

A Reappraisal of the Relationship Between Benjamin Britten and Walter Greatorex

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The Authorized Version

That the young Benjamin Britten disliked Walter Greatorex, his school music teacher, is an apparently permanent part of the Britten narrative; speaking, as it does, to the idea that the prodigious teenager's musical persona and compositional output were beyond the comprehension of a provincial and conservative schoolmaster who, in Kildea's memorable phrase, was "emblematic of English philistinism" (Kildea 2013, 45). This paper seeks to rehabilitate Greatorex's reputation, drawing on evidence that presents him as a humane and skillful teacher and as a musician with not only a breadth and depth of talent, but also a lifelong commitment to serve the musical needs of his community: a philosophy that has a certain resonance with Britten's stated views. The thesis is not so much that Greatorex had a demonstrably positive influence on Britten's musical development, though there are unprovable suggestions that he might have been to some extent. Rather, it is to rebut the received understanding that he was an incompetent reactionary whose lack of understanding of Britten's talent caused him to try and suppress the development of the young composer.

A reputation for being reactionary and small-minded that has attached itself to Greatorex is based on two sources. One is a description of Britten's first encounter with Greatorex at the start of the former's time at Gresham's school in 1928, which is an established piece of Britten lore and first appeared in print in Imogen Holst's 1966 biography. The second source, a *prima facie* more reliable one, are Britten's diaries and letters home from his time at Gresham's school.

Holst's biography of Britten was part of a series of composer biographies (other titles included Beethoven by Stanley Sadie and Haydn by C. Robbins Landon) aimed at younger readers. It is in this work that first appears a quote attributed to Greatorex that has become, alas, the best-known thing about him. Holst tells a story that on Britten's first day at Gresham's "a sudden shadow fell over his path and a tall, frowning man says 'so you're the little boy who likes Stravinsky'" (Holst 1966, 22). This narrative has formed the basis of the received wisdom about what the relationship between Britten and Greatorex was like. Although Kildea questions the meaning of this of this encounter and argues a more sympathetic view of Greatorex

than Britten's other biographers (Kildea 2013, 46, Powell 2013, 29). Both Kennedy (1993, 2-13) and Matthews (2003, 11-17) repeat the idea that Greatorex was conservative to the point of philistinism and hampered Britten's development (although Matthews presents another side to the story and reports poet W.H. Auden's high opinion of Greatorex). Carpenter is even stronger in his condemnation, stating that this "tough, domineering schoolmaster" was "determined to discourage him [i.e. Britten] in every way" (Carpenter 1992, 27). The present paper will call into question the accuracy of the report of this encounter and its meaning and significance.

Britten's recorded disdain for and anger at Greatorex in his diaries and letters home need to be understood in the wider context of his schooling and his adolescent personality. Britten's formal education began as a pupil at an old-fashioned dame school run by the Misses Astle in his home town of Lowestoft, England followed by a successful five years at a preparatory school called South Lodge. Unusually for this school, Britten was not a boarder but returned to his family home every evening. He was happy at South Lodge, did well in his studies and excelled at sport. In his final year (1927-8), he was Head Boy, Captain of the first XI cricket team and *Victor Ludorum* (Kildea 2013, 37-41). According to Kildea, this was the happiest time in Britten's life, and his life and work would be influenced by part of him that was "still thirteen" (Kildea 2013, 35); hence, according to Bridcut, his fascination with young people, particularly boys (Bridcut 2006, 5). In September 1928, Britten started at Gresham's School in Norfolk, some fifty miles from his home town. Gresham's was, and still is, a public school in the English sense of the term, which is to say it is private, fee-paying and (typically in the 1920s) with all its students boarding (i.e. living at the school).

When Britten mentioned Greatorex in his letters home from Gresham's, it was to complain and criticize. For example, a letter home on September 23, 1928 describes one of his first piano tutorials (possibly the very first) with Greatorex which clearly upset the boy. For whatever reason, the relationship between teacher and pupil appeared to get off to a very poor start.

