

Creativity, Productivity, Aging: The Case of Benjamin Britten¹

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British composer Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) died at the age of only sixty-three, but ill health in his last years parachuted him into what he himself saw as older age and its consequences. His story of challenge and adaptation allows us to examine the particular impact of illness and impairment on the role of productivity in definitions of creativity. Composing was the life blood of this prolific artist, known for his work ethic and professionalism. Though he completed only nine independent works after his operation, the last works stand as some of his best creations.

Britten's sense of selfhood depended to a large extent upon this self-identification as an active working composer. While he retained this to the end, his other life narrative had to be abandoned with his sudden entry into older age: that of being ever youthful. His self-fashioning as youthful and his tastes—in food, humor, habits—were formed in boyhood and never changed. Yet, through his letters and creative work, Britten reconstructed in the face of the challenges of aging that evolving life narrative of himself as the professional “working composer” that enabled his continuing creativity.

THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT

As the long creative lives of artists like Michelangelo (1475-1564), Goethe (1749-1832), and Elliott Carter (1908-2012) attest, age and creativity are far from the contradictory terms assumed by our gerontophobic popular culture (see Gullette; Delbanco). Our investigation of the British composer, Benjamin Britten (1913-1976), forms part of a longer study (entitled *Four Last Songs: Aging and Creativity in Verdi, Strauss, Messiaen, Britten*) addressing precisely the conjunction of aging and creativity in the later lives and last works of a series of well-known male opera composers.² We have chosen nineteenth- and twentieth-century composers for a number of reasons, one of which is that in this period they had much more control over their choice of both subject matter

and style of musical composition than did court (or even commercial) composers of earlier times. Also, by then, the composer had taken over from the librettist and singer as the central artistic figure in operatic production. But another important reason is that the late nineteenth century also saw the discovery and definition of “old age” as a social, economic, and medical construct. And thus were born both geriatrics and gerontology as disciplines (Katz 18-19). Our study primarily focuses on what has been called the “Third Age” (Laslett)—that new period in later life in which older people remain independent, active, and capable; it also, however, deals with the adaptations required by the next, the “Fourth Age” of increasing dependency and entry into “old old age” (Baltes and Smith), often caused by a break that signals “the irreversible exclusion of normal life, thus the end of normal life” (d’Epinay 144).

The research questions motivating this choice and this subject, however, are those suggested to us by the arts and humanities, as much as by the medical and social sciences. *King Lear* taught us that with age, roles change; the customary ones may be lost or abandoned. Is this the case with artists as well? Or does their creativity allow them to retain social roles in later years? Do they use their creations as a way of working out—both stylistically and thematically—their concerns about the advancing years? The methodological focus of our study is on their own attitudes to their aging and their creativity, the actual works of their late years, and the reception of those final operas—all examined within the context of both contemporary and historical gerontological and geriatric thinking about the aging process. Aging can be—and is—experienced in many different ways, but it brings with it changes that are physical, social, psychological, artistic, and sometimes cognitive. With changes come challenges to which all must respond.

These composers’ creative responses to these inevitable challenges contest a number of truisms (aka stereotypes and generalizations) about aging that have persisted in the literature, both medical and artistic. For instance, does old age inevitably bring either of the claimed extremes of rage/pessimism/depression or serenity/contemplation/resignation?³ These aging

composers' lives suggest that it is never quite that simple. Late creativity is inevitably highly charged for artists, as they contemplate the image of themselves and their work that they will leave behind. Expectations are high. The potential for failure hangs over them, and thus the possibly permanent damage to their reputations as artists. On the other hand, a successful outcome may guarantee fame, lasting influence, and perhaps even a new sense of personal fulfillment. Not surprisingly, however, these last works are often received by their audiences differently from those that preceded them—as everything from the “last gasp” to the “opus ultimum” (Einstein).

The specific challenges to be faced by aging artists vary, but with age come certain shared concerns: their impending mortality; their productivity vs. their creativity; the experience of aging in a youth-oriented, gerontophobic culture; modernity's emphasis on change and innovation; those worries about the aesthetic legacy they will leave behind. Directly tied to these concerns is the reception issue embedded in the critical concept of their last works' “late style.” While “early style” is something an artist is supposed to grow out of, “late style” is what one dies into—and it sticks. What is at stake is nothing less than the artist's entire posthumous reputation. From the Renaissance (Giorgio Vasari) to our own time (Edward Said), theorists of late style have presented transhistorical, transcultural generalizations that actual individual composers' lives, in fact, contradict (see also McMullan).

It is not only artists' professional reputations that are tested with age, however, but also their own sense of “personhood”—tied, as it so closely is, to their creativity. It is obvious that we can never know another's personhood completely—perhaps not even our own. What we can and do see (and even come to know) is what Morris Rosenberg has called the “presenting self”—how we show ourselves to others, the image that we “manage” in our self-presentation (45-49). While many aspects of that personhood may be exposed to threat with aging, artists are, by definition, creative agents, and their creative agency forms a large part of their identity: Britten claimed he had to compose to feel alive. Our qualitative exploration of these composers' self-constructions (in journals, letters,

interviews, autobiographical writings), as well as the narratives of others (biographers, family, friends), and the “ego-extensions” (Rosenberg 34-37) of their late works shows that with age and impending mortality, artistic extensions of personhood become charged with issues of worth—of both the self and the art.

Through their personal writings and creative work, Verdi, Strauss, Messiaen, and Britten all constructed—and reconstructed in the face of the challenges of aging—an evolving narrative or life-story (see Balber) that provided a sense of “unity, purpose and meaning” for the past, present, and anticipated future (McAdams, “Explorations” 39). These composers’ different but evolving “personal myths” (39) were also what specified what they intended to do in the future in order to leave a legacy of the self for future generations.

