



Benjamin Britten at Crag House  
c.1949: the seeming inevitability  
of his response to words is one  
of his hallmarks

# Sacred and profane

Whether writing a cappella church music or a major symphonic choral work, Benjamin Britten responded to texts with depth of insight. In the composer's centenary year, **Philip Reed** argues that there is much still to discover in his choral canon

The seeming inevitability of Britten's response to words is one of the hallmarks of his output. Indeed, so idiomatic are his settings that it remains difficult, when reading a text he has set, for one's mind's ear not to conjure up Britten's music. This remains as true of his wide-ranging choral music as it does of his numerous song-cycles and operas. But whereas in his operas and orchestral song-cycles Britten was something of a pioneer, establishing a national tradition for opera where none existed, in his choral music he was working within an already well-established tradition, which lay at the heart of British musical life.

Choral music – unaccompanied, for the church, and with orchestra – spans Britten's entire published output and occupies an important position in his music-making. To provide a truly comprehensive survey would require more space than presently available, so I propose here to focus on the less familiar. Major choral pieces such as *A Ceremony of Carols*, *Saint Nicolas*, *Spring Symphony* and *War Requiem* are well known and demand no special advocacy.

As it happens, one of Britten's earliest a cappella works is also one of his most celebrated: the beautiful *A Hymn to the Virgin*, composed in 1930 when he was still a schoolboy. The anonymous text from 1300 combines English and Latin in an antiphonal

setting for eight-part chorus in a *faux* medieval style. It was first performed in 1931 by the Lowestoft Choral Society (in which the composer's mother sang), along with his unaccompanied carol, *The Sycamore Tree*, a setting of a text related to the more familiar carol *I saw three ships*, which Britten did not publish (in a revised version) until 1967.

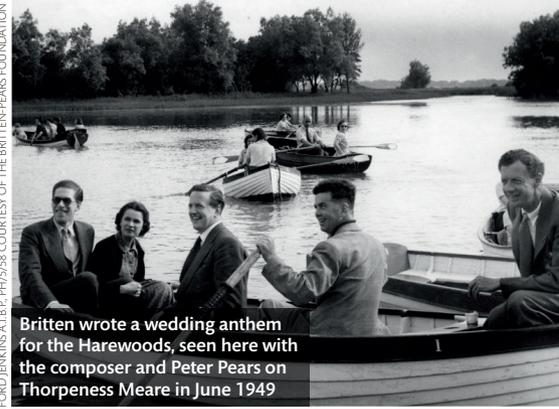
Christmastide remained a favourite season for Britten, one to which he repeatedly responded in his compositions. *A Ceremony of Carols* (1942) for boys' voices and harp, and independent carol settings such as *A Wealden Trio: The Song of the Women* (1930, revised 1967) and *The Oxen*, a setting of Thomas Hardy's poem, composed in 1967 at the request of Pears's sister for the East Coker Women's Institute, explore the dramatic possibilities of their respective texts. Two major choral works from the 1930s encapsulate Britten's love of Christmas: *A Boy Was Born* (1933); and its forerunner, *Christ's Nativity* (1931), originally entitled *Thy King's Birthday*, which, with the exception of two of its movements, was not heard during the composer's lifetime.

*A Boy Was Born* is a half-hour sequence of virtuosic variations on a theme – an example of Britten's employing an instrumental genre within a choral work to impressive cumulative effect. It remains

◀ one of the composer's most taxing yet rewarding unaccompanied choral pieces; indeed, when he revised it in the mid-1950s, he added an *ad lib.* part for organ to support the singers. At the time of its premiere, it was Britten's most ambitious work to date and its first performance – a 1934 BBC broadcast under Leslie Woodgate – brought him a great deal of attention.

The boy trebles who took part in the premiere of *Boy* came from St Mark's, North Audley Street, London, and they were rewarded for their labours later that year with Britten's initial foray into settings of the Anglican canticles. He wrote the first of his two settings of the *Te Deum*, in C major, for Maurice Vinden and his choir, and at the same period completed a *Jubilate Deo* in E flat. While Britten suppressed the latter – it was posthumously revived in 1984 – the straightforward setting of *Te Deum* was

not only published but also orchestrated by the composer for harp (or piano) and strings, presumably in an attempt to free it from a life entirely confined to the cloisters. Britten's other 'official' church music comprises a little-known *Festival Te Deum* from 1944 for the centenary of St Mark's, Swindon, composed in a break from writing *Peter Grimes*, and settings of the *Jubilate Deo* in C and *Venite exultemus Domino*, from 1961. The latter were composed at the request of the Duke of Edinburgh for St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, though at the time only the *Jubilate* was performed. Prince Philip attempted to persuade Britten to make complete settings of the canticles for morning and evening prayer, but Britten's response, despite the royal 'commission', was at best half-hearted and the request remained unfulfilled. The *Venite* was only published posthumously and there



Britten wrote a wedding anthem for the Harewoods, seen here with the composer and Peter Pears on Thorpeness Meare in June 1949

remains a sketch of a few bars of yet another *Te Deum* from the same period.

Among those who approached Britten in the 1960s to write a congregational mass setting was the Dean of Chichester, Revd Walter Hussey, who, when incumbent at St Matthew's, Northampton, had commissioned from the composer in 1943 *Rejoice in the Lamb*, one of the most engaging and delightful of Britten's choral works. This setting of part of Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno* inspired Britten to create a miniature Purcellian cantata. Originally with organ accompaniment, the composer invited Imogen Holst to make an orchestration of it in 1952.

