Miscellaneous: Notes, Announcements, Needs**

**Volunteers Needed:** One of the projects for high school students will be a "festival" for 100 gifted students: they will meet with faculty, directors, attend a special dinner, attend a performance of *Twelfth Night*, attend a workshop early Thursday morning, April 18th, followed by the opera at 10:30 a.m. The students are to arrive in Iowa City the day before. Their lodging will be underwritten by Opportunity at Iowa. Volunteers are needed to assist in the conduct of this "festival." It is an exciting, innovative event that deserves the attention of the Opera Supers. If you can help out, please call Mary Louise Plautz at (319) 335-2694.

**Costume Shop Needs:** For the fairy costumes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, gauzy fabrics and costume jewelry are needed. Maybe you have a "gauzy" old blouse, dress or skirt. The costume design people can take these apart and use portions--it need not be yard goods. Call Eleanore Bowers, 335-1680, drop things off at the Costume Shop in the Music Building, or at your editor's address (on masthead of *Entr'Acte*), and he will get your donations to the Costume Shop.

**Notes:** Dianna Penny, one of our singing active Supers, will be giving a recital in the Colloton Pavilion, University Hospitals, at noon on May 8th. She will be accompanied by Mary Beth Barteau. You are all invited to attend; admission is free.

A number of singers of local interest will be appearing in *The Marriage of Figaro* with the Cedar Rapids Symphony: Barbara Buddin, Kristor Hustad, Leslie Morgan, and Christopher Goeke. The opera is being produced by Beaumont Glass with the chamber-sized orchestra conducted by Christian Tiemeyer. The performances are March 23 and March 25 at the Paramount Theater in Cedar Rapids. Call 366-8203 for ticket information.

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