Most of the recorded criticisms of Greatorex in the young Britten's diaries and letters are about the teacher's ability as a pianist and organist, and they continued throughout Britten's time at Gresham's. "It looked as if [Mr. Greatorex] was a bad sight reader;" (Mitchell and Reid 2008, 118) "Gog [Greatorex]... sounded as if... had never seen the music before"; (ibid 2008, 117), "His idea of rhythm, logic, tone, or the music is absolutely lacking in sanity" (ibid, 97). By 1930, Britten's view of Greatorex had deteriorated even further: "I really cannot be bothered about him any longer. He ought to have retired 50 years ago or better never have tried to teach music ever" (ibid).

Current Musicology

Walter Greatorex the Teacher

Walter Greatorex was born to a middle-class family in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire in 1877. He spent five years as a chorister at King's College, Cambridge before completing his education at Derby School and St. John's College, Cambridge. He graduated in 1898 and later became a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists. The rest of Greatorex' professional life was spent as a Music Master in boarding schools. He taught at Uppingham from 1901-06, then at Gresham's School in Norfolk from 1911 until his retirement in 1936 (Denman 1950, 249).

Greatorex won the admiration and affection of the boys he taught. On his retirement, the school magazine (*The Gresham*) published kind words and fond reminiscences, and they are revealing about the sort of music program Gresham's had in the 1920s and 1930s (Diggle, date unknown). The poet Stephen Spender wrote the most eloquent tribute to Greatorex's kindness and compassion, describing him as the first adult with whom he formed a friendship (Spender 1951, 333-334). W. H. Auden, as well as admiring Greatorex as an organist, also praised his qualities as a teacher: "what the ideal schoolmaster should be, ready to be a friend and not a beak [archaic slang for a teacher], to give the adolescent all the comfort and stimulus of a personal relationship, without at the same time making any demands for himself in return" (Richards 1988, 251). It seems that many of the boys regarded Greatorex in this positive light, viewing him as a very approachable and compassionate teacher.

It is important to examine the provenance of Greatorex's reported comments to the young Britten about Stravinsky. The source of the story (recorded 28 years after the fact) can only have been Britten himself. Holst was living with Britten and Pears at the Red House in 1966 and working as Britten's secretary and copyist (Carpenter 1992, 311). Her biography of Britten serves its subject in an extremely uncritical way. For example, Eric Crozier had fallen out of favor with Britten and Pears by this time and, despite Crozier being the librettist of *The Little Sweep* (1949) and *St. Nicolas* (1948), he is not mentioned in Holst's biography at all. This not only calls into question Holst's objectivity; it serves to illustrate Britten's implacable lack of forgiveness on occasions. The literature reveals the cliquishness of the Aldeburgh "set" (which had Britten and Pears at its center) and of the "corpses" (i.e. socially and professionally discarded people) that Britten and Pears left in their wake (Carpenter 1992, 321).

There is something about the "Stravinsky" story (as recounted by Holst) that has a mythic quality – the young hero-artist determined to make his way despite the discouragement of the powerful and conservative forces which don't understand his work. Given Britten's stated view on

Romanticism (Britten quoted in Carpenter 1992, 445), it is a surprisingly Romantic image. However, certain elements lack verisimilitude. Britten was an athletic youth approaching his fifteenth birthday when he first came to Gresham's, so describing a "shadow falling over him" suggests a much exaggerated disparity of physical size between him and Greatorex. Furthermore, any teacher who has good relationships with adolescents (as Greatorex very evidently did) would never call one of them a "little boy" to his face.

Even if Britten's remembrance of a 28-year-old conversation is accurate, his apprehension of its meaning may have been entirely mistaken. Kildea suggests that Greatorex' remark about Stravinsky was "perhaps kindly-meant" and Powers offers the suggestion that Britten was not yet "accustomed to the quizzical ways of public-school masters" (Kildea 2013, 45; Powell 2013, 9). In his first days at Gresham's (which were also his first ever days away from home and family), Britten felt vulnerable and unhappy in his new environment. One of his first letters home (September 23, 1928) speaks of nightmares involving the deaths of family members – it is clearly written by a homesick and anxious child (Mitchell and Reid 2008, 97). It is easy to see how a sensitive boy of fourteen in this situation could have interpreted Greatorex's remarks as hostile. It is also easy to see, given the assessment of Britten's character found in much of the literature (for example Carpenter 1992, 375-377), that he could never forgive nor forget this imagined slight. Even if Greatorex was attempting to be avuncular and welcoming, Britten would always remain suspicious of him and always be ready to see the worst and express it in his letters home (Mitchell and Reid 2008, 94-120).