The title of the early *Hymn to the Virgin* was emulated in several later choral pieces. First, in the celebrated five-part *Hymn to St Cecilia* (1942), a setting of a text by Auden; it includes a memorable passage evoking lost innocence in A major with a sharpened fourth degree, the key that Britten habitually used for this image. Second is the *Hymn to St Peter* (1955), based on the plainsong 'Tu es Petrus' which is only revealed, in characteristic Britten fashion, at the work's conclusion. Finally, and perhaps least known of all, is *A Hymn of St Columba – Regis regum rectissimi mi*, for four-part chorus and organ, composed in 1962 at the request of the artist Derek Hill, to mark the 1,400th anniversary of Columba's voyage from Ireland to Iona. It was first heard on the hillside at Churchill, Co. Donegal, where Columba was said to have preached. A BBC recording was relayed over loudspeakers, but was virtually inaudible because of the strength of the wind blowing over the hill!

Other short church pieces include the exuberant *Wedding Anthem (Amo Ergo Sum)*, composed for the marriage of the Earl of Harewood to Marion Stein in 1949 at St Mark's, North Audley Street; the George Herbert setting *Antiphon* (1956), written for the centenary of St Michael's ▶

Composition draft MS of *A Hymn to the Virgin* written in July 1930, when Britten was still a schoolboy

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## BRITTEN'S CHORAL MUSIC

◀ College, Tenbury Wells, whose words 'Praised be the God of Love / Here below / And here above' suggested to Britten three contrasting types of music; and, despite its prep school origins, a setting of Psalm 150 for two-part children's voices and instruments of 1962.

Probably the most celebrated of all Britten's church music is the *Missa Brevis* in D, composed for George Malcolm and the boys of Westminster Cathedral Choir in 1959. This eleven-minute setting can be sung liturgically (as it was originally) or in concert, where it can make a neat adjunct to *A Ceremony of Carols*. Generally recognised as a minor masterpiece, much of the work is based on the opening phrase of the plainchant intonation heard at the outset of the Gloria. The Mass's expressive vocal writing (in two or three parts) looks forward to *War Requiem*, composed two years later. Conceived for the robust, Continental-style voice production advocated by Malcolm, it remained one of Britten's favourites among his own compositions and he practically wore out his copy of the BBC tape-recording made of the premiere, so much did he admire and enjoy what Malcolm and his Westminster forces achieved.

Among the lesser known of Britten's choral works with orchestra are two works from the 1960s composed either side of *War Requiem*, both of which are within the

capabilities of larger choral societies. *Cantata Academica* (1959) was written for the 500th anniversary of Basle University. Scored for four soloists and orchestra, this exuberant piece employs a variety of 'academic' musical devices – canon, fugue, serial theme – in setting what at first seems an unprepossessing text: namely, the university's charter rendered in Latin. But that shouldn't put anyone off, for this 21-minute piece is rich musically and challenging enough to keep the singers' interest. Post-*War Requiem* Britten wrote *Cantata Misericordium* for the centenary of the Red Cross in 1963. A Latin retelling of the parable of the Good Samaritan by Patrick Wilkinson, for tenor and baritone soloists, chorus, string orchestra, harp, piano and timpani, this work remains one of Britten's absolute gems, which no choral society should overlook. The lyricism of the closing 'Dormi nunc' recalls the final pages of the 'Let us sleep now' lullaby of *War Requiem*.

From the mid-1960s comes one of Britten's least successful choral works, *Voices for Today*, composed for the 20th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. Although Britten's humanitarian intentions in this multi-layered ten-minute anthem are unquestionably sound, the work is let down by the nature of its libretto – an anthology of worthy sentences from a variety of individuals from Christ to

Camus, culminating in an admittedly effective setting of a passage from Virgil's fourth Eclogue set in Latin.

Also virtually unknown are two posthumously published, pre-war pieces for speaker(s), soloists, chorus and orchestra, *The Company of Heaven* and *The World of the Spirit*. Both were conceived originally as BBC radio broadcasts, the former for the feast of St Michael and All Angels, the latter for Whitsun. *The Company of Heaven* is the better-made piece of moderate difficulty, requiring only two soloists and employing some familiar hymn tunes in typical Brittenesque arrangements. It is well worth investigating.

Straddling the sacred and the secular is the 1975 *Sacred and Profane*, eight unaccompanied settings of medieval lyrics whose close writing and technical difficulties rather suggest they are intended for professional chamber forces or a vocal quintet. Britten's genuinely secular choral pieces include the ever-popular *Choral Dances from 'Gloriana'*, a suite of madrigal-like settings from Britten's 1953 coronation opera about Elizabeth I, in which the musical gestures of the Tudor-period are refracted through Britten's own 20th-century perspective; the a cappella *Five Flower Songs*, composed for the silver wedding of philanthropists Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst of Dartington fame, who were also keen amateur botanists – hence Britten's choice of subject-matter; and, in 1976, his final pair of works: *Welcome Ode*, for young people's chorus and orchestra, written for the Queen's Silver Jubilee visit to Ipswich in 1977, and *Praise We Great Men*, a setting of a text by Edith Sitwell left unfinished at Britten's death, but orchestrated by Colin Matthews and posthumously published. Despite Britten's failing health, this work shows, even as his life drew to its close, just how powerful the creative urge remained. ■ [www.brittenpears.org](http://www.brittenpears.org)

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Dartington Hall in August 1959: Britten with George Malcolm and four choristers from Westminster Cathedral Choir, for whom the composer wrote the *Missa Brevis*

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