



Benjamin Britten by Enid Slater (Slater Estate)
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Benjamin Britten's *Temporal Variations* An Enigma Explored: Part One

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*In this first of two articles, **George Caird** studies the background to Benjamin Britten's Temporal Variations, the composer's association with the poet W.H. Auden and the poet and playwright Montagu Slater, and other key influences on the creation of this intriguing work.*

On 15 December 1936, a concert at Wigmore Hall in London included the first performance of Benjamin Britten's *Temporal Suite* for oboe and piano played by the oboist **Natalie Caine** accompanied by the promoter of the concert, Adolph Hallis. The evening also included Britten's *Two Ballads*, vocal duets on words by W.H. Auden and Montagu Slater, as well as works by Palestrina, Purcell, Fauré, Hindemith, Pierre Maurice, Jacques-Dalcroze and Bernard Schulé. This was the first Hallis Concert in a series that lasted three years, but the only one that featured Britten's music.¹ It was nevertheless to prove to be a key moment in the composer's career. Two of his works were premiered that night, both with intriguing stories to tell and especially the work for oboe and piano.

From its opening Theme, the *Temporal Suite* (now known as *Temporal Variations*), has an air of significance to it. Based on the opening motif of a rising semitone and a rising minor sixth, Britten set out the kernel of a remarkable composition that would eventually be seen to resonate with other works by the composer and with wider themes that occupied the composer's mind throughout his life:

Ex.1

1 **Andante rubato**

pp espress. *ten.*

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The creation of the *Temporal Suite* can be traced to the previous year, 1935, when Britten responded to a request from the oboist **Sylvia Spencer** to write what we now

know as *Two Insect Pieces*.² As recorded in the composer's diary entries, these were written between the 5 and the 15 April. However the oboist must have been pestering him in some way to have caused a letter to her from the composer on 17 April, 1935:

Of course you are nothing but a waster of other people's valuable time. Talk of dashing a piece off in five minutes! I have spent at least three weeks worrying (at) the blessed thing—with the result that I have written two insect pieces—sketched three more—sketched the scoring for accompaniment of string orchestra. In fact out of a simple little piece for oboe & piano has grown (or is growing) a large and elaborate suite for oboe & strings. It is all your fault, of course; I didn't want to write the blessed thing—I am supposed to be (a) finishing a string quartet (b) finishing a violin & piano suite (c) writing an orchestral work for Norwich Festival 1936 (d) writing an orchestral work for Robert Mayer.....³

There could have been a mismatch of intentions at the heart of this letter as **Sarah Francis** has pointed out that Spencer's request to write the *Insect Pieces* was in order to play them in concerts for children.⁴ Britten worked on the pieces with Spencer soon afterwards, writing '3.0 to Brechin Place to rehearse Grasshopper & Wasp with Sylvia Spencer—she is fine & I am pleased with the little pieces'.⁵ However the only known performance at that time of one of the pieces was when the Sylvan Trio played three 'insect pieces' at a Children's Day Concert in the Leith Hill Musical Festival on 2 May 1935. John Francis (flute) played Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Flight of the Bumble Bee*, Sylvia Spencer (oboe) played Britten's *The Grasshopper* and Millicent Silver (piano) played Gordon Jacob's *The Bluebottle*.⁶ This was probably the concert that Britten was referring to in his letter when he wrote: 'Choose which you want to do at Peckham or Clapham or wherever you are playing. If you choose 'Grasshopper' you might look at the other sometime—because I shall want you to play the whole lot sometime if you will'.⁷ There may have been more performances but a contemporary performance of *The Wasp* has yet to be traced.

There then appears to have been no further development until the 15 August 1935 when Britten wrote in his diary: 'Try & work at Oboe Suite in morning but no good'. And after this date, nothing more is known of this project: no evidence has come to light of the three further insect pieces mentioned in Britten's letter, there is no record of the sketched scoring for strings and any further reference to such a work has yet to be found. But the fact that within a year of this letter Britten was turning his attention

to writing for the oboe again and that this work turned into the *Temporal Variations* is surely more than coincidence.

The commission of the *Temporal Suite* came from the pianist and composer Adolph Hallis whom Britten had first met in October 1935 at the house of the publisher, Alan Frank. Hallis and Britten met again in January 1936, seemingly at the suggestion of Kenneth Wright, Assistant Director of Music at the BBC, ‘to talk over our light 2 piano-duets for B.B.C.’⁸ This collaboration was to produce the composer’s *Two Lullabies* for the duo’s BBC audition in March that year.

At the same time, Hallis was forming plans for a series of chamber music concerts for the 1936–1937 season, and on 12 March 1936 held his first committee meeting which Britten attended ‘for a time’.⁹ This meeting, which was also attended by composers Alan Rawsthorne and Christian Darnton and soprano Sophie Wyss, resolved that the composers present would each write a work for the series. At the next meeting of the committee on 24 March (not attended by Britten) it was reported that Sylvia Spencer was ‘favourably inclined’ to being involved and that the Britten work would be an ‘Oboe work’.¹⁰ Sylvia Spencer’s involvement appears to connect the new work with *Two Insect Pieces*.

The concert committee met thirteen times that year to arrange the series of four concerts to take place on the following 15th of December, February, March and April respectively. It was agreed that all those involved in the concerts would contribute financially in advance. Britten only got to one more of these meetings on 30 May 1936, when it was recorded that Sylvia Spencer had not formally confirmed her participation and it was decided to ‘look around for someone else’.¹¹ The order of the first programme was also rearranged ‘once more’. In the weeks that followed, another student of **Léon Goossens, Joy Boughton**, was approached to take Sylvia’s place in the concert but without success. This was recorded with some relief at the meeting on the 31 July as Sylvia Spencer had by then ‘given the necessary undertaking’. On that day, the committee heard for sure that the Britten work would be for oboe and piano. Again no insects were mentioned.

Britten’s first mention of the *Temporal Suite* itself came in a diary entry as late as 10 September when the composer tried ‘to get some ideas together for the Ob. & piano work for Hallis concerts’.¹² Thereafter Britten records his progress on the work right up to the date of the first performance with the Theme being written ‘in rough’ on the 6 November and with more work being done on the 12 November (‘one complete movement which may be usable after alteration’); 1 December (‘it goes quite well, but one cannot dash off this kind of thing like Film Music’); 8 December (‘Back here, very tired, by 9.30—eat a little & then get down to writing the oboe work tho’ I’m feeling

The first Meeting of the Committee of the Hallis Concerts was held at 18 Crawford Street, London, W.1. on 12th March, 1936.

Present; Mr: Adolph ^{Hallis} who took the Chair; Mrs: Sophie Weiss; Mr: Benjamin Britten; Mr: Alan Rawsthorne; Mr: Christian Donaton.

The Chairman outlined his proposals for inaugurating a series of concerts of little-known Chamber Music. He had in mind a series of 3 or 4 concerts, ~~the~~ suggesting that 2 should be given before & 2 after-Christmas 1936-37. Two features of the proposed concerts were to be that all the seats should be the same price & that the financial aspect was to be put on a co-operative basis. The details of these two points would be discussed later.

