

Book Reviews

Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed (eds)

Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976

Volumes I and II, 1923-1945

London: Faber, 1991. \$195, pp. 1,403

Would the Real Britten Please Stand Up

It would perhaps be too cynical to ascribe the media attention afforded the 1990 première of Paul Godfrey's play *Once in a While the Odd Thing Happens* to a carefully planned marketing strategy, although it is doubtful that any more publicity could have been generated had such a strategy been in place. With too little deference to irony, much of this media attention implied criticism of the Britten Estate, and the way it marketed the play's subject, Benjamin Britten. While researching the play and finding little support from within 'the Britten cult', an epithet attributed to Britten's sister, Beth, Godfrey looked elsewhere, and the similarity between the Britten in his play and that in Beth's own book gives a good indication of who he consulted while creating his portrait of Britten. Donald Mitchell, a leading figure in the Britten estate, was drawn into the fray, expressing disappointment with the whole affair; however Mitchell's disappointment was not based on the public criticism directed at his handling of the 'Britten industry', but at a picture of Britten which he could not reconcile with his own. Accordingly, Mitchell suggested that it might have been more prudent for Godfrey to wait until more material was available.

The 'material' Mitchell had in mind was released in June 1991. *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976*, the first two volumes of a projected series, have been a long time coming, but the detail and size of the books help explain the delay. These volumes cover the most interesting part of Britten's life, 1923-1945, although the material up to 1930, detailing endless games of cricket and the mutual devotion of mother and son, works better as background to the 1930s than as a self-contained unit. This is not intended to underestimate the effect of Britten's childhood on his mature personality; but ironically, the most important aspect of his childhood and adolescence is precisely the reason

that this period before 1930, in biographic terms, serves better as background than as foreground: in neither his diaries nor his letters did he attempt to come to terms with the issues which make the 1930s so important, and this adolescent reluctance to take control of these issues remained an intrinsic part of his personality.

The editors of this project, Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, deal with the 1930s expertly. Even knowledge of Mitchell's *Britten and Auden in the Thirties* (1979) and Reed's doctoral thesis, both of which deal with this period, does not prepare the reader for the narrative direction and detail in *Letters from a Life*. The many aspects of Britten's creative life are drawn together in an objective and successful chronology. Due to the insular nature of British music in this period, the BBC, Oxford University Press, Boosey and Hawkes, and the GPO Film Unit attracted some of the most important artistic minds in Britain, and Mitchell and Reed's accompanying footnotes to Britten's liaisons with each of these groups form one of the most vital documents of British artistic history of the 1930s.

The 1940s are similarly detailed. Tactfully, *Peter Grimes* does not dominate the second volume in the retrospective manner most music historians would like. Instead we see a Britten matured through love and politics, and in disillusionment with Auden's approach to both of these concepts. We see the creative process behind some of his first works of this maturity: the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, the *Ceremony of Carols* and the *Hymn to St Cecilia*. And the uncertainty that had made the 1930s so interesting is replaced by a confidence and artistic assuredness. This does not make the second volume less interesting: the same level of detail remains and our knowledge of any number of important British artists is the better for this detail; but the erosion of Britten's 'creative struggle', through him being accepted and advocated by established British society, is hinted at in

this volume, and the completion of this erosion will make the next volumes of *Letters from a Life* considerably different from their predecessors.

But the picture of Britten in these first volumes is quite different to that drawn by Godfrey, and this difference lies mainly with Britten's sexuality or, perhaps more precisely, his sensuality. The conflict is not so much the *existence* of sensuality, but rather the degree and importance of it in Britten's life and music. *Letters from a Life* presents Britten's music as the result of potent genius; Godfrey suggests that the sensual aspects of Britten's personality dominated his artistic drive. There must be a balance between the two, but those seeing the editorial omissions in *Letters from a Life* as a blatant editorial policy of mis-information and repression of information about Britten's sexuality will be disappointed: the original diaries themselves hold very little of importance that is not included by Mitchell and Reed. This in itself is vital: the constant cross-referencing of biographical details, and the omission of any truly personal thoughts in Britten's original diaries suggests that he saw them in terms of being read by others, perhaps an indication of an early belief in his own eventual success. Donald Mitchell disputes this in his introduction to the series, explaining the detail

in the diaries as a manifestation of Britten's personality rather than a self-conscious documentation of his life for posterity. This is entirely consistent with Britten's personality, but does not help us explain the almost total lack of personal commitment in the diaries.

Mitchell's introduction tells us much about Britten, including an explanation of the confusing chronology surrounding Britten's and Pears's relationship. The background to Britten's relationship with his mother is also detailed, and the psychology is mostly illuminating. However, Mitchell's exploration of Britten's and Pears's relationship as an extension of that between Britten and his mother undermines the insights presented in the rest of the introduction. Curiously reliant upon a supposed similarity between the singing voices of Pears and Britten's mother, Mitchell concludes that Britten's choice of Pears as a life-long companion was intricately linked with the fact that Pears was a *singer*, and thus represented the security of his childhood. But this is a minor quibble; a better document of British music history in the 1930s and 1940s is unlikely to be produced.

PAUL KILDEA

Michael Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues: An Autobiography*. London: Hutchinson, 1991. \$55, pp. 290

Dreams and the Man

As a baby Tippett had a dream of a 'Biting Lady' knocking on the front door. This dream was of such significance that it is recorded on the first page of his autobiography, and there are fifty more pages of dreams further on in the book. Tippett himself describes the volume as 'an account of my struggles to understand the chaotic inner world of dreams in such a way that I could create music of all kinds'. Often such records suggest not only a selective memory but a revisionist bent (Stravinsky comes to mind). While Tippett ceremoniously begins with his date of birth and earliest memories, almost twice as much space is given to his first forty years as to the latter forty. Themes seem to be more important than dates but this does not adequately explain the wandering chronology.

This, compounded by occasional grammatical infelicities, suggests a hurried editing. The original publishers withdrew from the contract with Tippett at the last moment - were they wary of including all those dreams?

Much of the first half of the book has been covered elsewhere, notably in Ian Kemp's *Tippett: The Composer and His Music*. Kemp described Tippett's family life (or lack of it, for his parents emigrated when he was 14) and his unpleasant experience at a famous public school. While Tippett himself admits he had only a vague notion of what it meant to be a composer he enrolled at the Royal College of Music and, in addition to studies in piano and composition, took the opportunity to stand next to Boult's rostrum every Friday after-