



Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music

Neil Powell

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This spellbinding centenary biography by Neil Powell looks at the music, the life, and the legacy of the greatest British composer of the twentieth century

Benjamin Britten was born on November 22, 1913, in the East Suffolk town of Lowestoft. Displaying a passion and proficiency for music at an early age, to the delight of his mother, Edith, a talented amateur musician herself, he began composing music when he was only five years old. After studying at the Royal College of Music, Britten went on to write documentary scores for the General Post Office Film Unit, where he met and collaborated with the poet W. H. Auden.

Of more lasting importance was Britten's introduction in 1937 to the tenor Peter Pears, who was to become the inspirational center of his emotional and musical life. Their partnership lasted nearly four decades, during a dangerous time when homosexuality was illegal in England. Conscientious objectors, Britten and Pears followed Auden to America before the war began in 1939. While there, they joined the extraordinary Brooklyn ménage of George Davis, Louis MacNeice, and Paul Bowles. Eventually intense homesickness, provoked in part by George Crabbe's poem "Peter Grimes," drove the pair home to East Anglia in 1942 and gave Britten the inspiration for his finest opera. Throughout his career, Britten did not want modern music to be just for "the cultured few" and instead always composed his music to be "listenable-to." The shared quotidian lives of Britten and Pears unfold in this intimate biography and the story of two men who created a truly remarkable legacy.

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