

Benjamin Britten: A Publishing Story “Voices that will not be drowned”

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Abstract

The publishing history of Britten is an alternative chronicle to the life and works of England’s finest composer of the twentieth century and is usually relegated to biographical footnotes and factual appendixes within the exploration of Britten’s musical oeuvre. The purpose of this research article is to thread together the disparate elements of Britten’s publishing history, using examples of his work to act as a chronological guide. This history forms a triptych between his early juvenilia with Oxford University Press, the majority of his professional career with Boosey and Hawkes and his late years with Faber Music, a sub-division of Faber and Faber which Britten instigated himself, acting as an editorial director until his death in 1976. Faber Music still enjoys a world-wide reputation as one of the leading independent British publishers of classical, contemporary and educational music.

Key Words

Benjamin Britten, Oxford University Press, Boosey and Hawkes, Faber Music, Montagu Slater

Introduction

Poetry and opera libretti both suffer from a marginalization within contemporary publishing practices. This is despite these unique art forms both producing texts which are linguistically rich with colour and melody. Charles Montagu Slater, the poet and playwright responsible for arguably the finest opera libretto of the twentieth century, the text for Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*, was certainly aware of this dyadic. His admiration and understanding of George Crabbe's poetry cycle *The Borough*, upon which *Peter Grimes* is based, is equally as richly textured, melancholic and dramatic as Crabbe's original poetry, although the opera's most potent line of dialogue “I hear those voices that will not be drowned” [Slater. 1946: 43] is a creation of Slater's own genius. Slater, finding literary sympathy with the eponymous *Peter Grimes*, was used to being marginalized. Hailing from rural Cumbria, [Brett. 1983: 23] Slater enrolled as an Oxford undergraduate at Magdalen College in 1920, before he mysteriously disappeared for twelve months, re-appearing on the college's matriculation register for 1921 as a staunch Communist [Brett. 1983: 25] and refusing to leave his father's status and position. [Magdalen College Archives. 1921] Slater, like *Peter Grimes*, always felt like an outsider and this led to a peripatetic lifestyle. One of his wanderings resulted in a position working at the GPO Film Unit, where he met the composer Benjamin Britten. Britten was equally as parochial as Slater, a gay man at a time when homosexuality was illegal and a pacifist at a time of political upheaval which would lead to war. This collaboration is of great significance to both musicologists and book historians. *Peter Grimes* was the first internationally successful English opera to have been brought to the stage since Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, which, musicologists have hypothesized,

was first performed at a London-based school for girls, run by Josias Priest, in April 1689, [Dent. 1968: ii] although no hard evidence has survived. The earliest extant copy of the score is held at the Bodleian library and is dated at 1750, almost sixty years after it is believed the opera was composed. [Purcell. 1750: Bodleian Library] Benjamin Britten was the first English composer in over 250 years to attain an international reputation for opera, and the first to acquire a traceable and cohesive music publishing history. The grateful recipient of *Peter Grimes*' success was Britten's publisher Boosey and Hawkes, a company trying to survive in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. *Peter Grimes* had been premiered at Sadler's Wells theatre in London on 6th June 1945, [Cooke. 1999: xv] and was quickly recognized as a modern masterpiece. Boosey and Hawkes were desperate to capitalize on their success by signing performance rights contracts with established opera houses in both Stockholm and Basle. [Wallace. 2007. 55] Hire library records confirm that within a mere eighteen months of the premier, *Peter Grimes* had been performed in a further nine countries around Europe, [Wallace. 2007. 53-54] a tremendous achievement bearing in mind that many nations were still recovering from the effects of war.

Copyright

The relationship between the publisher and the libretto is complex, bound with multiple layers of bureaucracy and copyright legislation. Libretti are regarded as part of a complete work that makes up the opera. Although the Britten-Pears Foundation [BPF] controls the copyright for Britten's own writing (i.e. letters or articles that he may have written) and they also own the majority of his manuscripts, the copyright for the operas are controlled by the publishers.