Drawing upon his past experience of the concert world the Chairman estimated that the total cost of four concerts would be in the neighbourhood of, but not more than, £200. He suggested to the Committee that a reasonable price for one serial ticket for the 4 concerts would be 12/-, this to include 2/- entertainment tax. Assuming that ten

FIRST CONCERT

15th December, 1936



I (a) *PALESTRINA (1525-1594) Ricercare del primo tono

There are seven of these *Ricercari* by Palestrina, one for each mode. They are short but complicated pieces of music of great beauty, full of augmentations, diminutions, inversions and other contrivances, in fact *recherchés* or full of *research*. The word *Ricercar* contains in its initials *Regis Iussu Cantio Et Reliqua Canonica Arte Resoluta*. They are in open score with, naturally, no indications as to instrumentation. Ideally, they should be performed on viols with, in all probability, a choir of trombones in support. But since this is scarcely feasible to-day, it has been thought that the present version for string quartet, for which no liberties with the text have been taken, will not give offence even to purists.

(b) PURCELL (1659-1695) Sonata of Three Parts
(two violins, 'cello and continuo)

Moderato—Vivace—Adagio—Presto—Largo

THE SHADWICK STRING QUARTET

II FAURÉ (1845-1924) La Bonne Chanson (opus 61)

1. Une Sainte en son auréole
2. Puisque l'aube grandit
3. La lune blanche luit dans les bois
4. J'allais par des chemins perfides
5. J'ai presque peur en vérité
6. Avant que tu ne t'en ailles
7. Donc, ce sera par un clair jour d'été
8. N'est-ce pas ?
9. L'hiver a cessé

Soprano : SOPHIE WYSS

III †BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913- —) Temporal Suite for Oboe and Piano

- | | | |
|------------|----------------|---------------|
| 1. Theme | 4. Exercises | 7. Waltz |
| 2. Oration | 5. Commination | 8. Polka |
| 3. March | 6. Chorale | 9. Resolution |

Oboe : NATALIE CAINE

Piano : ADOLPH HALLIS

INTERVAL

pretty bum. However manage by 19.30 to get a movement (Chorale) done—but God knows what it's like');¹³ 9 December (The Waltz); 11 December ('more work to the Polka.....which I think will do now') and 12 December ('..do the final Resolution of the oboe suite which I hope will pass muster tho' I can never tell till the next day. It is a relief to get it finished—but I'm not sure of the standard of work in it').

The haste with which the work was completed is borne out by Britten enlisting the help of Grace Williams. Grace was a Welsh composer whom Britten had met at the Royal College of Music in 1930. They maintained a good friendship meeting occasionally for tea or to go to a concert. In September 1936 Britten wrote in his diary that Grace was going to help him and she subsequently did some work for the films that Britten was working on, *Calendar of the Year* and *Love from a Stranger*. On 2 December, Britten wrote that Grace 'is going to help me alot with the oboe suite—copying and editing'.¹⁴ Grace obviously worked on the copying right up to the last minute as her beautifully scribed Fair Copy is taken over by the composer for the last three movements and the Oboe part is similarly written by her as far as the *Commination* thereafter completed by Britten himself.¹⁵

Meanwhile, Sylvia Spencer's marriage in the summer finally caused her to fall out of the project. As late as 11 October the committee made the resolution, recorded in a very laconic minute, to make an exception for her not to pay any more money into the project because of all the expenses that she had run up in getting married. However, soon after on 24 October, the Chairman (Hallis) 'also read out the abject letter from Sylvia Spencer'. She had clearly withdrawn from the project and it can be assumed that at this point Natalie Caine, another RCM graduate student of Goossens, was approached. By the end of November, Caine had bought 20 tickets for the concert on 15 December and thereby bought into the financial arrangements for participants.

It was only in December, too, that the Committee learned that Britten was writing two duets for Sophie Wyss and her sister Colette to sing in this same concert. These would replace a duet by Burkhard that had been chosen by the Wyss sisters and which never seemed to materialise in a programme that had experienced many changes during the year. Britten's duets turned out to be the *Two Ballads* to lyrics by Montagu Slater and W.H. Auden that, due to their last-minute inclusion, were entered in the programme as '*Two Duets*' with 'titles to be announced'.¹⁶

By late November, time was running out for the concert organisers and for an over-stretched Britten, whose film commitments were at a peak of activity. The *Temporal Suite* was still incomplete on 11 December when Britten attended a short rehearsal of the work:

..then on to Adolph Hallis for a rehearsal of the Oboe work with him & Natalie Caine—it seems to be going quite well tho' she is a bit clumsy. I think it comes off—doubtful movements—Polka and Exercises.¹⁷

The work appears to have been completed for the rehearsal on the 13 December, although the performers used the incomplete Fair Copy with the remaining movements from the Composition Sketch for the performance itself on 15 December. The concert was well-attended and Britten records going with W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Peter Burra and Lennox Berkeley—a discerning audience to say the least. There is no record of Montagu Slater being there, but with his own song being sung that night, it should be assumed that he was also at the concert.

After the concert, Britten seemed cautiously pleased with the performance of the *Suite*, writing 'My Oboe Suite which they play well if not brilliantly & which goes down very well—surprisingly—as also do the duets—Montagu Slater's & Wystan Auden's words'.¹⁸ There were no fewer than twelve newspapers publishing reviews albeit somewhat mixed in their reactions to the first performances by Britten and Hindemith. Scott Goddard of the *Morning Post* was most positive and sensed the potential depth of the oboe work:

This really excellent concert, the precursor of three others equally promising, brought to a first hearing a new "Temporal Suite" for oboe and piano by Benjamin Britten, played by Miss Natalie Caine and Mr. Adolph Hallis. The nine short movements of the Suite are given titles, some of which such as "Commination" and "Resolution" are intended to aid the listener in unravelling some presumably esoteric problems. But it is the music that should count, and in this case Britten's is extremely interesting.¹⁹

The Musical Times wrote:

Compositions by Benjamin Britten, grandiloquently described as 'first world premieres' fortunately turned out to be anything but pompous. The vocal duets were so new that their titles had to be announced at the concert. They were things such as this young composer, in whom wit and technical skill go hand in hand, can produce without much effort. In the other work, the Temporal Suite for oboe and piano, Britten strung together nine little tone-sketches bearing such titles as Oration, Exercises, Commination &c. They are brief, they are bright, and the oboe is put through its paces very prettily (how well Miss Caine played, too)—but one is left wondering whether such music ought to prove transient as well as temporal in Mr. Britten's career.²⁰

Frank Howes in the Times liked the performance but was baffled by the work and its title in a review that could have been hurtful to the composer:

