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**“Music-making in a Joyous Sense”:  
Democratization, Modernity, and Community at  
Benjamin Britten's Aldeburgh Festival of Music and  
the Arts**

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Spring 2016

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## Introduction

In early June of 1948, the composer Benjamin Britten, the singer Peter Pears, and the director and librettist Eric Crozier inaugurated a festival of music, opera, painting, and lectures in the modest English town of Aldeburgh. It was a notably quaint affair. The opening concert of that first Aldeburgh Festival of Music and the Arts marked the world premiere of Britten's cantata *Saint Nicolas*, featuring "the rough breathy voices of three kids from a local 'Co-op'" in solos and ending with the whole congregation being "drawn into a hymn."<sup>1</sup> To replace a raised platform in the Parish Church, the venue for the concert, Britten used one of his own wardrobes with the legs cut off.<sup>2</sup> Private homes opened their doors for exhibitions of paintings by, among others, the locally born John Constable, while literary and artistic eminences lectured on other East Anglian artistic figures.<sup>3</sup> The second evening, Britten's comic opera *Albert Herring* was presented in the 300-seat Jubilee Hall, with the percussion (dampened by "gaily coloured eiderdowns") and harp positioned in the auditorium proper because of the absence of room in the orchestra pit. Since the Hall had no bar, the crowd went down the street to the local pub during intermission, where one local remarked, "I took a ticket for this show because it is local and I felt I had to. I'd have sold it to anyone for sixpence earlier on. I wouldn't part with it now for ten pounds."<sup>4</sup>

From its beginning the Aldeburgh Festival had several distinctive and unusual features. Amateur musicians and everyday people played an important role in concerts, as with the

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<sup>1</sup> E. M. Forster, "Looking Back on the First Aldeburgh Festival," in *New Aldeburgh Anthology*, compiled by Ariane Bankes and Jonathan Reekie (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2009), 186.

<sup>2</sup> George Behrend, "Early Days in Aldeburgh: Memoirs of a Railway Enthusiast," in *New Aldeburgh Anthology*, *ibid.*, 190.

<sup>3</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1992), 269.

<sup>4</sup> Forster, "Looking Back on the First Aldeburgh Festival," 188.

children soloists and singing audience in *Saint Nicolas*. The Festival celebrated Aldeburgh and the surrounding Suffolk as a cultural place, with lectures and exhibitions spotlighting local artists and the use of parish churches and local halls as venues in spite of their limitations. A genial, informal spirit lent the venture the air of a small-town fair, as with the wardrobe-cum-platform and the friendly throng of people in the pub. Despite the provinciality and relaxed atmosphere of the town and the inclusion of amateur musicians in its productions, the Festival featured ambitious music performed by world-class musicians as well as exceptional productions like a world premiere and an opera, both by Britten. Indeed, Britten himself was strongly invested, volunteering his talents as a performer, composer, and organizer as well as his own furniture.

Other factors contributed to the Festival's uniqueness. Its relative isolation and distance from London invested it with a special aura, for one had to make an effort to visit. Britten and Pears themselves lived together in the town, and many of the visiting lecturers and musicians stayed with them during the Festival, contributing to a convivial environment. Those visitors were both important British figures and increasingly artists of international repute, like the American transplant violinist Yehudi Menuhin, the German singer Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, the Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, and the Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály.

Much of the Festival's success rested upon Britten himself and his place in the British cultural landscape. After the resounding 1945 success of his *Peter Grimes*, an opera (set in Aldeburgh) heralded as reviving the English operatic tradition and in retrospect as "symbolically represent[ing] a new direction for postwar culture," Britten was arguably the most important British musician of his generation.<sup>5</sup> In 1948, the first year of the Festival, the Metropolitan Opera

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Powers, "The Destructive Element: Benjamin Britten and Aldeburgh," in Lara Feigel and Alexandra Harris, ed., *Modernism on Sea: Art and Culture at the British Seaside* (Oxfordshire, England: Peter Lang, 2009), 214.

in New York presented *Peter Grimes* and Britten was featured on the cover of *Time*.<sup>6</sup> He garnered international fame as a performer by touring the world with Pears. As a composer, his works were frequently performed abroad and his operas eventually translated into many languages. His reputation continued to grow, so that by the late 1950s, recordings of his music achieved blockbuster sales, especially his 1963 recording of his *War Requiem*. Stephen Banfield even calls Britten one of the half dozen most important phenomena of British music in the twentieth century, along with such developments as the BBC and new recording technologies.<sup>7</sup> Britten's continued importance can also be seen in the existence of a fifty pence coin from 2013 honoring the centenary of his birth. Such renown helped bring funding and fame to the Festival.

The Festival also benefited from Britten's personal relationships. Many of the visiting performers and lecturers were Britten's friends, who were enticed by the communal atmosphere and often performed for cheap or no fees. Britten also enjoyed close relationships with wealthy and influential figures, including such royalty as the German Princess and Prince of Hesse and the Rhine and the English Countess of Cranbrook, and he occasionally turned to these people as well as his artist acquaintances for donations to the Festival. His working relationships with Decca Records executives and officials from the Arts Council and the BBC helped garner the Festival recording contracts, government subsidies, and broadcasts of concerts.<sup>8</sup>

Britten was such an integral part of the Festival that it can be seen as a concrete expression of his conception of culture and its role in society, in his own words an "experimental" venture

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<sup>6</sup> Neil Powell, *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2013), 270.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Banfield, "Introduction," in *The Twentieth Century*, ed. Stephen Banfield, vol. 6 of *The Blackwell History of Music in Britain*, ed. Ian Spink (Oxford: Blackwell Reference, 1995), 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Kildea, *Selling Britten: Music and the Marketplace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.

through which he believed he was instituting “really ‘contemporary’” artistic developments.<sup>9</sup> Those developments included the integration of a world-class music festival into a provincial community, the adoption of relatively new institutions like the Arts Council, the recording industry, and the BBC to support the festival, and an ingenious use of the limited resources of a small town that made a virtue out of a necessity. Perhaps most contemporary, however, was the way in which Britten and the Festival responded to the social and cultural changes of the era. Through the Festival, Britten attempted to democratize culture by making it available to all people. The Festival would foster the creation of a locally grounded, egalitarian community through the participation of everyday people, who would join professional performers in shared musical experiences. Strengthened by these experiences, such a community would act as a bulwark of humanity and affirm the value of art in the face of dehumanizing, commodifying modernity and technology. Though I lack the sources to evaluate how successful Britten was in his project at Aldeburgh, this thesis explores the conception and presentation of the Festival from its inception until Britten’s death in 1976 to discern Britten’s cultural ideals and their reflection of the social changes of the era.

The Festival was part of contemporaneous social and cultural trends. Britten’s fear of the effects of modernity and technology on human values and art, and his attempt to combat such tendencies through the Festival, are part of a widespread critique of modernity. His attempt to democratize culture was a response to common feelings that society was unequal. The use of community to counteract these problems fits into a broader cultural movement in postwar Britain

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<sup>9</sup> Britten to E. J. Dent, June 16, 1948, in *1952-1957*, ed. Philip Reed et al, vol. 3 of *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten, 1913-1976*, ed. by Philip Reed (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2008), 396; Britten to W. A. Sanderson, August 6, 1958, in *1958-1965*, ed. Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke, vol. 5 of *Letters from a Life*, *ibid.* (2010), 170.



that attempted to democratize art and build a national culture in which everyone could partake. Furthermore, an emphasis on participatory, shared art is a cultural manifestation of a time in which democracy was being redefined to mean equal participation in society by all people. The Festival's goal of democratic, communal art was a cultural counterpart to the attempt in Britain and Western Europe to construct an egalitarian society in the postwar period that resulted in the establishment of social democratic welfare states.

The push for true social democracies began in earnest during World War II. With the need to boost both production and morale in the face of military deployment and devastating bombings that damaged two out of every seven British houses by the end of the war, popular and state organizations came together to maintain industry and counteract fear.<sup>10</sup> The requirements of total war also “furnished people, particularly ordinary working class people, with a new sense of their moral worth,” so that they were less willing to accept prevailing social conditions and inequality after the war.<sup>11</sup> There was a strong belief that the war forged unity across society and acted as a leveling influence that would improve the lives of the working classes.<sup>12</sup> Victory over Germany in 1945 then allowed a chance to continue the extraordinary cooperation of the war years and reshape British society as an egalitarian welfare state, proving a commitment to the ideals of democracy and equality that had just been fought for in the war. Indeed, the promise that injustice and poverty would be alleviated after the war was a promise held before the people to raise morale, so that an expectation for a new, better postwar society existed.<sup>13</sup> As Sonya O. Rose

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<sup>10</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Literature Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: The Athlone Press, 1997) 7, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Bill Williamson, *The Temper of the Times: British Society since World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 24.

<sup>12</sup> Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 29.

<sup>13</sup> Sinfield, *Literature Politics*, 1.

has shown, “The idea that a new Britain would rise like a phoenix from the ashes of war was a powerful one that dominated the hopes and fears articulated in popular discourse.”<sup>14</sup>

After the war, Western Europe attempted to realize societies based on “an alternative conception of the social order,” one held together by consent and participation instead of by force. As Tony Judt avers, “the Second World War transformed both the role of the modern state and the expectations placed upon it. The change was most marked in Britain, where [the economist] Maynard Keynes correctly anticipated a post-war ‘craving for social and personal *security*’.”<sup>15</sup> Governments aimed to ensure full employment, universal secondary education, health care, pensions, public transportation, and housing. Everyone would have a stake in this welfare state, with resources fairly allocated across society.<sup>16</sup> The introduction by the British Labour party of welfare programs such as unemployment relief and social security between 1946 and 1951 accompanied the general socialization of private spheres. During Labour’s five-year government, the Bank of England, several transit networks, hospitals, and various industries were nationalized.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the slow decline of Britain as both an imperial and an economic world power in the post-war years contributed to the Labour government’s turn inward to domestic problems and the project of reconstruction after the war.<sup>18</sup>

This progressive attempt to create an egalitarian welfare society included culture as well. With the state now guaranteeing social benefits, it also began to financially support the arts for the first time in British history. Formal government subsidy of the arts in Britain began in

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<sup>14</sup> Rose, *Which People’s War* 25.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 73.

<sup>16</sup> Sinfield, *Literature Politics*, 15-16; Williamson, *The Temper of Times*, 28; Judt, *Postwar*, 73.

<sup>17</sup> David Childs, *Britain since 1945: A Political History*, Sixth ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 14-17.

<sup>18</sup> Becky E. Conekin, *‘The autobiography of a nation’: The 1951 Festival of Britain* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 30.

January of 1940, when the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) began operating under the auspices of the national Board of Education. CEMA's goals were to provide and preserve opportunities for the arts during wartime; to encourage amateur participation in the arts; and, through such activities, to support artists, musicians, and actors struggling to make a living in conditions of wartime austerity.<sup>19</sup> It achieved great success both in generating audiences and stimulating amateur art, so that "by the middle of the war a consensus began to emerge that state patronage of the arts had a vital and permanent role to play in British society."<sup>20</sup>

With CEMA's purpose tied to wartime conditions, there was a possibility that government subsidy of the arts would simply be a short-lived anomaly in Britain once the war drew to a close. But CEMA was reconstituted in 1946 as the Arts Council of Great Britain out of a belief that its success demonstrated a growing appreciation and need for the arts. This new chartered body would receive its funding from the Treasury, and, though subject to assessments by the government, effectively be an independent organization.<sup>21</sup> The government increasingly allocated larger amounts of money to the Arts Council, so that by 1951, five years after its inception, its grant had nearly tripled.<sup>22</sup>

CEMA and the Arts Council are indicative of, and helped support, a re-evaluation of culture and its role in British society. As the welfare state was established, an ideal of democratic, shared culture as an enlightening and restorative force began to be propagated amongst government officials and cultural elites. This was manifested in a variety of projects: a surge of new festivals

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<sup>19</sup> Eric Walter White, *The Arts Council of Great Britain* (London: Davis-Poynter Limited, 1975), 25-6.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Weight, "'Building a new British culture': the Arts Centre Movement, 1943-53," in *The Right to Belong: Citizenship and National Identity in Britain, 1930-60*, ed. Richard Weight and Abigail Beach (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 158.

<sup>21</sup> Clive Gray, *The Politics of the Arts in Britain* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 41-2.

