

Philip Brett. 2006. *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays*, edited by George E. Haggerty. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Reviewed by Byron Adams

Like the septet of Proust's fictional composer Vinteuil, *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays* consists of shards collected and transformed into a satisfying whole. Sadly, the collection's author, Philip Brett, died of cancer in 2002, shortly after receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship Award for 2002–3 that would have aided him to complete a book on Britten's life and work. While these selected essays cannot replace the larger project now forever lost—its potential richness strongly anticipated by Brett's Olympian entry on the composer for *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edition (2001)—scholars of twentieth-century British music will be grateful for this volume. As attested by this splendid collection, meticulously edited by Brett's life partner George E. Haggerty, Brett's writings on Britten's life and work remain unsurpassed for their insight, compassion, and elegance. Happily, *Music and Sexuality in Britten* enables the reader to trace the progressive refinement of Brett's thought in a way that would necessarily have been submerged in a larger, more integrated work. In his preface, Haggerty aptly observes that the "great virtue of this collection is that it shows Philip coming at similar material over nearly thirty years and producing increasingly subtle and nuanced readings that suggest as much about critical practice as they do about their subject" (xii).

In an eloquent postscript to the first essay in this volume, Brett went right to the heart of the matter, articulating as he did so his life's work as a scholar: "My ultimate concern is the social experience of oppression and its effects on the writing of *Peter Grimes*, not Britten's sexual preference" (26). To superficial readers of Brett's work, such a statement may come as a surprise, especially from one of the founders of the "new gay and lesbian musicology." But it is precisely Brett's concern with oppression as such that lends his work its continuing relevance now that the quarter-century-old "new musicology" has developed into a wide spectrum of approaches, some far from the wildest imaginings of its originators. In our own dark era, Brett's compassion for the plight of the powerless and disenfranchised shines forth with an urgent brightness.

This is not to deny that one of Brett's most pressing concerns was the plight of gay men and lesbians harassed by a bigoted society. At the same time, however, as the totality of his work attests, he was equally sensitive to

Current Musicology

the fate of such souls as recusant Catholics, such as William Byrd, during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Brett was well aware, furthermore, of the ghastly legacy of racial prejudice and the discrimination faced by women—especially women composers—in a patriarchal society. Brett was never inclined to give gay men a “free pass” just because of their orientation; he wrote strongly against the “grotesque” tendencies embedded in the “elitism of certain kinds of privileged male homosexual subcultures” (108). (Certain closeted musicologists who were members of that elite band did not take kindly to such rebukes and slapped back hard, often maligning Brett, publicly and privately, using the misogynistic adjective “shrill.”)

Brett wrote of his own tribe, gay men and lesbians, not because he valorized the sufferings of this persecuted minority above that of others, but because he was compelled by his innate honesty to write from his own experience, and because he decisively rejected a lazy ventriloquism that expropriates the experience of others. The heedless narcissism of a Leonard Bernstein, who thought he could assume the voice of African Americans during the 1960s, was utterly foreign to Brett, who used the injustice he encountered as a gay man as a lens through which to view compassionately the struggles of other oppressed peoples. For Brett, there were no “case studies,” only those living in the shadow of grave discrimination that quickly turned to physical peril.

Brett found that Britten’s life and music provided an endlessly fascinating pretext for an ongoing investigation of the fraught interactions between the homosexual artist—in this case a great artist—and society; he writes that “what is so interesting about [Britten] is how he dealt at a public level, in his music and especially in his operatic works, with the concatenation of musicality and homosexuality” (91). For this delicate scholarly operation, Brett used intellectual tools that he honed to a surgical precision. Avoiding both the temptation to uncritical essentialism and the allure of a safely positivist stance, Brett amassed a wide range of approaches derived from such diverse (but interrelated) sources as feminist theory, as found especially in Susan McClary’s writings; French critical theory as practiced by Foucault and others; the emerging discipline of queer theory; psychology; the liberal humanism of E. M. Forster; and the 1970s “gay liberation” movement. (Brett’s own gay identity was forged in Berkeley and San Francisco during that deliriously heady era.)

As noted by Haggerty, Brett’s arguments became more nuanced as he honed his understanding of the complex and often toxic interactions of class distinction and homosexuality that pervaded British society during Britten’s life (and before, and after, and today). To discern this continuing refinement, the reader need only compare chapter 6, “Britten’s Bad Boys:

Male Relations in *The Turn of the Screw*,” originally published in 1992, with chapter 8, “Eros and Orientalism in Britten’s Operas,” which appeared two years later in the volume *Queering the Pitch*. Observations made in the earlier article are given a much richer, more provocative context in the later; the structure of “Eros and Orientalism” is much tighter than “Britten’s Bad Boys,” and the 1994 essay contains some coruscating insights into the sources of Britten’s expropriation of Balinese gamelan sonorities. Only a first-rate historian could have illuminated the composer’s fascination with the gamelan by evoking the music of the Canadian Colin McPhee and the Frenchman Francis Poulenc, both of whom were gay composers as well as friends of Britten.

