

approach. In addition, the abundance of Spanish references (not only Spanish words, but also references to Spanish phonetics, and examinations of the importance of certain words in a poem, or letters in a word) makes me wonder how approachable this book would be for a non-Spanish-speaking reader.

In the preface, the writer states: 'my objective in the pages that follow is to open new pathways to intuitive and conceptual enjoyment of Lorca's production—and through the newness and rigour of my approach, of Falla's as well' (p. xii). Yet in the conclusion we encounter the confession that, 'the most salient conclusion that a book on the Falla–Lorca relationship can reach is its own inconclusiveness. The mutual impact of both artists has so many aspects and subtleties that exploration can proceed endlessly' (p. 199). This statement is in itself a recommendation to read *Lorca in Tune with Falla*. The preservation of cultural curiosity is an important human endeavour, and it is important to remind ourselves that there is always more to learn about subjects that may seem well-researched. In this light, Orringer offers a unique approach to the understanding of the creative processes of these two Spanish artists. May we never find an end to the inconclusiveness!

Paul Kildea. *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century*

London: Penguin, 2014

ISBN 9781846142338. 665 pp., ill., map, facs, mus. exx.

Neil Powell. *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music*

London: Windmill Books, 2014

ISBN: 9780099537366. 528 pp., ill.

Reviewed by Alexandra Mathew

I first knowingly encountered Benjamin Britten while a chorister at Trinity College, Melbourne. We were to perform and record *A Ceremony of Carols*, written for SSA choir and harp, although often sung by trebles alone, for our end-of-year Christmas concerts. Knowing little of this repertoire beyond the fact that Britten was a twentieth-century composer, I expected *Ceremony* to be obscure and challenging, and certainly not to my then-conservative taste in classical music. What I discovered instead was one of the most beautiful pieces of choral music I had ever heard. I was particularly drawn to the plainchant bookending the cycle, and listening to 'Spring Carol' was like hearing angels calling me from earth to heaven. Many words come to mind when listening to *A Ceremony of Carols*: angelic, ethereal, heavenly, celestial, otherworldly, sublime. What human could be capable of composing such music? And must this person meet our expectations of the heavenliness of the music? When it comes to Benjamin Britten, scholars, researchers, biographers, and musicologists seem intent on proving that he was as brilliant as he was flawed.

Britten scholarship has evolved considerably since Humphrey Carpenter published his substantial biography of the composer in 1992.¹ Carpenter dedicated a large part of his book to Britten's alleged predilection for, in W.H. Auden's words, 'thin-as-board juveniles,' and to the many friendships Britten allegedly discarded (his 'corpses'), creating an unflattering, but very intimate portrait of the composer.² Until recently Carpenter's book remained the most substantial biography of Britten, with few scholars willing to challenge his portrayal.

To coincide with the composer's centenary, two comprehensive studies of his life have been published: one by conductor, administrator, director, and musicologist Paul Kildea³ and another by East Anglian poet and biographer Neil Powell. Carpenter's research, after more than twenty years, now seems dated and biased, substantiating the need for a revised and updated perspective on Benjamin Britten such as these two books offer.

According to Paul Kildea's *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century*, Britten was a 'wolf in tweed clothing' (p. 14). Although leftist, pacifist, and homosexual in a largely homophobic and conservative society, Britten's conventional persona (well-dressed, curls tamed by a slick of Brylcreem, and a polished Received Pronunciation accent belying his East Anglian upbringing) allowed him to achieve mainstream success as an opera composer. His mother Edith, herself an accomplished amateur singer, recognised her son's musical talent from an early age, declaring him the fourth 'B' after Bach, Beethoven and Brahms.⁴ Britten enjoyed a long and successful career as a composer, performer, and festival administrator, unmatched by many of his contemporaries. Britten's life is hard to condense into the space of a single book, although many musicologists, historians and writers have tried, with varying degrees of success. As Paul Kildea writes, 'Loving, spontaneous, loyal, corrupt, humorous, humorless, soulless, courageous, weak, abnormal, flawed, beautiful, ugly, petulant, secretive, wonderful, crippled, sadistic, charming, great, hateful ... Is it possible for one person to be such a bundle of violent contradictions?' (p. 11).

Two simple questions underpin Kildea's study: 'Who was this man? And what was it in the twentieth century that both defined and repelled him?' (p. 15). Kildea attempts not only to provide a biography of the composer for a new generation of Britten scholars, but to place Britten's life and success in the context of the twentieth century, a time of great technological, political and social change. Having researched Benjamin Britten at doctoral level and conducted his operas at Aldeburgh and around the world, Kildea has had substantial access to primary source material and practical experience performing Britten's music. Throughout the book Kildea charts Britten's scholarships and earnings, and gives approximate present-day values using the Bank of England's inflation calculator, demonstrating Britten's increasing financial success over the course of his career. At the age of 25 Britten's gross annual income was £364 (£20,000 in today's value) (p. 137), and it almost doubled within the space of a couple of years. Compare this to the height of Britten's career, some twenty years later: in 1963, following the release of the *War Requiem* recording, Britten's gross income was £48,000, an extraordinary

¹ In 1983, prior to writing his Britten biography, Carpenter published a biography of the poet W. H. Auden (with whom Britten collaborated). Thus Carpenter comes to Britten not from a musicological perspective, but as a biographer of Britten's contemporary.

