



—Photos by Hans Wild.

Britten conducting at Snape—"a strong impulse toward performance."

## BRITTEN AT ALDEBURGH

By IRVING KOLODIN

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THE DRIVE from London, if not swift (the roads to the northeast don't encourage such a result), had at least been well within the time prescribed. This was due equally to planning and execution, perhaps because both had been the responsibility of the same person. He was London Decca's John Culshaw, headed for Aldeburgh to set up equipment for the recording of *The Burning Fiery Furnace* and glad to accommodate an itinerant music critic and his wife.

Culshaw's respect for time, bred in a world of takes and splices, operates no less on the road than in the air (his hobby, other than driving, is flying). It provided for a refueling stop en route (lunch at a pub south of Ipswich) as well as a landfall at the Wentworth Inn overlooking the sea and a visit to the new Snape Maltings Concert Hall en route to a meeting with Benjamin Britten.

"That's it," said Culshaw, as he turned

off the Snape-Aldeburgh road into a country lane, "that's the Red House." Red it certainly was, and definitely a house. Rather than being the picturesque clapboard structure with weather-beaten shutters conjured up by the mental association of Britten, Grimes, Aldeburgh, and the sea, it was a substantial brick structure surrounded by well-cultivated land broken up into lawns and gardens. Part of the lawn accommodated a croquet ground, and the roses were certainly well tended. Overhead the whine of a jet made the silence all the more pronounced when it faded away.

There was silence within, also. A ring at the front door brought no response, and we went around to the side. Just at the moment when some question of timing and arrival might have arisen, a low-slung sports car pulled into the lane. First out was the readily recognizable figure of the composer himself, closely followed by his long-time friend and musical collaborator, Peter Pears, and the Phippses—Sue Phipps, niece of

Pears and secretary to the composer, and her husband, an associate in a London concert management firm.

Were we early or were they late in returning from a shopping trip to the village? The difference was too slight to be arguable and it was time for tea anyway. Late afternoon in late May in Suffolk can be chilly, which made the tea and the fireplace beside which it was served equally welcome. Amid the rattling of spoons and the passing of cups, there was also opportunity for a look at Britten, last seen on a postwar visit to America for a concert tour with Pears in the late Forties. Slightly heavier, perhaps, and a little grayer; but on the whole as lean in his country clothes of corduroy and casually elegant color contrasts as he had then been in tails at Town Hall or lounge suit in the living room of a Park Avenue apartment.

From the hubbub of conversation I heard myself saying to Pears, who was standing nearby, "I hope you won't hate me for this, but I have recently heard your *Winterreise* and I am saying in print that it's among the best ever recorded." The pronouncement was received without complaint but also without overt satisfaction (I later learned that Pears would like to record it again, that he didn't think he was in voice at the time it was made). To a query about the relative problems of the great Schubert song cycles, Pears agreed that the *Die Schöne Müllerin* (which he has also recorded with Britten) "flows on its way" to an easier interpretative resolution than *Die Winterreise*, with its bleak, concluding "Leiermann."

As Pears moved away on some tea-serving mission, Britten settled into the next chair with a query about what I had been doing, musically, in England.

I mentioned *La Bohème* at Glyndebourne, which drew the observation that he couldn't understand present artistic policies down there. "However, I suppose I should be grateful that they are what they have been," he continued, "for there might not have been an Aldeburgh Festival otherwise. After the end of the war and the changes at Sadler's Wells, where we had been working with Piper, Joan Cross, Pears, and others, Rudi Bing invited us to do a season at Glyndebourne. They had a plant and nothing to put on, and we had a company and no place to play." But it soon developed that John Christie's ideas of opera and Britten's were not quite compatible. *The Rape of Lucretia*, I gathered, did not suit Christie's criteria for an opera because it had no overture. It was out of the quest to find a home for the English Opera Group that the Aldeburgh Festival was founded in 1947.

**T**HE composer's desire to live and work in the Suffolk area he knew so well (he was born in Lowestoft, a few miles upcoast) plus the associations with *The Borough* of George Crabbe, in which Britten found the seed for *Peter Grimes*, may seem a suitably emotional motivation for Aldeburgh's choice. But there were more practical reasons as well: such buildings as Jubilee Hall in Aldeburgh and an old Norman church in nearby Orford in which performances could be mounted.