With this background understanding, Britten's criticism of Greatorex in his diaries and letters home could easily be dismissed as adolescent pique in the context of a boy who hated school life and felt oppressed by the bullying and the vulgarity of his peers and by his perception that the school authorities failed to act to right these injustices (Bridcut 2006, 15-18).

At this time, Britten was a composition pupil of Frank Bridge whom he esteemed greatly. His *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* (1937) are evidence of the great affection he felt towards his mentor. He had clearly made a choice about whose advice he would take; advice from others was deeply unwelcome. Additionally, from November 1929, Britten started traveling to London regularly to have piano lessons with Harold Samuel, a pianist of international repute (Schonberg 1963, 409-410) further reinforcing his belief that he was above criticism from a boarding-school Music Master.

Britten's unhappiness and vulnerability during his first year at Gresham's can hardly be over-stated and would have profoundly colored his relationships with those around him and his later recollection of them.

Current Musicology

The fourteen-year-old Britten was deeply homesick and missed his mother's affection deeply; when there was the prospect of her visiting him at school, he wrote "You will come, won't you darling? ... please, please, do!" (14 February, 1929) (Mitchell and Reid 2008, 107). In his letters he often addresses her in terms such as "my darling pet" and "my angelic Mummy" (Mitchell and Reid 2008, 107). Britten could never function properly when he felt insecure. This was true even as an adult when his inner circle at Aldeburgh felt it necessary to shield him from criticism, lest his creativity be upset (Kennedy 1993, 50-60). In this context, it seems clear that, whatever Greatorex's qualities were as a man, a musician, and teacher, Britten was always destined to despise him.

Greatorex would be forever in Britten's mind associated with Gresham's and the unhappiness he felt in his early days there. Britten had nearly the whole of the Lent term of 1929 either in the sanatorium, or at home sick, a stark contrast to the hale athlete at South Lodge (Mitchell and Reid 2008, 94-120). Even though his last year at Gresham's was more successful and even (in parts) enjoyable to Britten, his relationship with Greatorex was never strong (Kildea 2013, 58-62). Institutional education seems not to have suited Britten at all. He never settled at The Royal College of Music, had an ambiguous relationship with Vaughan-Williams (Kildea 2013, 58-62) and detested his composition tutor John Ireland (although Ireland's alcoholic misbehavior could largely account for this (Matthews 2003, 18-25)). Nevertheless, he frequently complained that his studies at the Royal College were a waste of his time (Mitchell and Reid 2008, 138- 314).

Walter Greatorex the Musician

In the 1920s most English boarding schools had a music program that consisted largely of a Chapel choir and instrumental lessons as extras (Walker 2007, 157-199). Gresham's music curriculum seems to have been varied in comparison. The program Greatorex led included organ recitals which were very popular with the boys, original music for the school's theatrical productions, a gramophone record library from which the boys were free to borrow, and chamber music concerts which included works by Beethoven, Brahms and "the moderns" (Diggle, date unknown). Gresham's had a reputation for valuing the arts particularly highly (Kildea 2013, 47) and Greatorex maintained his position as Head of Music successfully for 25 years, which indicates a superior level of professional competence.

Greatorex' predecessor, Geoffrey Shaw (Music Master at Gresham's 1902-1910), was a distinguished organist and liturgical musician and edited hymnbooks with his brother Martin Shaw and with Ralph Vaughan-Williams (Benson, 2002). It was Shaw who introduced plainsong to the

Chapel at Gresham's, a tradition maintained by Greatorex (Mitchell and Reid 2008, 93). This was Britten's first exposure to a musical style which would later form such an important part of works such as *Curlew River* (1964) and *The Prodigal Son* (1968).

