

*Early Mentors**The Bridges, the Auden Set, and the Mayers of Long Island**Arnold Whittall*

Guide, advisor, teacher, tutor – the connotations of ‘mentor’ are unambiguous enough, and the relationships that arise between the precociously talented young and older, more experienced acquaintances outside the immediate family are invariable matters of interest to biographers and critics. But moving from the conviction that Benjamin Britten was one of the greatest twentieth-century composers to specifying what that greatness might have owed to anyone and anything other than his own innate genius is not a simple matter. It is easy to succumb to the lure of speculation and to the kind of wishful thinking that risks turning into something closer to a portrait of the writer than of the subject of the writing.

Britten first met the composer and conductor Frank Bridge (1879–1941) as a fourteen-year-old schoolboy in 1927, had lessons with him for several years and remained in close contact with Bridge and his violinist wife until Britten’s move to America in 1939. He first met W. H. Auden (1907–73) on joining the GPO Film Unit in 1935, and soon encountered several of Auden’s literary associates, including Christopher Isherwood, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender. While in America (1939–42), Britten and Peter Pears lived for a time in Auden’s New York house, after a spell with the Mayer family on Long Island: William, a doctor, with his music-loving wife Elizabeth and their four children, were German immigrants who Pears had met on his first visit to America with the New English Singers in 1936.

There are obvious and fundamental differences between the raffish bohemianism of Auden and his worldly-wise friends and colleagues and the much more conventional domestic circumstances of the Bridges and the Mayers, but there is clear evidence of Britten’s appreciation of the greater experience and sophistication they could offer. To Auden and his circle he came across as a charming, rather childlike character, despite his remarkable musical talents and compositional maturity, as is clear from a 1942 letter to him from Auden quoted below. As late as 1939 Bridge

described him in a letter as his 'quasi-adopted son', and a similar spirit is evident when the Mayers refer to Britten and Pears as 'boys' and even as 'children' within a warm and appreciative family circle.¹ But it is not easy to determine the degree to which that quotidian dependence moved beyond practical day-to-day physical and professional matters to do with friendship and collaboration to impact the essential elements of Britten's musical thinking.

Understandably, the genres in which Britten worked most intensively were those which also involved his closest friends and associates – primarily Pears – after 1938. Yet while certain specifics of style can be connected to the musical characteristics of the person in question, the ways in which such specifics were creatively deployed probably owed more to Britten's own choices and predispositions than to the advice or even the example of the particular friend or associate. Nevertheless, the years between the ages of twelve and twenty-six are, conventionally speaking, formative, and the extreme precociousness of the talented does not preclude the anxieties and uncertainties of immaturity. The Bridges, the Mayers, and Auden and his associates all contributed to the social and aesthetic context within which Britten was able to produce his substantial tally of early compositions, and while a complete different set of mentors and friends could have had an identical effect, the distinctive qualities of those who actually filled these roles are what matters here. Britten might not have produced his *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* had he not been an admiring student, and might not have written *Our Hunting Fathers*, *On this Island*, or *Paul Bunyan* without personal contact with Auden. However, the aesthetic and technical qualities that make those works distinctive cannot be completely divorced from the personal qualities of Bridge and Auden. Those qualities were part of what Britten was able and willing to absorb into the subtle intonations of his personal compositional voice.

Britten's ability to form confident and defensible musical judgements, about his own work as well as that of others, is clear from his earliest letters and diary entries. His resistance to what seemed to him the cosier forms of musical nationalism, as embodied in the romanticised, often folkloric effusiveness of much mainstream British music of the 1920s and 1930s, could be a matter of instinctive affinity with Bridge rather than the exclusive product of their acquaintanceship: and did the relative astringency and coolness of Auden's literary style match rather than

¹ Elizabeth Mayer to Britten, 6 May 1941, *LFAL* II, L311: 913–14.

determine the predispositions evident in Britten's early musical style and preferred subject matter? Mentors provide sympathetic environments in which innate predispositions can flourish, or emerge from the gradual working-out of uninhibited debates; otherwise, the extended and mutually fruitful relationships on which the mentor–mentored connection depends would be unlikely to take root. It could well be that one of Britten's crucial attributes as an emerging talent was not to be terminally discouraged by the inevitable tensions that arose with those disposed to criticise him – including Bridge and Auden – but to use his core of self-belief not just to counter the self-doubt that criticism created but to know (instinctively?) how to turn such tensions to positive creative account.