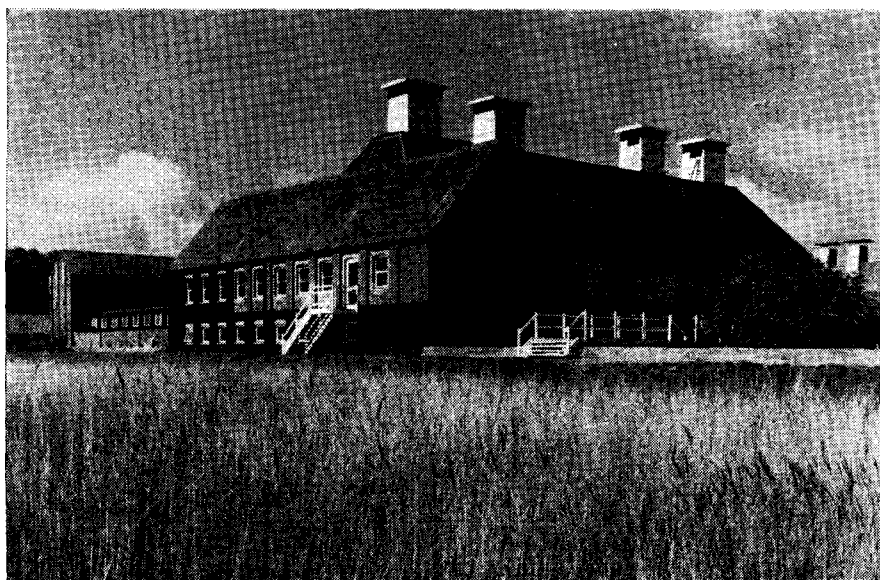
Out of the activity thus initiated and the creative results it engendered arose the conversion, in time for this summer's 20th anniversary festival, of an old, unused Maltings House into the new, very much used Snape Concert Hall. One of a series of sturdy structures grouped beside the River Alde,

the Maltings House is a kind of oblong-shaped granary in which barley was shoveled in and heated over subsurface burners to cause fermentation. Preserving the exterior, with its severe lines, dormer windows, and slate roof provided a happy solution, I suggested, to the problem of design in the open country. Britten's agreement was practical as well as esthetic. "By utilizing the old exterior," he said, referring to the walls and foundation, "we were able to do for £150,000 what might otherwise have cost two or three times as much."

Behind Britten's typically understated appraisal of the circumstances was a good deal of determined effort and no little self-sacrifice to realize his cherished hope of a place in which he could perform his own works to his own specifications. London Decca not only lent counsel and advice of an acoustical sort to the firm of Arup Associates which planned the transformation; it also made an investment assessed by Sir Edward Lewis, chairman of its board, at £17,500. There were even larger contributions from the Arts Council and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (reported to be £25,000 each).

There is nothing in the least luxurious about the black-walled building with its white, nautical-looking stacks (actually vents for air circulation), but there is everything about it which is tastefully simple and thoughtfully functional. When stripped of its old interior floors and furnaces, the long narrow "room" provided for an ample stage platform and sloping tiers of seats accommodating approximately 800. An ingenious system of jacks, screws, and hinges enables the stage floor to be raked, and its front section can be removed to provide a pit for a modest-sized orchestra. Remarkably, too, though the old roof had to be removed to facilitate the interior work, the replacement that preserved its prior appearance also functioned admirably for sound reflecting. The well traveled who notice something familiar about the cane seats will not be surprised to learn that they were built, locally, after specifications from Bayreuth and a sample supplied by Wolfgang Wagner. The choice was prompted by no desire to suggest a likeness at Snape to the Festspielhaus, but simply because investigation had determined that of all the chairs known to the theatrical trade, these required the least upkeep.

Creature comforts, however, have not been wholly ignored at Snape. The success of the ventilating system is not yet documented, but every effort has been made to offset the transmission of sun heat from the outside to the inside. And if the restaurant facilities are spare as well as spacious, who needs interior decoration when the view from the refreshment area takes in a wide sweep of



Snape Concert Hall—"the black-walled building with its white nautical-looking stacks."





Queen Elizabeth II at the dedicatory ceremonies (left)—  
 “Nobody could remember when the Royal family had previously visited Suffolk.” (Right) View from the stage—  
 “sloping tiers of seats accommodating approximately 800.”



marshlands to the sea beyond? Where a stand of trees breaks the line of the pure blue sky, one realizes why Suffolk is known as “Constable country.”

Britten’s attachment to it became clearer as he led the way from the tea table to a newly constructed library nearby. “This used to be the chicken run,” he said, waving in the direction of the low stone construction we were approaching. As we settled into the cheerfully furnished room with its two grand pianos, he left no doubt that the Aldeburgh Festival was closely related to his fundamental feeling that music should communicate. “Why else,” he queried, “should a composer write?”