<sup>22</sup> Weight, "'Building a new British culture'," 173.

of music and arts, like the Aldeburgh Festival, supported by the Arts Council; the launch of the BBC's cultural network, the Third Programme, in 1946; the 1951 Festival of Britain, which celebrated victory in and recovery from World War II; and the failed movement to build Arts Centres in provincial towns. All of these cultural projects strove to improve the quality and quantity of culture and performances in Britain, and to increase the demand for art—an explicitly stated goal of the Arts Council.<sup>23</sup> While in many ways a product of the prevailing ideal of an egalitarian society, these new projects and their underlying conceptions of culture also emerged in response to changes in society that brought about fears of materialism and consumerism. As Alan Sinfield argues, “Literature and the arts were made to embody the spiritual and human values that consumer capitalism and ‘mass’ culture seemed to slight.”<sup>24</sup>

The 1950s saw a general increase in prosperity in Britain and the West, as well as greater equality of opportunity, shorter working hours, and the introduction of paid holidays.<sup>25</sup> This greater affluence allowed larger groups of people to participate in middle class consumption and leisure. But the increasingly common lifestyle characterized by consumption and leisure also generated fears of mindless consumerism and soulless mass culture amongst intellectuals and cultural elites. The consumerist life was compared to a squirrel wheel, where “people chased endlessly round a self-defeating circle of production and consumption,” while advertising and the culture it created was decried as manipulative and dehumanizing through its creation of a “mass man.”<sup>26</sup> Under such conditions, people would passively consume what they were sold, so that “high” art would be ignored in favor of “low” entertainment and creativity would be lost

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<sup>23</sup> White, 25-6; K. King and Mark Blaug, “Does the Arts Council Know What It Is Doing?,” in *The Economics of the Arts*, ed. Mark Blaug (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1992), 112.

<sup>24</sup> Sinfield, *Literature Politics*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Weight, “‘Building a new British culture’,” 177; Sinfield, *Literature Politics*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Sinfield, *Literature Politics*, 21, 106-7.

along with a homogenizing erasure of the individual. The emergence of new technologies such as television and the increasing commercialism of older medias like radio or the recording industry further contributed to consumerism, especially as more people bought televisions and used their increasing leisure time to enjoy them.<sup>27</sup> Compounding this apprehension about the devaluation of art and the disappearance of the individual into the faceless mass were the alienating, dehumanizing tendencies of modernity as a whole: its inauthenticity, its rational, impersonal planning in the form of housing projects and bureaucracies, its stultifying conformity, and its destruction of history and localism in an attempt to create a progressive, cosmopolitan future that resulted in anonymous placelessness.

Britten sought to combat these dangers of consumerism and modernity with the Aldeburgh Festival. Amateur and audience participation in music and the Festival would democratize culture and prevent the passive consumption enabled by recording and broadcasting technologies. Creativity and humanity would be asserted through interpersonal relationships and a celebration of artistic activity of all kinds, from amateur to professional and visual to aural. A grounding in a specific, local place rejected the globalizing monotony of modernity and provided deep roots for a strong, convivial community that would dispel the isolation and alienation of modern life. With everyone on an equal cultural footing, audiences, professionals, amateurs and composer would all join together in authentic, humanity-affirming musical experiences.

## **Chapter Two: Historiography and the Origin of the Festival**

### *Historiography*

The Aldeburgh Festival has been neglected by scholars. There is a fair amount of scholarship on Britten and his outsider status, most significantly his homosexuality, as well as on

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<sup>27</sup> Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 363.

his music from a musicological or theoretical standpoint, but the Festival—one of his most lasting and consuming projects—barely features in this work.<sup>28</sup> Paul Kildea examines the Festival, its finances, and its effect on Britten’s music in a chapter of his invaluable *Selling Britten*, which explores the relationship between Britten and new markets such as radio, recordings, and government arts patronage. *Selling Britten* is integral to dissecting Britten’s contradictory relationship to new technologies. Britten took great advantage of those technologies, carving out a financially feasible role for the composer in modern society, as Kildea shows. But whereas I explore the antagonistic side of Britten’s relationship to technology, Kildea focuses on the beneficial aspects of that relationship. Britten’s attitude towards modernity is not the point of Kildea’s book; rather Kildea argues that new market denominators were integral to Britten’s career, and that Britten helped shape those new market forces.<sup>29</sup>

Few people have investigated Britten’s ideas about culture in depth, so I use the Aldeburgh Festival to explore his cultural goals. Biographies by Neil Powell and Humphrey Carpenter touch upon these as an important part of Britten’s character and goals as a composer. But they do so only superficially, in the context of Britten’s public pronouncements on music’s role in society, such as his famous 1964 speech upon receiving the first Aspen Award for Services to the Humanities.<sup>30</sup> Heather Wiebe does explore Britten’s vision for his music as a cultural tool in her *Britten’s Unquiet Past: Sound and Memory in Postwar Reconstruction*. Wiebe argues that Britten’s music attempted to engage with “memory, magic, and the sacred” to

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<sup>28</sup> Philip Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays*, ed. George E. Haggerty (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Christopher Palmer, ed., *The Britten Companion* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1984); Mervyn Cooke, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Philip Rupprecht, *Rethinking Britten* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Kildea, *Selling Britten*.

<sup>30</sup> Powell, *Benjamin Britten*; Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1992).

“bind people into communities, link the present with the past, and endow experiences and objects with meaning” in the face of “modernization, secularization, commodification, and technocracy.”<sup>31</sup> Though Wiebe explores Britten’s attempt to form communities, demonstrate the value of art through authentic experience, and fight the dehumanization of modernity, she devotes only cursory attention to the Festival, focusing instead upon Britten’s music. Her attention to specific works by Britten leads her to portray him as backwards-looking. However, the contradictions and complexities of the Festival’s goals reveal that such a characterization is overly simplistic. Instead of rejecting modernity outright in favor of an imagined past, Britten sought to update aspects of that past and not simply restore them.

There is not much scholarly work on music festivals.<sup>32</sup> A few popular surveys of British festivals exist, such as Richard Adams’ *A Book of British Music Festivals*.<sup>33</sup> Adams contends that music festivals “are closer to the centre of [British] cultural life than is perhaps the case in any other country in the world” and that British festivals have long focused on the local and the amateur, but does not support his argument in any detail.<sup>34</sup> Two recent books have examined British festivals as reflections of their contemporaneous society and economy, as in Pippa Drummond’s historical survey, *The Provincial Music Festival in England, 1784-1914*.<sup>35</sup> Becky E. Conekin has studied the government-organized 1951 Festival of Britain as a vision of the ruling Labour party’s social democratic agenda and as an embodiment of postwar British ideals.

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<sup>31</sup> Heather Wiebe, *Britten’s Unquiet Pasts: Sound and Memory in Postwar Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>32</sup> Michael P. Steinberg, *The Meaning of the Salzburg Festival: Austria as Theater and Ideology, 1890-1938* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Frederic Spotts, *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>33</sup> Richard Adams, *A Book of British Music Festivals* (London: Royce, 1986).

<sup>34</sup> Adams, *A Book of British Music Festivals*, 21.

<sup>35</sup> Pippa Drummond, *The Provincial Music Festival in England, 1784-1914* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011).

Her argument that the Festival “embodied the post-war British ideal of universal, popular access to and understanding of ‘culture’” and that a shared national culture had democratic potential may well be applied to the Aldeburgh Festival, showing the link between the cultural goals of Britten and other British cultural elites.<sup>36</sup> Like Drummond and Conekin, I attempt to situate the Aldeburgh Festival in the broader historical context of the time, in the process revealing social and cultural priorities of both Britten and British society in general. Yet where Conekin is primarily interested in politics, I examine social and cultural ideals.

In his book *Literature Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, Alan Sinfield engages in a similar project, but uses literature rather than music or a festival to understand politics and society. Sinfield provides an insightful and wide-ranging examination of English literature and its place within postwar welfare capitalism and attempts to build an equal society. Though he does not discuss music, his investigation of the intersections between culture, politics, and social change and his tying of culture to welfare capitalism are useful corollaries to my examination of the Aldeburgh Festival’s reflection of the social and cultural ideals of the period.<sup>37</sup>

The Festival’s focus on the local and non-metropolitan is part of two related contemporary developments in British culture. Around the end of World War Two, a resurgent interest in folk culture and a pastoral past emerged that valued folk music and customs and praised the rural community over the disconnection of urban life.<sup>38</sup> A local festival like Aldeburgh could reinforce such a community in its distance from metropolitan centers, while simultaneously tapping into a pastoral past, with its quaint buildings, small population, and

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<sup>36</sup> Conekin, *The autobiography of a nation*, 9. The Aldeburgh Festival was incorporated under the rubric of the Festival of Britain in 1951 as one of twenty-three “Festival Arts Centres.” Wiebe, *Britten’s Unquiet Past*, 161.

<sup>37</sup> Sinfield, *Literature Politics*.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Brocken, *The British Folk Revival* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003), 12, 20.



working class fishermen.<sup>39</sup> Britten's cultural goals also resonate with those of the British folk revival. Leading figures of the folk revival like Bert Lloyd and Ewan MacColl promoted folk music as "authentic," seeing it as an antidote to popular music, which was stale, uninspired, and un-cultural because of its ties to mass production and capitalism.<sup>40</sup> Such an anti-materialist view of culture is similar to Britten's antipathy towards recordings and their propensity to commodify art; I argue that the belief that modernity lacked authentic cultural experiences was one of the main drivers of Britten's Festival project. The similarity of Lloyd's and MacColl's ideas to Britten's show that Britten's cultural ideals were not unique and did not emerge in a vacuum, but were instead molded by the social and cultural climate of Britain at the time. Nevertheless, Britten lacked the Marxist leanings of many intellectuals associated with the folk revival, showing that such concerns were more mainstream and not solely confined to the radical political left.

Localism also emerged in British literature around the same time period, further proving that Britten's ideals were a response, albeit a unique one, to the circumstances of his era. Beginning in the late 1930s and early 1940s, there was a shift from "cosmopolitan modernism to local culture" in British literary culture, a literary corollary to the folk revival.<sup>41</sup> As Britain's empire and international influence declined, many writers saw an opportunity for cultural renewal and turned away from the aggressiveness and worldliness of imperial Britain towards a notion of "Little England," which celebrated "domestic Englishness" rooted in a pastoral past.<sup>42</sup> Like these authors, Britten believed in the transformative potential of local culture, as is obvious

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<sup>39</sup> Kildea, *Selling Britten*, 151.

<sup>40</sup> Brocken, *The British Folk Revival*, 26-28. Lloyd even sought to use folk music as a political tool in promoting Marxist proletarian revolution.

<sup>41</sup> Wiebe, *Britten's Unquiet Pasts*, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Wiebe, *Britten's Unquiet Pasts*, 134-7.

from his project at Aldeburgh. But Britten did not completely reject the cosmopolitan for the local, for he brought internationally renowned artists to perform at the Aldeburgh Festival and utilized radio and recordings to disseminate music from the Festival across Britain. Britten attempted to marry these seemingly contradictory strands in an effort to democratize culture as completely as possible, at both the local and the national level.

### *The Origin of the Festival*

The Aldeburgh Festival emerged out of the English Opera Group (EOG), an opera company formed by Britten, Eric Crozier, and the artist John Piper in 1946 to present Britten's first "chamber-opera," the small-scale *The Rape of Lucretia*.<sup>43</sup> With *Lucretia*, Britten was attempting to "develop a new art form... which will stand beside the grand opera as the quartet stands beside the orchestra," in his own words.<sup>44</sup> Such a form, with its modest forces and relatively short length, could much more easily be taken on tour than conventional operas. It could even be presented in small towns that lacked opera houses, fitting into the sort of theater or hall more commonly found outside major metropolitan areas. With its many performances of smaller scale operas, the EOG was also ideal for giving young singers needed experience, an explicit goal of Britten's; roles were not too taxing for a young voice, and the singers would get to sing the same role many times, instead of the maximum ten or so times a grand opera might be presented.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Powell, *Benjamin Britten*, 249-253.

<sup>44</sup> Britten to Ralph Hawkes, June 30, 1946, in vol. 3 of *Letters from a Life*, 198.

<sup>45</sup> Britten, "The Arts Council and Opera," in *Britten on Music*, ed. Paul Kildea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 87.

