
THE BOOKSHELF

Letters from a Life: Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten, Volume Three 1946-1951

edited by Donald Mitchell, Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke
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789 pages, \$55.00

The past decade has witnessed a substantial increase in the number of studies devoted to Benjamin Britten. Fortunately, the discussion is no longer limited to familiar works such as *Peter Grimes*. Lesser-known compositions including *The Beggar's Opera* and *Curlew River* have also been subject to scholarly examination. Volume Three of Donald Mitchell's impressive annotated collection of Britten's letters follows the same chronological format as its predecessors. Covering the period from the *Rape of Lucretia* to *Billy Budd*, the book provides a glimpse into the era immediately following the 1945 premiere of *Grimes*. Because that opera was almost universally recognized as a masterpiece, Britten had to maintain a delicate balance between composing music at the same level while not repeating himself.

The book begins with a provocative introduction titled "Happy Families." Mitchell argues persuasively we should reconsider "the image of the family and its creative significance for Britten" because he frequently expresses in his music emotions surrounding traumatic events in his life, such as the death of his parents. The "feuding family of Wingaves" in the opera *Owen Wingrave* (10) may serve as one example. The re-

mainder of the book has five sections, each covering several years and preceded by a chronology of important musical and other events.

Britten has a distinguished list of correspondents to include such luminaries as Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, Christopher Isherwood, E. M. Forster, and Serge Koussevitsky. Detailed annotations contain biographies of the correspondents and explanations of their relationship to Britten to support most letters. These annotations help readers unfamiliar with Britten's connection to singers such as Kathleen Ferrier.

Generally cordial and professional in his writings, Britten provides ample evidence in his letters of the numerous challenges he faced as an opera composer. He makes this quite apparent in the difficult process of preparing Melville's *Billy Budd* for the stage. Letters between Britten and his two librettists, Eric Crozier and E. M. Forster, reveal that the group often had heated disagreements concerning the direction of the work. Britten remained a consistent advocate for the merits of the opera even in the face of sharp criticism from Forster. Excerpts from other original reviews show Britten's operas often have a mixed reception, as one critic labeled the comic masterpiece *Albert Herring* "a miscalculation" (294) and another branded *Billy Budd* merely "efficient" (700).

Scholars such as Philip Brett have noted Britten was a gay man forced to live a largely closeted life in repressive English society. In works like *Peter Grimes*, the subtext of an outsider living apart from his community may be viewed as analogous to Britten's own experience as a homosexual. But the letters confirm he experienced few such inhibitions in private correspondence. Letters to friends and colleagues overflow with warmth and sentiment, and especially those written to tenor Peter Pears, his life partner, frequent collaborator, and artistic muse. Terms of endearment such as "my honey darling" and "I miss you, most dreadfully," are emotional, bold statements for a period when open homosexuality was still illegal in Britain. The letters demonstrate the crucial role Pears played in Britten's personal and professional life. The book concludes

with an extensive bibliography divided into several sections, various indices and a list of works discussed in the book. In sum, *Letters from a Life, Volume Three* makes a distinguished addition to the rapidly growing Britten literature. It provides a detailed and personal look into the composer's life and career and has extensive excerpts of primary sources—facsimiles of scores, rare photographs of opera productions, and concert programs. Readers should keep in mind this is a highly detailed source most appropriate for a specialized audience familiar with Britten's life and works. The sheer amount of material will likely steer away the casual reader. But opera lovers who appreciate modern music will find much to enjoy in these lively letters. Anyone undertaking serious research on Britten will want to consult this resource frequently.

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