Judgements about Bridge's mentoring of Britten have owed much to Britten's own retrospective account ('Britten Looking Back') from 1963.² Though one might suspect a touch of false modesty in Britten's conclusion, at the age of fifty, that 'I haven't yet achieved the simplicity that I should like in my music, and I am enormously aware that I haven't yet come up to the technical standards Bridge set me', it is entirely understandable that belief in the possibility of 'doing even better' is what keeps the creative impulse going even in the most successful and artistically fulfilled composers.³ As to what Bridge's standards were, Britten says only that 'in everything he did for me, there were perhaps two cardinal principles. One was that you should try to find yourself and be true to what you found. The other – obviously connected with it – was his scrupulous attention to good technique, the business of saying clearly what was in one's mind.'⁴ This was written in the 1960s, at a time when Britten was very conscious of the radical and often complex factors concerning many of his younger contemporaries, and on the rare occasions when he gave advice to other composers – Richard Rodney Bennett and Jonathan Harvey are examples – it was clear that he had a certain confidence in his ability to sense when things worked well and when 'saying clearly what was in one's mind' seemed to be less evident.

Near the end of his centennial biography, Paul Kildea wrote of the 'undiminished vigour' of Britten's later works: 'the scores conform on every page to Britten's resolution in the 1960s to strip back his music to its bare essentials, Bridge's stern example ever on his mind'.⁵ But Britten's

² 'Britten Looking Back', in *PKBM*, 250–3.

³ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *PKBB*, 557.

earlier music was less intensively devoted to 'bare essentials', in part at least because of one matter on which 'Bridge and Britten did eventually agree to disagree'.⁶ With Mahler, 'Bridge was sceptical; Britten, by contrast, was an early admirer and advocate, and retained a lifelong affection for Mahler's music.'⁷ The Violin Concerto and the *Sinfonia da Requiem* are probably Britten's most overtly Mahlerian works, though the closing section of the *Nocturne* (1958), the final bars of *Death in Venice* and parts of the Third String Quartet all have the kind of Mahlerian echoes that Bridge might not have been entirely happy with.

As he developed from schoolboy to college student to young professional composer and performer, Britten's admiration for Bridge's anti-establishment qualities as teacher, composer, and conductor may well have intensified; Britten's diaries and letters from these years underline his disdain for the casualness, amateurishness, and even downright ineptitude of his teachers at the Royal College of Music (RCM), and what he then saw as the limitations of prominent figures at the heart of the performing establishment like the conductor Adrian Boult. Nevertheless, the image of Bridge as a musician whose ideals were making him a relatively marginal figure in middle age might not have seemed the best possible model for an ambitious young composer: and in any case, the Bridges were of Britten's parents' generation, suited to nurturing as much as to mentoring, and in many ways sharing his parents' conventional social attitudes. By 1935, with scores like the *Sinfonietta* and *A Boy was Born* already behind him, and beginning to work for the GPO Film Unit, Britten was in contact with men whose anti-establishment aesthetic and political and sexual orientations he found compelling. His diary for 5 July 1935 records a visit to Colwall, near Malvern, where he and Basil Wright 'talk over matters for films with Wystan Auden [...]. Auden is the most amazing man, a very brilliant & attractive personality'.⁸

Over the next two years Britten would begin to set Auden's verse, and a diary entry for 1 March 1937 shows how radically his links with Auden and his 'gang' were bringing more political perspectives to bear on his judgements, while remaining inherently intimidating in their confidence and arrogance. He reports on a

long and lovely walk along the Downs with FB before lunch. Conversations – he is a fine thinker, but [*unlike Auden, he possibly implies*] not so domineering

