Heather Wiebe. 2012. *Britten's Unquiet Pasts: Sound and Memory in Postwar Reconstruction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Britten as a public figure. Britten as a composer of music for children, amateurs, and the church. These are sides of Britten's legacy that have attracted little scholarly attention prior to Heather Wiebe's recent monograph *Britten's Unquiet Pasts: Sound and Memory in Postwar Reconstruction*. More familiar is Britten as a composer of opera and art song, and as a man "at odds with . . . society" (Pears 1983: 152).[1] Although anticipating the Britten centenary by one year, *Britten's Unquiet Pasts* is much in keeping with the spirit of other Britten publications to be released this year, not least Paul Kildea's (2013) biography. What emerges from these new perspectives is a more complex view of Britten, both as an artist whose breadth of work defies easy classification, and as a man with changing and often conflicting impulses towards his envisaged role in society.

Wiebe's study also differentiates itself from much Britten scholarship in its wider historical outlook. As she states at its outset, it is less a study of Britten and his music than of the roles music played in the project of British postwar reconstruction. Britten is not even mentioned until partway through the second paragraph of the introduction, when his works appear as part of an impressive list of source materials, which include, but are by no means limited to, "planning and arts administration documents, journalism, social surveys, public ceremonial, television and radio broadcasting, film, theatre, and literature" (1). Each chapter begins with a rich contextualization of the topic under consideration, through which Wiebe demonstrates Britten's enmeshment in endeavors to rediscover, rebuild, and redefine British society after the war, particularly through invocations of the past. While the ambivalent messages of works like *Gloriana* and the *War Requiem* appear to set them apart from the project of postwar reconstruction, Wiebe demonstrates how they give voice to more widespread doubts about the ability of the past to revivify the present, or for it to be recovered at all.

From a historical point of view, Wiebe focuses on the following events: the Festival of Britain in 1951, the stated goal of which "was to demonstrate to the world the recovery of the United Kingdom from the effect of the war in moral, cultural, spiritual and material fields" (quoted on 4); the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953; and the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral, plans for which began shortly after its destruction in 1940 but were only

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realized in 1962. For readers primarily interested in the life and works of Britten, Wiebe begins with *A Ceremony of Carols* (1942) and ends with the *War Requiem* (1962), which was commissioned for the festival celebrating the consecration of Coventry Cathedral.

Wiebe's bookends are well chosen. The year 1942 not only marked Britten's momentous decision to return to England from America but also saw a fundamental change in the composer's attitude towards the artist's role in society. Early in 1941, Britten published what Wiebe, without exaggeration, describes as "a diatribe not only against the use of folksong as a foundation of English music, but against the idea of a national English music itself" (17). Britten's skepticism about the very idea of community is such that he encased the word in scare quotes. How contrasting this is from the Britten who would later speak of the artist's duty to serve his community (e.g., Britten 1951 and 1962). A year later, the seeds of *Peter Grimes*—the most likely candidate for England's national opera—had been sown. The composer had come to believe that he would only achieve his full potential as an artist if he returned to his native Suffolk. And, most shockingly, on the long sea voyage back to England, he began composing *A Ceremony of Carols*, a gesture towards the English musical past not appreciably different from those he had previously denounced. While Philip Brett (2006: 213–20) has interpreted Britten's about–face in Oedipal terms as an attempt to claim the domain of the previous generation of English composers, Wiebe connects it to broader trends in postwar British art and culture towards a reengagement with the past and the local as opposed to the exclusively modern, urban, and cosmopolitan.

Concluding with the *War Requiem* is fitting, as the work constitutes the composer's last grand public statement, after which his activities became more insularly focused around his community in Aldeburgh. As others have noted, the work's very success, particularly its astonishing LP sales (Kildea 2002: 226–28), was one of the chief motivators for Britten's retreat from public life. Not only was the *War Requiem* the end of a chapter of Britten's life but it constituted the end of "a certain vision of cultural renewal that began during the Second World War, one in which ritual and music were given the task of mediating between an imagined pre–modern Englishness and an all–too–real postwar world, thus resisting the forces of modernization, globalization, and commodification" (Wiebe: 14–5).

