—Berko.

Benjamin Britten at the Aspen Convocation

Saturday Review

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On Winning the First Aspen Award

On July 31, President Alvin C. Eurich of the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies at Aspen, Colorado, presented the first Aspen Award to the English composer Benjamin Britten. The award of $30,000 was accompanied by a citation reading "To Benjamin Britten, who as a brilliant composer, performer and interpreter through music, of human feelings, moods and thoughts has truly inspired man to understand, clarify and appreciate more fully his own nature, purpose and destiny." The following reply by Britten is one of the most complete expositions of his own point of view that he has, thus far, put into words.

WHEN last May President Alvin C. Eurich and Chairman Robert O. Anderson told me they wished to travel the 5,000 miles from Aspen to Aldeburgh to have a talk with me, they hinted that it had something to do with an Aspen Award for Services to the Humanities—an award of very considerable importance and size. I imagined that they felt I might advise them on a suitable recipient, and I began to consider what I should say. Who would be suitable for such an honor? What kind of person? Doctor, priest, social worker, politician? An artist? Yes, possibly (that, I imagined, could be the reason that Mr. Anderson and Professor Eurich thought I might be the person to help them). So I ran through the names of the great figures working in the arts among us today. It was a fascinating problem, rather like one's schooltime game of ideal cricket elevens or, slightly more recently, ideal casts for operas—but I certainly won't tell which of our great poets, painters, or composers came to the top of my list.

Mr. Anderson and Professor Eurich paid their visit to my home in Aldeburgh. It was a charming and courteous visit, but it was also a knockout. It had not occurred to me, frankly, that it was I who was to be the recipient of this magnificent award, and I was stunned. I am afraid my friends must have felt I was a tongue-tied host. But I simply could not imagine why *I* had been chosen for this very great honor. I read again the simple and moving citation. The key word seemed to be "humanities." I went to the dictionary to look up its meaning. I found *humanity:* "the quality of being human" (well, that applied to me all right). But I found that the plural had a special meaning: "Learning or literature concerned with human culture, as grammar, rhetoric, poetry, and especially the ancient Latin and Greek classics." (Here I really had no claims since I cannot properly spell even in my own language, and when I

set Latin I have terrible trouble over the quantities.) *Humanitarian* was an entry close beside these, and I supposed I might have some claim here, but I was daunted by the definition: "One who goes to excess in his human principles (in 1855 often contemptuous or hostile)." I read on, quickly, *Humanist:* "One versed in humanities," and I was back where I started. But perhaps, after all, the clue was in the word "human," and I began to feel that I might have a small claim.

I certainly write music for human beings—directly and deliberately. I consider their voices, the range, the power, the subtlety, and the color potentialities of them. I consider the instruments they play—their most expressive and suitable individual sonorities, and where I may be said to have invented an instrument (such as the Slung Mugs of "Noye's Fludde") I have borne in mind the pleasure the young performers will have in playing it. I also take note of the *human* circumstances of music, of its environment and conventions; for instance, I try to write dramatically effective music for the theater—I certainly don't think opera is better for not being effective on the stage. I fear some people think that effectiveness must be superficial. And then, the best music to listen to in a great Gothic church is the polyphony that was written for it and took account of the great resonance: this was my approach in *War Requiem* —I calculated it for a big reverberant acoustic, and that is where it sounds best. I believe therefore in *occasional* music, although I admit there are some occasions that can intimidate one—I do not envy Purcell writing his "Ode to Celebrate King James's Return to London from Newmarket." On the other hand, almost every piece I have ever written has been composed with a certain occasion in mind, and usually for definite performers, and certainly always *human* ones.

You may ask perhaps: how far can a composer go in thus considering the demands of people, of humanity? At many times in history the artist has made a conscious effort to speak with the voice of the people. Beethoven certainly tried, in works as different as the Battle of Vittoria and the Ninth Symphony, to utter the sentiments of a whole community. From the beginning of Christianity there have been musicians who have wanted and tried to be the servants of the church to express the devotion and convictions of Christians as such. Recently we have had the example of Shostakovich, who set out in his Leningrad Symphony to present a monument to his fellow citizens, an explicit expression for them of their own endurance and heroism. At a very different level, one finds composers such as Johann Strauss and George Gershwin aiming at providing the people with the best dance music and songs that they were capable of making. And I can find nothing wrong with the objectives—declared or implicit—of these men, nothing wrong with offering to my fellowmen music that may inspire them or comfort them, touch them or entertain them, even educate them, directly and with intention. On the contrary, it is the composer's duty, as a member of society, to speak to or for his fellow human beings.