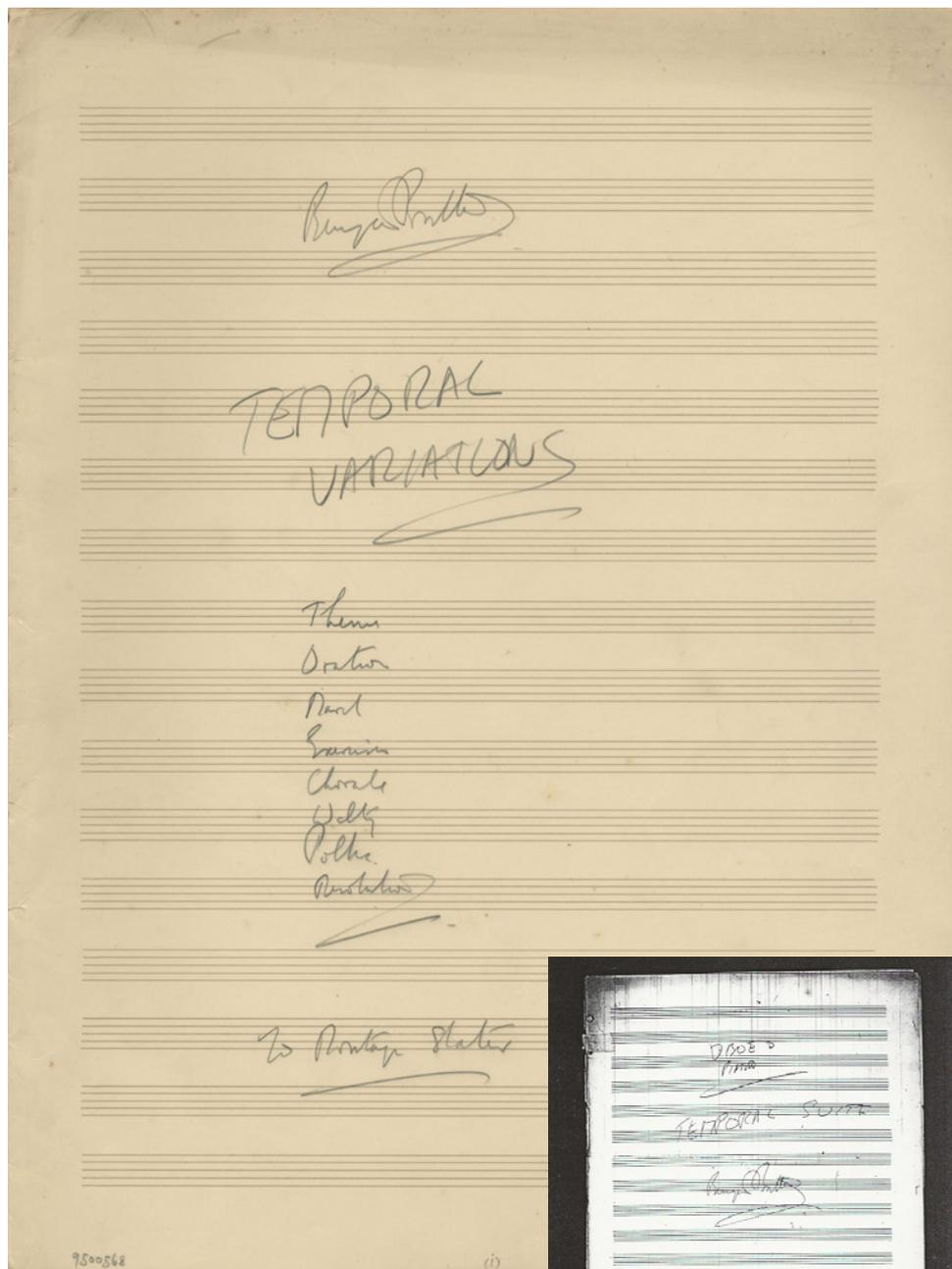
Benjamin Britten's "Temporal Suite" (does the adjective mean "ephemeral" in the context?) for oboe and pianoforte is a triviality. It is the kind of music that is commonly called "clever". The Suite was given an excellent performance by Miss Natalie Caine and Mr. Hallis. Two duets by the same composer sung by Miss Betty Bannerman and Miss Sophie Wyss seemed to have a parodistic intention, but without the words it was difficult to see the point.²¹

Despite all this attention and possibly because of some negative reactions, the *Temporal Suite* was soon to be put to one side. Britten returned to the *Suite* briefly on the 1 January 1937: 'Letters, & rewrite bits of Temporal Suite & 'Philip's Breeches' in morning'.²² This could have been the moment when the cover leaf of the Composition Sketch with no dedicatee was replaced by a new one entitled *Temporal Variations* and dedicated to Montagu Slater. However, it should be noted that the cover leaf of the Fair Copy was also entitled *Temporal Variations* which might indicate the change from 'Suite' to 'Variations' was made around the time of the premiere.

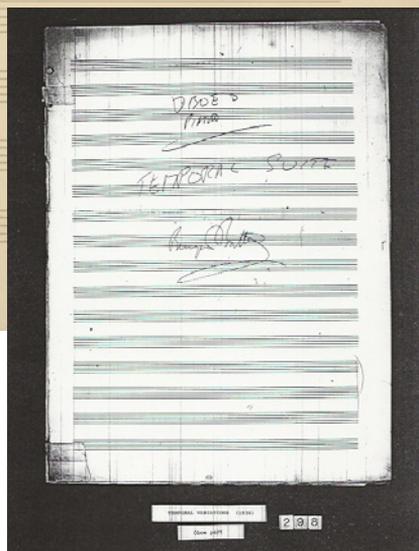
Shortly after this last mention of the Variations and in the New Year, Britten met Wystan Auden on 8 January 1937, bidding him farewell on his way to Spain to work as an ambulance driver in the Civil War. A visit to Paris with Ronald Duncan and Henry Boys followed and on his return, Britten arrived into the flu' epidemic that struck his sister, Beth, and then his mother resulting in her death on 31 January. Through these traumatic weeks Britten's world changed radically and before long he was moving on to other goals, notably the composition of the *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*. After 8 January 1937 then, we hear no more of the *Temporal Suite*. It was not performed again and was never presented for publication in the composer's lifetime.

The whereabouts of the manuscripts of *Two Insect Pieces* and *Temporal Variations* in the years between 1937 and 1976 is still a matter of debate. The oboist **Janet Craxton** reported the return of these works in a chest that Britten and Pears had left behind in the Mayer's house when they returned to England in 1943.²³ This collection was sent back to Aldeburgh years later but it has yet to be verified that the oboe works were part of this. However **Mark Biggam** has cited an article with an unknown provenance entitled '*Trunk Yields Forgotten Work by Benjamin Britten*':

In a classic case of life imitating art, a tin trunk on Long Island has yielded a significant work by the late English composer, Benjamin Britten. The long



Above: *Temporal Variations* cover sheet to the Sketch. Right: *Temporal Suite* discarded cover sheet. It is not known when this was replaced. (Reprinted by kind permission of the Britten-Pears Foundation)



years of neglect ended October 12 when newly published *Temporal Variations* received its premiere at Alice Tully Hall performed by **Philip West**, oboist, and David Burge, pianist.

Temporal Variations was originally performed in England on December 15, 1936, three days after its completion. The 23-year-old Britten then came to America for a five-year stay. He arrived with the manuscript, which along with compositional sketches and papers, he deposited in a trunk at the home of his American hosts, Dr. and Mrs. William Mayer of Amityville. Apparently, the prolific composer became so involved in other projects that when he returned to England, he left behind the trunk and its contents. Several years ago the trunk was discovered and returned to the composer, who died shortly thereafter in 1976.²⁴

This story remains unverified and is brought into doubt because the works returned to Aldeburgh by Elizabeth Mayer and now in the Britten Pears Library are marked with an 'Elizabeth Mayer Collection' stamp. This stamp is not present on the Composition Sketch or Fair Copy of the *Temporal Variations*.²⁵ Could it be that the story of the 'trunk' gained the oboe works by inference when all along they had lain untouched at The Old Mill, Snape between 1937 and 1943? If so, Britten would then have had access to the manuscripts on his return from the USA but still left them to lie unused.

