

TEMPO

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

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BRITTEN AT 50

Britten's fiftieth year has been a succession of memorable occasions, from the first London performance of the War Requiem at Westminster Abbey on December 6th 1962, followed shortly after by the first 'secular' one at the Royal Albert Hall, to the concert performance of *Gloriana* at the Royal Festival Hall on the 50th birthday itself, with another repeat of the War Requiem, at the Royal Festival Hall, before 1963 is out. The instantaneous, and world-wide, success of this work recalls the response to *Peter Grimes*, and has established it as a modern classic that seems to have been with us much more than a mere eighteen months. During the past twelve months it has been heard in more than a dozen foreign cities, from Berlin to Boston, including Prague, Paris and Perugia, while the Decca recording of it has sold 200,000 copies in only five months.

There were also many more intimate occasions, on two of which Britten responded to enthusiastic demonstrations with speeches of characteristic modesty. At Orton Hall he said that it was impossible to tell yet whether, in the 'river' of musical history, he was a ripple or a wave; and at the Macnaghten Concert that he had sometimes had the feeling during the year, under the weight of the birthday celebrations, that he was really dead. Certainly few composers in their lifetime have received such acclaim before their 75th birthday, if at all. Happily for us he is not only alive but still in his prime, and as fecund as ever. Besides the 'Cantata Misericordium', 'Psalm 150', and the 'Night Piece' for piano, which are all the subject of articles in this issue, he has in his fiftieth year completed his first major orchestral work since the 'Sinfonia da Requiem', the 'Cello Symphony', on which Professor Peter Evans contributes an extended study that whets the appetite for a performance. Originally planned for the Aldeburgh Festival this year, its first performance had to be postponed owing to Rostropovich's illness, and will now take place in Moscow, on March 12th 1964.

Rostropovich, whose playing has now inspired two large-scale works from Britten, is one of the contributors to the *Tribute to Benjamin Britten on his Fiftieth Birthday*, a collection of essays by his friends, edited by Anthony Gishford (a former editor of *Tempo*) and published by Faber at 2 guineas. Aaron Copland and Clifford Curzon, like Rostropovich, recall personal encounters with Britten, but most of the remaining two dozen pieces are not about him but simply birthday offerings on some subject of the author's choice—such as E. M. Forster's fascinating chapter from an unfinished novel, with his own commentary, William Plomer's essay on Edward Fitzgerald, or the botanical 'capriccio' by Robert Gathorne-Hardy. This agreeable miscellany is a first-rate example of the 'Festschrift', a type of publication that has never taken hold here very strongly. A birthday publication of more exclusively musical interest is the new complete catalogue of Britten's works (Boosey & Hawkes, 7/6), a welcome and extremely useful work of reference—which, however, in making our own birthday salutation, we hope the composer will soon put out of date on every page.