The libretto is regarded as the work of the writer, just as the music is regarded as the work of the composer. Britten often made revisions to the texts himself, usually to the displeasure of his librettist. Montagu Slater was so infuriated with Britten’s constant revisions to his text that he published the libretto himself, causing Britten much consternation. [Kildea. 2014: 257]

However, the libretto, like the music, is also owned by the publisher. When a libretto is reprinted in the format of an opera programme or a CD booklet, the publisher has to sanction the text’s usage. Any performance or recording of one of Britten’s operas is required by law to be licensed by the copyright holder before it can be produced. Similarly, if a substantial amount of text from a libretto is to be reproduced in a book, permission has to be sought. In the case of the libretto, the publisher probably has an agreement with the author or their estate about obtaining permission to do this and also about any royalties they will receive. [Clark. 2015: Email]

There are also additional issues which affect the publisher. For example, Eric Crozier and Britten decided that the text of the play that appears before the opera *The Little Sweep* could be adapted and changed according to context. The text has been updated several times, once by Crozier himself, meaning that the publisher must make sure that all later revisions to a libretto are under their copyright control. Furthermore, requests are made to reinstate lines which had been originally excised from the libretto, often for censorship reasons. The first draft of Ronald Duncan’s libretto for *The Rape of Lucretia* was censored in 1946 by the Lord Chamberlain. [Clark. 2015: Email] In recent years, an application was made to include the missing dialogue. Permission was granted both by Ronald Duncan’s estate and the BPF, but Britten had subsequently changed his score and

the metre of the text that Duncan had originally written did not match the revised composition. In 1954, Leslie Boosey had to determine whether Henry James had established international copyright for his novella *The Turn of the Screw*. This was a problem that Britten was happy to leave to his publishers. [Clark. 2015: Email]

Copyright agreement currently remains in place for 70 years after the author’s death, so many of Britten’s works remain subject to copyright legislation until 2046. However, copyright will still apply to works such as *The Turn of the Screw*, *Owen Wingrave* and *Death in Venice* because librettist Myfanwy Piper did not die until 1997. [Spalding. 2011: 507]

Many of the texts in Britten’s song cycles are by poets who died many generations ago, and so no royalty payments are required, but the estates of Myfanwy Piper, William Plomer and W.H. Auden are entitled to payment and therefore approval still has to be sought. The digital age and the internet have brought new problems for publishers, as non-sanctioned versions of scores and libretti appear online.

Britten and his Publishers

The relationships between Britten, his librettists and his publishers often produced many fascinating and humorous publishing anecdotes. The late classical music critic and broadcaster John Amis related:

Britten sent Michael Tippett a copy of the libretto of *[Billy] Budd*, asking for comments. Tippett replied saying what a good libretto Eric Crozier and E.M. Forster had written. But he suggested that a line in Act One might be misconstrued: Claggart at one point sings ‘Clear the decks of seamen.’ Britten wrote back saying what a

filthy mind Michael had: but he cut the line. [Amis. 2007: Blog]

Valentine Cunningham, professor of English at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, has deciphered what he believes are Latin, sexual subtexts contained within the libretto for *The Turn of the Screw*. [Cunningham. 2002: Article] Although the libretto was written by Myfanwy Piper, wife of the artist John Piper, Britten must have been aware of the homosexual connotations hidden within the Latin monologues. A litany of words, such as *vermis* (worm), *fustis* (stick), *cucumis* (cucumber) and *caulis* (cabbage stalk) are all terms which, in gay slang, can refer to the penis. [Cunningham. 2002: Article] We can only speculate as to whether Britten personally instigated them as a form of coded expression, disseminated at a time when homosexuality was still a punishable offence. With regard to libretti, Britten did not believe that composers should set their own texts, a criticism he had of Richard Wagner, [Blythe. 1981: 121] although Britten and Peter Pears did set Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to original music, with minimal alterations to the original text, [White. 1970: 194] for their opera adaptation. Britten argued that this was a pragmatic approach to a quickly devised project. [Cooke. 1999: 129] Interestingly, Britten pretended to have used a First Folio edition of Shakespeare's play in order to create the libretto. It was later revealed to have been a Penguin paperback, [Kildea. 2014: 442.] the original copy of which is housed at the Britten-Pears Foundation at Aldeburgh, complete with annotations and marginalia.