The first chapter introduces readers to the postwar rhetoric of cultural renewal. Journalism from the early to mid–1940s testifies to a widespread belief in the importance of the arts at a time of war. Remarkably, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA, which became the Arts Council in 1946) was founded in 1940. The importance of music, in

particular, was singled out in films like Humphrey Jennings's *Listen to Britain* (1942) and Powell and Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), as well as in novels like Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* (1958). Wiebe goes on to discuss the conflicting agendas of those stewarding CEMA and the later Arts Council, and how they changed over time. The aims of democratization and accessibility were at the forefront in its early years, giving way to an increasing focus on London's professional institutions after the war. Simultaneously modern and traditional, Britten's music was a locus of hopes for a new, more egalitarian musical culture, geared more towards active participation than passive consumption. Yet Britten's values were an uneasy fit with those of the Arts Council, considering his disdain for London, his focus on improving the cultural life of smaller communities through the touring of the English Opera Group, and the many occasional works he composed for local churches and schools. Critics called for Britten to take up a more "public" voice, presumably in the form of additional contributions to the grand opera canon. However, following a cue from Imogen Holst, Wiebe argues that it was through these "semi–private" pieces commemorating local institutions that Britten's "idea of a public musical culture was most fully realized" (35).

In Chapter 2, Wiebe contextualizes *A Ceremony of Carols* within the movement that Michael Saler (1999) has termed "medieval modernism." Important earlier manifestations of the modern carol revival include the *Oxford Book of Carols* (1928) and King's College, Cambridge's Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols (begun in 1918). Britten borrowed the ritualized structure of the King's carol service—namely, its framing procession and recession—but rendered his work simultaneously more modern and more medieval (52). Instead of a processional hymn from the nineteenth century, Britten chose a medieval chant and, in contrast to the eclecticism of the King's service, confined his carol selection to medieval sources. The performing forces were also radically stripped down from men, boys, and organ to boys and harp.

The carol was ideal for the postwar renewal project, Wiebe explains, not only because of its theme of rebirth, but also because it was able to "bridge the gaps between high and low, sacred and secular, past and present" (48). A chief means by which this feat was accomplished was through the thematization of the incarnation, the divine on earth—a sharp contrast to Romantic idealism, which posits a strict separation of these two realms (56–7). Wiebe demonstrates how the incarnation is manifest in the texts of the carols Britten chose and how he brought out this theme in his musical settings through word painting and by foregrounding singing as an embodied act. An example is Britten's setting of Christ's descent to earth in "In Freezing Winter Night" to an arpeggio spanning the entire range of the soloist's voice and reaching

down to a "near–impossible low G" (63). Wiebe also observes how the singing style Britten cultivated in his boy performers further enhanced the embodied character of the songs. Britten deliberately avoided boys' choirs in the mold of the King's College Chapel, with their pure, disembodied voices, and instead favored ensembles like the Morriston Boys' Choir (who performed the premiere) and the Wandsworth School Boys' Choir, whose sound had "a conspicuously earthy quality" to it, Wiebe comments, due to the use of chest voice, vibrato, and a "rough" approach to articulation (60). Sadly, most recent recordings do not accord with Britten's desired aesthetic. However, listening to a more conventional Anglican cathedral approach usefully illustrates the ways in which Britten's music forces the boys, willing or not, into their chest voice in songs like "In Freezing Winter Night" and "That Yongë Child." For this reader, Wiebe's careful attention to Britten's foregrounding of the unique qualities of boys' voices and the consequences of the composer's preferences regarding performance practice were some of the highlights of the study.

The postwar Purcell revival is the subject of Chapter 3, where Wiebe examines Britten's realizations of as well as Purcell's influence on *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne* and *Canticle III: Still Falls the Rain*. The side of Purcell that most attracted Britten was not the Purcell of spectacular pageants like *The Fairy Queen* (revived at Covent Garden in 1946) but rather the esoteric and personal Purcell, who can be heard in his devotional songs. Britten's approach to realizing Purcell was distinctly "quirky," in Wiebe's words, even by the standards of Britten's other arranging activities (e.g., his folksong arrangements and *The Beggar's Opera*), themselves classified by the BBC as "experimental," in contrast to more "normal" arrangements by other composers (73–4). To illustrate this, Wiebe examines Britten's arrangement of *Guilty Night* (also known as *Saul and the Witch at Endor*).

Other strands of Wiebe's argument in this chapter are less successfully woven together. At the chapter's beginning and end, she makes reference to the situation for homosexuals in postwar Britain who were finally recognized as part of the community yet were required to keep expressions of their homosexuality out of public view. Wiebe then suggests that "Britten's Purcell arrangements were a tool in the project of finding a public voice, that is, a tool of self–legitimation, and of cultural citizenship" (76). She returns to this point only at the end, at which time it becomes evident that this claim relates to the emotional excessiveness of Purcell, and the private, personal quality of both Purcell's and Britten's works, which nevertheless gain public expression in performance (106). If the queer dimensions to Britten's relationship with Purcell's music were more successfully integrated throughout the chapter, particularly in the discussions of the music itself, this point could have been demonstrated more clearly.