Britten's interest in writing such operas is an example of his desire to bring art to all sorts of people.<sup>46</sup> These easily transported productions enabled Britten and the EOG to bring opera to those who typically did not have access to it, such as rural dwellers who would have to travel to a city and buy expensive tickets to see an opera. "I feel it is absolutely worth it, because, as we have so often agreed, it does get music really to the people, finds out what they want & puts the emphasis on the music," Britten wrote to his friend about recital tours with Pears in provincial areas.<sup>47</sup> These tours, sponsored by CEMA during the war, let Britten bring music directly to the people as with the EOG tours, and are an early instance of him attempting to democratize and share culture.

While touring could bring music "to the people," large tours ended up being prohibitively expensive. Near the end of the Group's summer 1947 tour of Europe, which lost around £3,000 even with an Arts Council grant protecting against a loss of the same amount, Britten, Crozier, and Peter Pears realized that such touring for a small company was not financially feasible.<sup>48</sup> As Crozier recalled in an essay in the first Aldeburgh Festival programme book, "The cost of transporting forty people and their scenery was enormously high... It was exciting to represent British music at international festivals, but we could not hope to repeat the experiment another year." Hence the suggestion by Pears: "Why not make our own Festival? A modest Festival with a few concerts given by friends? Why not have an Aldeburgh Festival?"<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Britten continued to create small-scale operas for premieres at the Aldeburgh Festival following *Lucretia: Albert Herring* in 1947, *The Turn of the Screw* in 1954, and the three church parables from the '60s.

<sup>47</sup> Benjamin Britten to Elizabeth Mayer, 30 September 1942, in *1939-1945*, ed. Donald Mitchell et al, vol. 2 of *Letters from a Life*, *ibid.*, 1089.

<sup>48</sup> Powell, *Benjamin Britten*, 262.

<sup>49</sup> Eric Crozier, "The Origin of the Aldeburgh Festival," in *New Aldeburgh Anthology*, 183.

Pears's remark is a bit understated. "Friends" for Britten and Pears, who were both recital and life partners, meant some of the most well-regarded English performers of the time, and began to include more international stars as the Festival progressed. And while the venues and environs were certainly "modest," the ambitions of the founders were not, presenting as they were high quality music and opera in a small provincial town far from any metropolitan center. But the founders wanted to present the Festival as a local, non-elitist affair in order to fulfill their democratic, community-building project there. Hence Pears' emphasis on modesty and friendliness in his remark, which was recorded retrospectively and presented as part of the official founding story of the Festival by Crozier in the first programme book.<sup>50</sup>

Given Britten's affection for the area, Aldeburgh was an obvious choice as the location for the new Festival. He was born up the coast in the Suffolk town of Lowestoft, lived in Aldeburgh for the last 29 years of his life, and claimed, perhaps with tongue in cheek, "my sole daily paper is the East Anglian Daily Times... world news really has to take a second place to that of East Suffolk" (Figure 1).<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the isolation of Aldeburgh allowed him independence from the British musical establishment, which often frustrated him.<sup>52</sup> The landscape and town inspired his music: from the "Sea Interludes" in *Peter Grimes* that depict the Aldeburgh coast to the comical provincial characters of *Albert Herring*, Britten himself claimed that "all the music I write comes from [Aldeburgh]."<sup>53</sup> Because of his love for the community, landscape, and town, he explained in a speech, "I have tried to bring music *to* it in the shape of

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Britten to Yehudi Menuhin, January 18, 1958, in *Letters from a Life*, vol. 5, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 254.

<sup>53</sup> Benjamin Britten, "On Receiving the First Aspen Award," in *Britten on Music*, 262.

our local Festival.” In the same speech, he described the Festival as “the musical project I have most at heart,” while calling it a “family party” in a letter.<sup>54</sup>

That feeling of a “family party” in some ways resulted from the widespread inclusion of locals in the Festival as amateur performers, exhibiting artists, volunteers, and organizers. This inclusion was integral to his democratic project of the Festival, in that it provided a firm foundation for the community he sought to create. Integration of the locals was evident from the very first steps in planning the Festival. To begin instituting their idea in the fall of 1947, the Festival founders gathered influential locals into an Executive Committee that would help with the administrative details of mounting a Festival. It included the mayor and vicar of Aldeburgh, the owner of one of the town’s hotels, a bank manager, and the local Countess Fidelity Cranbrook as its chair.<sup>55</sup> These people proved essential to the Festival, especially the Countess Cranbrook, who continued a relationship with the Festival until after Britten’s death in 1976.

Aldeburgh as a town consisted primarily of working class fishermen and upper class pleasure seekers and retirees.<sup>56</sup> Though there was initial opposition to the “intrusion” of a music festival into their relaxed lives from the retirees of the “yacht and golf sets,” it was eventually overcome through the persuasion of the Countess of Cranbrook.<sup>57</sup> In January of 1948, a public meeting was held for locals to pose questions and hear about the proposed Festival. As Elizabeth Sweeting recalled in *Let’s Make a Festival*, her unpublished history of the Festival’s first eight years, when she served as its general manager, “We emphatically did not intend to face Aldeburgh’s people with a fait accompli... it was essential that they should be involved, not only

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.; Britten to William Plomer, July 10, 1957, in *Letters from a Life*, vol. 4, 531.

<sup>55</sup> Aldeburgh Festival Executive Committee minute book, October 24, 1947 (Britten-Pears Archive MSC 10/1).

<sup>56</sup> Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 255.

<sup>57</sup> Powell, *Benjamin Britten*, 271.

with moral support and as Festival audiences, but as actively as possible in the organization and conduct of the events. Frankly, it would have been impossible without such help.”<sup>58</sup> Britten himself agreed, saying, “in many ways, the Festival would not be possible without them [the locals].”<sup>59</sup>

The Festival not only included locals and provided them access to music but also established education programs for them as well as for non-local amateurs. 1959 saw the inauguration of the Hesse Student Scheme, which allowed students to attend the Festival and receive room and board in exchange for some basic help working the Festival. In 1965 Britten used his prize money from the Aspen Award for the Humanities to establish the Benjamin Britten Aspen Fund, which commissioned works by young composers.<sup>60</sup> The 1969 Constitution of the Aldeburgh Festival Association continued the commitment to education with its stated goal of the “advancement of education in music and the Arts...”<sup>61</sup> The 1976 Programme Book contained an essay entitled “Not *too* Educational” that responded to complaints about the Festival’s educational initiatives, in which Imogen Holst, an artistic director of the Festival, outlines the intentions of the programs, claiming that “we [the Festival] have never dreamt of giving people music because it was ‘good for them’.”<sup>62</sup> Rather than paternalistically impose art upon people, the organizers of the Festival sought to include people in music through education

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<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth Sweeting, *Let’s Make a Festival* (unpublished typescript in Britten-Pears Archive), 8.

<sup>59</sup> Ivan Howlett produced, “The Archive Hour: Out of the Ashes” (BBC, in Britten-Pears Archive).

<sup>60</sup> Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 441.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Sandra Cowan’s “Secondment to Aldeburgh Festival: June, July 1969” (Britten-Pears Archive PG/AF/1969/28), 4.

<sup>62</sup> Imogen Holst, “Not *too* Educational,” in *Aldeburgh Festival Programme Book, 1976* (Britten-Pears Archive).

and participation, thus democratizing culture and building a human community to fight against the alienating effects of modernity.

### Chapter Three: The Democratization of Music

During the second Aldeburgh Festival, in 1949, Britten's new opera *The Little Sweep* set off "a hubub [sic] of excited comment...when hardened opera-goers anxiously clutched their song-sheets."<sup>63</sup> Developing upon the audience hymn-singing in *St. Nicolas* the previous year, Britten now invited the audience to sing four songs framing the scenes of his opera. Devised to teach audiences about the genre, *The Little Sweep* has six roles for children (auditioned by Britten himself from amongst locals for the premiere) and begins with a "rehearsal" in which the audience learns how an opera is put together and is taught their four songs by the orchestra's conductor. One of the audience songs even has an unusual rhythmic meter, "a challenge to musical sophisticates who might regard communal singing as beneath them," in Humphrey Carpenter's words.<sup>64</sup> With *The Little Sweep*, Britten helped make opera less foreign through an edifying demonstration of its conventions and drew all sorts of people into a community through participatory music. Children, "musical sophisticates," and casual music fans all learned music together, laughed at the birdcalls they were asked to imitate in one of the songs, and joined in singing to create a democratic community.

As the British government sought to create a more egalitarian society through the creation of a welfare state after the war, Britten attempted to enact similar cultural reforms by democratizing art through the Aldeburgh Festival. By bringing world-class music to a provincial region and by including locals and amateurs in the Festival, Britten aimed to not only make art available to a broad swath of people regardless of location or class but also to create

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<sup>63</sup> Imogen Holst, quoted in Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 275.

<sup>64</sup> Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 275-7.

opportunities for them to partake in the Festival. Through amateur and audience participation in the Festival and pieces like *The Little Sweep*, art could be made available to and enjoyable for all. But the attempted democratization of music at Aldeburgh was beset by difficulties. The local audiences Britten wished to engage eventually came into competition with more cosmopolitan audiences as a result of the fame of Britten and his collaborators as well as the growing reputation of the Festival. The use of amateur musicians democratized the concerts of the Festival, yet Britten's desire for exceptional performances sometimes directly opposed amateurism. The difficulties of the Festival were partially generated by the challenge of presenting art at a financially viable level in a capitalist society. Larger audiences and more professional performances could produce greater profits and attract more funding, financial imperatives necessary for continuing the Festival.

The attempted democratization of culture at the Festival has direct connections to the ideals and projects of the welfare state. As Alan Sinfield explains, a central tenet of the welfare project was "that the condition of culture is in substantial part a responsibility of the state... Culture, in welfare-capitalism, is one of the good things (like economic security and healthcare) that the upper-classes have traditionally enjoyed, and it is now to be available to everyone."<sup>65</sup> The state would directly support culture through institutions like the Arts Council and the BBC Third Programme because it sought to equalize society and fairly allocate resources (including culture) previously reserved for the elite, as well as to generally improve the lives of its citizens.<sup>66</sup> The postwar Labour government, the architect of Britain's welfare state, especially envisioned culture as part of its democratizing welfare project. As Becky E. Conekin writes, "With the help of 'culture', 'the people' of Britain could have a fairer, more egalitarian society

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<sup>65</sup> Sinfield, *Literature Politics*, 50.

<sup>66</sup> Conekin, *The autobiography of a nation*, 48.



under Labour.”<sup>67</sup> Culture not only needed to be democratized, but could also help democratize the rest of society.

Much of Britten’s Festival project lined up neatly with the government’s goals for culture, hence the steady support of the Festival by the Arts Council through grants and the BBC through subsidized concerts and broadcasts.<sup>68</sup> The Festival’s localism especially endeared it to the Arts Council. One of the ways the government believed culture could be democratized was to focus on the provincial, as Richard Weight points out in the case of the wartime Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts: “The most effective way to democratize British culture... was for CEMA to encourage an appreciation of the arts at local level.”<sup>69</sup> The Arts Council continued this focus on the local, as shown in a 1970 retrospective of the program published by the Council itself. The author of that report emphasizes the Council’s desire to work with local organizations that are grounded in the community, and avers that regional artistic events make “an impact on the community impossible in the capital.”<sup>70</sup> Such ideals point to Britten as the perfect collaborator: he lived in Aldeburgh and was born in Suffolk, he sought to improve the lives of people through democratizing culture, the Festival was strongly grounded in the community, and it was definitely not metropolitan.

Britten viewed himself as a composer for the people who wanted to share his own profound artistic experiences, both enriching their lives and asserting art’s importance in the modern age. “As an artist I want to serve the community,” he asserted in a 1951 speech.<sup>71</sup>

Twelve years later he wrote in an unpublished article that “Speaking purely personally, I have

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<sup>67</sup> Conekin, *The autobiography of a nation*, 13.

<sup>68</sup> Kildea, *Selling Britten*, 153, 155-6.

<sup>69</sup> Weight, “‘Building a new British culture’,” 159.

<sup>70</sup> Hugh Willatt, *The Arts Council of Great Britain: the first 25 years* (The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1970), 3, 15.