Of particular interest throughout *Music and Sexuality* is Brett’s acute understanding of the role played by class distinction in the policing—both figurative and literal—of homosexuals in twentieth-century Britain. Brett found himself in a unique position to speak with authority about the British class system. In the course of an affectionate introduction to this book, Susan McClary recalls that “Americans took [Brett’s] English accent and supremely elegant demeanor as signs of an elite background, but his father was a collier and his mother a teacher” (3). Born into these distinctly unenviable circumstances as a British working-class homosexual, Brett later turned them to advantage when, as an American citizen, he focused his sharp eye upon the oppressive milieu from which he himself had escaped to explicate the inner conflicts that drove Britten:

Coming as he did from a cultured middle-class family, the security he undoubtedly felt was accompanied by those other middle-class characteristics, a compulsion to work and a puritan ethic from which he never really wanted to break free . . . The tension between these elements was apparently greater for Britten than it was for the many other twentieth-century composers who shared his homosexual orientation. It was a tension that could not be worked out in the usual ways, because of the puritanical streak that served him so well in other respects—we know that he was horrified by manifestations of gay subculture, and even by the word itself. (110)

That Brett repeatedly engaged directly and without euphemisms with the tragedy of Britten’s repressed life is a testament to his determination to contend with the forces responsible for that repression. By exposing the social prejudices that shaped Britten’s life and work, Brett held up an unflattering mirror to the British society that structured the lives of both the middle-class composer and the working-class musicologist.

While compelled to reveal social truths about Britten’s situation, Brett was, before anything else, a musician. He chose to study Britten’s music not as a pretext to articulate a pro-gay ideology but because he loved it. Brett’s

Current Musicology

detailed and assured knowledge of this music glows throughout these essays. Even when rightly exasperated by Britten's difficult personality, Brett writes of the music with an uncanny sympathy and understanding. One of Brett's most startling achievements was to enable his readers to forgive (or at least show compassion for) the flawed man molded by a hostile society, through an understanding of the music he composed. Thus Brett returns, again and ever again, to the music itself; those who have accused "new" musicologists of failing to engage with the music itself might read these essays with care.

Indeed, the cover of this volume features prominently a picture of Brett as a conductor, and the impression made by this photograph is confirmed on every page, for he brought together a rare combination of elegant scholarship with high accomplishment as a practicing musician. His musical acumen enabled him to evoke Britten's music in a manner at once lucid and sensuous, as in this description of a passage from *The Turn of the Screw*, Miles's song "Malo, malo" from act 1, scene 6:

This concentrated, thematically obsessive tune, with its triadic harp accompaniment and plaintive viola/English horn countermelody, suggests very powerfully the abjection of the boyish masturbator—as if Britten sensed from his vantage point of half a century later exactly the resonances of James's tale. Every rising melodic figure suggesting awakening knowledge is complemented by a downward turn epitomizing abjection. Each occasion Miles and his harp accompaniment coincide on a common note is matched by one when he sings a seventh or ninth to the harp's root; the string of descending sevenths at the end of the third phrase provides a balancing languor to the notably clearer, more positive sounds of the consonant, rising second phrase. (94)

In certain of the later chapters, notably "Keeping the Straight Line Intact? Britten's Relation to Folksong, Purcell, and His English Predecessors," Brett clearly began to lay the foundations for an ongoing project that would have placed Britten's achievement within the broad context of twentieth-century British music history. This move was radical, for many of Britten's admirers have preferred to view him as a cosmopolitan artist of international reputation who remained aloof from the parochial concerns of such countrymen as Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Bridge, Ireland, and Holst. In the course of this particular essay, which first appeared as a CD review in *The Musical Times*, Brett arrives at the startling but logical conclusion that Britten's being asked to arrange four English folksongs for a Faber anthology in 1968 "was surely an acknowledgement of his position as the leading English composer of the folksong movement since the death of Vaughan Williams, and therefore in some way to be accounted the latter's successor as leading national composer" (169). One can only speculate how Brett might have further extended this

insight; certainly he would have broadened and deepened his acquaintance with the music of those English composers who preceded Britten. (Greater familiarity with the work of Vaughan Williams, for example, might have saved Brett from one of his rare howlers, as he erroneously asserts that “folksongs in a piece like *The Lark Ascending* become simply the melodic material of a Western high-art genre known as the ‘tone poem,’” when, in fact, there are no folksongs whatsoever in this unjustly maligned score.) Whatever Brett might have accomplished in this direction would certainly have been as illuminating to readers as it would have been infuriating to Donald Mitchell and all those members of the Aldeburgh “court” who have dedicated their lives to “protecting” Britten’s reputation.

In an eloquent coda to this volume, Jenny Doctor touchingly recalls Brett’s persistence in braving the obstacles he encountered during the course of writing these essays, including impediments placed in his path by the composer’s trustees at Aldeburgh. But Doctor makes the astute observation that “Philip’s infractions against the unsayable affected broader horizons and challenged many more people than the few concerned with the study of Benjamin Britten” (234). The truth of this statement can be proved by considering Brett’s career as a pedagogue, for although he was an inspiring, if demanding, teacher, he left no epigones. How can such disparate musicologists as Robert Fink, Judith Peraino, Elisabeth Le Guin, and Mitchell Morris (to name only a few)—all of whom studied with Brett at the University of California, Berkeley—be pigeonholed as members of a putative “School of Philip Brett”? No, he did not cultivate disciples, but rather sought to liberate his students, his colleagues, his enemies, and his readers all from the stifling constraints of condoned repression and misplaced discretion. By repeatedly committing scandalous infractions against scholarly propriety, Brett threw open a casement that admitted brisk cold air into the stuffy chambers of traditional musicology, sweeping away untenable assumptions and inhibitions. Philip Brett’s example will live on through his teaching, his writing, and, most precious of all, his courage.