More effective argumentation concerning Purcell's influence on Britten would also have improved the chapter's cogency. Wiebe makes the intriguing claim that Purcell "exerted a strong influence on Britten's style, informing some of the most experimental aspects of his language" (74), and she provides an impressive list of works in which Purcell's influence can be observed (77). Unfortunately, the nature of that influence remains unspecified until much later, first emerging in a quotation of Britten himself describing Purcell's "unfettered rhythms, boldly discordant harmonies, his long soaring melodies without automatic repetitions of 'memorable' phrases, and especially his love of the virtuoso, the operatic, and conscious exploitation of brilliant sounds" (quoted on 87–8). Other Purcellian features Wiebe later identifies include his penchant for mimetic music and long melismas. Unquestionably, the works of Britten she examines in this chapter contain the aforementioned features. It is less clear that they are a direct response to Britten's engagement with Purcell in the 1940s, since these features may be seen in his earlier compositions like *Our Hunting Fathers* (1936). The beginning of "Rats Away!" contains some of the more extravagant melismas in Britten's oeuvre; the mimetic and excessive qualities may be seen in the "Rats!" exclamations and also the repeated "Fie! Fie!" in "Messalina" and the "Whurrrrret!"'s of "Dance of Death."[2] The fact that such features appear in Britten's works before the 1940s does not disprove that they were a result of his engagement with Purcell, but it does raise the question of when that engagement began.

Elizabeth II's Coronation and *Gloriana*, Britten's opera for the occasion, are the subjects of Chapter 4. The ascendency of another Elizabeth to the throne caused many Britons to reflect on the prosperous reign of her predecessor and to reimagine England's future in its image. Wiebe demonstrates how *Gloriana* invoked the rhetoric of "New Elizabethanism" but failed to uphold its more fundamental tenets. In explanations for the poor reception of *Gloriana*, previous commentators have focused on its hybrid character (part coronation pageant and part serious opera) and inaptly chosen plot in light of its occasion. Wiebe argues that the problem was not merely a conflict between generic conventions and political expectations. The manners in which the work invoked the past and represented English identity were both at odds with the values surrounding the Coronation. Britten's gestures to the past, most saliently in Essex's lute song, are not a source of renewal, but are distinctly nostalgic, suggesting that the past is fundamentally unrecoverable. With regard to the work's representation of English identity, Wiebe points to the first scene, in which the Queen defuses tensions between her courtiers through distinctly non–confrontational means:

> In its persistent privileging of pastoral over martial imagery and its emphasis on harmony and consensus rather than individualism and competition, *Gloriana* introduced the alternative notion of a quiet and ordinary mode of national belonging into the heart of the Coronation proceedings, a notion compatible with the new family–like constructions of the Commonwealth, but not with the more masculine and imperial ideal of Englishness encapsulated in New Elizabethanism. (137)

Chapter 5 returns to modern medievalism and focuses on the revival of mystery plays. Britten's contribution to the revival was *Noye's Fludde*, which was based on the Chester Mystery. Mystery revival hit its zenith in the 1950s. The York Mystery Plays, instituted as part of the Festival of Britain in 1951, were the most influential model. In keeping with other iterations of mystery revival, Britten intended *Noye's Fludde* for amateur performers—the vast majority being children—and encouraged active participation by the audience. It was a mixture of newly composed music with borrowings from medieval chant and popular hymns from later eras. Unlike the York Mystery Plays, however, "the central strategy of *Noye's Fludde* was not to transport the listener to an intact medieval world, but, rather, to endow remnants of the past with a new vitality in the present" (172). Specifically, it was music that served to accomplish this feat of reenchantment. Although church attendance was dwindling in the 1950s, most adults at this time had been regular attendees of Sunday school and sent their children there, even if they did not attend church themselves. Thus, the communal singing of familiar hymns jogged powerful memories of childhood in audiences. Yet Wiebe observes undertones of defamiliarization in Britten's idiosyncratic settings of the hymns as well as in the musical exoticism marking moments like the final stanza of "The Spacious Firmament on High," during which Britten borrows characteristic textures and timbres from Balinese gamelan music. Here Wiebe points to yet another meaning of Britten's gamelan topic: in contrast to its association with otherworldly threats and deviant sexualities in his operas, the gamelan in *Noye's Fludde* imparts a "magical quality" to the familiar hymn (182). She also draws interesting connections between Britten's efforts to exoticize the English past and a postwar impulse—the impulse, observed by Jed Esty, to anthropologize local customs in the face of the Empire's decline and find "the kind of cultural integrity it had formerly located in colonized societies" (8).

Readers familiar with the content of Chapters 4 and 5 from earlier publications by Wiebe will be pleased to hear that they have been subtly improved for inclusion in this volume and fit with newly expanded conclusions. This is particularly true of Chapter 5, in which Wiebe extends her contrast of *Noye's Fludde* with Noah Greenberg's 1948 production of *The Play of Daniel* and

Stravinsky's *The Flood* (1962). She also includes an epilogue about Britten's first church parable, *Curlew River* (1964), which represents a defamiliarized, austere, and abstract approach to modern medievalism. These remarks lend additional support to Wiebe's argument that the *War Requiem*, the subject of the final chapter, marked the end of an era for Britten.