In 1980, the decision to publish both the *Insect Pieces* and the *Temporal Variations* was made by the Britten Estate, with composer Colin Matthews as editor and Faber Music as publisher. The first modern performance was given by the oboist Janet Craxton and pianist Margot Wright as part of a memorial concert for Sylvia Spencer at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester on 7 March 1979.²⁶ The first recorded performance was by Janet Craxton with pianist Ian Brown, recorded on 28 March 1979 and broadcast by the BBC on 3 April 1980.

Since then, the *Temporal Variations* has been recognised as a work of true significance and has entered the standard repertoire for the oboe worldwide. But it remains a work with many unanswered questions. What caused Britten to write it in the first place? Did it have anything to do with the 'large and elaborate suite for oboe and strings' that he was planning to write as a result of his *Two Insect Pieces* of 1935? Why 'Temporal' for the title? Why did Britten choose the oboe to write for? Why was the work withdrawn after the first performance and not played again during the composer's lifetime? And, perhaps most enigmatically, is there any significance in the theme and why Britten used the variation titles *Oration*, *March*, *Exercises*, *Commination*, *Chorale*, *Waltz*, *Polka* and finally *Resolution*? These questions form the basis of this enquiry which will

seek to draw together a number of threads to understand better the creative process of this remarkable work. This will involve looking at Britten's life at the time through his diary and letters, at his relevant relationships, and at themes and preoccupations that the composer explored. Where better to start than a look at the extraordinary year in which the work was written, 1936?

1936

1936 finds me infinitely better off in all ways than did the beginning of 1935; it finds me earning my living—with occasionally something to spare—at the GPO film Unit under John Grierson & Cavalcanti, writing music & supervising sounds for films (this one T.P.O. Night Mail) at a rate of £5 per week, but owing to the fact I can claim no performing rights (it being Crown property) with the possibility of it being increased to £10 per week or £2 per day; writing little, but with the possibility & ideas for writing a lot of original music, as I am undergoing an agreement with Boosey & Hawkes for a £3 a week guarantee on royalties; having a lot of success but not a staggering amount of performances, tho' reputation (even for bad) growing steadily; having a bad inferiority complex in company of brains like Basil Wright, Wystan Auden & William Coldstream; being fortunate in friends like Mr. and Mrs. Frank Bridge, Henry Boys, Basil Reeve (& young Piers Dunkerley tell it not in Gath) and afar off Francis Barton; being comfortably settled in a pleasant, tho' cold flat in West Hampstead with Beth, with whom I get on very well; doing much housework but with prospect of having a woman in more than twice a week in evenings & once in mornings. So for 1936.²⁷

So begins Britten's diary for 1936, a year that Donald Mitchell identifies as 'a key year' both in its historical and political significance as a turning point in the 1930's as a whole and also 'for Britten himself as a young creator of phenomenal brilliance and originality, with a seemingly insatiable appetite for work'.²⁸ The year saw the composer write his 'real' Op. 1, *Our Hunting Fathers*, continue his work on film soundtracks including *Night Mail* (GPO Film Unit), *The Way to the Sea* (GPO), *Peace of Britain* (Strand Films), and *Love from a Stranger* (Capitol Films) and *Around the Village Green* (Travel and Industrial Development Association). He also wrote music for plays of Montagu Slater, *Stay Down Miner* for the Left Theatre and, for the Group Theatre, *The Ascent of F6* by W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood and *Agamemnon of Aeschylus* translated by Louis MacNiece. In addition, he then worked on, composed or finished original works,

Russian Funeral, *Two Ballads*, the *Te Deum*, *Soirées Musicales*, the *Violin Suite* and gathered material for the orchestral suite, *Mont Juïc* with Lennox Berkeley.

Much of the year was therefore spent in London working, but for occasional trips to Frank Bridge's house in Sussex or to see his mother in Frinton. However, he did visit Barcelona for ten days in April for the ISCM Festival and his most extended period away came in July when he decided to take a break for six weeks in Cornwall, renting a 'hut' in the grounds of Ursula Nettleship's house in Crantock. Here Britten continued to work, but, whilst being visited by some friends and colleagues, he was able to clear his mind and think to the future. During this stay it can be assumed that he would have begun to turn his mind fully to the writing of the *Temporal Suite*.

The fact that Britten was now able to earn his living as a composer was of great importance to him, but this brought with it an enormous workload. Much of the year was spent constantly on the move including regular trips to the G.P.O. film unit in Soho Square and Blackheath and with a breathtaking timetable. Beginning the year with the masterful score for *Night Mail* (completed on 13 January 1936), Britten worked on *Peace of Britain* (March–October), *Message from Geneva*, *Line to the Tschierva Hut* and *Men of the Alps* (all September to November), *Love from a Stranger* (18–26 November) and *The Way to the Sea* (1–15 December). In addition, Britten worked on the theatre scores for Montagu Slater's *Stay Down Miner* (3–7 May) and Louis MacNeice's *The Agamemnon of Aeschulus* (20 September–30 October). His ability to work at great speed is a characteristic of this extraordinary activity, as was his ability to generate new and vivid material at a moment's notice.

Furthermore Britten continued to focus on his own compositions and work without such tight deadlines. Having completed his score for *Night Mail* on 13 January, the composer prepared an orchestral version of his *Te Deum in C* before finishing the *Three Divertimenti* for string quartet that was premiered in Wigmore Hall on 25 February. He also prepared a small orchestra version of the *Sinfonietta* Op. 1, wrote *Russian Funeral* for brass and percussion and the *Two Lullabies* for piano duet for his broadcast with Adolph Hallis. In April 1936 Britten played the first complete performances of his Violin Suite of 1935 with violinist Antonio Brosa for the BBC and at the ISCM Festival in Barcelona in April. This visit was to prove important in connection with the Temporal Variations as will become apparent.

Even with all this activity, Britten was nurturing his most significant achievement of the year, *Our Hunting Fathers*. Born out of conversations held with W.H. Auden in January, the composer worked intensively on this major song cycle for high voice and orchestra from April until its completion in July before preparing for and conducting

the first performance in Norwich in September. This work was to play a major part in the creation of *Temporal Variations*.