Artists live, age, and create as individuals, yet they are clearly also embedded in their culture and their times. Their self-fashioning and their creative works are testimonies to their particular responses to the unique challenges and opportunities that later life offers them. All the composers we study had at their disposal, in the texted musical form we call opera, a means of adaptation, self-expression, and perhaps even catharsis that had the potential to help them explore their own aging and mortality in both a verbal and a musical way. All were successful artists and very public figures, not to say national icons, in their countries. Yet they too had to face challenges that came with their age, as well as their times—times that were changing socially, politically, and aesthetically. For Verdi, the challenge was Wagner and Wagnerism, and thus the future of Italian opera in the hands of a new generation of composers. Strauss’s later years were marked by both his resistance to the shift in musical culture that came with modernism and also by his implication in the cultural politics of the National Socialist regime in Germany and its aftermath following the end of World War II. For Messiaen, who took on the task of his first opera late in life, the attempt to compose what he saw as a summation of both his musical career and his Roman Catholic faith turned out to be almost more than he could handle.

Britten died much younger than any of these, but his ill health in his last years parachuted him into what he himself saw as older age and its consequences, and taught him the distinction between chronological and biological age. His story of challenge and adaptation allows us to examine the particular impact of illness and impairment on the role of productivity in definitions of creativity. The gerontological debate on productivity and creativity has been conducted primarily in quantitative terms. The dominant view was most influentially articulated by Harvey Lehman whose 1953 book, *Age and Achievement*, argued that the last years of an artist's life—across the arts—are the least productive and the least innovative, and therefore the least creative (324; see also Beard; Quételet). Opera composers' peak productive years, for example, are said to be their forties, with a severe decline in later years (see Dennis 1-8; Simonton 100). Most of the arguments against this position have been made in the name of proving that older people can be and are, in fact, productive, rather than questioning the necessary correlation of creativity and productivity. After all, it is only since the Industrial Revolution that we have come to value individuals based on their productivity (Esposito 56). As we shall see, Benjamin Britten certainly composed fewer and shorter works than usual in his last years, after a disabling stroke, but the critics are unanimous in seeing in them both continuing imagination and the same command of his craft of composition. In fact, what Britten did was adapt to these challenges; while his productivity decreased, his creativity remained unchanged.

THE CASE OF BRITTEN

Dearest Beth,

don't worry about me—once this spate of work is over (with luck, before Easter) I am going off into Hospital so they can find out what really is wrong, & I promise to do exactly what they say. But no one expects anything very serious, or something that can't be coped with.

Benjamin Britten to Beth Britten/Wolford,
12 February 1973, from Aldeburgh⁴

Writing to his sister, as the symptoms of his congestive heart failure worsened, the fifty-nine-year-old Benjamin Britten had no way of

knowing that he was very wrong about his expectations concerning his health. Though an active and seemingly healthy man throughout his life, he had had intimations of cardiac problems before this: in February 1968, in his mid-fifties, he had suffered a long bout of what was diagnosed as bacterial endocarditis. At that time, the long hospitalization and extended antibiotic treatment mostly meant to him an irritating break in his composing. At first, he called it “*awfully* frustrating”⁵ with “only a certain amount of discomfort & pain, & infinite boredom!” (Reed and Cooke 203). However, shortly he would write to his friend, William Plomer: “By breaking all doctors’ orders, & really thrashing my poor old self, I have finished [his “church parable”] Prodigal Son—score and all.” But he continued: “My progress is very uneven: some days I feel terrific, and the others low and depressed” (Reed and Cooke 216, 217). This drive to keep composing in difficult medical circumstances and this mixed psychological state would be things with which Britten would come to be only too familiar over the next few years.

Shortly after writing that note to his sister, Britten completed his last opera, *Death in Venice*, but it had been very difficult—not in terms of inspiration, but in terms of his health—for he had been experiencing increasingly debilitating symptoms of heart failure. Whether the medical cause of this shortness of breath and weakness was rheumatic heart disease, exacerbated by the bout of endocarditis, or, as Paul Kildea has recently argued, tertiary syphilis, the important fact was that he felt the urgent need to try to relieve those symptoms by undergoing cardiac valve surgery (in the relatively early days of such interventions).⁶ The combination of the surgery’s failure to dissipate those symptoms and a stroke suffered during the operation led to major changes in his subsequent life. In the few short years between the surgery and his death in 1976 at the age of only sixty-three, Britten was forced to undergo many of the changes we usually associate with aging over a longer period of time: specifically, physical decline, indeed impairment,⁷ and the facing of his imminent demise. It was as if the onset of his physical infirmities marked, in his own eyes and in those of others, his sudden entry into “old old age.”

This rapid aging must have been particularly difficult for Britten because, as we shall see, he had always identified with the young and the youthful. He had been athletically active since his school days; indeed, friends found him intensely competitive in tennis and squash as an adult (Carpenter 349). But there were other factors to make the descent into older age stressful for someone who had been a child prodigy, beginning to compose music at the age of five and playing the piano from early on with an ease and skill that would prefigure his subsequent brilliant career as a collaborative pianist. He had been born in Lowestoft, on Britain's east coast, in 1913 and, most auspiciously, on November 22, the day dedicated to the patron saint of music, St. Cecilia. Encouraged and promoted by his musical mother—to whom he was passionately devoted and who always planned for him to be the “fourth B” after Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms—he had been both precocious and prolific almost from the start.