<sup>71</sup> Britten, “Freeman of Lowestoft,” in *Britten on Music*, 109.

got so much richness out of art, especially music, that I have a real desire to help others do the same.”<sup>72</sup> To that end, he tried to expose Aldeburgh and the surrounding Suffolk to music that might not otherwise come to the town and its environs. As a provincial region, the area did not have many high quality musical performances, and the Festival brought unprecedented musical activity there according to a BBC radio retrospective.<sup>73</sup> By setting up a festival in Aldeburgh, Britten could include the locals in the perceived elitist culture of classical music as well as celebrate their own town and artistic endeavors. “The highest possible compliment for an artist,” he said in a speech upon accepting an honorary title from the Borough of Aldeburgh, is to be accepted “as a useful part of the Borough [i.e., the community].”<sup>74</sup>

Locals contributed greatly to the Festival, as supporters, as artists and musicians, and as an audience. A member of the Executive Committee provided a room in his hotel for a Festival office, while the other hotel in town lent space for a Festival club in which visitors could relax and enjoy refreshments.<sup>75</sup> Even locals not directly involved in planning the Festival helped out. Elizabeth Sweeting lists some of them: “Flower arrangers, ushers patiently sitting in at exhibitions, helpers distributing leaflets, addressing envelopes, opening their homes for bed and breakfast, offering transport for artists, a rota of little Boy Scouts waiting at the office to run messages between the venues[,] none of which had telephones.”<sup>76</sup> The Aldeburgh Festival Choir, consisting of local amateurs, always performed in the Festival. And many of the initial guarantors, who promised to contribute money in the case of a loss, were locals.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Britten, “On *Pravda*, Art and Criticism,” in *Britten on Music*, 237.

<sup>73</sup> Howlett produced, “The Archive Hour.”

<sup>74</sup> Britten, “Freedom of Borough of Aldeburgh,” in *Britten on Music*, 217.

<sup>75</sup> Aldeburgh Festival Executive Committee minute books (Britten-Pears Archive, MSC 10/1).

<sup>76</sup> Sweeting, *Let’s Make a Festival*, 23.

<sup>77</sup> Sweeting, *Let’s Make a Festival*, 24; Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 271.

The Festival organizers sought to include and spotlight the fishermen of Aldeburgh in the Festival in a democratic attempt to include the whole town. The first programme book features photos of fishermen at work, positioning them as an integral and characteristic part of life in Aldeburgh, while the 1958 and 1965 Festivals feted local fishing with an essay and photos in the programme book and a symposium on herring in 1958 and on sprat in 1965.<sup>78</sup> Britten's relationship with the fisherman Billy Burrell demonstrates one connection between the fishermen and Britten. Great friends, there is a famous photo from 1948 of Britten, Pears, and Burrell along with the writer E.M. Forster and a young Aldeburgh boy smiling in Burrell's boat together (Figure 2: Britten and Burrell are the two rightmost figures), and in 1951 Burrell captained a boat with Pears and Britten across the North Sea and down the Rhine for a vacation.<sup>79</sup> Burrell also worked as a stagehand for the Festival in the Jubilee Hall, and years later told Britten's biographer Humphrey Carpenter that great friendships developed between performers and workers, with everyone drinking wine on the beach after a concert.<sup>80</sup> By featuring the fishermen of Aldeburgh, Britten and the organizers sought to present the Festival as fully egalitarian; however, there may have been some ambivalence about it from many of the fishermen themselves. Wilfred J. Wren, a member of the Aldeburgh Festival Singers later in Britten's life, notes in his history of the Singers that the "fishermen on the beach were often united in their view that it [the Festival] was all a bit above their heads."<sup>81</sup>

The Festival also showcased the activities of local artists and artisans. In the first few years alone, there were exhibitions of local painters, of early editions and manuscripts by Suffolk

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<sup>78</sup> Aldeburgh Festival Programme Book, 1948, 1958, 1965, (Britten-Pears Archive).

<sup>79</sup> Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 304.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Wilfred J. Wren *Voices by the Sea: The Story of the Aldeburgh Festival Choir* (Terence Dalton Limited: 1981), 12.

writers, of crafts and ships from the area, of “Printing in East Anglia—Past and Present,” a performance by an Aldeburgh amateur theater troupe, and a concert of music by “Young Suffolk Composers.”<sup>82</sup> This participation of locals and showcasing of their art both affirmed art and localism as central to the Festival and helped Britten and the organizers present the Festival as beneficial to the locals rather than being imposed upon them. The Festival was portrayed as an inclusive democratic project rather than a paternalist one, for Britten held democratic ideals of culture. Since the available sources about the Festival are mostly from people affiliated with it, they reveal its public presentation but cannot show how effective that presentation was for audiences and locals. However, it is incontrovertible that many locals did take part in the Festival, and that the organizers sought to include them.

There was a concerted effort to fill events with locals. According to Elizabeth Sweeting, the making of opera “accessible to a new and wider public” was one of the goals of the English Opera Group, which provided the founding impetus of the Festival as well as many of its performers. This meant not only bringing opera to areas it normally did not reach, like Aldeburgh, but also presenting it at accessible ticket prices. The same impulse drove the Festival. Sweeting recalls of the organizer’s goals that “audiences would largely be from the East Anglian catchment area. They must not be pushed out of the market by aficionados [sic] who might be willing to pay high prices.”<sup>83</sup> Britten himself told an interviewer that “ideally one would like to keep the audience a local one... that was the main reason for having a festival at Aldeburgh in the first place.”<sup>84</sup> Angling towards local audiences also had a pragmatic benefit during the formative years of the Festival, because local publicity was less expensive than national

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<sup>82</sup> Aldeburgh Festival Programme Book, 1948, 1949, 1951, 1952 (Britten-Pears Archive); Sweeting, *Let’s Make a Festival*, 61.

<sup>83</sup> Sweeting, *Let’s Make a Festival*, 12.

<sup>84</sup> Britten, “Britten on Aldeburgh and the Future,” in *Britten on Music*, 313.

advertising.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, cheap tickets helped maintain the congenial atmosphere. Again from Sweeting: “The Festival must not be priced out of reach of the average visitor, and so acquire an undesirable image of élitism and provision for the favored few.”<sup>86</sup> The Festival would cast off the elitist image of classical music and democratize culture by bringing it to the average person.

However, presenting an ambitious arts festival in a capitalist society made it difficult to keep prices cheap. Reading through the minute books of the Aldeburgh Festival Executive Committee makes it obvious that the chief problem facing the organizers was finance. Despite the popularity of the Festival, money was a near-constant worry, and new schemes were continuously proposed to increase revenue without raising ticket prices.<sup>87</sup> The foreword to the 1955 programme book even publicly announces the financial difficulties of the Festival, regretfully informing readers that the Festival must be scaled back and Sweeting, the general manager, let go.<sup>88</sup> This is not to say that the Festival did not ever make money: Paul Kildea has shown that it did occasionally have surpluses and that there was growing financial stability throughout the 1960s.<sup>89</sup> But the first decade of the Festival tended to be one of financial difficulty.

In spite of the desire to fill events with locals and keep ticket prices down, the Festival’s persistent funding problems may have encouraged the attraction of bigger, more metropolitan audiences that would generate larger profits. The fame of Britten and his collaborators increasingly drew these audiences, whether intentionally or not, alleviating financial problems but compromising the Festival’s democratic project. Britten’s reputation as one of the most

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<sup>85</sup> Aldeburgh Festival Executive Committee minute meetings, Nov. 10, 1947 (Britten-Pears Archive MSC 10/1).

<sup>86</sup> Sweeting, *Let’s Make a Festival*, 54.

<sup>87</sup> Aldeburgh Festival Executive Committee minute books (Britten-Pears Archive, MSC 10/1).

<sup>88</sup> Aldeburgh Festival Programme Books 1955 (Britten-Pears Archive).

<sup>89</sup> Kildea, *Selling Britten*, 153-177.

prominent English composers of the era had already been established three years before the opening of the Festival with his opera *Peter Grimes*, and only continued to grow until he became an internationally known figure. His tendency to give premieres of his work at the Festival brought new and high quality music to Aldeburgh but also attracted national attention. The frequent participation of his friends in the Festival kept production costs down (they often performed for low costs or even for free) and contributed to the congenial atmosphere, but also proved irresistible to larger audiences since many of his friends happened to be massively famous artists like the writer E.M. Forster, cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, singer Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, and composer Aaron Copland, among others.<sup>90</sup> As Paul Kildea notes, “the Festival often included a Britten premiere, a spectacular, even unique, combination of artists, or the only appearance of a soloist in the country at that particular time,” all of which inspired cosmopolitan interest in Aldeburgh.<sup>91</sup> The financial difficulty of running a successful arts festival in a capitalist modern society factored into Britten’s use of marquee performers as well as his occasional push for more professional performances.

Tension between amateurism and professionalism is most evident in the history of the Aldeburgh Festival Choir during Britten’s lifetime. Though amateur participation was an integral part of the Festival’s project of building an inclusive community, a desire for high quality performances sometimes took precedence, unsurprising given that Britten was a world-class musician whose works were often performed by first-rate professional orchestras. The growing reputation of the Festival may also have contributed to the wish for better performances, as more cosmopolitan audiences expecting higher standards began to attend. However, the Festival Choir belongs to a vital tradition of amateur choral singing in Britain, one celebrated in numerous

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 155-6.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 155.

festivals, including the venerable Three Choirs Festival, which began in the early eighteenth century.<sup>92</sup> Well into the twentieth century, this tradition remained most robust in singing groups, for instance in amateur operatic societies.<sup>93</sup> However the use of amateur choirs in performances of high caliber pieces like Britten's was rare at this time. Dave Russell points out that amateur choirs in the twentieth century in Britain have "had only a relatively limited relationship with mainstream art composers."<sup>94</sup>

In a 1957 BBC radio interview, Britten asserted that the participation of local choirs is "a rather important side of the Festival," a statement proved by the participation of the amateur Festival Choir from the inaugural year.<sup>95</sup> For the premiere of *St. Nicolas* in the very first Festival concert, the organizers did not use professionals but instead drew choristers from Suffolk choral societies, church choirs, and schools to form a local group that they named the Aldeburgh Festival Choir.<sup>96</sup> The second year of the Festival, the Choir was split into two so that more people could be included on the limited stage space.<sup>97</sup> The tradition of an at least partly amateur Festival Choir continued through Britten's life, though as the Festival grew in scope and fame tension emerged between the conflicting desires to incorporate amateurs and to present high quality, increasingly professional concerts. That push for better performances probably came at least in part from the financial difficulties of presenting a Festival in a capitalist modern era: exceptional performances could bring in more audiences and therefore more ticket sales.

Ursula Nettleship, who had worked with East Anglian choirs during the war as a representative of CEMA and was the first Chorus Master of the Festival Choir, ended her

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<sup>92</sup> Adams, *A Book of British Music Festivals*, 16.

<sup>93</sup> Russell, "Amateur Musicians and Their Repertoire," in *The Twentieth Century*, *ibid.*, 145, 149.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>95</sup> Britten, "The Composer Speaks," in *Britten on Music*, 152.

<sup>96</sup> Aldeburgh Festival Programme Book, 1948 (Britten-Pears Archive).

<sup>97</sup> Wren, *Voices by the Sea*, 14.

involvement with the Festival in 1950 because she felt that the Choir was being pushed away from amateurs.<sup>98</sup> Yet despite (and perhaps because of) the drive for higher standards, there was also an effort to teach the amateurs. Nettleship's resignation and early educational efforts provide the first example of a consistent seesawing between two poles in the history of the Choir: a move towards professionalism would eventually be balanced out by a renewal of the commitment to amateurism.

Choral classes geared towards technical instruction and using examples from repertoire for upcoming Festivals were held during winters in the beginning of the Festival. These classes were open to anyone, as the Festival Choir was auditioned in the spring.<sup>99</sup> Thus someone who might want to sing in the Choir could attend the classes and learn better technique as well as some of the music the Choir would perform the next year. The fact that the classes were open to non-members of the Choir reveals willingness on the part of Britten and the Festival organizers to stimulate local amateur music-making, regardless of whether doing so would explicitly benefit the Festival. Additionally, the very existence of the classes evinces a clear desire to include amateurs in the Festival. The classes both prepared singers for the Festival and educated local amateurs, who, being better trained, could more easily take part in the Festival and join its community through shared musical experience.