The composer's diary for 1936 records the absorption of a huge amount of music from concert attendance (some conducted by his teacher Frank Bridge), to listening to the 'wireless', to playing through works on the piano and with friends. Starting with a 'wonderful' performance of Beethoven 8 (3 January), Britten is impressed by Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (12 February), Franck's G minor Quartet (3 March), *Parsifal* (5 May), *Tristan und Isolde* (18 May), *The Ring* (late May at Covent Garden) and Strauss' *Salome* (19 June), to name a few. He is equally dismissive of performances of Vaughan Williams and Walton, and has no time for the conducting of Sir Adrian Boult. Most enthusiastically of all, he goes to see *The Marriage of Figaro* for the first time at Covent Garden on 11 November, and is bowled over:

Figaro tonight & it is without exception the loveliest thing I have ever seen on any stage. This simple beauty (expressing every emotion) is withering to any ambitions one might have—& yet it is good to have lived in a world that could produce such perfection.²⁹

Britten read a wide range of works during the year including Isherwood's *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (31 January), Shakespeare sonnets and Keats' 'lovely dreams' (8 February), Hemmingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (29 February), Molière's *Comedies* (1 April), Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (19 June), Beer's *Marx* and Rabelais' *Gargantua* (8 July), Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (19 July) and E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. Some of these works such as *Gulliver* would have been with an eye to creative work but others appear to be a part of the composer's wide literary interests. In March, Britten also read the script of Montagu Slater's *Stay Down Miner* before writing the music for the show and he attended a performance of the Auden/Isherwood play, *The Dog Beneath the Skin*. On two occasions during the year the composer reports hearing radio plays, one on Andersen's 'lovely' *Snow Queen*, the other, Clifford Bax' *Socrates*.

Britten also found time that year for living and sheer fun. He visited the cinema no fewer than eleven times in the year, seeing films by Disney, the Marx Brothers, René Clair and others. With his sister Beth, he bought a second-hand Lagonda car in which Beth then had an accident due to wet roads. Britten seized every opportunity to play games such as on the 13 August when he reported 'Ping-pong at Forster's after—Miss Forster is infuriating in her steadiness—it takes me hours to recover my temper!'³⁰

In addition to all this the composer was often dining or having tea with friends and family, talking, exchanging ideas and debating politics. His personal friendships with

amongst others Piers Dunkerley, Peter Burra, Henry Boys and Lennox Berkeley are recorded in his diaries and indicate a growing awareness of the direction of his emotional life, which became a matter of discussion during the year with Wystan Auden. Britten was a man of his time but what comes through his diaries so strongly is that he was aware of his unique abilities and took a serious and highly motivated view of his work and all that was going on around him.

One vital theme running through Britten's life at this time was his interest and sensitivity towards politics and public affairs. The death of George V in January 1936 occupied his mind as does the whole affair surrounding the accession of Edward VIII. However the composer's concerns here were dwarfed by his feelings towards the emergence of right wing domination across Europe. His diaries contain regular comments about the state of Europe with Abyssinia in the melting pot, Spain on the brink of revolution and with the rise of Nazism in Germany. In January 1936, he writes about Mussolini's wavering campaign in Abyssinia and the 'excruciating Paris Peace Plan' but by March he records wider concerns on Germany's discarding the Versailles Treaty and the build-up of militarism in Japan, Russia, Italy and Central Europe, which is a 'hot-bed of intrigue'. Despite a politics-free visit to Barcelona in April, Britten shows increasing concern in his diary entries and repeatedly returns to the outbreak of hostilities in Spain during that summer.

So Britten was fully aware of the volatility and danger of the era that he was living in. For artists generally in the thirties, this was a period of recalibration and rebuild after the devastation of the First World War. The enormous influence of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) in pointing to a new poetic discourse on the tension between public and private experience led to a generation of poets including Cecil Day Lewis, W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood and Louis MacNeice building a new artistic landscape based on a rejection of the old political order, a rejection of militarism and the use of parable and charade to look for a new order.³¹ In the early 1930's there was a drive even amongst artists and intellectuals towards trying to create new political structures, hence the rise of interest in Communism on the left. But here the increase in militarism as shown in Russia and with far-right groups, notably the Nazis in Germany, led artists more and more to the urgency of adopting anti-militaristic stances. In Britten's case this feeling towards pacifism had grown from an early age.

Britten and Pacifism

Britten's worries about the rise of militarism in Europe during 1936 are surely part of a major theme in the composer's life that was to result in his public declaration of

pacifism to the Tribunal for the Registration of Conscientious Objectors on his return from America in February 1942. Then, his official declaration stated:

Since I believe that there is in every man the spirit of God, I cannot destroy, and feel it my duty to avoid helping to destroy as far as I am able, human life, however strongly I may disapprove of the individual's actions or thoughts. The whole of my life has been devoted to acts of creation (being by profession composer) and I cannot take part in acts of destruction. Moreover, I feel that the fascist attitude to life can only be overcome by passive resistance.³²

Contrary to the accusations levelled at Britten that his departure for America in 1939 and his registration as a conscientious objector were simple attempts to avoid conscription, Britten's position can be traced back to his childhood and also to being rooted in a wider pacifist context held by many leading artists of the 1930s.

In 1916, the Britten home was shelled by the Germans and the effects of this were considerable on the whole family. In addition, Britten came under the influence of Frank Bridge, himself a pacifist, from 1927 and in 1928, aged just 15, wrote an essay on Animals that set out his stance against cruelty to other creatures. As Mervyn Cooke has pointed out, this was one of a number of examples that showed the composer was able and ready to take a stand on important moral issues at an early age.³³

By the mid-1930s the composer's diaries make repeated references to the wish that the League of Nations should play a greater role in pursuing peace in the face of militarism across the world. Britten was also being active along with his Mother in his attempts to do more himself, as stated in his diary in February 1935:

A usual proof-practice-walk day. Mum has Mrs Owles & Mrs Woodger to tea. After which I spend 1½ hrs knocking at people's front doors up this road –delivering Peace Ballot papers. A foul job—but it may do a little good, and may make a few people use their brains. But of course it would be my luck to be allotted a road just packed with die-hards—Indian Colonels, army widows, typical old spinsters etc!³⁴

It should be noted that the League of Nations' Peace Ballot gained more than twelve million signatures by 1936 whilst Canon Dick Shepherd's Peace Pledge Union had over 100,000 members committed to renouncing war. Britten, along with many artists, was part of a significant number of people who were deeply disquieted by the increasing inevitability of world conflict.

From that year and with his new-found employment in the film industry, it is not surprising to find Britten writing for a 'Peace of Britain' film and through 1936 the composer's concerns about Abyssinia and Germany eventually led him to attend an International Peace Society meeting on 11 November with Montagu Slater. This was to lead to the composition of the Pacifist March with words by Ronald Duncan:

March, stride to resist strong with force not with fist.
Against all war we shan't cease to construct force for peace,
Now we're kept poor and merely exist to die, why?
March! March! etc.³⁵

It is clear that Britten found himself caught up in a movement towards peace but to understand his developed belief in pacifism and why this might relate to the creation of the *Temporal Variations* it will be important to trace first the thinking of his greatest collaborator of that year, W.H. Auden.

Britten and W.H. Auden

Britten first met the poet W.H. Auden on 5 July 1935 when the documentary film-maker, Basil Wright drove him to the Downs School in Colwell to begin talks about films for the GPO film unit. Both Britten and Auden had already contributed to the film unit's *Coal Face* earlier in the year, and now plans were made to work on *Night Mail* and a film about the introduction of slaves to the West Indies.³⁶ By early September that year, Britten and Auden were meeting regularly on these projects and the influence of the older Auden soon became apparent to the composer:

Spend day with Coldstream & Auden in Soho. Sq. & British Museum etc.....I always feel very young & stupid when with these brains—I mostly sit silent when they hold forth about subjects in general.³⁷

Despite this remark Britten, in the ensuing months, absorbed a huge amount from Auden who, with Christopher Isherwood, was writing the play *The Dog Beneath the Skin* and subsequently collaborating on *The Ascent of F6*, both for the Group Theatre. *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, like an earlier work of Auden's, *The Dance of Death*, were taken up with satirical and parable-like comment on the rise of leader-driven power and the loss of cohesive social order.