Throughout his life—except, as we shall see, in certain moments of depression—Britten was blessed with technical fluency and speed, what friend and composer Michael Tippett called his “wonderful facility” (qtd. in Carpenter 196). But his life-long work ethic made Britten also believe that everything was really the result of much hard work and considerable technique (qtd. in Holst 52). What he was, most of all, in his own eyes, was a professional working composer. This is one of his two life narratives, one that he had been developing from his early years as his self-defining identity and to which he clung for meaning and support throughout his life, right to the end.

Though as a young man Britten had been writing incidental music for radio and theatre, both in England and then in the United States, his first real piece of musical theatre—what he thought of as a high school opera—*Paul Bunyan*, was premiered in 1941 at Columbia University, while Britten was living in the USA. But by 1945, when *Peter Grimes* opened the first post-war season of Sadler's Wells Theatre, Britten had arrived as the English opera composer everyone had been waiting for: his music was English, but with an openness to contemporary European music (Oliver

44). The major operas that followed in quick succession cemented his role in British operatic life: *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946), *Albert Herring* (1947), *Billy Budd* (1951), *Gloriana* (1953), *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), *Owen Wingrave* (1970-71), plus all the equally important children's operas and church parables. But this massive operatic output actually marks only a fragment of his total musical creation over these years. A prolific composer, Britten wrote many song cycles and much instrumental music, usually for particular performers or occasions. Then, as his health declined, he began what he soon came to realize would be his last major opera.

DEATH IN VENICE, ILLNESS IN ALDEBURGH

Sensing, perhaps, that his time was limited, Britten threw himself into composing *Death in Venice*—creatively, physically, and emotionally. He wrote to choreographer Frederick Ashton in 1971 that he was “desperately keen to make it the best thing I have ever done” (Reed and Cooke 451). In the end, he felt it was “either the best or the worst music I’ve ever written” (Reed and Cooke 528) but important enough to have postponed surgery—at the risk of his life. His partner, the tenor Peter Pears (for whom he was writing the main part), feared that the opera was killing him (Carpenter 546). Dr. Ian Tait, who was his physician throughout these years, explained that Britten had made a pact with him: the composer agreed to go for tests and surgery as soon as the opera was completed, if the doctor would agree to try to keep him going with drug therapy until that time (Tait; see also Carpenter 541-44). He did complete *Death in Venice*, but was too ill to attend the opening. Hospitalized shortly after finally seeing a cardiologist, he soon underwent aortic valve replacement surgery, during which he had that ischaemic episode.

The stroke’s compromising of his right hand and leg affected his confidence immensely. Dr. Tait felt that the impairment had “very much undermined” his will to go on, sensing that the composer “felt drained of creative drive after *Death in Venice* was completed, and was half ready to give up” (Carpenter 576). Britten had been an important performer, a collaborative pianist who had always accompanied Pears

in recital. Gifted with an extraordinary facility and control over the keyboard, the composer was much admired for his pianistic skill. That part of his creative life was now over; Rosamund Strode recorded the “abject look of total misery” on his face when he tried to play the piano after the stroke (Carpenter 562). As he wrote to his sister, Beth, “Of all the things I cannot do now, the thing I mind about the most is not being able to play the piano” (Beth Britten 197-98). Though he had never composed at the piano, he always played through his pieces to exercise “his critical faculties aurally,” as Strode noted (61). As a composer, however, he would never again, interestingly, write for the piano: the vocal works written after the surgery were either unaccompanied or accompanied by harp, harpsichord, or small orchestra. For example, the Fifth Canticle (op. 89) was scored for his friend, the celebrated harpist, Osian Ellis, and as his biographer Michael Kennedy has remarked: “Writing for the harp seems to have spurred his imagination to new but economical effects” (260). In fact, Kennedy sees in this work’s writing for the voice a “broad but subtle expressiveness” that is characteristic of *Death in Venice*: in other words, he sees continuity, not change, in Britten’s technique and style. The harp also replaced the piano in Britten’s last song cycle a year later, *A Birthday Hansel*. Like *Canticle V*, it illustrates well not only the composer’s new physical limitations but also his innovative imagination at work.

Britten’s letters in the years between the surgery and his death are revealing for what they tell us about the composer’s initial crisis of confidence in the face of physical incapacity and his initial depression at the loss of productivity—two threats to his life narrative as a working composer.⁸ Impairment, in this case, involved what Michael Bury calls “biographical disruption” (169) in two different senses. First of all, there was the major reconfiguring of physical identity that occurred when he went from being a lively tennis player to being unable to climb the stairs without becoming breathless, unable even to compose music normally because his newly impaired hand wouldn’t reach to the top of the page. (This problem was solved by cutting the long music sheets in half.) The second threat was to his creative identity and came in terms of

his productivity: Britten's work ethic was legendary, as was his discipline and energy, and he needed to work to feel alive.⁹ The first year after the surgery he composed little, writing to Plomer that he was enduring "rather a dreary time with (it seems) more 'downs' than 'ups'" (Reed and Cooke 581). His sister Barbara tellingly wrote to him a few months after this, saying: "I do wonder how the breathing is getting on & whether you have given up bursting into tears!"¹⁰

Depressed, constantly worrying about his new limitations, and irritated at being dependent upon others, the composer mostly complained to his friends and colleagues about his frustration at not being able to get back to work (Reed and Cooke 684). But, beginning gradually by revisiting earlier pieces and revising them, he slowly returned to his work of composition. He himself admitted later, "For a time after the operation, I couldn't compose because I had no confidence in my powers of selection. I was worried too about my ideas. Then I suddenly got my confidence back and composing has become a marvelous therapy.... I have the feeling of being of some use once more" (Kennedy 104; Carpenter 570). Working, he said, "gets me back on the rails again" (Blyth 59). From an early age, he had been unhappy if a day went by without composing (Oliver 119-20). This is one of the two major life narratives that together might be argued to have given Britten's life coherence and meaning.

