

## The Gift He Gave Us: How W. H. Auden’s Influence Shaped Benjamin Britten into England’s Next Henry Purcell

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The impact different friendships and relationships have on a person is profoundly deep, often reaching much farther than it seems from the surface. The history of Western music is no exception—the pages of textbooks are littered with famous pairs such as Mozart and Du Ponte and Rogers and Hammerstein. In the realm of twentieth-century opera, Benjamin Britten holds the title as “by far the most successful in terms of gaining more than just a toe-hold in the current opera repertory,” effectively challenging the shadow of the nineteenth-century golden age of opera.<sup>1</sup> Part of this legacy is due to Britten’s ability to write extremely well for voice in an accessible manner for his audience, but he also partnered with excellent librettists, displaying the composer’s command of text setting. While Britten possessed a brilliant mind, he looked outward to others for inspiration, both those who had come before him, like Henry Purcell, and his peers, like his life-long partner, Peter Pears, and the poet, Wystan H. Auden. To become the great English composer he is known to be, Britten needed to have been impacted by these different relationships. Without Wystan H. Auden’s influence on and collaboration with Benjamin Britten, the composer would not have developed as deep an appreciation for poetry within music and an awareness of the

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<sup>1</sup> Halliwell, 87.

*Musical Offerings* 15, no. 2 (2024): 69–85.

ISSN 2330-8206 (print); ISSN 2167-3799 (online)

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challenges of text setting. Consequently, Britten emulated hallmarks of Purcell, revitalizing tradition and asserting himself into the canon of Western music.

Britten and Auden first were introduced to each other under innocuous, coincidental circumstances. In 1935, they both were hired by the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit, Britten to provide film score music, Auden to provide narration for documentary films, and they met officially at the Downs School in England on July 5, 1935.<sup>2</sup> While Auden was beginning to establish himself in his career at this point, Britten had newly graduated from the Royal College of Music and was essentially unknown. Both men instantly respected each other's talent and tenacity for their respective crafts. Matthew Carlson comments, "[Auden's] encounter with a young composer [Britten] whose technical gifts and attitude toward professionalism were comparable to his own must have inspired him."<sup>3</sup> In an interview later in his life, Auden reflected upon their first meeting, saying, "What immediately struck me about Britten the composer, as someone whose medium was language, was his extraordinary musical sensitivity in relation to the English language....Here at last was a composer who could set the language without undue distortion."<sup>4</sup> It is not a stretch to surmise the same sentiments resounded within Britten, as he recorded in his diary later that week, "We [talked] over matters for films with Wystan Auden....Auden is the most amazing man, a very brilliant and attractive personality."<sup>5</sup> Britten and Auden were vastly different in temperament and lifestyle; Britten was introverted, quiet, and studious, while Auden was gregarious, domineering, and acerbic. However, from their very first collaboration, it was clear that "both

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<sup>2</sup> Emmons, 52.

<sup>3</sup> Carlson, 413.

<sup>4</sup> Auden in Emmons, 57.

<sup>5</sup> Britten in Emmons, 52.

men were in mutual awe of something they did have in common, an astonishing ability to work with speed and brilliance at their chosen art.”<sup>6</sup>

Through the GPO Film Unit, Britten and Auden worked together on smaller projects—the documentary films *Coal Face*, *Night Mail*, and *The Way to the Sea*—gradually becoming better friends and collaborators along the way. Auden introduced Britten to more poetry and political opinions, and Britten opened Auden’s eyes to the process of musical composition. As Auden’s personality was naturally domineering and insistent, he tended to “assemble his friends as if they were a pack of creative playing cards: the Poet (himself), the Novelist (Christopher Isherwood), and so on. Since ‘the Composer’ had until recently been a vacancy unfilled, he had been delighted to welcome Britten in the group,” which he did by inviting Britten to live in a house he shared with Isherwood and others.<sup>7</sup> Suddenly being in close proximity to such dynamic figures, Britten underwent an awakening of sorts, becoming aware of different political beliefs and social agendas supported by his new friends. Because he was only twenty-two years old, his personal values were “largely unreconstructed” and seemed to Auden “ripe for conversion.”<sup>8</sup> He began to distance himself from the Anglican faith of his mother.<sup>9</sup>

In 1936, two important things happened in Britten’s life: Britten officially parted ways with Christianity, and he collaborated with Auden on *Our Hunting Fathers*, a symphonic song cycle for high voice and orchestra.<sup>10</sup> “*Fathers* was the first of a series of Auden collaborations and

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<sup>6</sup> Powell, 96.

<sup>7</sup> Powell, 107.

<sup>8</sup> Powell, 107.