Christopher Isherwood and WH Auden c. 1938 (NPG)
NPG x 137621 Keystone Press Agency

For Auden himself, the thinking behind these works came from ten years earlier when, in the wake of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and as an emerging poet he became influenced by the ideological ideas of D.H. Lawrence as set out in his *Phantasia of the Unconscious* and his novels *Kangaroo* and the *Plumed Serpent*.³⁸ Lawrence believed that it was necessary to suppress education for all but a few and to appoint a supreme Leader to govern in order to achieve the right balance between conscious controlling action and unconscious natural desires. Nevertheless and paradoxically, Lawrence argued that civilisation had opted wrongly for 'cerebral activity' over spontaneous living:

It is impulse we have to live by, not the ideals or the idea.³⁹

Auden's first major works, *Paid on Both Sides* (1929) and *The Orators* (1932) developed these ideas and were to set the tone for a generation of poets and authors that included Cecil Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice and Christopher Isherwood. Both of these works are parable-like in form and charade-like in structure—works that on the surface might seem comical and unintelligible but at the core have layered and nuanced meaning. Interwoven themes of the positive and negative power of love, the value of leadership and the importance of group organisation over the individual addressed the tensions in the 1930s created by the 'wasteland' of post-First World War Europe and the marked rise of far-right politics. *The Orators* begins with four prose 'orations' which build on the ideas of D.H. Lawrence whilst incorporating in the opening '*Address for a Prize-Day*' another idea, gained from the German philosopher Georg Groddeck, that we are all guilty of differing crimes against love (excessive love, defective love, perverted love).⁴⁰ The following *Journal of an Airman* and *Six Odes* complete this highly influential work which in its dedication to the poet Stephen Spender captures the anxiety of the age in pitting the individual or 'hero' against the power of the state:

Private faces in public places
Are wiser and nicer
Than public faces in private places⁴¹

At the time when Auden and Britten first met in 1935, the poet had also developed yet another theme on the Marxist idea of the decline of the middle class and its metamorphosis towards militarism and revolution. *The Dance of Death* made use of a Dancer and an Announcer to lead changes that the bourgeoisie seek, always resulting in failure. The parable ends with the death of the dancer (leader) and the collapse of the class's dreams. The metaphorical death inside the middle classes is portrayed by the dancer

who, through a process of escapism, nationalism, idealism and finally cynicism, finds release only in death. Auden invokes the structures of the music pantomime and cabaret to create a damaging critique of a 'sick' society. At the climax of the play, the dancer becomes a Pilot whose 'ambition is no less than to reach the very heart of Reality'.⁴² This theme of the pilot should be compared with Auden's *Journal of an Airman* from *The Orators*.

On 17 September and again on 6 October 1935, Britten attended the Group Theatre for productions of Auden's plays,⁴³ and on the latter occasion he was impressed by *The Dance of Death*. Thereafter, the composer became involved in the Theatre's activities accepting commissions to compose for productions, the first being Rupert Doone's and Robert Medley's *Timon of Athens*. Robert Medley's recollections of the power and idealism of the Group Theatre leave us with an impression of how influential its work was:

In spite of its potential for propaganda, under Rupert's direction the Group Theatre put art first as a way of discovering truth, but it could have not existed at all without a degree of political and social awareness. For one thing it was impossible to ignore the tragic consequences of the slump—the poverty and unemployment. The Group Theatre inevitably took on the left-wing colouring of its time, but its aims were always to produce plays and performances that were intrinsically interesting, and well done.⁴⁴

Thus in the autumn of 1935, as poet and composer worked closely together, Britten had exposure to many of Auden's burgeoning ideas, and in addition, not least his views on the power of good and the power of love, derived from the writings of Homer Lane:

Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice.⁴⁵

Amidst the whirlwind of activities and interests that both poet and composer were involved with at the end of 1935, it is therefore important to note Britten's diary entry for 2 January 1936 where he records that he and Auden 'talk amongst many things of a new Song Cycle (probably on Animals) that I may write'.⁴⁶

Britten is referring here to what was to become *Our Hunting Fathers*, the song cycle that he discussed with his teacher, Frank Bridge on 23 March having received some of the texts from Auden:



Benjamin Britten and W.H. Auden (NPG)
NPG x 15197 photographer unknown

I show him Auden's stuff for me and he is impressed. Also find he is very sympathetic towards my socialistic inclinations.....⁴⁷

Britten began composing *Our Hunting Fathers* on 13 May 1936 and completed the work by 28 July with the first performance sung by Sophie Wyss at the Norwich Triennial Festival on 25 September. Auden juxtaposed three poems, two anonymous and one attributed to the sixteenth century Thomas Ravenscroft, about animals and death, framing them with a Prologue and an Epilogue that seek to define the 'poles between which our desire unceasingly is discharged. A desire in which love and hatred so perfectly oppose themselves.....'⁴⁸

There have been a number of significant readings of *Our Hunting Fathers* from Donald Mitchell's view of the work as a stand against the rise of fascism in Europe,⁴⁹ to Stephen Arthur Allen's connecting the work to Britten's growing awareness of his sexuality guided by his collaboration with Auden.⁵⁰ Paul Kildea adds another dimension

of Auden at that time that 'his eye remained on a disintegrating Europe and the iniquity of the English class system.....Both themes informed the new piece'.⁵¹

More recently, Joanna Bullivant revisits these themes and adds important observations including the connection between the poems of the song cycle, and Auden's poem, *Journal of an Airman* from *The Orators* which 'consists of an earlier exposition of some of the core themes of *Our Hunting Fathers*: the comparison between humans and animals, the constant juxtaposition of levity and violence and musings on the nature of love'.⁵² Bullivant concludes that a full understanding of Britten's work demands exploration of its literary context and 'provides new insights into how Britten implemented a modernist musical language in a work that remains a monument of 1930s political art'.⁵³

Returning to Britten's works for oboe, whether the choice of animals in *Our Hunting Fathers* has any connection with the composer's work on his *Insect Pieces* is tenuous but this possible link must nevertheless be pointed out. Auden would have become aware of the oboe work that was on Britten's mind during that last months of 1935 and could easily have steered this in a direction that suited the emerging ideas behind the new Song Cycle. It is worth noting that Britten hinted at an earlier agreement on the commission in a meeting in London on 18 February 1936:

Lunch at Victoria with Mr. Graham Goodes (the very objectionable, self-important, ignorant, bumptious & altogether despicable secretary of the Norwich Festival). I find it not difficult to make him come round to letting me do a vocal suite (Sophie Wyss) for the Sept. festival.⁵⁴

Could it be that Auden developed the idea of a more powerful analogy between nature and human political ambition from an earlier plan to write an *instrumental suite* as Britten had recorded earlier in 1935? Certainly something led the two collaborators to fix on such a theme. Both artists are known to have been deeply concerned by the rise of nationalism in Germany, in Italy and later that year in Spain and it appears that the creative process for *Our Hunting Fathers* did progress Britten's preoccupation with what Donald Mitchell has described as 'acts of violence, their consequences and the 'climates' that unleash them'.⁵⁵