Because of this narrative, the relationship between working, being "of some use," and having to conquer depression is one that, by this point, was familiar to Britten. Throughout his life, he had frequent bouts of depression during which he displayed a lack of confidence in his work and often experienced a creative block (Kildea 321, 350, 369-70, 386, 423, 446-8, 459). Physical health issues alone did not stop him from composing, as we saw in the response to his hospitalization with endocarditis, during which he finished *The Prodigal Son*. In fact, it was quite typical of him to compose during a convalescence, even as a boy: it was "almost as though he had been composing feverishly in his head during the period of enforced rest, and could thus write down the resulting music with great speed once he was back at his desk" (Oliver 98). But the combination of

debilitating physical impairment and depression after the heart surgery proved to be a difficult, though not insurmountable, hurdle for the man who always thought of himself as a working composer.

CREATIVITY VS. PRODUCTIVITY

Indeed, it is because he was such a prolific and industrious artist that the relative paucity of post-surgery works stands out: Britten produced only nine new post-*Death in Venice* works in his last years. But these works challenge our familiar post-industrial linking of creativity with productivity. After all, if an artist can still bring to his creative work the powers of invention, inquiry, openness, spontaneity, formal command—in short, all the things we associate today with creativity—should the quantity of the works produced matter at all?

Britten certainly composed fewer works in his last years and some would see this as a sign of decline. But when we look at those last works, many see, to use Arnold Whittall's words, "no sudden change of direction, ... no sudden drying up of his own intensely personal reserves of invention and imagination" (309). Like many aging composers, Verdi, Strauss, and Messiaen among them, Britten looked back in his last works to his earlier compositions. *Death in Venice* has been seen as his musical autobiography with its echoes of *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, *Albert Herring*, *Curlew River*, *Gloriana*, and other works (Carpenter 554). Britten subsequently reworked material from *Death in Venice* in the last movement (revealingly subtitled "La Serenissima") of his Third String Quartet (op. 94). The critics are unanimous in describing this work as a masterpiece (e.g., Kennedy 249) and calling it his last artistic testament, worthy of comparison with the last string quartets of Beethoven (Evans 348; Kennedy 266).

The critics are also in agreement that these final works, however, are all "somerly coloured by reflections on death," to use Peter Evans' phrase. His extreme fatigue and restricted physical activity forced him to face both his premature aging and his impending mortality¹¹. "When does aging begin?" asks Gottfried Benn in his essay, "Artists and Old Age." His answer is: with the "foreknowledge of early death [which] compensates, in terms of inner life, for decades of outer life and the process of ageing that goes with

them” (208). Britten knew he was dying and was not distressed by this fact; a spiritual but not religious man, he came to terms with his mortality. One of the means of doing this may have been through the themes he chose for his last works. In these, Britten shifts away from his heretofore dominant dual thematic focus on the isolated outsider figure and on innocence betrayed: the themes of *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, and so many other works. But arguably, his shift from these to the themes of death and dying had come already with that last opera, *Death in Venice*, in which an aging artist, Gustav von Aschenbach, learns about creativity, love, and death. In fact, this opera (unlike Thomas Mann’s novella on which it is based) opens with Aschenbach in the throes of a crisis of creativity. This story is usually seen as one of an older man’s homoerotic desire for a beautiful boy (and it most certainly is that)¹², but there is another story being told here along with that one, a story about creativity and aging that is very much a response by Britten to the challenges to the second of his life narratives, one of himself as eternally youthful.

THE LURE OF YOUTH

In order to understand how these two themes of homoerotic desire and creativity/aging come together in the opera, we need to address another, somewhat more controversial aspect of Britten’s life: his attraction to the company of young boys. He was often deeply in love, but never (to anyone’s explicit knowledge) sexually involved with a series of boys, a topic sensitively dealt with in John Bridcut’s film and book, *Britten’s Children*. With each boy he had a “mentoring relation suffused with constantly sublimated desire” (Brett 194). As one of his biographers tactfully put it: “despite a long and happy relationship with the tenor Peter Pears, [Britten] found another happiness in the company of boys” (Oliver 12). We know from his letters and journals that Britten, from an early adult age, delighted in being with children, writing in his early twenties: “I am lost without some children (of either sex) near me” (journal qtd. in Carpenter 80; D. Matthews 40; Oliver 50). The young composer’s own school-boyish tastes, sense of humor, and general demeanor (Carpenter 74-75; Oliver 25, 120) led one friend to suggest in 1937: “He really hates

growing up & away from a very happy childhood that ended only with his Mother's death last Christmas" (Carpenter 114-15). But it seems clear that this idealized nostalgia for the spontaneity and innocence of the world of his youth continued throughout Britten's life and formed the core of his second life narrative. Until his last years, friends constantly commented on the boyishness of Britten's nature and his tastes (Carpenter 347). One friend, Marjorie Fass, tellingly called him a "poor little boy" when he was almost twenty-five and enduring the condescension of certain music critics (Oliver 71).

When he did turn twenty-five, the composer lamented to a young friend: "It's a horrible thing to feel one's youth slipping o-so surely away from one & I had such a damn good youth too" (Carpenter 123). His various biographers have traced this desire to retain his "damn good youth" in many different ways throughout his adult life, from preferring "nursery food" to delighting in "childish" card games, from using Lett's Schoolboy's Pocket Diaries to taking cold baths, as he had in school.¹³ Perhaps even his desire to live on the eastern coast of Britain suggests a desire to retain contact with his childhood home (Matthews 1). His constant "sportiness"—that is, his competitiveness and pleasure in physical exertion—was seen by his friend, the director Colin Graham, as his desire to "keep the physical side of his youth going" because he was "besotted by youth, and he tried to maintain it in his own life until the day he died" (qtd. in Bridcut 176). Like being a working composer, being youthful was a central narrative in Britten's life.

