

BUILDING CULTURAL BRIDGES: BENJAMIN BRITTEN AND RUSSIA

Book Review of *Benjamin Britten and Russia*, by Cameron Pyke

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Benjamin Britten visited Soviet Russia during a time of great trial for Soviet artists and intellectuals. Between the years of 1963 and 1971, he made six trips, four formal and two private. During this time, the communist regime within the Soviet Union was at its heyday, and bureaucratization of culture served as a propaganda tool to gain totalitarian control over all spheres of public activity. This was also a period during which the international political situation was turbulent; the Cold War was at its height with ongoing issues of nuclear armaments, the tensions among the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom ebbed and flowed, and the atmosphere of unrest was heightened by the Vietnam War. It was not until the early 1990s that the Iron Curtain collapsed, and the Cold War finally ended.

While the 1960s were economically and culturally prosperous for Western Europe, those same years were tough for communist Eastern Europe, where the people still suffered from the aftermath of Stalin thwarting any attempts of artistic openness and creativity. As a result, certain efforts were made to build cultural bridges between West and East, including efforts that were significantly aided by Britten's engagements. In his book *Benjamin Britten and Russia*, Cameron Pyke portrays the bridging of the vast gulf achieved through Britten's interactions with the Soviet Union, drawing skillfully from historical and cultural contextualization, Britten's and Pears's personal accounts, interviews, musical scores, a series of articles about Britten published in the Soviet Union, and discussions of cultural and political figures of the time.¹

In the seven chapters of his book, Pyke brings to light the nature of Britten's six visits and offers detailed accounts of Britten's affection for Russian music and culture. Pyke describes the relationship between this affection and Britten's own work, focusing on Britten's connections with Russian musicians such as Dmitri Shostakovich, Mstislav Rostropovich and his wife Galina Vishnevskaya, and Sviatoslav Richter. In addition, each chapter peels back another layer of Britten's simultaneous cultural *Russophilia* and political *Russophobia*. Pyke uses these terms to distinguish between differing sides of the composer's views, and he carefully alternates between the two (paying special attention to the latter) to avoid making any political insinuations against the composer. While *Russophilia* encompasses an admiration of Russian people, their rich culture, history, and, of course, musical art, *Russophobia* alludes to the United Kingdom's ambivalent political engagements and conflicts with Russia which often resulted in sustained periods of tension.² The primary purpose of Britten's visits was to serve as a cultural ambassador between not only the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, but also between an open Western Europe and an estranged, isolated communist Eastern Europe. Although Pyke's focus is on the historical and musical importance of Britten's multifaceted engagement with the Soviet Union, it is through these political backdrops that he delves deeper into the complexities which characterized the Anglo-Soviet relations during Britten's lifetime.

Pyke's thorough research of the origins and development of Britten's interest in Russia opens with *Russophilia* and suggests that Britten's copy of May Brown's children's book, *A Day With Tchaikovsky*, shaped

¹ Cameron Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2016).

² Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia*, 21. According to Pyke, Britten's genuine interest in Russian music and its rich tradition predominated over the political nature of his visits, which made the use of these opposing terms effective and helpful to clarify the difference between the two.

the composer's high esteem for both Tchaikovsky and Russia. In addition to offering insight into Britten's lifelong *Russophilia*, chapter one also examines the composer's musical tastes, his own brief accounts written while in Russia, and the thematic use of Russian tradition in his works. In chapter two, Pyke presents Britten's connections with Shostakovich, describing their mutual engagements and interests which fueled a creative relationship in each other's works. It is Britten's friendship with Shostakovich that scholars now increasingly recognize as an important aspect of Britten's creative persona during the last fifteen years of his life. Chapter three is dedicated to Britten's interest and relationship with the music of Sergei Prokofiev. Although there is no evidence that the two men ever met in person, Pyke suggests that there are various similarities between them, such as having "a powerful sense of melodic line and understanding of instrumental sonority, a significant number of imaginative works for children, an abiding interest in writing for the stage, and high-profile performance activity from formative years, both as a pianist and conductor."³

In contrast with these more positive connections, chapter four addresses both Britten's interest in Stravinsky as well as what might have caused the ambiguous and complex attitudes between them. This chapter introduces their interactions and explains how Britten's personal relationship with Stravinsky eventually deteriorated. At this point, Pyke turns to the lens of *Russophobia*, suggesting that Britten did not hide his dismay for certain Soviet actions, such as their refusal to allow Galina Vishnevskaya to sing at the premiere of his *War Requiem* in 1962, or the Soviet invasion of then-Czechoslovakia in 1968. Since any artistic discourse pertaining to the Soviet Union is almost impossible without including politics, Pyke titled chapter five "Hospitality and Politics," concentrating on Anglo-Soviet cultural relations of the time. This chapter also reflects on Britten's fourth and fifth visits to the Soviet Union (in 1965 and 1967), which "appear to have been essentially private occasions orchestrated by Rostropovich [and his wife] Vishnevskaya, only periodically interrupted by public performances."⁴ While Britten's formal visits often focused on official commitments such as attending concerts, concertizing his own works, and socializing at receptions, his private visits were focused on networking with the artistic elite, maintaining personal connections, or simply enjoying some time off in the countryside. Here Pyke also provides insights regarding limitations on Britten's music within the Soviet Union until the mid-to-late 1950s, times when even the works of Mosolov, Prokofiev, Roslavets, and Shostakovich were coming under fire from Stalin's authority. Although the state continued to control artistic expression and moderate anything modern that came from the West, the Soviet cultural scene finally started to slowly open up through Khrushchev's and Brezhnev's somewhat more flexible attitudes following Stalin's death in 1953. This "tolerance" allowed for new cultural initiatives, but a controlled alliance between the Soviet Union and the West remained.