When I am asked to compose a work for an occasion, great or small, I want to know in some detail the conditions of the place where it will be performed, the size and acoustics, what instruments or singers will be available and suitable, the kind of people who will hear it, and what language they will understand—and even sometimes the age of the listeners and performers. For it is futile to offer children music by which they are bored, or which makes them feel inadequate or frustrated, which may set them against music forever; and it is insulting to address anyone in a language that he does not understand. The text of my *War Requiem* was perfectly in place in Coventry Cathedral—the Owen poems in the vernacular, and the words of the Requiem Mass familiar to everyone—but it would have been pointless in Cairo or Peking.

DURING the act of composition one is continually referring back to the conditions of performance—as I have said, the acoustics and the forces available, the techniques of the instruments and the voices—such questions occupy one's attention continuously and certainly affect the stuff of the music. In my experience they are not only a restriction but a challenge, an inspiration. Music does not exist in a vacuum. It does not exist until it is performed, and performance imposes conditions. It is the easiest thing in the world to write a piece virtually or totally impossible to perform —but oddly enough that is not what I prefer to do; I prefer to study the conditions of performance and shape my music to them.

Where does one stop, then? In answering people's demands? It seems that there is no clearly defined "Halt" sign on this road. The only brake that one can apply is that of one's own private and personal conscience; when that speaks clearly, one must halt; and it can speak for musical or non-musical reasons.

In the last six months I have been several times asked to write a work as a memorial to the late President Kennedy. On each occasion I have refused—not because in any way I was out of sympathy with such an idea; on the contrary, I was horrified and deeply moved by the tragic death of a very remarkable man. But for me I do not feel the time is ripe; I cannot yet stand back and see it clearly. I should have to wait very much longer to do anything like justice to this great theme. But had I, in fact, agreed to undertake a limited commission, my artistic conscience would certainly have told me in what direction I could go, and when I should have to stop.

There are many dangers that hedge round the unfortunate composer: pressure groups that demand true proletarian music, snobs who demand the latest avant-garde tricks; critics who are already trying to document today for tomorrow, to be the first to find the correct pigeonhole definition. These people are dangerous—not because they are necessarily of any importance in themselves, but because they may make the composer, above all the young composer, self-conscious, and instead of writing his own music, music that springs naturally from his gift and personality, he may be frightened into writing pretentious nonsense, or deliberate obscurity. He may find himself writing more and more for machines, in conditions dictated by machines, and not by humanity; or, of course, he may end by creating grandiose claptrap when his real talent is for dance tunes or children's piano pieces. Finding one's place in society as a composer is not a straightforward job. It is not helped by the attitude toward the composer of some societies.

My own, for instance, semi-socialist Britain, and conservative Britain before it, has for years treated the musician as a curiosity to be barely tolerated. At a tennis party in my youth I was asked what I was going to do when I grew up —what job I was aiming at. "I am going to be a composer," I said. "Yes, but what else?" was the answer. The average Briton thought, and still thinks, of the arts as suspect and expensive luxuries. The Manchester counselor who boasted he had never been to a concert and didn't intend to go is no very rare bird in England. By Act of Parliament, each local authority in England is empowered to spend a 6*d*. rate on the arts. In fact, it seems that few of them spend more than one twentieth of this—a sign of no very great enthusiasm! Until such a condition is changed, musicians will continue to feel out of step in our semi-welfare state.

But if we in England have to face a considerable indifference, in other countries conditions can have other, equally awkward effects. In totalitarian regimes, we know that great official pressure is brought to bring the artist into line and make him conform to the state's ideology. In the richer capitalist countries, money and snobbishness combine to de-

mand the latest, newest manifestations, which I am told go by the name in this country of Foundation Music.