His early interest in writing music for children's voices (e.g., *Saint Nicolas* [1947-8]), especially for the unbroken voices of boy trebles, could be seen as part of this same nostalgic youthfulness narrative. As Jonathan Keates put it, "For the childless Benjamin Britten, childhood and its enchantments furnished some of his profoundest inspirations as a composer." Others have seen the boys as being Britten's muses, opening up new emotional worlds, and have argued that his preoccupation with the world of childhood gave him "access to areas of the imagination, even to types of music, that he would perhaps not otherwise have approached"

(Oliver 51). Recovering from a bout of depression in 1949, he joyfully turned to writing *The Little Sweep*, an opera for children. Earlier he had composed *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1945). Throughout his life, he would write for children's enjoyment, but also for the child's voice, refusing to "write down" to his young performers. He also kept the child, the innocent child, at the forefront of his sung narratives (*Peter Grimes, Turn of the Screw, Abraham and Isaac, The Golden Vanity, Children's Crusade, Who Are These Children?, Curlew River*) (Wilcox 45-56, 75-76).

And children reciprocated, as conductor Charles Mackerras noticed: "Children really loved him and were fascinated by him, and by the fact that he spoke their language and, in a way, entered their world" (qtd. in Bridcut 240). As another friend, Eric Crozier, noted, he changed when around children: "It was almost a return to his own youth, . . . but a kind of idealized image of himself at the age of ten or twelve, the gay, attractive, charming young Lowestoft boy, unerringly skilful in the use of a cricket bat or a tennis racket, and being able to do things with a ball that no other child of his age could do" (Carpenter 344). Indeed, the pre-pubescent years—the ones before innocence became either self-conscious or threatened—appear to figure as the idyllic, if not mythic, ones for Britten. And it was when he was in contact with young adolescents of this age that he was said to be "at his most generous and natural. . . . [T]hrough them he re-encountered and re-charged himself" (Bridcut 5).¹⁴ The thirteen-year-old boy was what psychologists might call Britten's "imago"—"the idealized personification of the self that functions as a protagonist of his life narrative" (McAdams, "The Psychology" 106). For a person with this self-understanding, to suddenly "age" after surgery would have been even more devastating than it might be for others.

There is little doubt that the company of children was what Britten always preferred—but this may have been more than just a repressed and sublimated sexual interest for this "Peter Pan composer who would never lose touch with his boyishness" (Wilcox 15). No wonder he was dismayed at, not to say gloomy about the public celebrations in 1963 of his fiftieth birthday (Carpenter 420). But along with age come changes

that are hard to ignore, given either of his life narratives. In a BBC interview, he said: “It is becoming, as I get older, more and more difficult to satisfy my ear that I have found the right notes to express my ideas with” (Carpenter 421). His friends confirm that as he grew older “he seemed to harbor increasing doubts about his own works” (Culshaw 63). Within another decade, he would also admit that with age came not only greater expectations and thus demands made by the composer on himself, but also, with success, came greater expectations on the part of both audiences and critics. Not surprisingly, his 1970-71 opera for television, *Owen Wingrave*, was both hailed as proof that Britten was “at the masterly height of his career as a composer,” and yet deemed “not as masterly an achievement” as the earlier *Turn of the Screw*.¹⁵ With the years, Britten’s pre-performance nerves when performing on the piano became almost incapacitating. As he explained to a young pianist: “It gets much worse the more famous you become—you have to prove yourself from the first note” (Carpenter 476).

Because of his youthful self-identifying narrative, Britten appears to have been excruciatingly sensitive to the idea of his aging. At the opening of Britten’s theatre at the Maltings in Snape, Prince Philip innocently asked Tony Palmer, who was filming the proceedings for the BBC: “What’s the old man written for us this time?” The fifty-four-year-old Britten was furious—but it was the word “old” that enraged him (Carpenter 473). When, less than a decade later, the composer made his abrupt entry into old age after his stroke and the increased heart failure, he still kept to his image of himself as almost an eternal schoolboy, but this time with his nurse, Rita Thomson, in the role of the nanny or Matron (Carpenter 569); she, in turn, would describe the ailing Britten as “the best brought-up little boy you could imagine” (Carpenter 584). He is said to have broken down when hearing the BBC broadcast of Paul Bunyan in 1976 when he heard the words of Auden’s libretto, “The campfire embers are black and cold, / the banjos are broken, the stories are told, / The woods are cut down and the young are grown old” (Carpenter 577; Kildea 553).

ASCHENBACH AND BRITTEN: THE AGING ARTIST IN CRISIS

It is here that the protagonist of *Death in Venice* and the aging and ailing composer meet once again—in that opera's second story about aging and creativity. Aschenbach, the respected mature writer, sings “My mind beats on” (Piper and Britten 1), words suggesting movement and energy. But he sings them to music that is “repetitious, non-developing” (Corse and Corse 345).¹⁶ This lack of musical movement is all too fitting, for his next line is “and no words come” (1). As Kildea notes, “Never before had Britten packed so much narrative weight into the opening line of an opera” (535). The aging artist is facing a creative crisis: his mind may “beat on” but it is “Taxing, tiring, / unyielding, unproductive” (Piper and Britten 1). What creativity has meant before this to the writer is, in his own words, “self-discipline” and “routine” (1), his imagination subordinated to will; passion has left him, as has “delight in fastidious choice” (1). He laments: “I am at an end” (1). One might well argue that the reason for this can be discovered in his very welcoming of what he later calls the “austere demands of maturity” (9). The son of a bourgeois father and a bohemian mother, Aschenbach has over time, in his words, “turned away from the paradox and daring of my youth, renounced bohemianism and sympathy with the outcast soul, to concentrate upon simplicity, beauty, form—upon that all my art is built” (9-10). While this directly echoes Mann's novella, there would have been another, more personal echo for Britten.