What Gresham's music curriculum did not contain were lessons in composition. However, composition was not a formal part of the music curriculum in most English schools until the introduction of the GCSE in 1988 (Salaman 1988, 3-20). There was a widespread perception in early twentieth century Britain that composers were all dead, foreign or both (Blake 1997, 26-75). Not only did Greatorex include "the moderns" in his chamber music concerts, he also programmed an original work by Britten in 1930 (Mitchell and Reid 2008, 119-123).

This performance of Britten's *Bagatelle* for violin, viola and piano at Gresham's on March 1st, 1930, with the composer on viola and Greatorex on piano was a deeply unusual event. Lennox Berkeley was a student at Gresham's a few years before Britten and none of his works were performed there, although he was "not as prolific a composer as the young Britten while at school" (Morris and Rainbow 2014, 270). Schoolboy works by other composers of that generation and class were also unperformed, for example those of Tippett at Fettes (Tippett 1991, 1-20, Soden 2019, 47-51) and Lambert at Christ's Hospital (Lloyd 2014, 27-31). Not only did Greatorex program Britten's trio, he also learned the piano part himself and ensured that the concert was a major school event and reviewed in the school magazine. Characteristically, Britten complained about Greatorex's lack of taste and his playing. He did concede, however, that the two of them with violinist Miss Chapman were "working quite hard on it" four weeks before the recital (Mitchell and Reid 2008, 122-123).

This is by no means the only encouragement Greatorex offered to the young Britten. It was he, as Music Master, who was pivotal to Britten being awarded a music scholarship to Gresham's. It was he who encouraged all the boys in his charge to sing, to play, and to listen to great music. The fact that Britten was of an exceptional talent made it difficult for him to fit into the program, but it did offer him an insight of what a musician might do with performers of disparate abilities.

Even though the best-known thing about Greatorex is that he was the Music Master at Britten's boarding school, there is evidence that throws a wider light on his capacities as a man and as a musician. Nobody has ever claimed that Greatorex was a musician of international stature. He was a music teacher, and practiced within his own community as a composer, conductor, organist, choral specialist, pianist and chamber musician. No recordings of him playing or conducting exist, but the consensus among

his former pupils is that he was a fine musician. The poet W. H. Auden remembered him as one of “England’s best organists” and Auden’s contemporaries had an even higher opinion of Greatorex’s musical prowess (Matthews 2003, 11; Powell 2013, 31). Greatorex was also devoted to Bach’s organ music; the preludes and fugues, and the chorale preludes, which show not only technical aptitude but something of an adventurous taste as these works were not part of most school and church organists’ repertoire at this time (Spender, date unknown). His organ recitals were popular events with the boys (Diggle, date unknown).

His background as a boy chorister steeped him in the Anglican choral tradition. It was also this tradition that attracted his few forays into composition. The hymn tune *Woodlands* (1919) (named after a house at Gresham’s) is Greatorex’ only published musical work (although he was something of a Dickens scholar and published an article in *The Dickensian* (Greatorex 1926, 35). This tune is still used as the school hymn at Gresham’s, to the words *Lift Up Your Hearts*. Its best-known use is as the tune to Bishop Dudley-Smith’s paraphrase of the Magnificat *Tell Out My Soul* (Mayhew 2004). *Woodlands* is a very English piece of music; its striding bass is a device beloved by English composers from Handel to Elgar (Fig. 1). That and its three crotchet anacrusis in the melody, make *Woodlands* a tune reminiscent of Vaughan-William’s *Sine Nomine* (1906) (Fig. 2).

The rise from dominant to tonic after *Woodlands*’ triple anacrusis is emphatic and pleasing in its symmetry. Its short phrases and simple rhythm make it an easy melody for congregational singing, despite some large intervals (including a falling seventh near the end). It is not a masterpiece, but it is *Kapellmeister* music by a composer who knew his craft thoroughly. The fact that it is still very popular (Britain’s 51st most-loved hymn, according to the BBC’s *Songs of Praise* in 2013) (www.bbc.co.uk) is testament to its strength as a hymn tune.