Hubert Foss and Oxford University Press

The majority of Britten’s published work was overseen by Boosey and Hawkes but it was Oxford University Press who first invested time and energy in helping to establish the young composer’s reputation. Britten had signed his first publishing contract with Hubert Foss, head of Oxford University Press’s Music Publishing Division, in early 1932. [Clark, 2015: Email] Hubert Foss founded OUP Music in 1925, aged just twenty-six. [Kildea. 2014: 76] Foss was a competent pianist and an enthusiast of English choral music whose business acumen was sharp. [Hinnells. 1998: 23-24] He delivered a publishing coup by signing Ralph Vaughan Williams and William Walton, along with Britten, to the OUP’s fledgling music publishing catalogue. Foss was devoted to the production of beautifully printed musical scores, which featured distinctive cover designs suited to project the image of an individual composer. [Hinnells. 1998: 12] Britten was initially enthused by his burgeoning professional relationship with Foss, who handled Britten’s published output meticulously, but the cracks began to appear during 1935 with Britten’s acknowledgement of the Performing Rights Gazette, today known as the Performing Rights Society. The PRS advocated allowing composers and writers to be paid for public performances of their works still controlled by copyright legislation. [Clark. 2015: Email] The PRS published a polemical advocacy in their journal, highlighting the moral and legal needs for composers and authors to be paid for any performances of their works:

[...] these new elections will be a matter of considerable satisfaction to the existing composer and author members who have works published by firms belonging to the incoming group. Hitherto these composers and authors have, for the most part,

been unable to secure any income from general performing rights in respect of such works, since they had [...] assigned the rights over to the publishers, whose policy it was to allow performances, other than broadcasts, to be given for free. [Mitchell. 1991: 362]

The PRS's argument found many sympathizers within the music discipline but Foss was vehemently opposed. Foss believed that the PRS went against a publisher's professional interests, arguing that it makes poor business sense to ask a performer to pay for additional rights to a composer's work alongside the sale of the scores, especially when so much music was available out of copyright. [OUP Archive. 1934: Letter 22] Contemporary composers may find their works being overlooked. [Kildea. 2014: 93-94] Britten began throwing a protective veil over the integrity of his work and scrutinized how his music was disseminated. His relationship with Foss began to fracture:

In future [...] I must have all my works controlled by the PRS as a matter of principle. I appreciate enormously the interest you have shown in producing my works; although I feel compelled to say that the rumours I have heard of your disappointment in the way the *Boy was Born* was going, have rather hurt me. [...] I notice that it isn't even being advertised on the back of my *Simple Symphony* among the OUP works. [Mitchell. 1991: 360]

Foss's response was somewhat bemusing:

[...] you mustn't on any account imagine that I am disappointed with you or the work
[...] because *Boy* has not sold. My railings are against the public and the musicians
[...]. [Mitchell. 1991: 362]

Dr Nicholas Clark believes that Foss was biding his time, waiting to see if Britten would deliver on his early promise. [Clark. 2015: Email] This reluctance to commit to Britten's output would be his eventual downfall, as Britten was now talking with the publisher who managed the works of his mentor Frank Bridge; Boosey and Hawkes. Initially, Foss was not concerned due to his belief that Britten's music was, in the main, uncommercial:

[...] it may be worthwhile to let Boosey waste some money on him so long as we can keep his more remunerative efforts. [OUP Archive. 1934: Letter 5]

Boosey and Hawkes

Leslie Boosey and Ralph Hawkes, both of whom had served in the First World War, met as board representatives of the PRS before eventually merging their respective companies to form arguably the most important music publishing house of the twentieth century. Boosey and Sons had been established by John Boosey as a bookseller and lending library during the 1760s, based in London, before diversifying into the manufacture and retail of musical instruments. [Wallace. 2007: 3] Hawkes and Sons were founded in 1865 by William Henry Hawkes, principally to sell sheet music. [Wallace. 2007: 5] The two companies merged to form Boosey and Hawkes in October 1930. [Kildea. 2014: 93]

Political turmoil within Austria and Hungary during the 1930s allowed Boosey and Hawkes to build a publishing portfolio featuring some of the most distinguished musical minds of the

twentieth century, including Bartók, Kodály, Stravinsky and Martinů, [Kildea. 2014: 93] all of whom were trying to escape the encroaching shadow of Nazism. Ralph Hawkes saw potential in Britten and became determined to lure him away from Foss and the OUP. The PRS situation was the defining attribution and Britten signed a contract with Boosey and Hawkes in January 1936, ironically, the same year that the OUP finally consented to join the Performing Rights Society.