In chapter six, Pyke shifts back to *Russophilia* with Britten's use of Alexander Pushkin's poems in his song cycle, *The Poet's Echo*. Considered as "the most obvious expression of Britten's Russian affinities," the work offers even more evidence of the composer's keen interest in collaborating with Russian artists.⁵ Britten's setting of Pushkin's work can further be interpreted as a "more calculated gesture, representing his response to the creative challenge of producing an authentic and highly condensed gesture of homage to Russia's great poet in a language with which he was unfamiliar."⁶ In addition, the political backdrop of this chapter suggests that with this very song cycle, Britten was also making a statement of strengthening the Anglo-Soviet relationship, a statement which likely would have been appreciated in the unenviable post-Stalin era. Since the Britten-Shostakovich relationship is a key thread throughout the book, the final chapter reinforces their relationship, Britten's sympathy for the composer, and the ways the two perceived and engaged with each other's works even before their first official meeting in 1960.

³ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia*, 84. While there are possible links between their compositions (e.g., *Peter and the Wolf* and *Paul Bunyan*, or some of their piano works), these assertions are mostly speculative.

⁴ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia*, 170.

⁵ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia*, 188.

⁶ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia*, 188.

In retrospect, Pyke's study shows how the complex pattern of Britten's engagements with Russia sprang from his constant personal curiosity for its cultural development within the realm of the overall complex and unpredictable political circumstances. He asserts that Britten's relationship with Russia was "a lifelong phenomenon . . . incorporating both musical and extra-musical elements . . . while [it was] also, to a degree, calculatingly professional and, perhaps above all else, artistically driven," implying that Britten's interest in Russia was primarily musical, but also unavoidably political.⁷ In order to support this, Pyke turns to a variety of English and Russian sources and draws from the leading scholars on Russian music such as Donald Mitchell, Eric Roseberry, and Lyudmila Kovnatskaya. In the appendix, Pyke lists relevant letters and interviews that complement the entire research and offer an increased understanding of the contexts of Britten's visits to the Soviet Union and his reception.

Without a doubt, this comprehensive study provides ample insight into Britten's genuine interest in and engagement with Russian music and culture; however, deeper and more refined details could have enhanced Pyke's explanations. Pyke neglects to further address the Soviets' visits to the West, which were likely carefully crafted and controlled. If included, those insights would help to better demonstrate how the West-East tensions were handled and to what extent each side was allowed to interact with the other. Furthermore, a comparison of the differences between the mutual visits in the highly complex political arena of the time would help to clarify how the Soviet communist regime worked, especially to those who are unfamiliar with the reality of an ultra-controlling system. Given that Britten had strong ties to British political establishments, it also remains unclear if there were more layers of meaning behind Britten's activities that were organized through the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the British Foreign Office. Since the British Foreign Office deemed that the political stance of the potential visitor to Russia was of critical importance, their choice to send Britten (Arthur Bliss, Michael Tippett, and William Walton were also considered) is telling; Britten was evidently the best fit, perhaps because his diplomatic and pacifist credentials coupled with his true interest in Russia, its history, and its music were bona fide and unpretentious. However, if Pyke could have provided deeper contexts of these accounts, the "uneasy relationship between cultural *Russophilia* and political *Russophobia*, which had characterized the United Kingdom's relations with Russia during Britten's lifetime" would have been clearer.⁸

Even without these more refined details, Pyke effectively transports us back to the 1960s and 1970s to demonstrate how Britten managed to build multiple bridges, serving as a high-profile cultural ambassador. More than that, Pyke stretches beyond this time frame to position Britten's role in a wider context of Russian history, beginning with an "abiding admiration for Tchaikovsky" and ending with the lingering popularity of Britten's music in post-Soviet Russia.⁹ Pyke looks back to Tsar Alexander II's attempts in the 1850s to plant seeds of *glasnost*—"openness." Britten may be seen as a catalyst sowing these seeds of *glasnost* through the cultural bridges he built in the mid-1900s. Pyke then moves forward to speculate what Britten's thoughts might be about post-1990 Russia, after *glasnost* finally came into fruition in the Gorbachev era. While Pyke highlights the composer's role in Anglo-Soviet relations, his book can benefit readers beyond Britten or Russian scholars. Since *Benjamin Britten and Russia* encompasses broad historical, musical, and political contexts, the rich accounts within this book would spark the interest of any reader exploring the history and culture of Europe in the twentieth century.

⁷ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia*, 9. Here Pyke also notes that Peter Pears often accompanied Britten on these journeys. Pears also had an interest in the musical culture of Russia, and he was equally engaged in endeavoring to help build cultural bridges between the West and East.

⁸ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia*, 9.

⁹ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia*, xi.

About the author

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