Adding to the extant body of literature about the *War Requiem*, Wiebe offers fresh insights regarding the relationship between the work and Coventry Cathedral, highlighting the fact that they were both constructed to function as war memorials. She interprets the oft–remarked conflicts between the *War Requiem*'s heterogeneous performance forces, religious and secular components, and intimate and monumental dimensions in terms of the tensions inherent in the act of commemoration itself, specifically, between public and private expressions of mourning. For instance, the Chorus's performance of "Requiem aeternam" is called into question by the entrance of the tenor soloist singing Wilfred Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth," whose subject is the very "inadequacy of such rituals—the choirs, bells, and prayers the listener has just heard—to assimilate war's reality" (207). Another problem with the genre of the monument, in particular, is its tendency to blend into the landscape and thus fail in its primary purpose, which is to preserve memories of the past. The architect of Coventry's Cathedral attempted to avoid this effect by preserving the wreckage of the old cathedral in the plans for the new one. Britten's music is also overtly concerned with preservation. As Wiebe illustrates, it dramatizes the very process of private, individual experience being transformed into public gestures of memorial in the "Lacrimosa" when the "soldier's expression of mourning is transfigured in the soprano's weeping gesture—and not in an unambiguously positive way . . . Something is preserved . . . but the ephemeral immediacy—the particular content—of the soldier's experience is lost" (216). The *War Requiem* provides an interesting contrast to works examined earlier in the study like *Noye's Fludde* and *A Ceremony of Carols*, in which music serves to forge connections between present and past, divine and earthly realms, high art and popular culture, unproblematically and without conflict. It also testifies to a notable shift in emphasis from the initially optimistic endeavors of renewal to later anxiety–ridden curatorial efforts.

The one topic of Chapter 6 that could have used additional clarification is the subject of monumentality in the wake of the Second World War. Wiebe states that Coventry Cathedral "epitomized the architectural movement of 'new Monumentality,' which gained favor in the US and then in Britain in the early 1940s as a substitute for the style of monumentality associated with the Third Reich" (193). For readers unfamiliar with aesthetic trends in architecture, it would have been helpful if Wiebe had elucidated how

New Monumentality and Coventry Cathedral, in particular, distinguished themselves from "old monumentality." Although Wiebe is generally successful at bringing music and architecture into dialogue in this chapter, the question of how the *War Requiem*'s sonic monumentality relates with these differing conceptions of architectural monumentality was one strand left hanging at the end of her discussion.

Britten's Unquiet Pasts is a valuable contribution not only to Britten studies but also to postwar British history. Especially commendable is how effectively Wiebe integrates the musical and historical aspects of her work. Her discussion of broader cultural issues is consistently grounded in concrete musical illustration through eminently readable and engaging musical–analytical exegeses.

Within Britten studies, it is exciting to have substantive scholarly inquiry directed towards neglected areas of Britten's output; namely, his music for children and amateurs as well as his occasional and educational compositions. It is especially welcome in light of the important place works like *A Ceremony of Carols* occupy in the repertoire of English–speaking choirs and community groups. Wiebe alludes to one of the reasons for this blind spot when she remarks that the transparency of *Noye's Fludde* has left critics "strangely disarmed" when set with the task of approaching it as a scholar (152). This does not appear to be a problem for Wiebe, for not only does she explore these works with the same confidence and rigor that she does *Gloriana* and the *War Requiem*, but her efforts have also succeeded in deepening our understanding of these pieces, as seemingly simple as they are. Likewise, Wiebe provides valuable insights into Britten as an arranger, another aspect of the composer's legacy that deserves further study. Finally, Wiebe's work on *Gloriana* has done much not only to advance our understanding of the reasons behind its poor reception, but also to revivify interest in Britten's undeservedly "slighted child."

Notes

1. Admittedly, Pears's remark was directed at the fictional character Peter Grimes, but the slippage between Grimes's and Britten's alterity was encouraged by both Pears and Britten and has been taken up by commentators and scholars. Tony Palmer's documentary about Britten's life, *A Time There Was* (1979), begins with Leonard Bernstein describing the composer as "a man at odds with the world." See also Philip Brett, "Britten and Grimes," reprinted in Brett 2006.

2. There is a difference in terms of the intended effect of the extravagant vocalizations in *Our Hunting Fathers* and those in works like Britten's settings of Donne. Those in "Rats Away!" for instance are clearly intended to be parodic, in contrast to the sincere expressions of grief and terror one finds in *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*.

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