The people of the borough give a great deal back to him in their annual endeavor: They build and paint scenery, sing in the chorus, and, in general, involve themselves as much with his life as he does with theirs. Even the creation of the Snape Concert Hall has brought Britten closer to the population. Those natives who were not drawn into the yearly activities and viewed the “artists” with suspicion, reacted differently when it was discovered that the Queen would participate in the dedication ceremonies in early June. Nobody could remember when the Royal family had previously visited Suffolk.

Britten’s references to “involvement” and “communication” turned his thoughts to a recent visit to York where he had appeared before an audience of advanced music students at a university. “They seemed interested in my way of working, in my belief in communication. . . . I wouldn’t say reinterested,” he

added, “because I don’t think they had such an interest before. One of the students during a question period said: ‘It must be very hard to write music if you don’t use the twelve-tone method.’” Britten said he quite agreed, but added with a smile, “Creation itself is hard, whether with paints, or words, or tones.”

As for “novelty” in expression or affiliation with the avant-garde, I mentioned that the date of a composition is perhaps its least important element, that few know and even fewer care whether *Das Lied von der Erde* was written in 1903, 1909, or 1919. The only fact of importance is that it “exists.” His comment was to the effect that, of course, a dominant seventh chord doesn’t have the same connotation today that it did 150 years ago, but it remains a value that can be used. As for “fashion,” his face lighted up as he said, “What about Bach? He was considered old-fashioned in his lifetime, but you can open to a page of almost any cantata and find striking uses of ideas that are exciting today.”

“Communication” is also involved in his recent trend to the writing of such works as *Curlew River* and *The Burning Fiery Furnace*. “What’s the use of writing English operas when there are no English opera houses in which to perform them?” he observed. “On the other hand, almost every town, not to say village, has one of those old Gothic churches in which this form of writing can flourish, and involve the local musicians as performers.” As for future intentions, Britten is stimulated by the possibilities of a television opera, especially since the brilliant TV adaptation

of his *Billy Budd* by Basil Coleman, with whom he would like to work. As to subject matter, Britten was communicatively vague. That is to say, he was willing to be informative, but there wasn’t much to be informative about. “Very likely it will be from an existing source,” he said, “because I have very little capacity for story invention. . . . It could be a Henry James again [a reference to *The Turn of the Screw*] but there is nothing definite yet. . . .”

It is definite that Britten will do some traveling this fall, when the English Opera Group performs at Expo 67, and that he will satisfy long-standing invitations to perform song programs with Pears in New York, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, and several other South American cities. He confesses to some uneasiness about this diffusion of effort, that he is “a little worried” when he isn’t composing. But he recognizes that he has, still, a strong impulse toward performance and that contact with an audience provides a stimulus like no other.

Doubtless 1967 will be recorded, in the Britten chronology, as the year in which he acquired a place of his own in which to house his artistic offspring. But it is the offspring themselves, past and future, who will make the house a home for the Aldeburgh activities of the future. My guess is that, together, they will make this corner of Suffolk a lure for music lovers long after the jets that roar out of the nearby NATO airbase have gone elsewhere—which, for those who have Britten’s interest at heart, can’t be too soon.

# Monteverdi for Moderns



Claudio Monteverdi —  
“a long-remiss tribute.”

**A** BIRTHDAY can often afford the recording industry an ideal occasion for paying a long-remiss tribute to a sometimes neglected composer. May 15, 1967, marked the 400th birthday of the Cremona-born master, Claudio Monteverdi, and for this important quadricentennial year both Telefunken's *Das Alte Werk* series (SAWT 9501/02-A) and Columbia (stereo, M2S 763; mono, M2L 363) have released the first stereo recordings of his masterpiece, *Vespro della Beata Vergine*, or the “Vespers of 1610.” Of prime attention for the Monteverdi scholars and fanciers is the fact that the two paths taken to performance ends are as disparate as the Renaissance and the twentieth century themselves.

Among the crucial questions facing the conductor and/or editor of such a venture is the exact circumstance and place for which the composer intended his “Vespers” to be heard. Because it is a vespers service based on the opening of the Ordinary of the Ecclesiastical Hours and consisting of the response (“Domine ad adiuvandum”), five psalms (Nos. 109, 112, 121, 126, and 147), a hymn (“Ave maris stella”), and Magnificat (all with preceding and following antiphons), it might well have been intended for a purely liturgical function.

But because it also contains five non-liturgical sections—“Nigra sum,” “Pulchra es,” “Duo Seraphim,” “Audi coelum,” and the instrumental “Sonata sopra ‘Sancta Maria ora pro nobis’”—it is also convincingly argued that the “Vespers”

was composed as a collection for a private chapel or palace.