Another important dimension to point out is that the relationship between Auden and Britten rapidly became close from autumn 1935 onwards. For Britten this was primarily driven by his admiration for Auden's phenomenal intellectual and artistic abilities but in Auden's case there was, in addition to his recognition of Britten's musical gifts, a strong personal attraction. As Auden attempted to 'bring him out',⁵⁶ most significantly the poet was to produce the poem *Underneath (an) the abject willow* that

Britten would set and include in his *Two Ballads* which received their premiere on the same night as the *Temporal Variations* in December 1936. The poem exhorts the reader (Britten) to be bolder:

All that lives may love; why longer
Bow to loss
With arms across?
Strike and you shall conquer.⁵⁷

In September 1936, as an apparent afterthought to his earlier play, *The Dance of Death*, Auden wrote a remarkable poem, *Death's Echo*, that encapsulates a nihilistic rejection of the ambition of humanity. Now with the Spanish Civil War raging, both Auden and Britten reacted with great concern, Britten stepping up his pacifist activities and Auden making plans to join the republicans in Spain. The exhortation of *Death's Echo* to turn away from empty endeavour and dance, seems in step with the mood of the second part of *Temporal Variations*:⁵⁸

The desires of the heart are as crooked as corkscrews
Not to be born is the best for man;
The second-best is a formal order;
The dance's pattern; dance while you can.
Dance, dance, for the figure is easy,
The tune is catching and will not stop;
Dance till the stars come down from the rafters;
Dance, dance, dance till you drop.

Britten finished his setting of *Our Hunting Fathers* in July 1936 and spent the early part of August on holiday in Devon working on his Rossini suite, *Soirées Musicales*. But it is reasonable to assume that he was also turning his thoughts towards the oboe work by mid-August and certainly was writing by the time of his diary entry on 10 September. Could the oboe work be a further 'take' on the ideas that he and Auden put into *Our Hunting Father's*? Could the ironic dances, *Waltz* and *Polka*, reflect the mood of *Death's Echo*?

The relationship between Britten and Auden was undeniably a close one in 1936, but the poet's travels to Iceland in July and the composer's exceptional workload were also factors in keeping the two apart. Auden's decision during the autumn of 1936 to turn away from absolute pacifism and to join the war effort in Spain must have been

a big facer for Britten as 1936 drew to a close and as the première of the *Temporal Suite* approached. After that concert and in the New Year, the two met on 8 January 1937 to say goodbye:

He goes off to Spain (to drive an ambulance) tomorrow. It is terribly sad & I feel ghastly about it, tho' I feel it is perhaps the logical thing for him to do being such a direct person. Anyway it's phenomenally brave. Spend a glorious morning with him (at Lyons Corner House, coffee drinking). Talk over everything & he gives me two grand poems—a lullaby, & a simple folksy Farewell—that is overwhelmingly tragic & moving. I've lots to do with them.⁵⁹

These were *Danse Macabre*, 'It's farewell to the drawing room's civilised cry' that Britten used in his *Ballad of Heroes* in 1939 and 'Lay your sleeping head my love'. It is interesting to note that the former of these follows Auden's dance theme and makes reference to Britten's duet playing with Adolph Hallis:

It's farewell to the drawing-room's mannerly cry,
The professor's logical whereto and why,
The frock-coated diplomat's polished aplomb,
Now matters are settled with gas and with bomb.

The works for two pianos, the brilliant stories
Of reasonable giants and remarkable fairies,
The pictures, the ointments, the frangible wares
And the branches of olives are stored upstairs.

Britten had set other Auden works from this period including, *Night Mail* and *O lurcher-loving collier* for the GPO films and *Stop all the clocks* which was initially part of the play *The Ascent of F6* in April 1936, but later was set as *Funeral Blues*. In addition, *Let the florid music praise*, *Now the leaves are falling fast*, *Look, stranger, at this island now* and *As it is, plenty* were poems that in 1938 would be part of his Op. 11 song cycle, *On this Island*, and all part of Auden's seminal publication, *Look, Stranger!*, published in 1936.⁶⁰

Finally, this very collection also contained the poem, *Underneath the abject willow* that has already been discussed and formed part of the *Two Ballads* performed at Wigmore Hall concert on 15 December 1936. Significantly, the other ballad, *Mother Comfort*, was by Montagu Slater whose relationship with Britten at this time now needs consideration.

Britten and Montagu Slater

Britten first met the poet, playwright, critic and left-wing activist Montagu Slater in 1935 working on *Coal Face* for the GPO Film Unit. The two had probably met via Group Theatre events that Britten had been drawn into by Auden. After Britten started to write scores for the Group Theatre productions in September 1935, it is interesting to note that, on the 2 December, he had 'lunch with Montagu Slater at Bertorelli's, & talk over sounds for his new Easter play.... See Slater & his orchestral leader again...'.⁶¹ This was to involve the composer in the work of the Left Theatre that Slater was heavily involved with. The music and sounds that Britten provided for *Easter 1916* were insubstantial but the collaboration led to greater things in 1936.

Born in Millom Cumberland in 1902 to a working class family, Slater was sixteen when the First World War ended and, as Arnold Rattenbury has written:

...the world of his adolescent awareness was one of collapsing trade, of strikes, of returning soldiers, of wounded begging in the streets, of homes unfit for anyone, leave alone returning heroes, and of the utter ineffectualness of his father's or anyone else's religion.

Insofar as Time can ever be pigeonholed away from the flow of events which make up History, those 1930's of Montagu's unregeneracy were years in which slump, unemployment, immiseration, rearmament, approaching war, the emergent various fascisms of Italy, Germany, Japan, Spain and England drew in massive movement a popular anger, determination for peace, and increasingly practical thinking about social justice.⁶²

Slater won a scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford and thereafter pursued a career in journalism, firstly with the Liverpool Post and later in London.⁶³ He was drawn to socialism and in 1927 joined the Communist Party whilst also involving himself in left-leaning enterprises such as the Left Theatre (founded 1932) and the Left Review (1934–1938). His early writing combined a strong feeling for social equality with his innate opposition to the misuse of political power as exemplified by his first two novels, *The Second City* (1929) about life in a major provincial town and *Haunted Europe* (1934) based in 1929 Berlin.

Benjamin Britten's direct involvement with Slater's creative work began with his writing of the scores of his next major works *Easter 1916* (December 1935) on the Irish uprising of that year and *Stay Down Miner* (May 1936) on the legendary strike at the Nine Mile Colliery in Cwmfelinfach in 1935. These works were dramatised for the Left

Theatre with music by Britten. In addition, Britten and Slater worked on a number of films notably *Calendar of the Year* (March–September 1936).

Stay Down Miner is of particular interest here because its account of the struggle of the Welsh miners against closed-shop control and in favour of proper unionised representation, and raises the wider question on the morality of protest. In its original book form, Slater finishes with a reflective conversation with a miner in the Nine Mile Point dispute. The miner, named Howard, articulates the connection of ‘fighting for ones rights’ (in the dispute) with his strong chapel religious beliefs:

‘When the money-changers were thrown out of the Temple it wasn’t because they hadn’t got a perfect right to be there. They had. Their right had become a public wrong and it became right to expel them....I think you have no religion unless you believe in *the right* for every man to have sufficient to live a full, happy and honourable life.’