<sup>9</sup> Allen in Rupprecht, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Rupprecht, 21.

among Britten's vocal works...it is the first to clearly explore the psycho-dramatic topic of 'the war within' that would be so central to his subsequent art."<sup>11</sup> *Fathers* was an extremely pivotal work in Britten's life: "it was his first song-cycle, his first score for full orchestra and his first collaboration (outside the documentary film studio) with Auden; what must have seemed still more auspicious to the young composer, this was his first important commission."<sup>12</sup> Auden only wrote the text to the first and last songs of the set, but personally compiled the rest of the poems; "[his] compilation of texts was not only the stimulus to virtuosity but a prickly goad to [the] tender social conscience [of Britten]."<sup>13</sup> Stephen Arthur Allen reflects, "*Our Hunting Fathers* is the first of Britten's secular liturgical dramas: a procession toward and a recession from a central death event...and a rejection of Christian charity in order to obtain the pride of aesthetic artistic depth. Who but Auden could be the instigator?"<sup>14</sup> The success of *Fathers* prompted the two artists to continue to collaborate, even though Britten privately wrote in his diary that Auden's intellectual dominance aroused both admiration and oppression in him.<sup>15</sup> Britten and Auden went on to create *On This Island*, another song cycle, as well as a few other art songs. They only collaborated on one opera together, which was *Paul Bunyan*, written during both of their brief residencies in America. However, *Paul Bunyan* was not received favorably by critics, and Britten would not consent to revisit it until 1976.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Rupprecht, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Evans, 68–69.

<sup>13</sup> Evans, 69.

<sup>14</sup> Allen in Rupprecht, 26.

<sup>15</sup> Porter in Palmer, 283.

<sup>16</sup> Emmons, 63.

Auden underwent a spiritual awakening that directed him in the opposite path of Britten, converting to Christianity. He then wrote “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio,” specifically for Britten to set to music; however, Britten only set part of it to music before declaring the text to be too unwieldy to work as an oratorio, and he sent it back to Auden for revisions, which Auden refused to execute.<sup>17</sup> After this disagreement, the friendship between Britten and Auden began to cool, and the two never again collaborated on a project, remaining distant and grudging admirers of each other’s successes. Their rift, never repaired, was deeply regretted by both men. Even though their initial attempt together at opera was not a success, *Paul Bunyan* served as the drawing board for future individual success. Britten went on to compose his operatic masterpiece, *Peter Grimes*, and Auden collaborated with Stravinsky to write the libretto for *The Rake’s Progress*; both of these works are credited to display the full genius and artistic maturity of both men.<sup>18</sup> The influence Britten and Auden had on each other is undeniable. Throughout Britten’s career, Peter Porter comments on how “clarity, unexpectedness, a fondness for litanies, aphoristic brevity, and a predominant enthusiasm for the crisp and real are all qualities in Britten’s vocal music, and in Auden’s poetry and his productions as an anthologist.”<sup>19</sup> Britten himself declared that “Auden is in all my operas.”<sup>20</sup>

Auden encouraged and broadened Britten’s interest in poetry, which later infused his music with a more human and speculative feeling. Many of England’s great artistic contributions have come about in the form of poetry; figures such as William Shakespeare and John Donne spring to

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<sup>17</sup> Emmons, 66-67.

<sup>18</sup> Carlson, 428.

<sup>19</sup> Porter in Palmer, 283.

<sup>20</sup> Britten in Rupprecht, 21.

mind. Following in the tradition of great English artists, such as Henry Purcell, Britten's musical works are characterized by an infusion of poetic feeling, whether they are setting poetry to music or are instrumental.<sup>21</sup> While Britten enjoyed poetry as well as any other layman before meeting Auden, "Auden broadened Britten's horizons by encouraging Britten to read poetry and become more aware of political events."<sup>22</sup> Auden introduced Britten not only to poetry written by himself and his contemporaries, but also to classics such as Donne and Michelangelo.<sup>23</sup> Britten's 1945 song cycle, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, was composed of Donne sonnets in reaction to Auden's influence. Britten said, "Auden got us [Britten and Peter Pears<sup>24</sup>] to take Donne seriously,"<sup>25</sup> and later admitted in a 1960 BBC interview:

The person, I think, who developed my love [of poetry] was the poet, Auden...we collaborated over music and verse for a film, and he had an enormous influence on me for quite a considerable period. He showed me many things. I remember, for instance, it was he who introduced me to the works of Rimbaud, who was only a name to me then; and he showed me the different periods in verse. I remember he showed me Chaucer for the first time. I'd always imagined that was a kind of foreign language, but as he read it, which was very well, I understood almost immediately what is meant, and I find now that it isn't so difficult to read—one must just

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<sup>21</sup> Carlson, 272-3.