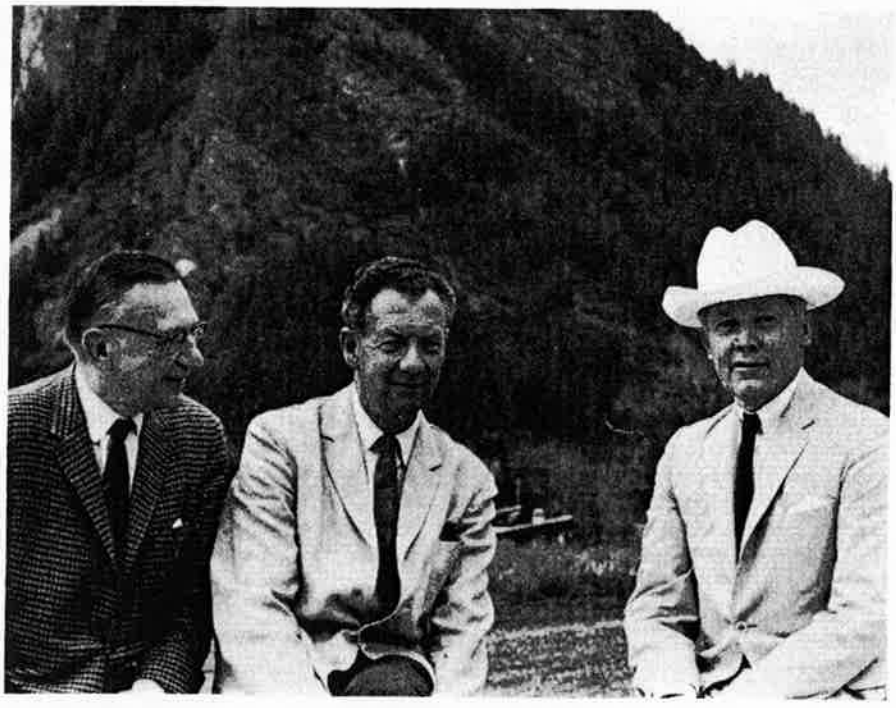
The *ideal* conditions for an artist or musician will never be found outside the *ideal* society, and when shall we see that? But I think I can tell you some of the things that any artist demands from any society. He demands that his art shall be accepted as an essential part of human activity and human expression; and that he shall be accepted as a genuine practitioner of that art and consequently of value to the community; reasonably, he demands a secure living from society, and a pension when he has worked long enough; this is a basis for society to offer a musician, a modest basis. In actual fact there are very few musicians in my country who will get a pension after forty years' work in an orchestra or in an opera house. This must be changed; we must at least be treated as civil servants. Once we have a material status, we can accept the responsibility of answering society's demands on us. And society should and will demand from us the utmost of our skill and gift in the full range of music-making. (Here we come back to occasional music.) There should be special music made and played for all sorts of occasions: football matches, receptions, elections (why not?), and even presentations of awards. I would have been delighted to have been greeted with a special piece composed for today. It might have turned out to be another piece as good as the cantata Bach wrote for the municipal election at Muhlhausen, or the Galliard that Dowland wrote as a compliment to the Earl of Essex. Some of the greatest pieces of music in our possession were written for special occasions, grave or gay. But we shouldn't worry too much about the so-called permanent value of our occasional music. A lot of it cannot make much sense after its first performance, and it is quite a good thing to please people even if only for today.

That is what we should aim at—pleasing people today as seriously as we can, and letting the future look after itself. Bach wrote his *St. Matthew Passion* for performance on one day of the year only—the day which in the Christian church was the culmination of the year, to which the year's worship was leading. It is one of the unhappiest results of the march of science and commerce that this unique work, at the turn of a switch, is at the mercy of any loud roomful of cocktail drinkers—to be listened to or switched off at will, without ceremony or occasion.

The wording of your institute's constitution implies an effort to present the arts as a counterbalance to science in today's life. And though I am sure you do not imagine that there is not a lot of science, knowledge, and skill in the art of making music (in the calculation of sound qualities and colors, the knowledge of the technique of instruments and voices, the balance of forms, the creation of moods and the development of ideas), I would like to think you are suggesting that what is important in the arts is not the scientific part, the analyzable part of music, but the something that emerges from it but transcends it, which cannot be analyzed because it is not in it, but of it. It is the quality which cannot be acquired by simply the exercise of a technique or a system: It is something to do with personality, with gift, with spirit. I simply call it magic—quality which would appear to be by no means unacknowledged by scientists, and which I value more than any other part of music.

It is arguable that the richest and most productive eighteen months in our music history is the time when Beethoven had just died, when the other nineteenth-century giants, Wagner, Verdi, and Brahms, had not begun; I mean the period in which Franz Schubert wrote the *Winterreise*, the C-Major Symphony, his last three Piano Sonatas, the C-Major String Quintet, as well as a dozen other glorious pieces. The very creation of these works in that space of time seems hardly credible; but the standard of inspiration, of magic, is miraculous and past all explanation. Though I have worked very hard at the *Winterreise* the last five years, every time I come back to it I am amazed not only by the extraordinary mastery of it—for Schubert knew exactly what he was doing (make no mistake about that) and he had thought profoundly about it. But each time the magic is renewed, and the mystery remains. This magic comes only with the sounding of the music, with the turning of the written note into sound—and it only comes (or comes most intensely) when the listener is one with the composer, either as performer himself or as a listener in active sympathy. Simply to read a score in one's armchair is not enough for evoking this quality. Indeed, this magic can be said to consist of just the music that is not in the score. Sometimes one can be quite daunted when one opens the *Winterreise*—there seems to be nothing on the page. One must not exaggerate; the shape of the music and its substance is perfectly clear—sometimes, as in his last great B Flat Sonata, elaborately so. What cannot be indicated on the printed page are the innumerable small variants of rhythm and phrasing which make up the performer's contribution. In the *Winterreise*, it was not possible for Schubert to indicate exactly the length of rests and pauses, or the color of the singer's voice or the clarity or smoothness of consonants. This is the responsibility of each individual performer, and at each performance he will make modifications. The composer expects him to; he would be foolish if he did not. For a musical experience needs three human beings at least. It requires a composer, a performer, and a listener; and unless these three take part together there is no musical experience.

