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Benjamin Britten in rehearsal

When I was growing up, Benjamin Britten was a contemporary composer. I first heard *The Young Person's Guide o the Orchestra* around 1964. On January 20, 1967, from the standing-room area of the brand-new Metropolitan Opera, I witnessed the opening night of *Peter Grimes.*

The new Tyrone Guthrie production, which I would conduct in revival in 1994, awakened in me what became a lifelong passion for Britten's music. After that I wanted to know every piece he had written. Scores were not readily obtainable, and when they were, too expensive for my high-school-student budget. The New York Public Library became my source. I checked out the few scores in the circulating collection, as well as the LPs. I remember my excitement when I first listened to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its evocative, nocturnal, dark-blue cover. I tracked every new work I could, including the television premiere of *Owen Wingrave* in the early 1970s and the first Met production of *Death in Venice* in 1974.

In my high-school years, Britten and tenor Peter Pears, his partner and artistic collaborator, gave two lieder recitals (*Die Winterreise, Dichterliebe* and Britten songs) at New York's Hunter College. I was in the audience and came away stunned by Pears's charismatic artistry and Britten's exquisite pianism. In the first years after my graduation from the Juilliard School, I started programming any Britten I could — the *Peter Grimes* Passacaglia and Sea Interludes, the *Cantata Misericordium, Les Illuminations*, the *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings* and the Violin Concerto. I chose the *War Requiem* for my first concert as music director of the Cincinnati May Festival, at a time when the piece already seemed like a classic but was only seventeen years old.

In the fall of 1976, I started conducting Britten's powerful 1940 piece, the *Sinfonia da Requiem.* My performance with the Cleveland Orchestra on November 20 occurred exactly two weeks before the shocking news that Benjamin Britten had died on December 4. The *Sinfonia* was still in my system when I read the obituary. I have continued to conduct this piece into the present, and its funereal character always brings me back to that moment.

When Britten died, there were hundreds of reflections about him and his music, which have continued to this day. His detractors were many. Igor Stravinsky, with his acid wit, supposedly remarked, "He's not a composer — he's a kleptomaniac." Theodor Adorno, the German philosopher and musicologist, likened Britten's music to afternoon tea. Luigi Nono refused to shake his hand when they met in 1959.

FOREST MURMURS

As he prepares to lead the Met's revival of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, JAMES CONLON reflects on a lifetime of being under the opera's spell.

The Met's 2002 revival of Tim Albery's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, designed by Antony McDonald, with Nathan Gunn (Demetrius), Susan Chilcott (Helena), Peter Rose (Bottom), Alexandra Deshorties (Tytania), Justin Brill (Puck) and Maria Zifchak (Hermia)

But Britten also had many enthusiasts, among them Dmitri Shostakovich, whose music first struck the young British composer in the '30s. One can even speak of Shostakovich's influence. For instance, the Passacaglia from *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* probably played a role in Britten's almost systematic adoption of this form in his works thereafter. There was, at first, a mutual admiration, and then, after they met, a friendship and appreciation that endured until Britten's death. Although their music reflects different worlds, they had much in common. Both had a deep consciousness of the political and social worlds in which they lived, and which imposed themselves on twentieth-century composition to a far greater degree than in the past. That awareness was conveyed in their music. Britten had the luxury of free choice for his texts. Shostakovich did not, and he abandoned opera after the vicious attack on him and *Lady Macbeth* in *Pravda*. Through his fifteen symphonies and string quartets, not operas, he wrote under the cover of plausible deniability. Stalin had deprived Russia of its potentially supreme operatic genius, and its greatest twentieth-century composer chose to write in code.

Britten, too, learned to write in code, but for very different reasons. In the choice of his subjects, more than any composer who precedes him, he dealt directly, if discreetly, with homosexuality. Societal intolerance functioned for Britten as Stalinist repression had for Shostakovich. It was illegal up until the late 1950s to portray or even openly discuss the subject in British theater. A combination of reticence, a puritanical streak and sheer necessity led him to find a way of portraying the truth he wanted to express. It was there to be found by any who cared to decipher his code.

Britten, unlike Wagner, who was set on revolution, did not like theorizing or even discussing music. Like Verdi, he was extremely practical and wanted his music to speak to his public, large or small, without regard to writing for posterity. Britten, like his illustrious Italian predecessor, simply composed for an audience he knew. Paradoxically, both Britten and Verdi did revolutionize the music of their countries. The former reawakened English opera after a two-hundred-year slumber, and the latter, step by step, pushed at the edges of a tradition he accepted even as he totally transformed it.

A Midsummer Night's Dream **at the Met, with David Daniels, Deshorties and Peter Rose**

The recurring Britten themes — pacifism, innocence betrayed, cruelty, love, eroticism and society's victimization of the individual — had motivated much of his music since the 1930s. With *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he moves into another realm. One can certainly see strands of his previous subjects, but his preeminent goal was setting a Shakespearean masterpiece to music. *Dream* is about love and eroticism in their many forms, some hitherto unimagined. Britten wrote "... night and dreams — I have had a strange fascination by that world since a very early age.... [Night] can release many things which one thinks had better not be released."