² W.H. Auden, quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber, 1992), 164.

³ This review examines the third printing, published with revisions in 2014.

⁴ Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 31.

£756,000 in today's value (p. 438). These calculations and descriptions of Britten's earnings are unique among Britten biographies and studies. Britten's rapid rise in wealth is particularly astonishing when compared to the incomes of contemporary composers, or indeed composers of the past. Kildea's focus on Britten's finances is no doubt directly related to his doctoral research and subsequent book *Selling Britten: Music and the Marketplace* (2002). Unlike other researchers, Kildea draws attention to the commerciality of Britten's music and the financial practicalities and commitments of a career in composition.

Another distinguishing feature of Kildea's book is new information on Britten's medical history and death, now a point of contention and controversy.⁵ Heavy criticism has prompted a new printing of the biography, which contains evidence to substantiate his arguments.⁶ Rather than a simple matter of heart failure, Kildea contends that Britten instead died of syphilis, perhaps contracted from Peter Pears. Kildea argues that although 'gentlemen of a certain class did not discuss such things,' evidence from the 1920s to the 1940s shows that syphilis was widespread, and that 'even as late as the 1970s, undiagnosed syphilis was common, especially among male homosexuals' (p. 533). Britten's fame meant that doctors would have been unlikely to diagnose syphilis, lest the diagnosis damage his reputation, or worse, lead to a criminal conviction. In defence of Kildea's assertions, cardiologist Hywel Davies published an article in the *New Statesman* recounting first-hand information and evidence supporting the argument that Britten did in fact have syphilis.⁷ While any evidence that Britten may have died of syphilis does not affect his legacy or cast any new light on his compositions, it raises questions about Britten and Pears's relationship and underlines how Britten may not have been able to take even his doctors into his confidence.

Unlike Carpenter's 1992 biography, Kildea takes a less partial approach to the debated and controversial aspects of Britten's life. Carpenter relied heavily on opinions and quotes from others suggesting Britten had pederastic tendencies,⁸ and sought an 'explanation of Britten's homosexuality.'⁹ Conversely, Kildea declines to pass value judgements: by offering a variety of insights and interpretations of aspects of Britten's life, and by reserving his own judgement, Kildea invites the reader to question any biases he or she may hold against Britten. *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century*, with its comprehensive musical analyses and new biographical insights, offers a thorough and detailed survey of the composer's life. Few Britten biographies have proved as successful in combining both these attributes as Kildea's. The book is beautifully written and highly readable. Unlike Carpenter, Kildea neither promotes nor dismisses certain aspects of Britten's life and music, but rather more even-handedly presents an extensive biography with new insights into Britten's life.

Neil Powell, in his book *Britten: A Life for Music*, while not deviating from the chronological history of Britten's life or adding any new and spectacular discoveries, provides an affectionate

⁵ Following publication of Kildea's book a number of articles were published that attempted to disprove his revelations. See, for example, Charlotte Higgins, 'Benjamin Britten Syphilis "Extremely Unlikely," Says Cardiologist,' *Guardian*, 23 Jan. 2013.

⁶ The third printing and the paperback—the subject of this review—were updated to deal with the controversy that erupted after the book's publication.

⁷ Hywel Davies, 'Notes From a Cardiologist: Unraveling the Mysteries of Benjamin Britten's Heart,' *New Statesman*, 14 June 2013.

⁸ See Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 342–58.

⁹ Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 20.

and heartfelt portrait of the composer and his music. Powell's language is conversational and accessible and, without delving into musical analysis of Britten's compositions, provides an interesting biography for a wide readership. The beginning of the book draws heavily on the published diaries of Britten: *Journeying Boy*,¹⁰ the first volume of *Letters from a Life*,¹¹ and Beth Britten's memoir *My Brother Benjamin*,¹² all invaluable studies of his early life. Powell skillfully draws his sources together to create an immensely readable narrative, and a brief overview of the denser, more detailed texts. He comes to Britten from a totally different perspective to that of Kildea: he is an East Anglian poet, whose previous book was a biography of fellow East Anglian poet George Crabbe (author of the original poem around which Britten based his opera *Peter Grimes*). Thus, Powell's primary focus is the written word, not music, and his greatest area of knowledge and interest is in East Anglia and the area's famous residents. Powell's skill as a poet is evident throughout *A Life for Music* in his lovely, simple use of language, in a continuous, uninterrupted flow throughout the narrative. Similarly, Powell's affection for the composer comes through clearly, and he hesitates to engage with controversial rumours.