Nettleship was replaced as director of the Festival Choir by Imogen Holst, the daughter of the composer Gustav Holst and a staunch advocate of amateur music who had worked as a "music traveller" encouraging amateur music in the countryside for CEMA. Holst also eventually became an artistic director of the Festival and a close friend of Britten. She was

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>99</sup> Aldeburgh Festival Choir meeting minutes, July 21, 1950 (Britten-Pears Archive, Britten's correspondence with the Aldeburgh Festival).



committed to maintaining the amateur Choir as an integral part of the Festival. She disliked the idea of even holding auditions (something which had been done from the outset) because she did not want to turn anyone away.<sup>100</sup> In a retrospective about the Festival broadcast by the BBC in 1963, she praised the Festival's integration of amateurs as one of its most important and exceptional features, declaring that "we need works for our local amateurs," which Britten provided in pieces like *St. Nicolas*, *Noye's Fludde*, the *Alpine Suite*, and others.<sup>101</sup> The first recording of *St. Nicolas*, made in the Aldeburgh Parish Church by Decca in 1951, even featured the Choir and local school boys, prepared by Holst and conducted by Britten.<sup>102</sup> The choice of locals and the Choir for the recording as well as Britten's direct work with them as conductor is another good indication that he himself was committed to amateurs. The organizers of the Festival, most obviously Holst, clearly envisioned the Choir as an integral part of the Festival's democratizing project.

Just as Nettleship ended her association with the Choir due to what she felt to be the marginalization of amateur music, Holst stepped down from leading the Choir after the 1957 Festival (though she continued to be an artistic director of the Festival), when new auditions were held to "weed out" weaker voices, often the more senior members. Wren implies that Britten and Pears called for the auditions because they felt that standards had begun to slip.<sup>103</sup> After the re-auditions, the choir was reduced to about half its size, with more young singers. Following the 1963 Festival, the Choir was renamed the Aldeburgh Festival Singers after being

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<sup>100</sup> Wren, *Voices by the Sea*, 24-5.

<sup>101</sup> Imogen Holst, "Britten and the Aldeburgh Festival" typewritten script of broadcast, Oct. 30, 1963 (BBC European English Service, produced by Elizabeth St. Johnston, in Britten-Pears Archive).

<sup>102</sup> Wren, *Voices by the Sea*, 38.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-7.

culled again and augmented with professionals, so that there were now only 25 amateurs and yearly auditions.<sup>104</sup>

This increasing professionalization was balanced out in 1967 with the establishment of a new group for the opening of a concert hall for the Festival. Seven local choirs, including the Festival Singers, took part in the concert opening the Snape Maltings, joining together into a large, un-auditioned East Anglian Chorus. That Chorus, eventually renamed the Aldeburgh Festival Chorus and still un-auditioned, continued to take part in the Festival through the rest of Britten's life. The commitment to amateurs demonstrated by the Chorus supposedly reconciled Ursula Nettleship with Britten and Pears.<sup>105</sup> Additionally, throughout the Festival during Britten's lifetime, local amateur choirs unassociated with the Festival gave concerts as part of the Festival, beginning with the Aldeburgh Choral Society in 1949.<sup>106</sup>

It is important to note that, though the existence of the Festival Singers allowed amateurs an opportunity to perform, the members of the Singers tended to be more privileged members of society, according to Erica Wren, a member of the Singers from 1971-2011 and the widow of Wilfred J. Wren. She noted that at one point there were nine doctors in the choir, while many other members were solicitors (lawyers). Both professions implied the middle or upper class because of the required schooling and associated income.<sup>107</sup>

But Wren also pointed out that there seemed to be a conscious effort to recruit working class children for the premiere of *Noye's Fludde* at the 1958 Festival. Herself a product of a white-collar working class family, she recalls Imogen Holst coming to audition children at her state school, which was publicly funded and was therefore attended by many working class

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 68-72.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 79-87.

<sup>106</sup> Aldeburgh Festival Programme Book, 1949 (Britten-Pears Archive).

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Erica Wren, Feb. 11, 2016.

children. According to Wren, this implies a concerted effort on the part of the organizers to include the working class in the Festival and provide educational music experiences to those children.<sup>108</sup> In this way people that might not otherwise have opportunities to hear or partake in high quality art music were included.

Britten envisioned the Aldeburgh Festival as a project to democratize art, a cultural embodiment of the equalizing impulse of the welfare state. But as with the social democratic project of the government—which accomplished great advances but was unsustainably expensive, underfunded, and excluded certain people—the enactment of that goal proved more complicated.<sup>109</sup> The Festival attempted to reconcile amateurism and professionalism, localism and national renown, marquee performers and intimate scale in order to provide great culture to all. Those conflicting forces did not, however, always easily coexist. The Festival thus serves as an illustration of the contradictions in the social democratic projects of the era, of the difficulties of true democratization in a modern, capitalist society. Nowhere are such tensions more evident in Britten's cultural goals than in his tangled relationship to modernity and recording technologies, in his coexistent beliefs in both their useful cultural potential and their commodifying effects upon art.

#### **Chapter Four: Technology, Modernity, and their Dangers**

For Britten, new technologies and by extension modernity were both a boon and a danger. His relationship to new technologies especially was complicated and even hypocritical. Such ambivalence arose out of a conflict between the economic utility and democratizing potential of new recording technologies and a coexistent fear of their commodifying, alienating tendencies. Britten skillfully utilized radio, the record industry, and television to secure the

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Judt, *Postwar*, 75, 538; Sinfield, *Literature Politics*, 21.

finances necessary for realizing projects like Aldeburgh as well as to spread culture, and simultaneously denounced what he saw as the devaluing effect of these technologies upon music, most memorably in his 1964 speech upon receiving the Aspen Award for Services to the Humanities. Whether he was consciously hypocritical in his relationship to recording technologies or did not recognize the dissonance between his views and actions, Britten's use of recordings and media was strategic. Through the money and fame recording technologies brought him, they enabled him to construct his ideal community at Aldeburgh in order to combat the alienation and commodification that modernity and those same technologies caused.

Great advances were achieved in recording and broadcasting technologies during Britten's life. The BBC was founded and began transmitting on the radio in 1922, when Britten was eight years old.<sup>110</sup> It first broadcast his music in 1934 and premiered its new highbrow program, the Third, in 1946 with a concert including an overture by him.<sup>111</sup> Throughout its early decades, the broadcasting range and quality increased. Recording technology underwent three major improvements during Britten's life: electrical recording was introduced in 1925, greatly improving recording quality; the long-playing record came about in 1950; and the stereophonic (two channel audio) record emerged in 1958.<sup>112</sup> With these and other new technologies also came "an enormous increase in music's earning power," as musicians were able to tap into larger markets.<sup>113</sup> Britten lived through the emergence and refinement of mass media, and new media and technologies shaped his career and cultural goals.

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<sup>110</sup> Kildea, *Selling Britten*, 44.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.; Humphrey Carpenter, *The Envy of the World: Fifty Years of the Third Programme and Radio 3* (London: Phoenix, 1997), 30.

<sup>112</sup> Kildea, *Selling Britten*, 197.

<sup>113</sup> Cyril Ehrlich, "The Marketplace," in *The Twentieth Century*, *ibid.*, 49.

Britten took great advantage of recording technologies and media. They were an important part of his musical education, allowing him to hear music as a young schoolboy that he might not have encountered otherwise.<sup>114</sup> A deeply pragmatic person, Britten skillfully utilized media throughout his career. As Paul Kildea has shown, radio and especially recordings benefitted Britten greatly. Kildea even points out that Britten's use of recordings "from the 1930s onwards tends to undermine his Aspen Award sentiments [that technology devalues music], at least in their most simplistic reading."<sup>115</sup> Beginning in the 1950s, the BBC both broadcasted and sponsored specific concerts of the Aldeburgh Festival, while by the 1960s, nearly every Britten work was recorded within about a year of its premiere, many even at Aldeburgh after the opening of the Snape Maltings concert hall.<sup>116</sup> The opera *Owen Wingrave* was written specifically for TV, and *Peter Grimes* and *The Turn of the Screw* were adapted for TV broadcasts.<sup>117</sup> Britten even praised recordings in a letter to his publisher the year before his Aspen speech, writing that recordings of his works "are to be encouraged in every way rather than to be regarded as a nuisance [sic]."<sup>118</sup>

A musician in a changing modern era, one in which the composer had to sell his works to the public to survive and art music had the potential to become "a serious mass-market proposition" as a result of recordings and radio, Britten in many ways updated the role of the composer by utilizing new technologies in order to financially succeed.<sup>119</sup> In his use of new recording technologies and media, Britten was rather unusual. Most British classical musicians before the 1950s were reluctant to utilize recording technologies, viewing them both with a

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<sup>114</sup> Kildea, *Selling Britten*, 4.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 155-6, 224-5.

<sup>117</sup> Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 487, 507.

<sup>118</sup> Britten to Ernst Roth, 13 Jan. 1963, quoted in Kildea, *Selling Britten*, 226.

<sup>119</sup> Kildea, *Selling Britten*, 196.

certain snobbery (industrialization was incompatible with many artists' pastoral vision of English culture) and fear (recordings could replace live performers). But by keeping up with new recording advances and their possibilities, Britten realized he could avoid exploitation by record companies who might use his music for their own profits without benefitting him.<sup>120</sup> By the 1960s, he had established relationships with nearly every aspect of the music market. Kildea writes, "Britten retreated to Aldeburgh and new supply patterns developed: music was premiered at the Festival, broadcast by the BBC, published by Boosey & Hawkes or the new Faber Music, recorded by Decca, and quickly put on the market."<sup>121</sup>

As Kildea points out, media technologies became enmeshed with the Aldeburgh Festival as Britten's career began to focus more upon it. The involvement of the BBC, for instance, helped keep costs down, even if it may have slightly compromised Britten's cultural goals. The BBC's Head of Transcription Service explained in a 1957 memo that broadcasts from the Festival "sell exceedingly well," and that "Britten has always been quite frank with me in admitting that if the BBC take any appreciable number of programmes from the Aldeburgh [Festival] this represents a big financial gain to the artists and tends to encourage them to accept... comparatively small fees."<sup>122</sup> The increased publicity of BBC-broadcast concerts convinced musicians to perform for less, reducing the Festival's expenditures. Kildea also notes that "the use, however, of the BBC to subsidize programmes that the Festival could not afford to mount on its own did limit Britten's autonomy, however slightly."<sup>123</sup>

Britten's use of recording and broadcasting technologies was not only pragmatically motivated but also an attempt to adapt those technologies to art music without depreciating its

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 1-4.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>122</sup> Memo from M. A. Frost, May 13, 1957, quoted in *ibid.*, 156.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 156.

value, as in his efforts to produce serious opera for TV. Broadcasting his operas on TV could “do an enormous amount to popularise opera in this country,” he wrote, and to bring opera to people who might not otherwise be able to see it.<sup>124</sup> Additionally, as Kildea points out, recordings allowed Britten to accomplish his goal of writing music for everyday people across the nation even from the isolation of Aldeburgh: “The recording industry allowed him to serve his public, circumvent the established base of the British music industry, London, and allow him the rural sanctuary in which he thrived.”<sup>125</sup> With the help of the recording industry, Britten could both write for “the people” and avoid hectic, commercial London. In the process, he became one of the first composers to successfully use these new technologies, benefitting both financially and in global reputation.<sup>126</sup>

Yet despite their importance to his career, Britten also feared recording technologies and media. His strongest remarks against them come from his high-profile 1964 speech upon receiving the Aspen Award. In that speech, he declared that “the loudspeaker is the principal enemy of music.” Adding a caveat that “I don’t mean that I am not grateful to it as a means of education or study, or as an evoker of memories,” he continued by declaring “it is not part of true musical *experience*.”<sup>127</sup> Given Britten’s frequent use of recording technologies and the benefits they afforded him, such polemical statements could easily be dismissed as hypocritical grandstanding designed to hide his substantial success and make him relatable to “the people” for whom he supposedly wrote. Yet Britten was a canny public figure who carefully guarded his

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<sup>124</sup> Britten, “Television and *The Turn of the Screw*,” in *Britten on Music*, 161.

