

Britten's got talent

Benjamin Britten's centenary celebrations will be global. Jessica Duchén says the humanity of his works gives this British hero universal appeal

Who do they think Benjamin Britten is? Mozart? That's the first thought that comes to my mind, gazing at the phenomenal programme of events for the centenary of the composer's birth, which falls next November. It's the most widely celebrated anniversary of any British composer, ever. Few composers worldwide could compete. Wagner and Verdi, whose bicentenaries are both due next year, won't stand a chance.

The UK's musical life will be dominated by Britten while this goes on – his image will even appear on a new 50p coin. The Britten 100 online diary currently lists more than 1,150 events worldwide, and rising. Britten is the only British composer who has gone truly global, and the international roster of performances, books, films, exhibitions, festivals, broadcasts and commissions proves the point. Russia, where he is well-known, will enjoy high-profile commemorations, but anniversary events also pop up in corners of the globe where he is less recognised, among them Chile, Brazil, China, the Palestinian Territories and possibly the Amazon rainforest.

Britten's artistic appeal and his strength as a figurehead for British music are so compelling that he has been excused certain things for which, in another age, he might well have been shredded by the tabloids. He was a pacifist and a conscientious objector during the Second World War; and in an era when homosexuality was still illegal, he enjoyed a publicly accepted relationship with the tenor Peter Pears, who he got to know in 1937 and for whom he created some of his finest operatic roles.

Even his tendency to be attracted to adolescent boys (scrutinised in John Bridcut's book and documentary *Britten's Children*) is forgiven – it's worth noting that no charges were ever brought against him. Nevertheless, he can seem an unlikely hero for a country that has virtually a national obsession with paedophiles.

British music has never travelled easily. Even Elgar has had an uphill struggle abroad. With Britten, though, it's a different story. His opera *Peter Grimes*, in its first three years from 1945, was performed at Sadler's Wells (and thence on tour around the UK), the Royal Opera House, Antwerp, Brussels, Rome, La Scala, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Mannheim, Hamburg, Berlin, Tanglewood, the Met in New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Boston, Stanford University, Graz, Basel, Zurich, Brno, Budapest, Paris and Sydney. "It's incredible,"



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BY NICK BARRATT

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says Richard Jarman, director of the Britten-Pears Foundation, the driving force behind the celebrations. "Name a British opera apart from Gilbert and Sullivan that had ever been seen beyond these shores. Almost overnight, Britten made the world take British music seriously."

This global reach is a multifaceted matter. In his lifetime, Britten was fortunate to have a range of influential friends and contacts to help spread the word and inspire him to new heights – notably some towering Russian musicians, the pianist Sviatoslav Richter, cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and the composer Dmitri Shostakovich. And he possessed the ability to build a power base that bolstered his reputation

Almost overnight, Britten made the world take British music seriously

and continues to do so today. Born in Lowestoft, Suffolk, the son of a dentist, Britten was prodigiously gifted from the start. He took private composition lessons with Frank Bridge before progressing to the Royal College of Music in 1930. His mother squashed his dream of studying with Alban Berg, opining that the Austrian genius was "not a good influence". The young "Benji" could have followed a conventional, unambitious path through the British musical scene, involving academia or the BBC. Instead, he started his career as a jobbing musician, for instance writing film scores – adapting his abilities to whatever the task in hand happened to be.

Paul Kildea, whose new biography of Britten will be published in February, stresses the parochialism that made Britten reject the status quo. "We don't often recognise how poor the musical infrastructure in Britain was during the first decades of the 20th century," he says. "The standard of operatic performance was pretty poor until around 1950; the level of orchestral playing was probably just as low. When Britten travelled to Vienna and heard the Vienna Philharmonic, I think he had a sort of epiphany about the state of music in the UK." Britten

INTERNATIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

• Brazilian premiere of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', São Paulo (March 2013)

• 'Peter Grimes' performed on the beach during the Aldeburgh Festival (June 2013)

• Royal Opera House: 'Gloriana', new production by Richard Jones (June 2013)

• Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics give joint performance of the 'War Requiem' in Berlin conducted by Sir Simon Rattle (June 2013)

• Choir of London tours the Palestinian Territories (August 2013)

• Israeli premiere of 'Curlew River', Tel Aviv (September 2013)

• Focus on Britten at Tanglewood and Aspen Festivals, USA (August 2013)

• Opera North devotes entire season to Britten operas (from September 2013)

• Moscow Festival of Britten includes Russian premiere of 'Death in Venice' at Moscow Conservatoire and an exhibition at the Pushkin Museum (November 2013)

• 75,000 schoolchildren in the UK sing 'Friday Afternoons' simultaneously on Britten's centenary (22 November 2013)

Hitting the high notes: Benjamin Britten conducting in the 1960s (left); an Opera North production of 'Peter Grimes' (below) ERICH AUERBACH/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; BILL COOPER

likewise rejected the English pastoral tradition of music – the "cowpat school" – in favour of a pan-European outlook that found him influenced by Debussy, Schoenberg and Berg (from a distance). Crucially, his music retained its ability to communicate with a wide audience at a time when many other composers were losing this in the thickets of avant-garde serialism.