In 1942, Britten's friend W. H. Auden had declared to him that all great art was the result of “a perfect balance between Order and Chaos, Bohemianism and Bourgeois Convention. Bohemian chaos alone ends in a mad jumble of beautiful scraps. Bourgeois Convention alone ends in large unfeeling corpses. Every artist except the supreme masters has a bias one way or the other. . . . Technical skill always comes from the bourgeois side of one's nature.” Since Auden saw Britten as leaning toward the bourgeois, he went on: “Your attraction to thin-as-a-board juveniles, i.e. to the sexless and innocent, is a symptom of this. And I'm certain too that it is your denial and evasion of the demands of disorder that is

responsible for your attacks of ill-health, i.e. sickness is your substitute for the Bohemian” (Carpenter 163-64; Oliver 92-93). The eerie echoing of Mann’s split bohemian/bourgeois artist figure might alert us to Britten’s personal investment in this particular story beyond even the homosocial nature of the topic: the work was composed as his health deteriorated and he, the eternal thirteen-year-old, faced premature “aging.”

In the operatic version of the story, Aschenbach’s “maturity”—in other words, his age—is at the heart of the creative crisis that opens the work. The aging writer has premonitions of death from the very start. He decides to go to Venice while walking by a Munich graveyard and meditating upon what he calls “the black rectangular hole in the ground” (Piper and Britten 1). Once he arrives in Venice, he rides to the Lido in a gondola and ruminates: “How black a gondola is— / black, coffin black, / a vision of death itself / and the last silent voyage” (8). It is rowed by a bizarre gondolier who is explicitly likened to Charon propelling the writer across the Styx to the world of the dead.

Besides thoughts of death, reminders of age confront Aschenbach. On the boat on his way to Venice, he meets a group of boisterous youths and, among them, what he calls a “young-old horror” (5)—or what the libretto refers to as the Elderly Fop. In youthful clothes and garish make-up that help him mimic (or parody) the young, this character comes back to haunt Aschenbach. The prim and very proper writer is totally appalled by this figure, at this point. Later in the opera, however, Aschenbach allows the Hotel Barber to help him “make a stand against advancing years” (34), as the libretto puts it. He dyes his hair to remove the grey and adds color to his cheeks “to bring back the appearance of youth” (34). The Barber’s final words are: “Now the Signore can fall in love with a good grace” (35). That Aschenbach has become the very image of the Elderly Fop is clear both visually and then verbally and musically, as he echoes fragments of the songs of the youths and the “young-old horror” on the boat. That Britten disapproved is equally clear in his distancing from this parody of youthfulness. His discomfort with any hyper- or stereotypical gay male social behavior is manifest in

his letters, and his biographers stress his social conformism and “middle-class normality” models (Carpenter 327).¹⁷

Aschenbach, however, has fallen in love with a young and beautiful boy whom he can only see through the Hellenizing lenses of Platonic philosophy (and thus ancient Greek homoeroticism): for someone like Britten “to whom the beauty of childhood meant so much, the appropriation of this philosophy would be virtually intuitive” (Allen 279; see also Hutcheon and Hutcheon 30-36, 48-52). But Plato is not the only philosopher called upon in both the novella and the opera: Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous argument (in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*) of the aesthetic need to balance Dionysian passion with Apollonian order comes to the foreground as the controlled, restrained artist loses that balance, and surrenders to the once (dangerously) repressed Dionysian. It is this, as much as cholera, that brings about his death. Britten, whatever his dark personal struggles, never lost that balance, and the result is the opera, *Death in Venice*. The ending of the opera can be read in strongly opposing ways, either as “a scene of denial and pessimism” (Brett 149) or, as we would argue, as the sublime reassertion of balance and order through the music (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 35)—music that has been described as “the most exquisite, most Mahlerian, utterance of Britten’s entire output, Aschenbach’s and Tadzio’s motifs at last meshed together ... [in] a work of searing brilliance and originality, his power undiminished” (Kildea 530). Britten’s creativity, in other words, may actually have been nourished by his sublimation... and by those two very different life narratives, both of which came under threat at this time, however.

LATE STYLE: ADAPTING TO IMPAIRMENT

During the years Britten was composing this opera about aging, creativity, and death, he not only was unwell but he also felt his position as the preeminent English composer was being challenged. With people like Michael Tippett around, some felt Britten’s tonal, if original, music was rather old-fashioned (Mitchell 37). Another part of the challenge Britten faced in coming to terms with his own mortality involved dealing

with the loss of those near him as well. It may seem a truism that age also brings with it increased thoughts of mortality, but, as gerontologist Victor W. Marshall has argued, there is actually an entirely new reality for the individual aging into old age to make sense of: the “self-as-mortal” or even “the self-as-dying” (107). This awareness is not a simple function of age, but includes things like one’s own health and the comparison of one’s own age with the age-at-death of significant others in one’s life. In the weeks after his surgery, Britten had to face the deaths of a number of close friends and contemporaries: W. H. Auden, William Plomer, Dmitri Shostakovich. For an artist like Britten, it became clear that the life narratives, now necessary for coping with illness and loss, for charting meaning in his life (see Balber), would have to be adapted.