⁶ John Evans (ed.), in *BB/B*, 49.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *BB/B*, D (5 July 1935), 269.

as to prevent any observations from myself. I feel that he has a rather precious & escapist view of art – but that is typical of his generation – & eminently excusable. But his enthusiasm for music & his understanding of the classics is a tremendous virtue.⁹

A few months later, around the time of the premiere of *On this Island*, Marjorie Fass, who was close to the Bridges and also to Britten, would write to a friend about Bridge's irritation at 'Britten's affiliation with the Auden gang'.¹⁰ Fass wrote: 'The thing that is bad for him is that he's meeting brilliant people who are not brilliant in his sphere, but their own, & so make a mutual admiration society.'¹¹ It was particularly clear that in 1937 – perhaps in reaction to having written the intensely appreciative tribute, that is, the *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* in June and July of that year – Britten was finding it necessary to distance himself to some degree from Bridge (see diary for 26 October) as his contacts with 'the Auden gang' flourished.¹² On 25 June 1937, he wrote that 'I meet Christopher Isherwood for a meal and have a grand evening, sitting, walking and talking with him. He gives me grand advice about many things, and he being a grand person I shall possibly take it.'¹³ By 29 July, he was writing that 'Isherwood is an awful dear, & I am terribly tempted always to make him a father confessor'.¹⁴

It was all too easy for talented twenty-somethings, without any experience of the First World War, to find preciousness and escapism in the art of even their most respected seniors. The shift in Britten's perception of Bridge might have briefly intensified the brittle qualities of his music, as in the cabaret songs and the Piano Concerto (1938), another work about which Bridge was sceptical. But Britten was too self-aware and too self-doubting to bask for long in the warm but domineering glow of the 'mutual admiration society'. From 1936 until 1942, when Britten and Pears returned to England from America, there were many interactions between Auden and the composer, and a celebrated photograph, taken in New York in 1941, seems to capture the essence of their fruitful yet uneasy relationship. Britten, slightly in the background, looks thoughtful, even a little petulant, whereas Auden, cigarette in hand, appears altogether more confident.

⁹ BB/B, D (1 March 1937), 413.

¹⁰ HCBB, 114.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² BB/B, D (26 October 1937), 459–60.

¹³ BB/B, D (25 June 1937), 439.

¹⁴ BB/B, 446.

Auden was one of Britten's many collaborators: but in what sense was he also a mentor? The years 1939–42 were very decisive for Britten both personally and musically – the years when his relationship with Peter Pears became permanent, when both agreed that England (even in wartime) and not America had to be their home, and in which Britten's feeling for vocal, and especially operatic music owing more to Italian than to German traditions, began to emerge. As is well known, however, Auden's work with composers after 1942 (often in conjunction with his partner Chester Kallman), reached its apogee with Igor Stravinsky and later Hans Werner Henze, not Britten. As with Bridge, it seems that Britten saw Auden less as a model to follow in awe and admiration and more as a serious and impressive artist through whose life and work he, Britten, might appreciate his own creative potential and practical needs more clearly and confidently. At the very beginning of a professional career where the best initial opportunities were in music for film, theatre and radio, Britten proved his versatility and efficiency in producing scores for films like *Night Mail* and the Auden–Isherwood stage dramas *The Ascent of F6* and *On the Frontier*. He also produced some cabaret songs which demonstrate his easy facility for jazz-oriented club culture on the one hand and the more earnestly leftist political counterculture of Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Weill, and Hans Eisler on the other. Nevertheless, Britten's experience of living close to Auden in New York in the early 1940s was that such essentially metropolitan bohemianism (with its overtly sexualised behaviour catering as much to bisexual as to homosexual preferences) was not for him. His awareness of this was probably one of the factors that fuelled Britten's conviction that he should return to England, and to Suffolk, despite the hazards of wartime voyages through U-boat-infested waters.