<sup>22</sup> Emmons, 53.

<sup>23</sup> White, 32-33.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Pears was a famous tenor and Britten's lifelong partner. Many first-hand sources came from Pears' own collection from his time living with Britten.

<sup>25</sup> Britten in Emmons, 53.

have confidence and read ahead and then the meaning comes very strongly, very easily.<sup>26</sup>

Auden's influence on Britten in the realm of poetry cannot be overstated. As Porter comments in Palmer, "not since the days when musicians and poet were the same person has there been a great composer whose art is as profoundly bound up with words as [Britten]."<sup>27</sup> The time that Porter references here is the medieval era of composition, where music served first and foremost as the vehicle to text expression—the words themselves, often liturgical in function, were the most important part of the composition. Porter continues to comment, "Musical composition up to Josquin is, despite the growth of instrumental invention, a matter of sung notes, usually in the service of the Church. Notes need syllables; syllables come in words."<sup>28</sup> While the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries rejected this idea in favor for the emotional expression of instrumental music, Britten in the twentieth century returned to this older idea of music as primarily conveyor of words. While Britten himself elevated the role of music and did not downplay his own melodic and harmonic contributions to the total art, he emulated this return to medieval musical ideals by being extremely sensitive to what texts he decided to set. Consequently, "the whole corpus of Britten's work is informed by a deeply poetical feeling. ...What poets have prefigured in words, he has reworked in music.... By fertilizing his musical mind in poetry, Britten gets back to the unfractured sensibility of the pre-classical past (that is, music before Purcell)."<sup>29</sup> Through his poetical disposition, Britten brought about the reunion of England's brilliance of poetry and music arguably for the first time since Purcell,

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<sup>26</sup> Britten in Emmons, 53–54.

<sup>27</sup> Porter in Palmer, 271.

<sup>28</sup> Porter in Palmer, 271.

<sup>29</sup> Porter in Palmer, 272.

combining the sensibilities of words and harmony to best convey the themes and ideas of his compositions.<sup>30</sup>

Britten's music embodies a general feeling of poetic cadence, a characteristic evident in his instrumental works, but even more so in his vocal works. Britten's setting of John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* is a particularly apt example. Donne's poetry is rich with poetic devices and imagery; one example is his Holy Sonnet 14, "Batter My Heart, Three Person'd God," in which the speaker passionately begs the Lord to bring him to Himself, in a forceful and almost seemingly erotic seduction. The juxtaposition of such a tender, poignant faith crisis with the forceful alliterative verbs calling for "break, blow, burn," and other strong action words creates a unique and emotional cry for mercy.<sup>31</sup> When Britten set this poem to music, he emulated many of Donne's poetic devices on a musical plane, attempting successfully to match the imagery and shifting moods of Donne's poetry with his music. In this way, the music "show[s] the listener how poetical Donne is, and [the music] underline[s] that in linking itself to poetry music may be returning to its true home."<sup>32</sup>

As Britten's appreciation for the beauty of poetry deepened, his music began to take on similar characteristics to the defining features of poetry Auden approved and emulated. Britten's collaboration with Auden, although brief, benefitted greatly from the poet's input, as Auden specifically wanted the words of his poems to not fade into the background, covered in sound, but instead "sought a theatrically viable function for his poetry."<sup>33</sup> This emphasis of searching for the best way to communicate a larger,

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<sup>30</sup> Porter in Palmer, 280.

<sup>31</sup> Donne, *Holy Sonnet 14*.

<sup>32</sup> Porter in Palmer, 274.

<sup>33</sup> Carlson, 413.

broader theme seeped into Britten's life, making Arnold Whittall's description of Britten's style of opera composition an equally apt description of Auden's poetry: "His concern was not to find the best way in which to be novel, but to discover the form best suited to dealing with the themes which mattered most to him, and offering the greatest scope for the deployment of his preferred techniques."<sup>34</sup> In this way, Britten used the concepts Auden taught him in the realm of poetry to discover a different and expressive way to communicate in his music.