In other words, both a liturgical or a purely musical attitude may be taken to this music. *Das Alte Werk*'s Jürgen Jürgens, using Nikolaus Harnoncourt's version, and Columbia's Robert Craft offer eloquent reasoning, aural and intellectual, for both opinions. Another editor, Denis Stevens, has so strongly felt the schism between the liturgical and the secular that his 1960 version includes *only* the response, psalms, hymn, and Magnificat. Both newly recorded versions here consist of the full thirteen movements, employing the larger, seven-voice Magnificat, instead of the alternate six-voice version with organ. The major difference is that Harnoncourt has included for the first time on record the antiphons, emphatically stating his position for the music as being liturgically intended; while Craft, buoyed by the added factor that he has rearranged the order of the pieces to make the “Sonata sopra ‘Sancta Maria’” the climactic midpoint, has chosen to present this music for contemporary concert listening.

A further major consideration in performing music of the seventeenth century is that of the authenticity of the instruments. Harnoncourt and Jürgens, in attempting to recreate Monteverdi's music as he might have heard it played in a church or chapel, have assembled in the *Concentus Musicus* of Vienna a twenty-five piece orchestra of ancient and reproduction strings, pifferi (early oboes), Renaissance recorders, Baroque trombones, genuine cornetti, virginals, dulcian (early bassoon), and lute. On the other hand, Craft uses only modern instruments in his Columbia Baroque Ensemble.

With all such central and inevitable musicological questions under consideration, both performances by Jürgens and Craft are valuable additions to the catalogue. The forces gathered under Jürgens's baton—including the skillful *Concentus Musicus*, as well as the Monteverdi Choir of Hamburg, the *Capella Antiqua* of Munich, members of the Vienna Boys' Choir, and his six soloists—seem born to the task of capturing the style and sound of Monteverdi's music. As prepared by Jürgens and recorded by Telefunken, the choral voices and instruments take on an almost transparent quality, and the soloists are of the vibrato-less variety.

Of prime importance among the solo

assignments are those given to the first and second tenors. Nigel Rogers, in his “Nigra sum” and throughout, handles the decorated vocal line with uncommon flexibility and ease. And the virtuosic blend of the two tenors (Bert van t'Hoff as second tenor with the eventual addition of baritone Max van Egmond) in “Duo Seraphim” is exquisite as the vocal lines poetically weave among one another. Sopranos Rohtraud Hansmann and Irmgard Jacobeit attain an equal plane of perfection in their beautiful duet, “Pulchra es.” The engineers have given the overall Telefunken effort a warmth of tone and clarity of voices that embellish Jürgens's total view.

The Columbia set, more modern in its approach as it is, provides a somewhat more dramatic listening experience under Craft's knowing baton. The combined choruses of the Gregg Smith Singers and Texas Boys' Choir may not effect the delicate blend of their European counterparts, but they do sing with accuracy and expressivity; and Columbia engineers have created some superb stereo effects in the echo and antiphonal choruses of “Laudate, pueri” and “Nisi Dominus.” By using a modern organ and trumpets, a certain weightiness tends to inflate the musical texture, yet it is hard to resist the glowing and rich, fruity sounds produced here. Craft, like Jürgens, conducts with an authority, a freedom and lack of academicism, which makes for vivid listening. His soloists are not always up to those on Telefunken.

**T**HE two previous versions of the “Vespers,” Oiseau-Lyre's conducted by Anthony Lewis and Vox's conducted by Hans Grischkat, both lack the blessing of stereo to bring them fully to life. Both would seem to use somewhat larger choral forces than on the new recordings. The Oiseau-Lyre treatment boasts a complete version edited by Leo Schrade, while the Vox is incomplete.

Another welcome tribute to the celebrant Monteverdi turns out also to be a welcome reissue. Odyssey's mono disc (32 16 0087) of the New York Pro Musica, available in the late 1950s on Columbia, can be recommended without any reservation, musical or musicological. Having assembled eight madrigals from the nine books, plus the six madrigals from “Tears of a Lover at the Tomb of the Beloved,” the Pro Musica under the late Noah Greenberg's splendid direction conveys simplicity in manner and pleasure in music-making, enhanced by remarkable presence of both voices and instruments. This means delight in Russell Oberlin's lead in several of the madrigals, beginning with the opening duet “Zefiro torna” with Charles Bressler, as well as Bernard Krainis's sparkling recorder throughout.

—ROBERT JACOBSON.