‘But that means socialism’.

I think Christianity implies it.⁶⁴

Whilst this exchange is not present in the script of the play that was to be published as *New Way Wins* at the end of 1936, it is indicative of Slater’s sensibilities and arguably in accord with Britten’s own religious and left wing sympathies. Graham Elliott has pointed to the composer’s ‘my duty towards God is to believe in him, to fear him, and to love him, with all my heart’ from 1928, the year of his confirmation and goes on to describe the changing relationship he had with his beliefs in the light of his mother’s adherence to Christian Science.⁶⁵ In any case, Britten’s use of two ‘spiritual’ titles (*Commination* and *Chorale*) in the *Temporal Variations*, a work that has strong connotations of protest, can be attributed to influences that persisted throughout the 1930s.

During 1936, the relationship with Montagu Slater became a warm-hearted and special one. Britten recorded meetings with moments of relaxation as on 8 April:

Meet Slater for tea at M.M. at 5.0 & after discuss at length the music for his new play, a little ping-pong after,....

And meetings with Slater often remarked on how nice a man he was, such as the diary note for 2 July 1936:

Lunch with Montagu Slater - who is a dear & exceptionally intelligent of course. We are thinking of a ballet on Gulliver...⁶⁶

So, where the relationship with Auden was characterised by the composer's feelings of inadequacy, here was a relationship that was more relaxed and based on true friendship. More specifically and at this early stage of their friendship, Britten and Slater found a mutual interest in pacifism, significantly demonstrated by their attendance, mentioned above, at the International Peace Society on Armistice Day 1936. Britten wrote in his diary on that day:

In the morning I go with Montagu Slater up to a meeting of the International Peace Society (Film, Theatre & Music Section) at Vaudeville Theatre. There aren't many people there—everyone is enjoying remorse & glorifying the noble milatry (sic) profession at the cenotaph. However it gives one some satisfaction that something is being done (in 33 countries) to propagate pacific settlement of disputes (if disputes there be)...⁶⁷

The mutual understanding between Slater and Britten on pacifism can be seen in contrast to the work achieved by Auden and Britten in *Our Hunting Fathers*, in being more practical and idealistic in opposing war. In 1936, Auden was articulating a more complex view that would involve him in joining the Spanish Civil War, albeit as an ambulance driver, but this was a different position from that of other writers like Christopher Isherwood, who remained fervently pacifist throughout his life. These opposing positions were ones which Britten must have weighed up at the time and his own emerging pacifist beliefs would have separated him from Auden to an extent. It is therefore understandable that the composer took strength from Slater, a friend who would uphold a more pure form of pacifism in these turbulent times.

In the years after 1936, Britten and Slater were to remain united on this issue and Slater may have tried to persuade Britten towards



Montagu Slater by Enid Slater
(Slater Estate), NPG x 15201
1935–1936 postcard print

writing a war requiem.⁶⁸ Britten was to dedicate his *Ballad of Heroes* to Slater and the isolationism of being a pacifist may have brought the two together in creating the composer's first and great opera, *Peter Grimes* whilst, as this work was being premiered, Britten toyed with the idea of a 'post-Hiroshima oratorio entitled *Mea Culpa*'⁶⁹ under the influence of Ronald Duncan. And later still, Britten continued to ponder this theme eventually producing his *War Requiem* in 1962 and *Cantata Misericordium* in 1963.

In the light of the growing friendship between Britten and Slater in 1936, it is significant for this study to note that Slater's poem *Mother Comfort* became the companion Ballad that Britten set alongside Auden's *Underneath the abject willow*, for the *Two Ballads* that received their first performance in Wigmore Hall on the same night as the premiere of *Temporal Variations*. Where Auden's poem is seen as a plea to Britten to abandon his reticence over his sexuality, Slater's, drawing its title obliquely from Richard III's aunt,⁷⁰ seems to offer consolation and understanding at the dichotomy of making a choice:

Dear, shall we talk or will that cloud the sky?
 Will you be Mother Comfort or shall I?
 If I should love him, where would our lives be?
 And if you turn him out at last, then friendship pity me!
 My longing, like my heart, beats to and fro
 Oh that a single life could be both Yes and No.

With Auden (and probably Slater as well) at the concert, it must have been an extraordinary premiere of the *Two Ballads* in addition to the power of the *Temporal Variations*.

Britten dedicated the *Temporal Variations* to Montagu Slater, which leaves us with a continuing question as to a possible reason for and timing of such a dedication. Was the creation of the work bound up with the creative discussions that the two artists had had during the year? Is the work an expression of the pacifism that the two men are known to have shared? And what do the lyrics of *Two Ballads* tell us about these questions, if anything?

Synthesis on Auden and Slater

The inclusion of the *Two Ballads* and *Temporal Suite* into the concert on 15 December 1936 could be seen as Britten's way to bring together two important and intertwining threads whilst committing them to separate works in the same performance. In the *Two Ballads* we have a lyric by Auden that seeks to challenge the composer to confront his

own sexuality and a lyric by Slater that offers 'comfort' whilst wishing the possibility to say both 'Yes' and 'No'.

But the *Temporal Variations* shows no sign of these personal considerations and every sign of being part of the major theme of the mid-1930's, the rise of fascist power and the need of artists to counter this with heroic stands against war. The logical conclusion would be that Britten deliberately separated his personal 'journey' and his political/social beliefs by programming two separate works in this concert. This thought can hang in the air when, in Part Two, we consider the music itself and why the composer decided to write *Temporal Variations* for the oboe.

Music example and editing, Stephen Powell.

Thanks to the many people who have helped me with my research including Gabriel Anderson, Nicholas Clark (Britten-Pears Library), Nicholas Daniel, Sarah Francis, Carol Leacock (Slater Estate), Peter Linnitt (Royal College of Music), Bruce MacRae (Faber Music), Colin Matthews, Fiona McHenry (British Library), Michael Mullen (Royal College of Music), Emily Pailthorpe, Stephen Powell, Anja Rohde (Rare Books Library, Nottingham University), Jane Salmon and Richard Winterflood (Slater Estate).

21 June 2019



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In addition to many orchestral recordings, he has recorded CDs of solo and chamber music repertoire including An English Renaissance of quintets and quartets for oboe and strings, and Britten's Six Metamorphoses after Ovid as part of his published study on that work. Among the works written for him are Paul Patterson's Duologue, John Gardner's Second Oboe Sonata, Andrew Downes' sonata, In the Gardens of Burdwan,

John Mayer's Abhut Sangit and in chamber music, *Elizabeth Maconchy's* Wind Quintet, *Paul Patterson's* Comedy for Winds and *Jim Parker's* Mississippi Five.

George joined the Royal Academy of Music as professor of oboe in 1984, became Head of Woodwind in 1987 and Head of Orchestral Studies in 1989. In September 1993, George was appointed Principal of Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, Birmingham City University a post that he held until August 2010. From 2011–2016, George was Artistic Director of the Classical Music Academy, Codarts Rotterdam and from 2017–2018, interim Principal of the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama.

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