Ralph Hawkes became Britten’s closest advisor and mentor, despite, as an ex-soldier, feeling deeply hurt by Britten’s decision to leave England for the United States during April 1939, publicly declaring the relocation to be “in bad odour” and potentially damaging to Britten’s sales and reputation. [Wallace. 2007: 23] Hawkes re-located to New York during 1940, principally to oversee developments at the Boosey and Hawkes offices in the city, and partly to avoid the intensive bombing of London which destroyed the B&H Denman Street premises. [Wallace. 2007: 26-28] It was whilst in voluntary exile that Britten began work on his first opera, an adaptation of the American folktale *Paul Bunyan*, with Britten’s fellow exiled pacifist, W.H. Auden, as librettist. The New York office of Boosey and Hawkes had contacted Britten and suggested that he work on a production to be performed in American high schools, an invitation which Britten accepted. [Carpenter. 1981: 276] It is possible that this commission came directly from Ralph Hawkes. However, *Paul Bunyan* was a disaster. Most critics blamed the fatuous libretto. [Mitchell. 1991: 914-916] Auden admitted that he “knew nothing of what is required of a librettist” [Carpenter. 1981: 278] and later in his career reflected “The result [...] was a failure, for which I was entirely to blame.” [Kildea. 2014: 180] Britten would not revisit *Paul Bunyan* again until 1974. The libretto and the

musical score remained unpublished until 1976, when Faber Music finally made the work available.

Faber Music

Boosey and Hawkes remained loyal and supportive towards Britten for the majority of his professional career, allowing him creative freedom and an influential voice upon business matters, an interaction which Britten was only too eager to seize. Managing Director Ernst Roth believed that Britten’s influence was too great. This animosity heightened during 1950 when Britten’s greatest supporter, Ralph Hawkes, died from a heart attack. [Wallace. 2007: 76-78] This left Britten exposed. Leslie Boosey was viewed by many within the company, especially Roth, as being weak. Both Roth and Britten manipulated Boosey’s generosity and business naivety, but Britten made matters almost impossible for himself by humiliating Boosey after refusing him the chair of a music publishing board which Boosey himself had established. Britten had also brought his own executive to the company, Donald Mitchell, a highly respected music editor and critic whom Britten had first met in 1958 whilst Mitchell was editing the programme book for that year’s Aldeburgh Festival, and proved an erudite and valuable advisor. [Blythe. 1981: 130] Mitchell was responsible for discovering and nurturing new talent. Initially, Roth tolerated Mitchell, but as relationships between the four men deteriorated and Mitchell proposed to advocate Modernist composers from the Manchester school, Roth cracked and in February 1964, after just one year, Mitchell lost his job. [Kildea. 2014: 476] Britten was furious and refused to sign his new publishing contract. Mitchell, who was also an editorial consultant with Faber and Faber, contacted Britten with regards to the creation of a new music publishing enterprise; Faber Music. [T. S. Eliot](#) was

highly enthusiastic; “I have no idea how this can be done, but we clearly must do it.” [Kildea. 2014. 476] Ironically, Britten’s Faber Music became the first newly established music publisher in England since Hubert Foss founded the music division at Oxford University Press. Britten was to remain intimately involved with Faber Music until his death. [Matthews. 1996: Online]

Britten was conforming to his belief that young, talented musicians should work with a publisher who is prepared to invest time and energy in their compositions and careers, just like Ralph Hawkes. Donald Mitchell later reflected:

That was his general idea about publishing [...]. He was keen that younger composers should benefit from such a constructive association [...]. On the more technical side of music publishing [...] he had a passion [...] for maximum clarity in the notation [...] on the printed page. [...] I think [with Faber Music] we succeeded in meeting his [...] demands [...] to advance the design of printed music in this country. [Blythe. 1981: 131-132]

Benjamin Britten advocated Montagu Slater’s prophetic line of prose from *Peter Grimes*; “I hear those voices that will not be drowned” [Slater. 1946: 43]

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