Auden's view of what Britten's potential was – and with it his most determined attempt to influence and advise his friend by an unsparingly frank diagnosis of his apparent weaknesses, sexual and psychological – can be read in a letter written soon after the failure of their joint operatic project in New York, *Paul Bunyan*, and just before Britten and Pears began their perilous journey back to England.¹⁵ At its heart was Auden's suspicion that Britten was constitutionally unable to storm the artistic heights of the epic or tragic themes that he admired in Wagner (*Tristan*) or Strauss (*Elektra*). Auden seemed not to understand that (in all

¹⁵ W. H. Auden to Britten, 31 January 1942, *LFAL* II, L364: 1015–16.

probability) Britten already knew he had to do the best he could as best he could according to his temperament. With the prospect of *Peter Grimes* as a way of positively countering the failings of *Bunyan* already taking shape in his mind, Britten could well have found Auden's homily (though strictly speaking unnecessary) most useful in reinforcing his innate awareness that using compression and immediacy to further intensity was the technical and expressive route he had to follow, and that modern 'dis-ease' could be most effectively projected by the simplest possible means. The disciplined yet accessible contemporaneity that suffuses Auden's writings in the late 1930s and early 1940s might well have struck Britten most forcibly as the kind of relatively cool, uncomplacent shunning of romantic and pastoral banality that he sought in his music to distinguish it from most of what he found wanting in other contemporary British composers. To this extent, Auden was indeed a significant mentor, despite the difference of medium.

Auden's bald observation in his 1942 letter that 'wherever you go you are and probably always will be surrounded by people who adore you, nurse you, and praise everything you do' included a reference to Elizabeth Mayer as one of Britten's American nurse-adorers.¹⁶ The contrast between the domestic tranquillity of the Mayers' establishment in Amityville, Long Island and Auden's bohemian squalor in New York City surely confirmed Britten's recognition that his otherness was sufficiently defined by pacifism and same-sex relationships, and did not need bolstering with elements of political or cultural extremism. The capacity of pacifist tenets and homosexuality to combine with a bourgeois, community-serving lifestyle would determine the nature of Britten's well-ordered, somewhat sanitised *modus vivendi* in Aldeburgh, Suffolk for the rest of his life. That such an existence was never anxiety- or guilt-free was proof of the value of 'suffering' to the creative enterprise, as noted by Auden in his letter. For those closest to Britten, it might have seemed that from a very early stage he needed friendly collaborators, along with servants; subordinates, rather than mentors; or, especially in his years of illness, facilitators who would offer deferential advice if requested to do so.

But, it was in Britten's nature to resist potentially intrusive mentoring as much as to invite it: in August 1940 he wrote to his sister Beth Welford that 'Mrs Mayer, darling as she is, is inclined to put people's backs up by

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1015–16.

not being tactful'.¹⁷ Here, Britten was surely acknowledging a characteristic he himself also displayed in abundance. Earlier, he had written more positively to Enid Slater that Mrs Mayer 'is one of those grand people who have been essential through the ages for the production of art; really sympathetic and enthusiastic, with instinctive good taste (in all the arts)' and 'one of the few really good people in this world – & I find her essential in these times when one has rather lost faith in human nature'.¹⁸ His occasional but heartfelt letters to Mrs Mayer after his return to England retain a strong sense of their personal rapport. In the first he reported that 'so far people have been very nice to me, and there has been no suggestion of vindictiveness. In one or two places, over-kindness, which makes one suspicious.'¹⁹ His preoccupation with work on *Peter Grimes* would soon detach him further from nostalgia for the nurturing environment of Long Island, but in this first letter, he wrote of 'a provincialism & lack of vitality that makes one yearn for the other side' and confessed that 'I miss you more than I can say'.²⁰ In 1942, rising twenty-nine, he was still reluctant to turn his back completely on the understanding mentors of his youth.

¹⁷ Britten to Beth Wofford, 25 August 1940, *LFAL* II, L284: 847–8.

¹⁸ Britten to Enid Slater, 7 November 1939, *LFAL* II, L219: 724.

¹⁹ Britten to Elizabeth Mayer, 4 May 1942, *LFAL* II, L374: 1037.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1038.