It seems likely that the remainder of Greatorex’s output as a composer has been lost. Nothing exists in the school archives (Larby 2016) and in 2013, Britten’s centenary year, the music staff “searched high and low” and found just one page of manuscript (Waring 2016). Waring’s principal object in his search was Greatorex’s *Benedicite*, which occasioned Britten to compose his Poem of Hate “at W.G.” (www.brittenproject.net). What Waring did discover was the manuscript of *The Spacious Firmament* (Fig. 3)

The following transcription (Fig. 4) has added the words of the first verse of the hymn. Their placement took into account the scansion of the poem and the way in which this text is set in its two best-known tunes (*Creation* by Haydn and *London* by Sheeles) (www.hymnary.org).¹

The immediately striking things about this piece are its long, skillfully

WOODLANDS

Figure 1. *Woodlands* Incipit

SINE NOMINE

Figure 2. *Sine Nomine* Incipit

managed modulating passage to F# major (mm. 4-7), the emphatic use of parallel harmony leading to the climax (m. 10) and, above all, the opening. There are a number of features in the first phrase which, although fairly predictable melodic and harmonic features in this diatonic language are nevertheless unusual in a congregational hymn in the Anglican tradition. These features include the unison anacrusis and the first two chords (V⁶/₃ with a 9-8 suspension followed by Iⁿ 2/4/6). This restless invention continues on the following chord (with its suspended ninth and no root – assuming the chord is a subdominant). The harmony conforms to the norms of its style, but has elements in it which show more inventiveness than a typical entry in a hymnal.

The modulation to F# major is particularly interesting. Greatorex also uses the mediant major to great effect in *Woodlands*, which suggests a certain fondness for this effective harmonic device. An abrupt change to a slightly remote major key is a trope found in composers as far back



Figure 3. *The Spacious Firmament*

as Beethoven (for example the change from Ab to C major in the second movement of the Fifth Symphony) and Britten was very fond of using a similar device in moments of sudden light. Britten's harmonic language was far more advanced than Greatorex's, nevertheless, the brightness of a sudden major mediant chord is something of a Britten fingerprint.

The Spacious Firmament

Walter Greatorex

$\text{♩} = 120$

The spa - cious fir - ma - ment on high, with all the blue e - there - al sky, and

span - gled heav'ns a shin - ing frame, their great O - rig - i - nal pro - claim. Th'un -

wea - ried sun from day to day does his Cre - a - tor's power dis - play, and pu - blich -

es to e - very land the work of an al - migh - ty hand.

Figure 4. *The Spacious Firmament* (transcribed)

The most famous instances in Britten's output are in the *Dawn Interlude in Peter Grimes* (Britten 1945, 28-29) and the resolution to F major that occurs three times in the *War Requiem*, including at the very end (Britten 1962, 238).

Current Musicology

To claim that this rhetoric is purely an influence of Greatorex the composer would be overstating the case to a huge degree. Nevertheless, Greatorex's two surviving compositions contain prominent examples of what was to become one of Britten's favorite harmonic devices. This may have, possibly unconsciously, made a positive impact on his developing musical imagination.

The Spacious Firmament shows two other ways in which a possible influence on Britten's later career may be discerned. The first is that this may well have been Britten's introduction to this text (by Addison) which he used so memorably in the finale of *Noye's Fludde* (1958) (using the music of Thomas Tallis). Although the date of Greatorex's composition is uncertain, these hymn words were not widely known in the 1920s and 1930s (www.hymnary.org) and that Greatorex's setting was Britten's first encounter with them is plausible.

Walter Greatorex the Role Model

The final way in which this relationship is misunderstood is because it could be seen to be formative on Britten's development as a composer for children and as a composer who served his society. At South Lodge, there was no music at all apart from some singing on the last day of term (Britten, 1968). Britten had private instrumental tuition at this time and began composition lessons with Frank Bridge in 1927 (Carpenter 1992, 16). However, in Greatorex, Britten first encountered a musician (composer, conductor, instrumentalist) who was dedicated to serving a community in precisely the way that Britten later sought to do (Britten 1965, 16-25), although Greatorex's work was on a much smaller scale.