<sup>125</sup> Kildea, *Selling Britten*, 229.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>127</sup> Britten, “On Receiving the First Aspen Award,” in *Britten on Music*, 261.

pronouncements as his reputation grew.<sup>128</sup> The fact that he issued such stringently anti-recording statements in a public venue at the height of his fame suggests that they reflect some of his true feelings.

Britten's conflicted attitude toward recordings and media may have stemmed from his father, who refused to buy a gramophone or radio when Britten was a boy, believing instead that his children should make their own music.<sup>129</sup> In his Aspen speech, Britten gave more nuanced reasons for his statements against recordings, elaborating on the potential pernicious influence of technology on music. Recordings and radio robbed works of their context, so "that the vast majority of musical performances take place as far away from the original as it is possible to imagine," thus weakening their effect. The ease with which one could put on a record forestalled any investment on the part of the listener, whom Britten believed should put some effort into listening to the music. Finally, and worst of all, technology allowed music to become background noise, "at the mercy of any loud roomful of cocktail drinkers—to be listened to or switched off at will, without ceremony or occasion."<sup>130</sup> Britten also decried the effect of recordings and media upon taste. Later in his life he lamented that in the modern era "the inclination is so much to mass communication and for people to think rather the same about things," suggesting that he believed mass media could be a negative, homogenizing force.<sup>131</sup>

Britten was not unique in his fear of recording technologies. In his classic 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin argues that works of art have an "aura" that is lost when they are reproduced: "Even the most perfect reproduction

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<sup>128</sup> Kildea, "Part II. 1946-1955: Introduction and Chronology," in *Britten on Music*, 55; Kildea, "Part III. 1956-1965: Introduction and Chronology," in *ibid.*, 136.

<sup>129</sup> Kildea, *Selling Britten*, 198.

<sup>130</sup> Britten, "On Receiving the First Aspen Award," in *Britten on Music*, 260-1.

<sup>131</sup> Britten, "An Interview with Benjamin Britten," in *Britten on Music*, 305.



of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”<sup>132</sup> British intellectuals and artists like W.H. Auden thought mechanization was at odds with both art and human values.<sup>133</sup> British reformers in the immediate postwar period feared that radio and film encouraged passivity and that Hollywood films in particular inspired “moral laxity” and obsession with status and wealth.<sup>134</sup> Britten’s views on technology as expressed in the Aspen speech are strikingly similar to these critics, especially Benjamin and Auden. In fact, Auden befriended Britten in the 1930s and was a powerful ideological influence, at least in Britten’s youth.<sup>135</sup> Britten surely encountered some of these strains of technological criticism through Auden at the very least, and they may have helped shape his own views.

Technology was just one potentially dangerous aspect of modernity, which inspired widespread concern across the West for its alienating and dehumanizing effects. Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s a growing number of critics began to see modernist architecture and planning as monotonous, inauthentic, and placeless, with modernist housing projects even portrayed as “a monstrous human catastrophe.”<sup>136</sup> Dissenters favorably juxtaposed the local against cosmopolitan modernism to reveal modernism’s failures. The British *Architectural Review* emphasized human scale, regional distinctiveness, and bustling street life over rational

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<sup>132</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (Harcourt, Brace & World: 1978), 220-1.

<sup>133</sup> Sinfield, *Literature Politics*, 108-9.

<sup>134</sup> Weight, “‘Building a new British culture’,” 164-5.

<sup>135</sup> Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 69, 134-5.

<sup>136</sup> Kenny Cupers, *The Social Project* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xiii-xiv; Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 100; Christopher Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 84-7.

modernist planning in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>137</sup> Many postwar French planners and sociologists believed “that the small, intimate neighborhood scale offered the ideal framework for individual self-development and community life and would protect the human spirit against the alienation of metropolitan life,” while a new urban middle class in America and Canada likewise sought authenticity in the local historic neighborhood as opposed to the oppressive, placeless modernism of cosmopolitan downtowns.<sup>138</sup> For these critics, the rise of consumerism and its encouragement of mass culture seemed to ignore humanistic and spiritual values in their erasure of individuality and soulless focus on consumption.<sup>139</sup> The “art of life” had been destroyed by mass production and standardization.<sup>140</sup> “Anomie, anonymity, and alienation” especially plagued modern cities in the view of some intellectuals and writers.<sup>141</sup>

Britten seems to have had similar fears about modernity, which he most explicitly addressed as a young man in an article on “England and the Folk-Art Problem.” Arguing against the use of folk music as the basis for classical composition, he proclaimed that “The attempt to create a national music is only one symptom of a serious and universal malaise of our time—the refusal to accept the destruction of ‘community’ by the machine,” then quotes an Auden poem with the same point: modernity and technology have destroyed human values and connection.<sup>142</sup> While Britten eventually cooled from such heated denunciations and moderated some of those opinions, there are later hints that he continued to be wary of modernity. When asked in a 1963

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<sup>137</sup> Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse*, 84-7.

<sup>138</sup> Cupers, *The Social Project*, 72; Osman, *The Invention*; David Ley, *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 19-22.

<sup>139</sup> Sinfield, *Literature Politics*, 2; Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 1.

<sup>140</sup> F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, quoted in Wiebe, *Britten's Unquiet Past*, 19.

<sup>141</sup> Herbert Gans, quoted in Osman, *The Invention*, 164.

<sup>142</sup> Britten, “England and the Folk-Art Problem,” in *Britten on Music*, 34.

interview, about large cities like London, epitomes of modernity, he declared “I hate them!”<sup>143</sup> The same year he wrote in an unpublished article that “I like to encourage the love & practice of the arts among the young, because it develops their sensitivity, their imagination, their personalities, their ‘neuroses’ (‘differentness’).”<sup>144</sup> An encouragement of “differentness” and “sensitivity” shows a fundamental similarity to critiques of modernity, which inveighed against monotonous housing projects, homogenizing mass media, conformity, and rational technocracy.<sup>145</sup>

But modernity was more complicated than polemics sometimes made out, bringing not only detriments but also benefits like the establishment of vast welfare systems, expanded infrastructures, and increased access to news and culture through media, to name a few. The complexity and contradictions of modernity led Britten, someone who was deeply concerned with culture and its role in the modern world, to have an ambivalent relationship to it. Recording technologies could prove exceptionally useful in Britten’s attempt to democratize art, but they could also have the opposite effect by commercializing and cheapening art. Modernity itself often acted as an equalizing force in its attempt to provide fair housing and health care to all people, but that same impulse could extend too far and erase individuals completely, treating them as an undifferentiated mass. These were the contradictions that inspired, shaped, and complicated Britten’s cultural goals and his project at Aldeburgh.

### **Chapter Five: The Festival as Community**

The Aldeburgh Festival was Britten’s attempt to both democratize music and combat the dangers of modernity: the isolation and alienation it caused, the commodifying tendencies of

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<sup>143</sup> Britten, “British Composers in Interview: Benjamin Britten,” in *Britten on Music*, 223.

<sup>144</sup> Britten, “On *Pravda*, Art and Criticism,” in *Britten on Music*, 237.

<sup>145</sup> Cupers, *The Social Project*; Osman, *The Invention*; Sinfield, *Literature Politics*; Wiebe, *Britten’s Unquiet Past*.

recording technologies, and the passive consumption they enabled. Through shared, authentic, localized musical experiences people would be drawn into an egalitarian community in which art had social value and human connection flourished. That democratic community would consist of locals, performers, and visitors, brought into contact in the narrow environs of Aldeburgh and surrounding areas. The celebration of the area itself would give the Festival a local grounding and specificity lacking in the anonymous placelessness of modernity. Through the Festival, a bastion of humanity would be erected in the form of a musically-grounded community.

Heather Wiebe has argued that Britten “tended to envision renewal occurring through a de-centralized and sometimes participatory musical culture, connected to local communities and the English past.”<sup>146</sup> Wary of what he saw as England’s cultural “philistinism” and, in Wiebe’s telling, afraid that it might poison government arts institutions like the Arts Council, Britten established a base in a rural community instead of a modern metropolitan center. Wiebe is correct that Britten believed there was a general lack of artistic interest in Britain. For example, he lamented in his Aspen Speech that “[t]he average Briton thought, and still thinks, of the Arts as suspect and expensive luxuries.”<sup>147</sup> However, his emphasis on localism was not solely a response to perceived British indifference towards the arts. By creating a Festival that invited the community to participate and that celebrated the local culture and area, he could encourage culture at the grassroots and present “sophisticated” music in a convivial, familiar environment. The grounding of art at the local grassroots also strengthened the bonds of the Festival’s community by tying it to a specific area and culture. Moreover, *pace* Wiebe’s insistence that his emphasis on the local was simply nostalgic, Britten sought to update the rural community for a modern age, taking advantage of its humanizing potential.

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<sup>146</sup> Wiebe, *Britten’s Unquiet Past*, 23.

<sup>147</sup> Britten, “On Receiving the First Aspen Award,” in *Britten on Music*, 258.

However, bringing music to Aldeburgh in the form of an ambitious festival could disrupt that ideal community, as explained in Chapter Three. To prevent this, Britten sought to integrate the Festival into the fabric of the local area rather than impose events upon the town. This is evident in his intentions behind an unrealized plan to construct a venue more suitable for opera and with more seats than the 300-seat Jubilee Hall, which would both allow for greater profits from the larger number of people able to attend and enable more ambitious productions. Britten emphasized in a letter soliciting funds for the plan that the new theater would need to be “all-purpose,” suitable not only for the Festival’s operas and chamber or orchestral concerts, but also for lectures, town meetings, rehearsals, and exhibitions, so that locals could use it throughout the year when the Festival was not occurring.<sup>148</sup> In this way the Festival would continue to benefit the local community even during the off-season.

The two schemes to provide a better hall for opera that were realized during Britten’s lifetime further demonstrate his attempt to celebrate the local and benefit rather than impose upon the community. In 1960, the tiny Jubilee Hall, which as a sort of community arts center predated the Festival, was enlarged through funding by the Festival, so that the Festival essentially subsidized improvements to a pre-existing local building.<sup>149</sup> Eight years later, the construction of the Snape Maltings finally realized Britten’s dream for a suitable opera venue (Figure 3). Originally a malt factory in the nearby town of Snape, the abandoned building was repurposed under the Festival’s auspices into a multi-function concert hall. Its construction helped revitalize Snape, which had emptied out after the closing of the factory in 1965, according to two Snape natives interviewed in a BBC radio retrospective of the Festival.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Britten to W. A. Sanderson, August 6, 1958, in *Letters from a Life*, vol. 5, 170.

<sup>149</sup> Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 390.

<sup>150</sup> Howlett produced, “The Archive Hour.”

Britten claimed that the Maltings “keeps its old character, and has a wonderfully Suffolk atmosphere, being right on the river and on the edge of the marshes.”<sup>151</sup> It was vital to Britten and his project at the Festival that local distinctiveness be maintained even as the Festival expanded, thus counteracting the placeless anonymity of modernity and celebrating local culture. According to the BBC retrospective, the decision to convert the maltings was also one of the first examples of the now common practice of repurposing a derelict industrial building for a new use.<sup>152</sup> Thus the Festival both brought money into the area and saved part of its heritage, while also providing a concert hall with a historic local grounding.

The Festival also celebrated the landscape and architecture of the area in a further attempt to ground it in a local base and include locals. Elizabeth Sweeting, the general manager of the Festival for its first eight years, hoped that visitors to the Festival would explore the town and surrounding area, with its beautiful old churches, vibrant bird life, and picturesque marshes so inspiring to Britten.<sup>153</sup> The Festival also directly promoted local sites. The programme books occasionally included essays on or photos of area churches, and tours of them were given in later Festivals.<sup>154</sup> Other aspects of local life featured in the programme books. For instance, the first year’s book contains essays on “Aldeburgh in 1844” and “Aldeburgh in 1890,” as well as charming photos of town buildings and the local milkman.<sup>155</sup> The following year, every Festival lecture but one concerned Suffolk or Suffolk residents, while 1950 spotlighted the town with an essay “In Praise of Aldeburgh.”<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Britten to Mstislav Rostropovich, April 4, 1967 (Britten-Pears Library, Britten’s correspondence with the Aldeburgh Festival).

<sup>152</sup> Howlett produced, “The Archive Hour.”

<sup>153</sup> Sweeting, *Let’s Make a Festival*, 23.

<sup>154</sup> Aldeburgh Festival Programme Book, 1948, 1949 (Britten-Pears Archive).

