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Reflecting Emotions Through Music: A Brief Glance at Britten

I believe in roots, in associations, in backgrounds, in personal relationships. I want my music to be of use to people, to please them... I do not write for posterity.

- Benjamin Britten (1864)

Edward Benjamin Britten was an English composer born in Lowestoft, Suffolk, England on November 22, 1913. Coincidentally (or perhaps auspiciously), Britten was born on the same day as the feast of Saint Cecilia, patron saint of music. His home looked over the beach of the North Sea, or the German Ocean, as it was called before the First World War. Britten spent most of his life in the Aldeburgh area, and he once stated that all his music came from there. His mother, a talented amateur musician, greatly encouraged her children's love of music. The youngest of four children, Britten proved to be a good student with a particular talent in mathematics and a love of sports. Though he was an accomplished and well-rounded boy, Britten's true passion always remained music.

Britten began composing at an early age, finishing his first piece at the age of five. He produced prolifically throughout his childhood, even without any formal training. In addition to composing, Britten studied the piano and the viola, both of which he learned to play quite well. At the age of eleven, Britten met Frank Bridge, a composer who was very interested in experimentalism (particularly focusing on the works of Béla Bartók and Arnold Schoenberg). Two years later, in 1927, Britten began studying composition from Bridge.

Bridge gave Britten the musical guidance and technical foundation on which to base his creativity and introduced him to a wide range of composers from many different countries. Britten produced about 800 works as a child, including a symphony, various orchestral pieces, works for chamber ensemble, suites for solo piano, drafts for Masses, a symphonic poem, and many songs.

As a teenager, Britten devoted much of his time to writing, performing and listening to music at every opportunity. At the age of sixteen, Britten won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music, where he studied composition with John Ireland. Though he admired Ireland and found his training a useful supplement to what he had learned with Bridge, Britten was constantly frustrated because he felt there was a lack of interest in the kind of music he wanted to write. In his later years, Britten remarked that he “did not learn much” at the Royal College of Music.

Britten gained recognition in musical circles as a composer of much promise when he wrote a set of choral variations titled *A Boy was Born* for the BBC Singers in 1934. In 1935, he was asked to write a film score for the documentary *The King's Stamp* and was eventually employed by the GPO Film Unit, which produced the documentary. During his time there, Britten collaborated quite a bit with the poet W.H. Auden, a partnership that lasted long after Britten stopped working at GPO. In 1936, Britten composed music for the feature film *Love from a Stranger*, which is based on a short story by the English author Agatha Christie. Much of the works or films Britten chose to create music with or for show Britten's interest in his identity as an Englishman and his sense of nationalism.

One of the most difficult years for Britten was 1937. Early in the year, his mother died of a heart attack. Britten was distraught by her death because he was very close to his mother. At the same time, however, he was somewhat liberated and felt like he had more freedom to explore both sexually and musically. Later that same year, his friend, writer Peter Burra, was killed in a plane crash. He spent much time with one of Burra's closest friends, singer Peter Pears, sorting through Burra's papers. The two men soon formed a close friendship that eventually grew into a life-long personal and artistic partnership. Pears became Britten's musical collaborator and inspiration. Using money that his mother had left him, Britten bought a disused windmill in the Suffolk village of Snape, on the river Alde, and transformed it into a residence that he moved into in 1938. At this residence, he hosted many of his friends, including composers Lennox Berkeley and Aaron Copland, W.H. Auden and writer Christopher Isherwood, and, of course, Peter Pears.

Despite his national and international success as a composer, Britten still felt frustrated by what he felt was a lack of musical perception in England. In 1939, he and Pears followed Auden and Isherwood to the United States. When war broke out in September 1939, he wanted to return to England but were told to stay in America and increase sympathy for Britain there. Britten continued to compose during his stay in America, but continued to try to return home. In 1941, Britten considered the possibility of writing an opera based on Peter Grimes. This idea finally came to fruition when he received a generous commission to write an opera from the conductor Serge Koussevitsky (a close friend of Russian composer Arthur-Vincent Lourié). In 1942, Britten and Pears were finally able to

obtain visas to return home. Upon their arrival in England, both Britten and Pears applied for recognition as conscientious objectors to the war.