Auden's unconventional use of the English language provided a fertile training ground to awaken Britten to the challenges of effective text setting. When Britten's vocal music is studied today, it is clear that the composer was an "unrivalled genius at word-setting," illustrated by masterful handling of complicated phrases that appear at first glance to be unsingable.<sup>35</sup> In large part due to Britten's early collaboration with Auden's own unwieldy poetry, the composer found himself well equipped to traverse the challenges of marrying words with music in a technical sense. Auden's poetry was unique in its own way, presenting a number of challenges because of its clunky flow, idiosyncratic tone, and spontaneous emotional content. Similar to Auden's dynamic personality, his poetry was temperamental, unexpected, crisp and sharp, somewhat bipolar, and, as Peter Pears put it, "scratchy and definitely *un-bel-canto*."<sup>36</sup> His works were known for "objectivity and clinical detachment."<sup>37</sup> Auden's works in the 1930s mostly contained a political—often communist—agenda, as he sought to use his platform as a poet to influence those around him, often preaching at his readers as a sort of "lunatic

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<sup>34</sup> Whittall in Carlson, 429.

<sup>35</sup> Halliwell, 87.

<sup>36</sup> Pears in Mitchell, 63.

<sup>37</sup> Emmons, 94.

clergyman.”<sup>38</sup> One example is “The Cultural Presupposition,” in which Auden argues that the cultural presupposition is that, unlike animals who cannot reason with the future, man defends himself from the inevitability of death and destruction in life with art, entertainment, sports, and other things that are ultimately meaningless.<sup>39</sup>

One of his self-titled poems, “My second thoughts condemn,” is particularly exemplary of Auden’s typical tone. This three-stanza poem passionately articulates the thoughts of a lovesick man late into the night struggling with how to articulate his emotion and commitment to the object of his desire. Auden concludes with “Tempus fugit. Quite. / So finish up your drink. / All flesh is grass. It is. / But who on earth can think / With heavy heart or light / Of what will come of this?”<sup>40</sup> These lines are rough in the sense of poetic cadence and meter. To set these to music in a way that still allowed for a singable tone would be quite the challenge, and Auden’s poetry often defied easy subduing.

Britten was able to work closely with Auden on setting this temperamental poetry to music in their first song cycle, *Our Hunting Fathers*. Auden began the song cycle with a Prologue he later republished under the title “The Creatures,” a poem that begins with the ambiguous phrase, “They are our past and our future: the poles between which our desire unceasingly is discharged.”<sup>41</sup> The poem continues to paint images of an ambiguous, never expressly named “they” in a series of “pithy, intellectual images and ideas.”<sup>42</sup> “The Creatures” has developed a reputation for itself as being vague and difficult to understand as a result of this

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<sup>38</sup> Emmons, 99.

<sup>39</sup> Auden, 46-47.

<sup>40</sup> Auden, 216.

<sup>41</sup> Auden, 133.

<sup>42</sup> Emmons, 108-109.

writing style. Monroe K. Spears comments generously, “The prologue...is in prose, somewhat oracular and riddling, but providing in each sentence an image or theme which can be rendered in musical terms.”<sup>43</sup> Britten writes the accompaniment correspondingly, setting the intellectually dense “Prologue” in a recitative style, allowing the melodic line to more closely follow the cadence of the prose.<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, there is relatively little conflict between the orchestral texture and the text of the vocal line. In his Norwich program notes for the “Prologue,” Britten wrote, “The words are set in a natural recitative fashion for the voice—supported by simple chords for the full orchestra. At ‘O pride so hostile to our charity’ the strings introduce a phrase which receives considerable prominence in each subsequent movement.”<sup>45</sup> This use of a motivic link between each movement helps to chain together pieces from the cycle. Furthermore, Britten emphasizes important words and syllables through using higher pitches, longer durations, louder dynamics, and appropriate accents, attempting to make Auden’s text more accessible to the listener.<sup>46</sup>

Some scholars have debated whether any of Auden’s texts were technically settable due to standards other composers have set; Whittall proposed that Auden’s satirical, mocking libretto for the operetta *Paul Bunyan* drove Britten away from further collaboration, saying, “like most opera composers, he was happiest and most successful with librettos that did not in themselves aspire to the condition of Art.”<sup>47</sup> Auden wrote “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio” specifically for Britten to set to music; however, Britten was only able to set two short excerpts of the work

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<sup>43</sup> Spears in Emmons, 110.

<sup>44</sup> Emmons, 205.

<sup>45</sup> Britten in Emmons, 207–208.

<sup>46</sup> Emmons, 212.

<sup>47</sup> Whittall in Carlson, 427.

to music due to the Oratorio's unwieldy use of language, extreme length, and almost obtuse density. Britten admitted to Auden and their mutual friend, Elizabeth Mayer, "I shall have to be an older and better composer before I get round to the Oratorio," and regrettably for music history, Britten never became old enough to set it.<sup>48</sup> However, the work Britten did along with Auden provided a fertile ground for the composer to draw from later in his career, particularly in his opera, *Peter Grimes*.