William Shakespeare, more than any poet or playwright in Western civilization, has been the source of inspiration for music of every genre. The list (I have never counted) would probably include more than 1,000 songs, ballets, tone poems and well over two hundred operas. Most of those operas are unworthy of the original plays. The greatest successes, most notably Giuseppe Verdi's three Shakespearean operas, are all in translation. It is often said that he didn't quite equal the original in *Macbeth*, did so in *Otello* and surpassed it in *Falstaff*. In this respect, I rank Benjamin Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream* with *Otello*. The bar is infinitely higher for those who choose to set Shakespeare's original text, and in this sense, Britten's accomplishment remains unparalleled. (Purcell, whom Britten greatly admired, set Shakespeare's story without using any original text at all.) By accepting the challenge of editing the original text for the opera stage, Britten's partner and artistic collaborator Peter Pears provided a coherent organization of the opera that corresponded to Britten's very clear idea of its architecture: the opera's text contains only a single line that was not Shakespeare's.

Britten, for whom issues of form and structure were fundamental, was attracted to the three discrete groups of characters who barely interact. He could build on their diversity to establish the supernatural magic of the fairy world, the melodrama of the lovers and the comedy/farce of the rustics. Britten found a perfect musical equivalent to the differences in their speaking styles, realized brilliantly through vocal characterization and an adept orchestration.

The percussion, bells, harps, harpsichord and celeste envelop King Oberon (imaginatively cast as countertenor), Queen Tytania and the fairy boys. The acrobatic Puck, Oberon's henchman, declaims to the accompaniment of the side drum and the trumpet, simultaneously playful and diabolical. The warring royal couple sings as if in an eighteenth-century opera, with formal clarity, in evocations of a lost time. The choice of a countertenor and a speaking role was unusual at the time. They set the fairy world apart.

The four lovers (Helena, Hermia, Lysander and Demetrius) sing to the predominant accompaniment of the woodwinds, horns and strings in an overall equilibrium corresponding to their "conventionality" as operatic animals. High passions, jealousies and excesses, operatic staples, find their melodramatic counterpart in the rich atmospheric and lyrical expression of the "core" orchestra, without the "fairy world" instruments or the trombone, which is reserved for the rustics.

Like Shakespeare's descent into prose for his rustics (also known as the "Mechanicals"), Britten's vocal writing for them is simple, foursquare and bumpy. There are no florid lines, except for special effect. The two stars are Bottom, the weaver, and the trombone. The bass instruments and lower registers are emphasized, in contrast with the upper registers of the fairy world. The clear delineation of the three groups, the Fairy World (A), the Lovers (B) and the Mechanicals (C), is reflected in an equally and thoroughly coherent architectural structure of the first two acts. The first act is written in a perfectly symmetrical arch form. The three groups are connected with interludes (x) of the tacit protagonist — the Forest. It forms, in mirror image, a schematic configuration of x A x B x C x B x A x.

The forest is the all-encompassing universe of Britten's *Dream.* One might say it is not a dream at all, but reality — a deeper reality than the characters have previously experienced. A primeval force that reveals the truth to all, it is first expressed by a motive of portamento strings, suggesting a dark and troubling breeze in the night. In Act II, the forest turns sublime and is represented by four magical chords (as in Mendelssohn), in which Britten uses all twelve tones of the scale. The two-scene structure is written with varied forms of the chords recurring periodically. The love scene between Tytania and Bottom, after Puck has turned him into an ass, is at the center of the act, and thus of the entire opera. The forest music is ravishing, mysterious, nocturnal, serene and perilous in turn — some of the most beautiful music Britten ever wrote.

The primacy of the forest and the fairy world bring us to one of the most contentious issues, on which many of Britten's critics concentrated. As Verdi did in *Otello,* Britten cut Shakespeare's Act I in *Midsummer Night's Dream.* Verdi worked any information he deemed necessary in to the remaining acts. But Britten's intention is more radical and, ultimately, eminently Shakespearean. Britten upgrades the status of the forest and fairy worlds. It heightens the sense that the forest is not a dream, but a deeper reality, and reveals Britten's often unstated meaning about Eros.

In Act III, the spells have been broken (except for that of Demetrius), the couples are reconciled and happy, and Tytania is released from her passion for Bottom, who wakes up to realize he has missed his rehearsal. At this moment, the opera completely changes gears. In one sense, the "story" is over and really only needs the rustics' play of "Pyramus and Thisby" to tie up all of the loose ends.

This is the most difficult transition: it is the point at which Britten ceases being himself and moves to parody, in the "play within a play." Moving from the atmosphere of the forest and its tightly organized architecture, the final scene is almost prosaic in its freedom from form. What some see as a weakness, I see as further evidence of Britten's intention to accord supremacy to the world of the fairies, the forest, and all that was revealed therein. He releases himself and us from its magic.

The broad humor of the rustics' performance of "Pyramus and Thisby" banishes all restraint with an unabashed parody of nineteenth-century Italian opera. Abruptly, the tempo directions in the score appear in Italian, and each of the Mechanicals has his moment of glory. And Britten is not above personal sarcasm: it is exemplified by the choice of *Sprechstimme* for Wall's presentation (a poke at his dodecaphonic critics?) and of the many bel canto clichés that form the substance of the parody. Thisby and her flute are reminiscent of *Lucia di Lammermoor.* Britten was one of the few dissenters at Joan Sutherland's sensational Covent Garden Lucia di Lammermoor in 1959. Schoenberg, Sutherland and Donizetti are all on the receiving end of some wicked humor.

I know few composers, other than Shostakovich, whose mastery of form and orchestration was so great that the "substance" of the music is already manifest without need for "interpretation." I have found, when conducting nearly all of Britten's music, that one barely has to "do" anything to render it, except to ensure that the composer's intentions are served. Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream,* with its subtle, seductive power, inexorably draws us in. Britten transports us into the forest of our subconscious. His themes — peace, innocence, and the theme of the individual driven out from society by its cruelty — are submerged in the harmonious unity of his music. □

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