One way of seeing how that adaptation process may have operated is to return to the themes and stories he chose to relate in his last creative works. For instance, the Fifth Canticle (op. 89) is a setting of T. S. Eliot’s obscure early poem, “The Death of Saint Narcissus,” and, like the Thomas Mann novella on which that last opera was based, it offers what one critic calls “erotic and sexual desire ... conflated with spiritual longing [that] ... can find their resolution only through death” (Pond 232). Death certainly haunts the last works, as we have seen. The last of the eight medieval lyrics that compose Opus 91, “Sacred and Profane,” is called “Death” and, as Kennedy describes it, is a “catalogue of the physical manifestations of mortality which Britten sets with grisly relish.” He goes on to say, however: “A great cry of ‘All too late! All too late! When the bier is at the gate’ momentarily wipes the wry smile from our lips, but Britten does not want our sympathy—the last line is a defiant ‘For the whole world I don’t care a jot’” (262). Adapting, for Britten, meant accepting his mortality and, indeed, making that acceptance part of his works’ thematics.

In the next year, 1975, “his renewed creativity reached its peak,” claims one of his biographers (Matthews 150), while another calls this his “Indian summer” (Kildea 550). Britten composed *Phaedra* for Dame Janet Baker, a solo cantata for mezzo soprano and chamber orchestra,

based on Robert Lowell's translation of Racine's play *Phèdre*. Taking the awareness of death "untouched by self-pity" (Evans 396) as its moving theme, this "opera-in-miniature" (Kennedy 264), packs all the emotion of a full operatic work into a mere fifteen minutes. Physically unable to compose an opera, perhaps because of the restricted spans of creative activity possible, Britten here made that limitation into a strength. Critics have insisted that "there is no hint of a fatally ill composer husbanding his resources, rather of one eagerly responding to new stimuli" with new sounds in his music (Oliver 207). While that is the case, the same new brevity characterizes *Canticle V*, the shortest of the canticles, coming in at about seven minutes in performance.

At this point in his last years, as Britten told Alan Blyth in an interview for the *Times*, "Writing even a bar or two is a sweat" (Carpenter 571). His nurse, Rita Thomson, was more specific, and described his new daily routine in these terms: "In the mornings he had his breakfast upstairs in bed, and then I would bath and shave him, and dress him. If he had to do it himself, he could have, but then he would have had no energy left over for anything else—he tired very easily. He'd come downstairs at about eleven, and have a beer or something, and then perhaps he'd see Rosamund [Strode] and work with her, or he would work by himself until lunchtime, usually in the drawing room with a little board on his knee" (Carpenter 563). Afternoons were spent in bed but he'd resume work at tea time. As she put it: "He was always working; he worked all the time. The will to work was there. It was the physical part that wasn't so easy" (Carpenter 565). Like the shift from composing for the piano to the harp, this seeming negative of both energy- and time-constriction actually became a positive, offering a new creative impetus within the narrative of the working composer. The same is true for the shift to the thematics of death and dying. All were arguably productive adaptations (both creative and psychological) to those life narratives challenged by physical change. Facing with courage his decline and imminent death, Britten in a sense "mined" his life-and-death situation for his art. But age had effectively rendered the youthful life narrative mute; it was the working composer narrative that saved the day,

the one that was instrumental in mood repair (McAdams, “The Psychology” 113). It was also this narrative that allowed him to finish “tying up loose ends”: in the last four years of his life he produced a last opera and a final song cycle for Pears, a last canticle, a final orchestral piece, a choral work, a cantata for a friend, and a final string quartet that has been seen as offering “a special coda” to the opera (Kildea 551).

Because “late style” is a matter of reception, critics cannot resist seeing and hearing in these last works the style of a dying man. The same is true of Britten’s biographers. For instance, one writes of the “Suite on English Folk Tunes” (op. 90): “The suite is undeniably poignant, its sound irradiated by those strange luminosities which, like the light of the dying sun, reflected from the score of *Death in Venice*. Sorrow for what can never be, love for all that has been, are in this music” (Kennedy 261). Britten’s very last work, a short piece for young people’s chorus and orchestra called the “Welcome Ode” (op. 95), has been interpreted as his final attempt “to recapture the lost youth and innocence he so desired” (Sinclair 11) and as offering “one of his strongest moral legacies: enjoy summertime, youth, innocence, and health while they are yours because all too soon they are taken away” (Sinclair 12).

Is this really Britten’s final message? Perhaps. But it has been a message stated throughout the composer’s oeuvre, though now tinged with poignancy at the necessity of bidding farewell to the narrative of the eternally young boy. What is certainly clear is that right up to the end, Britten was totally engaged not only in his own work—that is, in his continuing creativity—but also in the business and artistic affairs of the Aldeburgh Festival, which he had founded in his Suffolk home town (Duncan 156). A few days before he died, he presented his friend Mstislav Rostropovich with the sketch of *Praise We Great Men*, one of the few “working” obligations he did not manage to fulfill; as Michael Oliver suggests, “even at this stage Britten’s physical exhaustion was not accompanied by any enfeeblement of his imaginative powers” (210). At his death, Pears said: “There was no struggle to keep alive ... his greatest feeling was sadness and sorrow at the thought of leaving ... his friends and his responsibilities” (Matthews 155).