The experience will be that much more



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Britten at Aspen with Alvin C. Eurich, president of the Aspen Institute (left), and Robert O. Anderson, creator of the Award.

intense and rewarding if the circumstances correspond to what the composer intended: if the *St. Matthew Passion* is performed on Good Friday in a church, to a congregation of Christians; if the *Winterreise* is performed in a room, or in a small hall of truly intimate character to a circle of friends: if *Don Giovanni* is played to an audience which understands the text and appreciates the musical allusions. The further one departs from these circumstances, the less true and more diluted is the experience likely to be. One must face the fact today that the vast majority of musical performances takes place as far away from the original as it is possible to imagine. I do not mean simply *Falstaff* being given in Tokyo, or the Mozart Requiem in Madras. I mean, of course, that such works can be audible in any corner of the globe, at any moment of the day or night—through a loudspeaker, without question of suitability or comprehensibility. Anyone, anywhere, at any time, can listen to the B-Minor Mass upon one condition only: that they possess a machine. No qualification is required of any sort—faith, virtue, education, experience, age. Music is now free for all. If I say the loudspeaker is principal enemy of music, I don't mean that I am not grateful to it as a means of education or study, or as an envoker of memories. But it is not part of true musical experience. Regarded as such, it is simply a substitute, and dangerous because deluding. Music demands more from a listener than simply the possession of a tape machine or a transistor radio. It demands some preparation, some effort—a journey to a special place, saving up for a ticket, some homework on the program perhaps, some clarification of the ears and sharpening of the instincts. It demands as much effort on the listener's part as the other two corners of the triangle, this holy triangle of composer, performer, and listener.

This award is the latest of the kindnesses for which I am indebted to your country. I first came to the United States twenty-five years ago, at the time when I was a discouraged young composer—muddled, fed up and looking for work, looking to be used. I was most generously treated here, by old and new friends, and to all of these I can never be sufficiently grateful. Their kindness was past description; I shall never forget it. But the thing I am most grateful to your country for is this: It was in California, in the unhappy summer of 1941, that, coming across a copy of the poetical works of George Crabbe in a Los Angeles bookshop, I first read his poem of *Peter Grimes;* and, at this same time reading a most perceptive and revealing article about it by E. M. Forster, I suddenly realized where I belonged and what I lacked. I had become without roots, and when I got back to England six months later I was ready to put them down. I have lived since then in the same small corner of East Anglia, near where I was born. And I find as I get older that working becomes more and more difficult away from that home. I plot and plan my music when I am away on tour, and I get great stimulus and excitement from visiting other countries. With a congenial partner, I like giving concerts, and in the last years we have traveled as far as Vancouver and Tokyo, Moscow and Java. I like making new friends, meeting new audiences, hearing. new music. But I belong at home—there—in Aldeburgh. I have tried to bring music to it in the shape of our local festival; and all the music I write comes from it. I believe in roots, in associations, in backgrounds, in personal relationships. I want my music to be of use to people, to please them, to "enhance their lives" (to use Berenson's phrase). I do not write for posterity; in any case, the outlook for that is somewhat uncertain. I write music, now, in Aldeburgh, for people living there, and further afield, indeed for anyone who cares to play it or listen to it. But my music now has its roots in where I live and work. And I only came to realize that in California in 1941.

People have already asked me what I am going to do with your money; I have even been told in the post and press exactly how I ought to dispose of it. I shall of course pay no attention to these suggestions, however well or ill-intentioned.

The last prize I was given went straight away to the Aldeburgh Festival, the musical project I have most at heart. It would not surprise me if a considerable part of the Aspen award went in that direction; I have not really decided. But one thing I know I want to do; I should like to give an annual Aspen prize for a British composition. The conditions would change each year. One year it might be for a work for young voices and a school orchestra, another year for the celebration of a national event or centenary, another time a work for an instrument whose repertory is small—but in any case for specific or general usefulness. And the jury would be instructed to choose only that work which was a pleasure to perform and inspiriting to listen to. In this way I would try to express my interpretation of the intention behind the Aspen Institute, and to express my warmest thanks, my most humble thanks, for the unbelievable honor which you have awarded me today.

—BENJAMIN BRITTEN.

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