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 1948.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 1949, 1950.

Concerts and exhibitions quietly showcased the area and its characterful features. The English Opera Group performed operas in the Jubilee Hall until the construction of the Snape Maltings, while “Music on the Meare,” in which performers played or sang from boats on a nearby lake, became a beloved mainstay. In the early years of the Festival, hymns were sung from the tower of the hilltop Aldeburgh Parish Church, thus encouraging an appreciation of the church’s façade and of the picturesque town and coast (Figure 4). Festival exhibitions were often held in homes, one even taking place in the garden of Britten’s house in 1964.<sup>157</sup> Britten believed these venues gave the Festival its special character. “I think the shape of the Festival,” he said in 1960, “—that is, the works you want to perform in the Festival—is very much dictated by the town itself, the buildings, the size of those buildings, and the quality of those buildings.”<sup>158</sup> The specificity of Aldeburgh and its buildings rebuked a specific aspect of modernity, namely the homogenous anonymity of modernist architecture and bureaucracy and their demoralizing effects.

Furthermore, such specificity and grounding were integral to art. Presaging his complaint in the Aspen speech that recording technologies devalue music by robbing it of its context, Britten opined in 1956 that “I’m more and more convinced that art needs to be seen and heard in its own environment. Once you’ve done that maybe you can carry it away and reproduce the beauties and your excitement elsewhere.”<sup>159</sup> This conviction explains his continually increasing propensity to write music for the Festival, and even particular venues in and around Aldeburgh.

Britten believed that grounding the Festival and his music in the local both improved them and endowed them with social use. “[H]aving created a Festival, with its own small opera

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<sup>157</sup> *Letters from a Life*, vol. 5, 599, footnote 11.

<sup>158</sup> Britten, “People Today: Benjamin Britten,” in *Britten on Music*, 176.

<sup>159</sup> Britten, “Britten and South-East Asia,” in *Britten on Music*, 143.

house, in the part of the world where I live, I intend to continue to write for the people who come there,” he wrote in 1960. “And in my own small experience I have learned that if one concentrates on the local, the particular, if one writes for particular singers, instrumentalists, local occasions, the works can have an actuality, a realistic quality, which may make the result useful to the outside world.”<sup>160</sup> Britten almost always composed for a specific musician, most often for Pears but also for other friends who then frequently premiered the piece at the Festival. His emphasis on “actuality” and usefulness is an implicit rebuke against commodified, inauthentic art whose sole purpose was to be sold.

The emphasis on writing music for a particular occasion evinced in the above quote is unusual in the context of Western art music, which with the rise of the Romantic composer-artist in the nineteenth century began to value pure concert music (“art for art’s sake”) over occasional music (music for use). Britten, however, looked to an older model of the composer as working craftsman, writing music for specific occasions. He admired the seventeenth century English composer Henry Purcell for being a “practical composer” who “wrote for many different occasions...[he] was a Church composer, a theatre composer, wrote for the home.”<sup>161</sup> Britten believed composers should not abstain from writing occasional music because it gave music a social use for a specific event. “I would rather have my music used than write masterpieces which were not used,” he told an interviewer in 1968.<sup>162</sup> Additionally, he believed that writing within constraints was beneficial training for a composer. “I maintain very strongly that it is the duty of every young composer to be able to write every kind of music—except bad music,” he said in a 1946 BBC broadcast. “It is a very good thing for a young composer to have to write the

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<sup>160</sup> Britten, “On Writing English Opera,” in *Britten on Music*, 209.

<sup>161</sup> Britten, “On Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*,” in *Britten on Music*, 163.

<sup>162</sup> Britten, “The Moral Responsibility of the Artist towards his Fellow Man,” in *Britten on Music*, 311.



lightest kinds of music.”<sup>163</sup> By writing for society, a composer might produce profound music because its attention to the specific needs of people and an occasion enabled it to deeply connect to an audience. “Many of the greatest works of art...have grown from a desire of the artist to serve or be in contact with his public—have been made or written for a specific public, for a specific purpose,” he wrote in in 1960.<sup>164</sup> This is why Britten wrote film music for government documentaries in the 1930s and pieces like *The Building of the House* for the opening of the Snape Maltings or *Voices for Today* for the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations. Britten sought to create authentic musical experiences in an inauthentic modern world by grounding his works in social utility.

Non-operatic concerts often took place in local churches like the Aldeburgh Parish Church (Figure 5) and later St. Bartholomew’s Church in nearby Orford. Indeed, the use of these churches was a distinguishing feature of the Festival, as Colin Graham, who directed several Britten operatic premieres, pointed out. “The Aldeburgh Festival always depended on the use of local churches — in fact made a virtue of it,” Graham wrote.<sup>165</sup> Graham is probably referring to Britten’s propensity to compose pieces specifically for performance in churches. The three Church Parables, which were chamber operas designed to be performed in a church, were written with the Orford Church in mind, as was *Noye’s Fludde*, which Britten specifically stipulated should be performed in a public space like a church instead of a theater.<sup>166</sup> Britten ingeniously responded to the limitations of Aldeburgh and other small towns by writing operas for performance in church, allowing the English Opera Group to bring the art form to many places it

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<sup>163</sup> Britten, “The Artist and His Medium,” in *Britten on Music*, 63.

<sup>164</sup> Britten, “On Writing English Opera,” in *Britten on Music*, 209.

<sup>165</sup> Colin Graham, quoted from David Herbert, ed. *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, in *Letters from a Life*, vol. 4, 581, footnote 3.

<sup>166</sup> Wiebe, *Britten’s Unquiet Past*, 151, footnote 1.

might not otherwise be able to. “Many English towns lack any auditorium as suitable as their church...,” he wrote in 1969. “We can now perform in localities where otherwise we could not, and the needs of the production are relatively modest.”<sup>167</sup> In this way, Britten could bring live opera to a larger audience of everyday people who might not have access to it, allowing the democratic project of the Festival to expand to small towns other than Aldeburgh.

Britten’s incorporation of churches into his music and the larger Festival suggests that a past ideal community grounded in the church served as the model for the community he sought to create in the present through the Festival. He even explicitly described his Church Parables as a form of music drama that “was driven out during the Reformation,” thus hearkening back to an earlier tradition of communal music within a church.<sup>168</sup> Heather Wiebe argues that Britten’s engagement with religion and tradition “stood in for an idealized, organic culture, where art blended seamlessly into community life.”<sup>169</sup> For Wiebe, a work like *Noye’s Fludde* used the communal ritual of religious tradition and the shared national past of Anglicanism to bring people together in the present. The piece “exemplified one aim of the project of culture renewal that was central to the Aldeburgh Festival: to revive local cultural life through participatory contact with tradition, in opposition to the passive, dislocated consumption of mass cultural products.”<sup>170</sup>

While Britten did idealize an imagined historic community organized around the church, the focus was on the coming together and the localism rather than on the sacred trappings. He did not seek to return to a pastoral, religious past, but rather to reanimate a specific aspect and usher

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<sup>167</sup> Britten, “No Ivory Tower,” in *Britten on Music*, 332-3.

<sup>168</sup> Britten, “No Ivory Tower,” in *Britten on Music*, 333.

<sup>169</sup> Heather Wiebe, “Benjamin Britten, the ‘National Faith,’ and the Animation of History in 1950s England” in *Representations* 93:1 (Winter 2006): 77-78, doi: 10.1525/rep.2006.93.1.76.

<sup>170</sup> Wiebe, *Britten’s Unquiet Pasts*, 175-182; 151.

it into the modern era. The ideal community of the church would shed its explicitly religious elements and instead be based upon communal music-making. It would be locally-based rather than cosmopolitan, allowing for interpersonal connection free from the distractions of metropolitan life. Like a church congregation, it would participate in music through amateur performance, as with the Festival Choir, and singing, as in *St. Nicolas* or *The Little Sweep*, where the audiences are invited to join in hymns and songs. The composer would be a valuable and useful part of the community—“Artists... need society, and society needs them,” Britten once said—writing music for specific occasions rather than producing art in isolation.<sup>171</sup> The composer’s engagement with society would affirm music’s human values in the face of dehumanizing modernity. This was an important part of Britten’s conception of the modern musician, as evidenced by his assertion “that the artist must be consciously a human being. He is part of society and he should not lock himself up in an ivory tower.”<sup>172</sup> All of these aspects together would prevent the commodification of art and the alienation inherent to technological modernity.

Such a community would be characterized by a congenial atmosphere that facilitated interpersonal connections. The fact that performers were warmly received friends helped contribute to the convivial feel of the Festival—a true “Festival with a few concerts given by friends.” Artists or lecturer friends appearing at the Festival would sometimes stay in the home of Britten and Pears, perhaps reducing costs and increasing good will.<sup>173</sup> According to Paul Kildea, Aldeburgh was a pleasant retreat for musicians, a respite from grueling international

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<sup>171</sup> Britten, “Speech on Receiving Honorary Degree at Hull University,” in *Britten on Music*, 215.

<sup>172</sup> Britten, “The Moral Responsibility of the Artist towards his Fellow Man,” in *Britten on Music*, 311.

<sup>173</sup> Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 267.

careers and an opportunity for them to socialize and perform with their colleagues in a relaxed environment. “[O]utside the Festival such occasions were limited,” Kildea writes. “The result was truly unique.”<sup>174</sup>

There is ample evidence that the Festival’s convivial environment brought Britten, visiting artists, performers, locals, and audiences together. A 1966 article in *The Guardian* noted that you could hear many people at the Festival calling Britten simply “Ben” despite his imposing status as a renowned English figure.<sup>175</sup> Erica Wren, a local East Anglian who began singing in the Festival in 1971, said that Britten and Pears always engaged her in conversation and treated her as an equal when she was a teenager sitting in on Aldeburgh Festival Choir rehearsals before she was a member.<sup>176</sup> The pair even manually helped out with the Festival, moving music stands during concerts in the first year.<sup>177</sup>

Testimonies to the friendliness and community of the Festival are almost *de rigueur* for people describing it. Wilfred J. Wren calls it “one of the most unusual, most friendly and most successful musical enterprises of the twentieth century;” Francis Routh lauds the Festival for its “personal flavour rarely found in the more commercial rough-and-tumble of the concert world”; the singer Janet Baker recalled to Humphrey Carpenter the “sense of camaraderie,” “music-making in a joyous sense,” and “tremendous friendliness” that characterized the Festival.<sup>178</sup> Britten’s approachability also contributed to the openness of the environment. Elizabeth Sweeting told Humphrey Carpenter that “Ben kept open house for anybody—you could almost

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<sup>174</sup> Kildea, *Selling Britten*, 176.

<sup>175</sup> Geoffrey Moorhouse, *The Guardian*, June 11, 1966, quoted in Carpenter, *Britten on Music*, 458.

<sup>176</sup> Interview with Erica Wren, Feb. 11, 2016.

<sup>177</sup> Howlett produced, “The Archive Hour.”

<sup>178</sup> Wren, 1; Francis Routh, *Contemporary British Music: the Twenty-five Years from 1945-1970* (London: Macdonald and Co., 1972), 207; Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 458.

just walk into the door of Crag House [Britten's home] during the Festival."<sup>179</sup> Despite his impressive stature as a major cultural figure, Britten was available and visible in Aldeburgh, further enacting the democratization of culture by removing the composer from an isolated pedestal.

That unique sociability was not only characteristic of the community but helped build it, especially since it extended not just to the performers but to the audiences as well. The intimate scale of the Festival allowed performers to connect with audiences while performing in small venues, a form of interpersonal connection absent from radio broadcasts or recordings that Britten highly valued: "I don't want to give up performing, playing and conducting," he said in 1964. "I treasure this contact with live audiences too much."<sup>180</sup> Through the Festival, audience members and musicians could also mingle in a way that encouraged the breaking of the divide between performer and observer. Simple proximity and approachability was an important enabler of this equalization of musician and audience. As Elizabeth Sweeting relates, during the intermission of operas in the Jubilee Hall, when "visitors, orchestra, stage staff and helpers" migrated across the street for a drink at the Cross Keys pub, "they literally rubbed shoulders in a friendly crush."<sup>181</sup> The Cross Keys is not large; interaction between performers and audience members would have been impossible to avoid (Figure 6). Thus, the music of the opera was given a human face, so that a listener could return to the Jubilee Hall for the second half of an opera and recognize the violin or flute parts as being produced by someone with whom they had just conversed. In this way the music became more approachable and the listener perhaps became more invested in the performance.