The manuscript of *The Spacious Firmament* has the subscription "Howson's House Copy." This suggests that a copy was made for each of the houses and all the boys had the opportunity to learn this hymn. This is full participation by a community in new music. To be sure, it is not on a level of sophistication encountered in Britten's works, but this is a difference of degree not of fundamental nature. Here is a clear example of Greatorex modeling the sort of musician Britten would become.

Greatorex spent his life ensuring that music was an important and valued part of a community, that as many people were included and involved as possible, and that he was useful to that community by providing the music it needed (Denman 1950, 249). It was Greatorex's inclusiveness in music-making and his clear vision of himself as a musical servant to his entire community that showed Britten a model for what a nationally-famous composer-conductor might mean to his country.

"Until the 19th century, the composer was the servant of society... [then]

composers began to blow up their egos... Now the artist is the glorified mouthpiece of God... I believe in the reverse of that. I believe in the artist serving society. It is better to be a bad composer writing for society than to be a bad composer writing against it. At least your work can be of some use" (Britten quoted in Carpenter 1992, 445).

These views are central to Britten's philosophy of music and his ideas on what a musician was for. He was the first great composer to create a substantial body of original work for children and young people to perform (Kennedy 1993, 201-205). Moreover, this body of work is poly-technical in the sense that the pieces have parts for professional musicians and musically untrained children at the same time. These three central points of Britten's artistic make-up – his empathy with children and young people, his inclusive poly-technicality, and his need to be useful to his society – are all ideas whose seed could well have been planted at Gresham's. It was here that, for three years, he saw in Greatorex a musician whose core purpose was to be useful to his society (albeit a small and rarified society), to engage with youth and to encourage participation through poly-technicality. Even though there was a "mutual suspicion" between them, the older musician's practice was a prototype for Britten's, but on a much smaller scale (Mitchell and Reid 2008, 1285).

Greatorex's community was a school and his musical practice rarely extended beyond that. There were occasions in Britten's adult life where the musical community he was serving was also a school (*Friday Afternoons* (1936) and *St. Nicolas* (1948), for example). For Britten, there were concentric layers of community, all of which he sought to serve as an artist. Beyond recognizable groups for whom he wrote works like church communities (*Rejoice in the Lamb* (1943)) and civic communities (*Welcome Ode* (1976)), there was the wider circle of his beloved Aldeburgh Festival and the English Opera Group. Wider again, there was the national community that Britten served as de facto national composer with major pieces such as *Gloriana* (1953) and *War Requiem* (1963).

The nearest thing to a manifesto Britten ever produced was an address he delivered on receiving the Aspen Award in 1964. In it, he sets out a vision of a composer as a servant of society whose music must "offer to my fellow-men music which may inspire them or comfort them, which may touch or entertain them" (Britten 1965, 12). He stresses the need for the practical in music-making: "Music... does not exist until it is performed", and he dismissed snobbery and academic criticism. He goes on to say, "I want my music to be of use to people, to please them, to enhance their lives. I do not write for posterity" (1965, 13). In the light of Britten's poly-technical works, such as *St. Nicolas* (1948) and *Noye's Fludde* (1958), the

sincerity of these words is quite clear.

These remarks could also serve as a mission statement for Greatorex's job at Gresham's. Although Britten's public was, in its largest manifestation, a nation and Greatorex's was a school, they shared a philosophy of what music is for and what a musician is for. It may be in modeling this practical and inclusive approach to music that Greatorex had his greatest influence on Britten. Despite Britten's affection for Bridge and Samuel, and despite the very great deal they taught him, it was Greatorex, and no one else, who showed him how to be a musician that serves the needs of his society, and, in this light, his influence on Britten's philosophy and practice of music needs to be re-evaluated.

Notes

¹ http://www.hymnary.org/text/the_spacious_firmament_on_high (accessed 4th October 2017) also tracks the hymn's popularity over the years by charting the percentage of hymnals in which it was published. Woodlands, for example, was published in 100% of the hymnals surveyed in the early 1980s).

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