Many musical and literary scholars have lamented the rift between the two men that prevented them from collaborating in their respective periods of maturity. Unfortunately, Auden's verbose writing, stubborn personality, and physical move to America did not lend themselves well to collaboration. As Britten began to distance himself from the domineering personality of Auden, the space allowed for the composer to flourish and attain his own individual voice for which he became famous. Still, Stephen Spender laments, "the unwritten masterpiece of the century is the collaboration between Auden and Benjamin Britten. That ought to have been written and I think they both knew it ought to have been written."<sup>49</sup> Peter Evans echoes this thought, adding:

In the light of the libretti Auden wrote later for Stravinsky and Henze, one easily regrets that Britten's early collaboration foundered [in *Paul Bunyan*], yet it may be that just that obsessive restriction of focus which made possible the composer's strongest dramatic achievements, in *Budd* or *The Screw* for instance, would have been less certainly

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<sup>48</sup> Britten in Carlson, 427.

<sup>49</sup> Spender in Carlson, 428.

maintained had he continued in partnership with so mercurially brilliant a talent.<sup>50</sup>

The facts are that Britten and Auden's large-scale collaborations were not as successful as their later partnerships with other artists. Peter Porter summarizes this thought by saying, "*The Rake's Progress* shows what Auden could achieve when he served a composer of commanding intellect, and Britten, post-*Grimes*, might have received from him a superb opera book. It is, alas, empty conjecture."<sup>51</sup> That being said, the influence the two men had on one another lasted far longer than their brief working relationship. The collaboration of Britten and Auden was incredibly important to the development of both artists, especially in propelling Britten closer to Purcellian traits.

Throughout his life and beyond, Benjamin Britten has often been implicitly compared to Henry Purcell. While in music school, Britten's teachers honed in on the Tudor era of English music; however, Britten was drawn to Purcell over Tallis and Byrd due to Purcell's tendency to compose for words, building mood and tone to support the text.<sup>52</sup> As a result, Britten identified several aspects of Purcell's compositional style that he wished to emulate. Britten found in Purcell "an earlier English composer of like melodic mind, going right back to the primal nature of song as sung melody, melody that is frequently self-sufficient in thematic material, harmony and rhythm."<sup>53</sup> Purcell composed specifically for the words he was setting to music, choosing to craft his musical choices around his lyrics, a trait Britten emulated especially while learning how to set text through

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<sup>50</sup> Evans, 97.

<sup>51</sup> Porter in Palmer, 284.

<sup>52</sup> Porter in Palmer, 157.

<sup>53</sup> Banfield in Emmons, 192.

Auden's poetry. Purcell also favored dissonance over the smooth harmonic devices utilized by Tallis and Byrd, another harmonic feature that Britten found interesting and worth copying.<sup>54</sup> Especially in retrospect, Britten appears to be the perfect modern-day Purcell, another modernist in his day driven by a strong devotion to text setting, poetic cadence, and vocal line. And while Britten looked to Purcell for inspiration, it was Auden's influence that awakened the composer to harnessing that inspiration for his own musicality and career.

Andrew Porter comments, "Britten has long seemed to me one of three composers—the others being Purcell and Virgil Thomson—who set English words with so delicate understanding of musical values that even the most familiar lines, once heard conjoined to their music, are thereafter remembered inseparably from it."<sup>55</sup> Without Auden's influence, Britten would not have so finely tuned his craft of text setting to aspire to emulate Purcell in this way. Britten's *Holy Sonnets of John Donne* song cycle show "a deep engagement with the Purcellian vocal line," but Britten found the poetry of Donne compelling as a direct result of his friendship with Auden.<sup>56</sup> Because of Auden's tutelage in poetry, Britten brought back the tradition of Purcell's musical and poetical marriage in his own composition, forging a brilliant musical language.<sup>57</sup>

People have an interesting way of influencing those around them without consciously knowing. Wystan H. Auden was a dynamic figure who desired to bring together his friends and peers, allowing them all to learn from each other. Because of a chance encounter, Benjamin Britten became friends with

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<sup>54</sup> Messenger, 157.

<sup>55</sup> Porter in Emmons, 191.

<sup>56</sup> Messenger, 157.

<sup>57</sup> Porter in Palmer, 272.

the man who, in the very foundational years of their careers, helped launch him to greater artistic heights. Auden's direct influence on developing Britten's love of poetry and skill of text setting are the very aspects that Britten admired of Purcell's compositions. That, coupled with Britten's innate love for the voice and expertise in writing for the voice, created the perfect atmosphere for another great British composer to step into the pages of history. Without Auden, Britten would not have so readily been able to fill the shoes of Purcell. This collaboration, past into present, is a gift all three men gave the world of music.

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