Britten's *Peter Grimes*, undoubtedly his most acclaimed opera, paved the way for a whole generation of composers and firmly established Britten's career as an opera composer. This opera soon established itself as the most important by an English composer since Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. After *Peter Grimes*, Britten decided he wanted to focus on chamber operas, which were smaller-scale, and formed the English Opera Group with John Piper and Eric Crozier in 1948. One year later, he founded the Aldeburgh Festival of the Music and the Arts, initially to provide a home for the English Opera Group. The festival eventually expanded to include poetry readings, literature, drama, lectures and art exhibitions. Britten wrote a series of English operas, including *Billy Budd*, *Gloriana*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Of his works, Britten's operas are perhaps the most substantial and important. They are considered one of the most significant contributions to twentieth-century British music. It is notable that Britten chose to focus mainly on chamber operas. This choice reflects his preference for economy and clarity, as well as his belief in music education and desire to bring musical forms to a wider audience. Many of his operas were focused on many social concerns. Perhaps because he was a homosexual, his themes are often spoiled innocence and the role of the outcast. One of the reasons his operas were such a success were their accessibility. His operas were performed in English, making them widely popular in both England and America. Britten was also a master of tone painting, illustrating the text of his

librettos through his music.

In writing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Britten worked in the tradition of such as Claude Debussy's *Pelléas and Mélisande*, Richard Strauss's *Salome*, and Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*. Stylistically, this opera is typical of Britten; it is not strikingly atonal or dissonant, but filled with his characteristic tone painting. Because of his decision to cut out Act I from Shakespeare's play when writing the opera's libretto, Britten gives the fairies a much more prominent role in the drama. Almost all the action takes place in the woods around Athens. Britten differentiated the three groups of characters through different sound-worlds, giving the rustics simple, folk-like music, the lovers romantic, idealistic music, and the fairies an ethereal, other-worldly music. Fascinating about this play is Britten's choice of writing the lead male role, Oberon the Fairy King, as a countertenor. Perhaps Britten chose this role because he wanted to keep in line with the ethereal quality of the fairy world.

The plot of the opera closely follows that of the play, except that Britten gave much greater precedence to the wood and to the fairies. This is evident by the trumpet and snare-drum that always introduce Puck's appearance and the harp and celeste which accompany Oberon throughout. The opera also opens with a chorus from the Tytania's (the Fairy Queen) attendant fairies, all played by boy sopranos.

What differentiates Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from his other plays is that it is mainly concerned with psychology and the madness of love, rather than on individual characterization. Britten continues to focus on psychology to a large extent, but puts much more emphasis on the theme of innocence, an ideal that the composer continually

sought. The opening of the opera with the chorus of the boy-fairies emphasizes this concern with the theme of purity. It is eventually this group of attendant fairies who get the four Athenians to stop their love quarrel. It could be considered that the attendant fairies represent an idealized vision of innocence and purity that Britten was captivated by throughout his entire life.

A rather curious aspect about *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is Britten's treatment of Tytania. He takes the relationship between Tytania and Bottom, a relationship that, in the play, is considered to be grotesque, and places it in the center of the opera. Though Tytania dominates Bottom, she is completely dominated by Oberon and Puck. This is a fascinating point of study, considering women in Britten's operas tend to be either predators or prey.

In the last decade of his life, Britten suffered from increasingly bad health. By 1973, Britten's health had deteriorated considerably. Though he underwent surgery to replace a heart valve, it was not successful. With constant medical supervision, Britten was still able to compose. In 1976, he accepted an honor from the Queen, who created him a Life Peer, 'Baron Britten of Aldeburgh in the County of Suffolk.' Britten died of heart failure at his house in Aldeburgh on December 4, 1976. Britten's funeral service was held at the Aldeburgh Parish Church on December 7, 1976.

Britten's legacy continues in the Aldeburgh Festival and in his music, which is undoubtedly his greatest lasting achievement. Britten had many friends who were musicians (including close friendships with Dmitri Shostakovich and Mstislav Rostropovich) and composed numerous pieces especially for them. Britten was a composer highly interested in

his identity as an Englishman and had a clear sense of responsibility as an artist in the international community. He succeeded in becoming a focus of British pride and a respected national figure. Britten was very concerned with the balance between private and public communication and the fine line between art as self-expression and art as moral resolution. Though an emotionally troubled man, he became a patriotic icon. Britten used his compositions, especially his operas, to search for a public voice that would embody, communicate, and perhaps resolve his private beliefs and anxieties.