

Billy Budd

Composer Biography: Benjamin Britten



Britten was born, by happy coincidence, on St. Cecilia's Day, at the family home in Lowestoft, Suffolk, England. His father was a dentist. He was the youngest of four children, with a brother, Robert (1907), and two sisters, Barbara (1902) and Beth (1909). He was educated locally, and studied, first, piano, and then, later, viola, from private teachers.

He began to compose as early as 1919, and after about 1922, composed steadily until his death. At a concert in 1927, conducted by composer Frank Bridge, he met Bridge, later showed him several of his compositions, and ultimately Bridge took him on as a private pupil. After two years at Gresham's School in Holt, Norfolk, he entered the Royal College of Music in London (1930) where he studied

composition with John Ireland and piano with Arthur Benjamin. During his stay at the RCM he won several prizes for his compositions. He completed a choral work, *A Boy was Born*, in 1933; at a rehearsal for a broadcast performance of the work by the BBC Singers, he met tenor Peter Pears, the beginning of a lifelong personal and professional relationship. (Many of Britten's solo songs, choral and operatic works feature the tenor voice, and Pears was the designated soloist at many of their premieres.)

From about 1935 until the beginning of World War II, Britten did a great deal of composing for the GPO Film Unit, for BBC Radio, and for small, usually left-wing, theater groups in London. During this period he met and worked frequently with the poet W. H. Auden who provided texts for numerous songs as well as complete scripts for which Britten provided incidental music. In the spring of 1939, Britten and Pears sailed for North America, eventually settling in Amityville, Long Island, NY, where they lived with Dr. and Mrs. Wm. Mayer and their family. In 1940 he worked with Auden on what would become his first opera, actually an operetta for high schools called *Paul Bunyan*, based on traditional American folk characters. However, on a trip to California in 1941, he read an article by E. M. Forster on the English poet George Crabbe, planting the seed for what would eventually be Britten's first opera, *Peter Grimes*. In 1942, Serge Koussevitzky became interested in Britten's music and performed the *Sinfonia da*

Requiem with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Out of this association came the commission from the Koussevitzky Foundation (in memory of Koussevitzky's late wife Natalie) for the new opera, based on Crabbe's work *The Borough*. Britten and Pears worked on the scenario during their return voyage to England in March 1942.

During the early 40s, Britten produced a number of works, outstanding among them the *Hymn to St. Cecilia*, *A Ceremony of Carols*, *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*, *Serenade* (for tenor, horn, and strings), *Rejoice in the Lamb*, and the *Festival Te Deum*. *Peter Grimes*, with a libretto by Montagu Slater, was complete in 1945 and had its premiere on June 7 of that year by the Sadler's Wells Opera Company. (Slightly over a year later, the work had its American premiere at the Boston Symphony's summer home at Tanglewood, under the baton of Leonard Bernstein.)

Britten was awarded the Order of Merit in March 1965; he was created a Life Peer, Baron Britten of Aldeburgh in the County of Suffolk, in the Queen's Birthday Honours List, June 1976. Three years earlier, in May 1973, he had undergone open heart surgery which left him an invalid for the remainder of his life. He was nevertheless able to attend the London premiere of *Death in Venice* at Covent Garden, October 1973, and was able to travel to Germany and Italy. He died at his home in Aldeburgh, Suffolk, on 4 December 1976 and is buried in the churchyard of the Aldeburgh Parish Church. His colleagues Peter Pears and Imogene Holst, co-founders with BB of the Aldeburgh Festival, lie in adjacent graves.

Source: Opera Stanford