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<sup>179</sup> Elizabeth Sweeting, quoted in Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 269.

<sup>180</sup> Britten, "Musician of the Year," in *Britten on Music*, 269.

<sup>181</sup> Sweeting, *Let's Make a Festival*, 10.

The music was made more accessible by Britten's "serious-popular" style of composition, as he termed it. As he explained his compositional style, "There is a way of pleasing most people and still not hurting one's aesthetic standards, and that, I feel, should be the aim of a composer."<sup>182</sup> Britten's compositions were "serious" art written in a direct manner to appeal to people without compromising his works' integrity. His pieces drew people into an egalitarian community and democratized art through their accessibility as well as their parts for amateur musicians. The everyday person could thus participate in music as both listener and performer, further erasing the boundary between audience and musician. In this way even Britten's compositional style was democratic, aiming to be accessible to all people. Francis Routh describes a certain "*rapport* with the mass of the audience" as a defining feature of Britten's music.<sup>183</sup> Britten himself sought to write in a style that would connect with an audience on the most basic human level, asserting the power of music as an essentially human art. For instance, in a 1965 radio interview he emphasized twice that the makeup of the audience did not matter for the reception of one of his pieces being premiered simultaneously in England, New York and Paris, "because I knew they were all human beings."<sup>184</sup> That ability to connect with large audiences through music partly resulted from his tendency to write operas about relatable subjects, like provincial Suffolk life in *Peter Grimes* and *Albert Herring*; classic works like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; or biblical stories in the Church Parables. The fact that his operas were in English and many were generally briefer than grand operas also helped.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Britten, "American Impressions," in *Britten on Music*, 22.

<sup>183</sup> Routh, *Contemporary British Music*, 209.

<sup>184</sup> Britten, "Sibelius," in *Britten on Music*, 278.

<sup>185</sup> It should be emphasized that the Festival by no means exclusively featured the music of Britten. Britten himself claimed "It is not a festival for propagating one's own works. . . . We are only too happy to do works by all composers of any age or any generation, of any kind, that fits into our plans." (*Britten on Music*, 177). Concerts included a wide range of music, especially

Audience participation served as an integral part of the effectiveness of Britten's music. As mentioned previously, both *St. Nicolas* and *The Little Sweep* include the audience in singing. Imogen Holst described the importance of audience participation for Britten and the Festival in both a 1949 article and a 1963 BBC broadcast. "It is this fact of the audience being allowed to join in that is perhaps the most memorable thing about the Aldeburgh Festival," she wrote in 1949, before becoming a part of the Festival. "Joining in the two hymns [of *St. Nicolas*], visitors are aware that they are visitors no longer and that the Aldeburgh Festival has become *their* festival."<sup>186</sup> Participation supported the formation of a convivial, democratic community at the Festival by allowing them to take part and share in its creation. Almost fifteen years later, she looked back on that first year. "The crowning glory of that first performance [of *St. Nicolas*] was when the whole audience was drawn into the singing of the two great hymns. It marked the real birth of the Aldeburgh Festival — and every June, since then, the listeners have been able to take part in some of the music-making."<sup>187</sup> The singing of the audience organically brought listeners and performers together in a shared musical experience essential to the Festival's project.

Even children were included in the democratic project of Britten's music and the Festival. Many Britten pieces include parts for children, whether in a choir, as characters in *The Little Sweep* or *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, or most notably as singers, characters, and instrumentalists in *Noye's Fludde*. In that work, children dress up as the animals on the ark, sing, and play recorders and percussion instruments. This both brought children into the Festival's community and allowed them profound, authentic experiences with music. One woman who took

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pieces not traditionally performed. But Britten's own compositions are most apropos for the purposes of this thesis.

<sup>186</sup> Imogen Holst, "The Aldeburgh Festival," in *Ballet and Opera*, August 1949, 51-54 (Britten-Pears Library HOL/2/12/1).

<sup>187</sup> Imogen Holst, "Britten and the Aldeburgh Festival," broadcast script, pre-recorded Oct. 30, 1963 (Britten-Pears Library HOL 2/12/3).

part in the first performance at the 1958 Festival as a child recalled to the BBC “just weeping and weeping as if nothing like that could ever happen to me again.”<sup>188</sup>

Beyond the Aldeburgh Festival Choir discussed in Chapter Three, Britten attempted to encourage amateur music-making amongst instrumentalists. He and Pears were founding members of the Aldeburgh Music Club, an amateur music group that often met in their shared house. Rather than perform on their typical instruments, the pair would play instruments with which they were less familiar: recorder for both, viola for Britten, and piano for Pears. During the 1955 Festival, the Music Club, including Britten and Pears, premiered two Britten works for recorder that he had written specifically for amateurs.<sup>189</sup> Britten not only included amateurs in the music-making of the Festival, but catered specifically to them and even brought himself down to the level of one by performing on an unfamiliar instrument, thus joining the amateur community and complicating the separation of professional and amateur musicians.

The equality of audience, performers, and composer at the Aldeburgh Festival enacts Britten’s concept of a “holy triangle of composer, performer and listener.” In his Aspen speech, he elucidated this formulation, explaining that music requires effort from all three types of people that partake in it, not just the ones who write or play it. “Unless these three take part together there is no musical experience,” he said. For the audience, music “demands some preparation, some effort, a journey to a special place [e.g. Aldeburgh], saving up for a ticket, some homework on the programme perhaps, some clarification of the ears and sharpening of the instincts. It demands as much effort on the listener’s part as the other two corners of the

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<sup>188</sup> Howlett produced, “The Archive Hour.”

<sup>189</sup> Patrick Walker and Valerie Potter with Rosamund Strode, *Aldeburgh Music Club 1952-2002* (Saxmundham: Aldeburgh Music Club, 2001), 6-12.



triangle.”<sup>190</sup> This egalitarian ideal of music (everyone is integral and puts in equal effort) would democratize culture and imbue musical events with interpersonal meaning and richness. Collective and participatory musical experiences would provide shared bonds to aid in the construction of a vital community. Music would resist commodification and become available to all, and humanity would be affirmed in the face of alienating modernity.

### **Conclusion**

The Aldeburgh Festival of Music and the Arts is still held every June in and around Aldeburgh and the Snape Maltings. Now in its 69<sup>th</sup> year, it remains an internationally regarded music festival. After Britten’s death in 1976, Pears continued as an artistic director of the Festival while bringing on new musician-directors like the pianist Murray Perahia (who increasingly served as Pears’ recital partner as Britten’s health declined) and the composer Oliver Knussen (whose bass-playing father had performed in the Festival for years). Twelve years after Pears’ death in 1986, the directorship shifted to composer and pianist Thomas Adès, a contemporary version of Britten who was only five years old when the older composer died. Directed by the pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard since 2009, the Festival continues to be devoted to the local and to the encouragement of music. The 2016 Festival still features concerts in area churches and the Jubilee Hall, though the majority take place in the Snape Maltings. The local landscape and culture remain focal points through outdoor concerts, guided tours of a bird sanctuary, and “A Festival Organ Crawl” of area organs. Amateur performance continues with a concert by the Aldeburgh Voices, the successor to the Festival Choir, as well as two concerts featuring amateur pianists.<sup>191</sup> One of those concerts even explicitly encourages people to learn

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<sup>190</sup> Britten, “On Receiving the First Aspen Award,” in *Britten on Music*, 261.

<sup>191</sup> “Aldeburgh Festival 2016,” accessed March 11, 2016, <https://tickets.aldeburgh.co.uk/Online/festival>.

the piano, with a program that allows the booking of practice rooms at the Snape Maltings complex, a feedback session, and online tutorial videos leading up to the chance to perform on the Maltings stage.<sup>192</sup>

Such an educational focus, which began in the first years of the Festival with the choral classes in advance of Festival Choir auditions, has remained a vital aspect of the Festival. In 1979, the Britten-Pears School for Advanced Musical Studies opened at Snape to offer continued training for young musicians at the beginning of their career.<sup>193</sup> Aldeburgh Music, the organization in charge of the Festival, now runs numerous other educational initiatives, many of which culminate in the chance to participate or perform in the Festival: residencies that offer artistic development opportunities and training, programs for musicians between the ages of 8 and 18, a workshop focused on developing new operas, and various education outreach programs for children, incarcerated adults, and sufferers of dementia.<sup>194</sup>

Yet despite the continuations of Britten's legacy in Aldeburgh, the Festival has fundamentally changed. Though amateurs are still included, they are now a small part of the overall Festival, which is dominated by professionals. Instead of the Festival Choir being featured in multiple headline concerts that included Britten premieres, Aldeburgh Voices has only a single performance on a Monday night. Participation has shifted from a model of inclusion as amateur performer to primarily one of inclusion as simple spectator. The Snape Maltings has evolved into an extensive complex that seems more self-sufficient than a part of the

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<sup>192</sup> "Grade 1 Challenge," accessed March 11, 2016, <http://blog.aldeburgh.co.uk/grade-1-challenge/>.

<sup>193</sup> Susan Hill, "A Novelist Visits the Britten-Pears School," in *New Aldeburgh Anthology* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2009), 208-211.

<sup>194</sup> "Artist Development Overview," accessed March 11, 2016, [http://www.aldeburgh.co.uk/artist\\_development](http://www.aldeburgh.co.uk/artist_development).

local community. The democratic ideals of the Festival largely remain, but they have become attenuated with the passage of time.

In many ways this is the result of the vastly different social and cultural circumstances of the first and 69<sup>th</sup> years of the Festival, namely the gradual abandonment of social democratic ideals and less dire apprehensions about modernity. In the decades since Britten's death, the welfare systems in many Western European countries have weakened as politics have shifted to the right, manifested in Britain by the rise of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. Economic recession in the 1970s and the impending loss of tax revenue from the aging baby boomers as they retired plus their dependence on welfare in retirement also stressed social democratic ideals.<sup>195</sup> Alan Sinfield even dates the failure of what he terms "welfare-capitalism" in Britain to 1976, the year Britten died. Since the late 1970s, the postwar belief that the state could build a more equal society has slowly disappeared.<sup>196</sup> Democracy has moved away from utopian ideals of the participation of all. Fear of the alienating tendencies of modernity has disappeared with the abandonment of the rationalism of modernism and the move into a postmodern era. Even during Britten's life culture began to embrace commercialization and commodification, as with Pop Art, the elite acceptance of popular groups like the Beatles, and in the postmodern contention that art is at base a commodity to be sold.<sup>197</sup> Technology is now ubiquitous, so that music is both easily accessible and ever-present: an endless variety of listening experiences is available, but music is also often relegated to the background, barely heard.

When Britten founded the Aldeburgh Festival in 1948 with Peter Pears and Eric Crozier, society was being reimagined and reshaped. New ideals demanded a more equal nation, with

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<sup>195</sup> Judt, *Postwar*, 535-6.

<sup>196</sup> Sinfield, *Literature Politics*, 282.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 285-6, 292.

democracy defined as the participation of everyone in a fair society. For a brief moment, it seemed as if a true social democracy would finally coalesce in Britain, one that asserted the importance of every individual through their equal participation in the welfare state and a shared national culture.

Such a social democracy demanded that culture also be equalized and available to all people. This is what Britten attempted to do at the Aldeburgh Festival. Widespread hopes about democratization and pervasive fears of modernity molded, encouraged, and inspired Britten's cultural goals and ideals. Nor did Britten escape the inherent contradictions of the modern democratic project—its attempt to privilege all individuals through improving their circumstances in opposition to faith in rationality and a standardized treatment of society as a group to be fixed with a single, one-size-fits-all solution. His cultural goals and the Festival are suffused with such contradictions. But that unique historical tension also proved productive. Britten carved out a new role for himself as a composer in the modern world who took advantage of the democratizing potential and financial possibility of evolving technologies. He instituted a modern composer-impresario model wherein a composer not only writes music but also markets and presents it; Adès and Knussen are only two examples of inheritors of this legacy. And he strove to create an egalitarian, human community at the Festival by harnessing the participatory power of music. In all of these ways, Britten and the Festival serve as a demonstration of the ideals and contradictions of postwar British society, and help illuminate our understanding of that time.

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