THE ENDURING AND ENABLING LIFE NARRATIVE

Britten died at the age of only 63, not old by the standards of a Strauss or a Verdi or a Tippett. One of his last interchanges with his sister emphasized his longing for death—because of his inability to continue to work. He wrote: “If this is it, and I am sure it is, I want to go. I can’t bear to go on any longer not being able to do all the things I used to do” (Beth Britten 199). Becoming the first British composer to receive a peerage raised his spirits somewhat in his last year, helping him to get beyond, in his friend Donald Mitchell’s words, his feeling of being “ill . . . isolated—and forgotten,” no longer “the fashionable composer” (Carpenter 580). What is most interesting, however, is his creative adapting of his working life narrative to his changed circumstances. Physical infirmity and disability had to be dealt with; happily, cognitive decline did not. But the narrative of eternal youthfulness did not—could not—evolve with time and had to be discarded.

Britten never aged into old age, but he did experience prematurely some of the kinds of challenges that aging brings. In fact, what he did was adapt to these challenges by engaging in what gerontologist Paul B. Baltes rather awkwardly calls “selective optimization with compensation” (Baltes, Freund, and Li 53-55). One famous example of this kind of adaptation would be that of the pianist Arthur Rubenstein: as he aged Rubenstein said he reduced his repertoire and played a smaller number of pieces (selection); he practiced these more often (optimization); he slowed down his speed of playing prior to fast movements, so that the contrast would enhance the impression of speed in those fast movements (compensation) (Schroots 745). For Britten, the parallel process would be the selection of the smaller number and smaller scale of works; the optimization consisted of conserving his limited physical and mental energies for composition; and the compensation for his stroke impairment would include everything from composing for the harp instead of the piano to composing a string quartet because it needed only four staves of music, at a time when he had no energy to complete a page of full score (Oliver 207). The results of this “selective optimization

with compensation” was a creative output that is smaller, but not different in terms of style or, most agree, quality; the last works were still composed in what is thought of as his characteristic mode of musical expression.

For Britten’s recent biographer, Paul Kildea, “Instead of decline ... these [last] were years of unfettered brilliance, of inspiration at every turn and of notebooks brimming with plans and ideas” (557). Those adaptations to his life narrative as a professional working composer were what saw him through to the end, even with the necessary failure of the youthfulness narrative. While many believe that Britten’s nostalgia for childhood was the mainspring of his creativity, this was only one of the life narratives that made Britten the productive creator he was—and continued to be even after his sudden entry into old age: his dedication to his creative work and his self-identifying as a “working” composer provided the sustaining other narrative.

NOTES

¹ A companion to this article is a jointly written piece that came out of our research team’s collective efforts: “*Death in Venice* and Beyond: Benjamin Britten’s Late Works,” by Kimberly F. Canton, Amelia DeFalco, Linda Hutcheon, Michael Hutcheon, Katherine R. Larson, and Helmut Reichenbächer, which appeared in the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 81.4 (2012): 893-908. Our gratitude to the whole team for their insights, hard work, and collaborative example.

² Though it is obvious that the later years of a female artist are likely to be different from those of a male—given that their entire lives and careers may well have had another trajectory—we sadly could find very few to study in order to investigate these differences: opera (indeed, music) was a male field for a very long time, often relegating even very talented women to the roles of muse or helper. This is the subject of a work in progress by the authors.

³ The rage theory (as either positive or negative) is shared by Said (passim) and Edel 212-13; the depressive one by Cohen-Shalev 33 and Kerrigan 171. The other side is represented by Arnheim 149-50; Gervais 205.

⁴ Britten-Pears Library, The Red House, Aldeburgh, Suffolk; hereafter BPL.

⁵ Britten to Peter Pears, 29 Feb 1968, BPL.

⁶ Respectively, the theses of Dr. Ian Tait, Britten’s physician, as reported by Carpenter 542-43, and his surgeon Donald Ross, according to Dr. Hywel Davies, as reported in Kildea 532ff.

⁷ We use the term impairment here in the sense that disability studies has come to use it to distinguish “‘impairment’ (an underlying biological or medical condition) from ‘disability’ (the meanings conferred on impairment by social and cultural construction)” (Straus 4). While, as we shall see, Britten did face disability as well, it was the physical impairment that contributed most to his sense of having “aged.”

⁸ “After his operation, Britten often confessed to Mrs [Mary] Potter, though probably to few others, that he was profoundly depressed and that he found life hardly worth living. He fretted about his disability, hated to be dependent on others and bitterly regretted not being able to work at full stretch. Up to the time of his illness, he was pretty tough and very active” (Blyth 107).

⁹ Ralls; see also Peter Pears’s remarks about Britten as a “working musician” in Tony Palmer’s film, *A Time There Was*.

¹⁰ Barbara Britten to Britten, 30 Oct. 1973, BPL.

¹¹ This is emphasized in all the biographies and by Dr. Tait in his interview, speaking of his friendship with Rt Revd Leslie Brown, Bishop of St. Edmundsbury and Ipswich, in those last years. See also Elliot.

¹² The most extensive analysis of this can be found in Brett passim. See also Chowrimootoo; Harper-Scott 116-35, especially; Seymour 3 and passim.

¹³ See Carpenter 262, 263, 315, 424, 484-85; Oliver 25; Matthews 124; Bridcut 1, 19; Kildea 36.

¹⁴ See also Brett 24. Indeed, Mildred Cary entitles her book *Benjamin Britten et le mythe de l'enfance*.

¹⁵ Respectively, by William Mann in *The Times* and Desmond Shawe-Taylor in the *Sunday Times*; qtd. in Carpenter 519.

¹⁶ For a detailed (Freudian) reading of this opening monologue and its musical and verbal representation of creative block, see Johnson.

¹⁷ Carpenter is clear that Britten always rejected the foppish stereotype of gay male behavior, in part because of his desire to play it safe and be part of the Establishment. See also Bridcut 266-67 and Kildea 536.

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