Powell's reasons for writing this biography are twofold: he actively seeks to promote the work of East Anglian artists, and also sees Britten and Pears as exemplars of the ability to exist as homosexuals in a highly conservative society. For Powell, who is himself gay, Britten and Pears 'taught gay men of my generation that it was possible for a homosexual couple to live decently and unapologetically in provincial England' (p. 466). He then quotes journalist Bernard Levin: '[Britten's] private life was a model of devotion and integrity—it is not at all an exaggeration to say that the example set by Britten and Pears went far to instill throughout this country a sympathetic understanding, so long and so brutally denied, of homosexual love' (p. 466). One controversy Powell does tackle is the origins of the fire at the original Snape Maltings concert hall, which he alleges was the result of arson, rather than an unfortunate accident. Powell finds that Britten was (and still is) deeply hated by some of Aldeburgh's inhabitants for his homosexuality and apparent elitism, and believes that it was one of those adversaries who set the concert hall alight. Perhaps there was no intention to harm anyone, but instead to send a very loud and clear message that neither Britten nor his festival were welcome: 'I once met a man in a Suffolk pub who claimed to know who started the Maltings fire: he wouldn't say any more, but I didn't disbelieve him' (p. 423).

Using the wide range of already published sources, Powell creates a dialogue between the composer and his many correspondents. For example, using the early letters and diaries, Powell generates a fascinating conversation between the young composer and the Director of Music at Gresham's School, Walter Greatorex, who famously greeted Britten with 'so you are the little boy who likes Stravinsky' (p. 29). Powell also adds interesting commentary to the diaries, such as a passage in which he questions Britten's ability to make friends beyond his family (p. 52). He notes that Britten almost never mentioned other similar-aged students at the various London colleges, and did not seem to strike up 'casual acquaintances in the metropolitan world around him, about which he remains

¹⁰ Benjamin Britten, *Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten, 1928–1938*, ed. John Evans (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).

¹¹ Benjamin Britten, *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten 1913–1976*, vol. 1, ed. Donald Mitchell (London: Faber, 1991).

¹² Beth Britten, *My Brother Benjamin* (Buckinghamshire: Kensal Press, 1986).

shyly incurious and unobservant' (p. 53). Powell's considered analysis is one of the unique features of the book, elevating it from a cautious retelling of Britten's life to a warm and interesting portrait of the composer.

Neil Powell's *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music* serves as an introduction to the composer for those interested in Britten but with little prior knowledge of his life. Paul Kildea, on the other hand, in *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century*, offers a thorough exploration of Britten's life and music, making for fascinating but sometimes exhausting reading. Both, however, are well worth the collective 1,200-page effort, and provide much needed revised perspectives on the composer.

Allan Marett, Linda Barwick and Lysbeth Ford.

For the Sake of a Song: Wangga Songmen and their Repertories

Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2013.

ISBN 978-1-920899-75-2. 436pp., incl. bibl., index, ill., audio

Reviewed by Myfany Turpin

For the Sake of a Song: Wangga Songmen and their Repertories documents an Indigenous ceremonial genre of the Daly River region in northern Australia, called *wangga*. The book discusses its history, music and song texts, and assembles six sets (repertories) of *wangga*, totalling some 150 songs recorded over a fifty-year period. The publication is a result of twenty-two years of fieldwork by Allan Marett and his collaboration with musicologist Linda Barwick and linguist Lysbeth Ford. To date, there is no comparable publication of an entire Aboriginal performance genre analysed in such detail with accompanying audio (which is presented on the University of Sydney website along with the text: wangga.library.usyd.edu.au). *For the Sake of a Song* can be seen as a reference work that underpins Marett's earlier book *Songs, Dreamings and Ghosts*.¹ *For the Sake of a Song*, however, has value not only to the people of north-western Australia, but to the community at large. For the people of north-western Australia, it is an astounding record of their history, law, culture and identity, and will no doubt play a significant role in their cultural survival.

In Chapter One, 'A Social History of *Wangga*,' we learn that *wangga* is performed at circumcision and mortuary ceremonies, which are major social events in the region. *Wangga* is performed to accompany dance and, like most Aboriginal music, it is primarily vocal. It is sung by two or more songmen who accompany themselves with clapsticks, and who are accompanied by a male didjeridu player. Songmen are not just talented musicians, but individuals who have inherited particular *wangga* repertories. The *wangga* documented in this book were created in the advent of large community societies in the 1950s to assist social cohesion (p. 37). These *wangga* were part of a new tripartite system of ceremonial reciprocity and they varied from their earlier forms, which was in line with the changing social situation.

¹ Allan Marett, *Songs, Dreamings and Ghosts: the Wangga of North Australia* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2005).