

VICKI STROEHER, NICHOLAS CLARK AND JUDE BRIMMER (EDS), *MY BELOVED MAN: THE LETTERS OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN AND PETER PEARS*, Aldeburgh Studies in Music, 10 (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2016). ISBN 978-1-783-27108-5, xx+452pp, £25 (hardback).

One might be forgiven, upon encountering the newly published complete correspondence between Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, for harbouring the uncharitable suspicion that this was an unnecessary book. After all, the monumental *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten*—encompassing three editors, six volumes, over twenty years' worth of labour, and nearly 4500 pages of text—released its final instalment in 2012. What meaningful epistolary research on its subject could be left to address? What niche could a separate volume dedicated only to Britten and Pears—one that reprints several letters already published in *Letters from a Life*—usefully occupy that would validate the time and expense of such a project? Is it possible, in short, to justify this collection's existence?

The answer is a resounding 'yes'. Stroeher, Clark and Brimmer have produced an eminently readable and thoughtfully organized volume that brings the Britten–Pears relationship into sharper focus and closer balance. Moreover, this compilation of 365 letters demonstrates conclusively, should doubts still linger, that this was a partnership of equals rather than that of a junior and senior member. Stroeher *et al.* accomplish this by avoiding the Britten-centric perspective one might reasonably expect to find; indeed, the editors state from the outset that their aim was, in part, to give 'equal prominence' to Pears for the first time in their published correspondence (xx). In so doing, *My Beloved Man* strikes an effective balance in its coverage of the two men, revealing how the accomplishments and struggles of one powerfully affected those of the other.

The editorial methodology adopted here differs significantly from that in *Letters from a Life* (hereafter 'LFAL'). Individual letters receive much less annotation, the commentary generally being restricted to identifying individuals mentioned (particularly those referred to only by first name), clarifying timelines or briefly contextualizing otherwise obscure allusions within the text. Readers of LFAL are well aware of how overwhelming the editorial coverage can be; it is not unusual for a half-page letter to be followed by six to ten pages of editorial commentary that may include additional letters, published reviews or extended quotations from secondary sources that expand on the topic mentioned in the original piece of correspondence. As a result, LFAL can serve multiple purposes—biographical, historical, critical, documentary—with extraordinary efficacy, though the density and shifting perspectives can make it difficult for newcomers to navigate.

By contrast, the relative simplicity of *My Beloved Man* creates a more personal snapshot of Britten and Pears, allowing them to relate the story of their life together in their own words, albeit unwittingly, to latter-day readers. In the introduction, the editors indicate that this was indeed their purpose in assembling this collection, although it does come with one or two caveats. The most obvious one, of course, is that the two men lived together from 1938 until Britten's death in 1976; their entire surviving corpus of letters only extends back one year before that period. As a result, there are many gaps in correspondence explained by the fact that Britten and Pears both resided in the same place during those stretches. However, Pears's active touring career meant that there were several periods when they would be separated for weeks, with letters exchanged every few days during those times. Thus, the divisions between the eight chapters reflect large gaps between letters, or significant events that took place at the ends of particular periods. Analogous gaps that appear within a chapter are bridged by short editorial commentaries, often summarizing important changes in their personal or professional lives that are not otherwise covered in the correspondence.

As a result, this book does not provide the same level of detail as a more extended biography (or, for that matter, as *LFAL*). To give only one example: the complicated saga involving the departure of Stephen Reiss as manager of the Aldeburgh Festival in 1970 received a four-page-long footnote in *LFAL*, volume 6 (see Letter 1308), and nearly twenty pages' worth of (occasionally indignant) coverage in volume 3 of that same collection. In *My Beloved Man*, the entire affair is consigned to a single sentence: 'By early July, tensions with the Aldeburgh Festival manager Stephen Reiss had escalated, ending rancorously with his resignation and the appointment of William Servaes to succeed him' (335). This is not to criticize the editors for this decision; given the amount of coverage on this topic (and many others) provided elsewhere, it was eminently sensible. But it does indicate that *My Beloved Man*, taken as a whole, may not be an ideal entry point for readers unfamiliar with Britten and Pears's shared history, or with Britten studies more generally.

With that said, the editors should be praised for the excellent extended commentaries seeded throughout the book. The Introduction itself is elegantly written and highly informative, providing not just an overview of the book's scope and content but also a discussion of the variable and evolving nature of Pears and Britten's relationship. Each chapter receives a similar summary (usually spanning three or four pages) of the time period under consideration, summarizing the themes of the letters in that section, identifying major historical and biographical events that occurred for the two men during that period, and providing insightful observations about their personalities, motivations, habits and other characteristics. The wealth of information packed into these concise sections is most impressive, all the more so given the stylish prose. These passages are helpful for any reader, but are essential for those less

familiar with the two men. I would have no hesitation recommending that undergraduate students, for instance, read these sections in conjunction with the *New Grove* entries for Britten and Pears in order to come away with a clear and accurate overview of both artists' lives and careers.

Moreover, while some familiarity is helpful, readers need not be specialists in Britten studies to find this collection both informative and edifying. The focus on Pears's career is especially welcome, since (as previously noted) most secondary sources have largely marginalized it. As these exchanges of letters allow Pears's activities to come to the fore more clearly, one is struck by the range and number of performances, master-classes and festivals in which he participated. The volume thus provides not just a new appreciation for his own singing career but a more general sense of what professional life was like for performing musicians in the mid-twentieth century.

Beyond that, readers will not fail to be moved by the intimacy displayed in these letters. Britten, in particular, is at his least guarded and most natural; because of that, his letters do not always reflect the most attractive aspects of his personality (something that applies equally to Pears), yet there are also exchanges of profound tenderness. Readers may occasionally feel uncomfortable reading such missives—not because of anything prurient or untoward but because we know that we are intruding. These were not written for us, and so we recognize our privilege in reading the letters of two men so deeply connected by the bonds of love and art for nearly four decades, in exchanges ranging from trivial banalities to gossipy complaints to the deepest expressions of devotion.

The book also features a variety of photographs, appendices and concordances. Most helpful are the two *personalia*, the first organized by forenames and nicknames, which can then be checked against the second list that includes annotations and cross-references to the letter(s) in which the subject is mentioned. Similar cross-referencing lists exist for all of Britten's works mentioned in the book (along with a list for other composers), as well as for poems and plays, artworks, books and films, which greatly simplifies searching. Occasional facsimiles of letter excerpts are also interspersed throughout the book, most of which appear to be selected on the basis that they feature sketches or doodles (such as the amusingly smutty pictogram signing off 'Bee from Pee' on p. 72), marginalia or layout designs that are difficult to replicate.

In conclusion, this book constitutes an admirable and worthy contribution to Britten scholarship, if not an absolutely essential one. However, its accessibility, clarity and—in particular—its fleshing out of Peter Pears's personality and career make this a desirable volume for any academic library, and specialists in twentieth-century opera or British music generally will find it a rewarding read. It admirably fills a gap that

few may have realized still existed, and the editors are to be commended in recognizing this and producing such a fine volume in response.

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