But there was an extramusical element to Britten's international success story: that gift for building power bases. Partly that was a function of his personality. He was, according to Kildea, a perfectionist and rather a control freak, slow to trust others and preferring to give performances only under conditions he could determine himself. Without the support of that power base, might Britten be less well-known today? It's possible. The cellist Matthew Barley, who will be travelling the UK with 100 events in an Around Britten tour of the solo cello suites, suggests that Britten's oeuvre is yet to find its true level.

"I've been in love with Britten's cello suites forever," he says, "but I don't think all of his output is equally great. No composer, not even Beethoven, had a complete output of works that are all equally great. Perhaps Britten is slightly overplayed in the UK – we tend to perform anything and everything. Time does an excellent editing process with a composer's works: usually only the best survive. This hasn't yet had a chance to happen with Britten."

Nevertheless, there's no denying the power of Britten at his best, especially his operas. He has become the most-performed opera composer born in the 20th century and the quality of such works as *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd* and *The Turn of the Screw* has only become more evident with the passing of time.

"When you hear Britten's music... you become aware of something dark," the conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein once commented. "There are gears that are grinding and not quite meshing, and they make a great pain." Barley picks up on that quote, remarking: "He's spot-on. And isn't that a perfect description of us all?"

More information about Benjamin Britten and the centenary celebrations: britten100.org

The gossip on a fresh batch of A-list actors

As *Gossip Girl* ends, fan **Sarah Hughes** assesses the star potential of its cast

It contains some long words, it was the ultimate guilty pleasure. A frothy soufflé about the lives and loves of privileged teens on Manhattan's Upper East Side, which you knew you shouldn't watch but somehow could never quite switch off. Sadly all teen dramas, even those hailed (only half-jokingly) by *New York* magazine as "The Greatest Show of Our Time", come to an end, and thus tomorrow night sees the final episode of *Gossip Girl* after six seasons of betrayal, brooding and bitchiness.

Will tormented trust-funder Chuck marry neurotic queen bee Blair? And if he does, will their honeymoon be spent in a limo but on the lam following the death of Chuck's hated father Bart? Can golden girl Serena, a cut-price Daisy Buchanan with a fondness for reinvention, find solace in Hollywood – or will she settle instead for a lifetime of waffles and angst in Brooklyn with aspiring novelist Dan?

What of Dan's sister Jenny, she of the raccoon-eyes and permanently laddered tights? And Eric, Serena's little brother, the only well-adjusted member of the gang? Will the exiled Vanessa return for one more self-righteous rant about the horrors of Manhattan versus the wonders of Brooklyn? Will Lily and Rufus ever mention their briefly glimpsed love child again? Most importantly, just who is *Gossip Girl* – and will Chuck's best friend, the lovely if laid-back Nate Archibald, locate what passes for his brain long enough to expose her?

While old fans will tune in one last time to uncover the answers, *Gossip Girl*'s demise is no surprise. The show has fallen a long way from its glory days, when a combination of acerbic wit and high fashion made its young cast the toast of New York, earning them a *Rolling Stone* cover in the process. In part, that's due to the graduation curse – all teen shows fall apart once the characters move from high school towards adulthood – although it didn't help that the writers seemed determined to pile twist upon twist

(Chuck's mother is dead, she's alive, she's Elizabeth Hurley... or is she?) even as the dialogue slipped from knowingly sending-up soap operas to simply sounding like a bad example of the genre.

With the end in sight, the post-*Gossip Girl* jostling has begun as the cast wait to discover who will become their generation's Michelle Williams (from *Dawson's Creek* to Oscar bait) and who'll pull the Ian Ziering short straw and end up as the answer to a trivia question in a midweek pub quiz (Steve Sanders in *Beverly Hills 90210*, if you're wondering).

The frontrunner is Blake Lively (Serena) thanks to a string of fashion endorsements, prominent parts in darker fare such as *The Town* and *Savages* and a high-profile marriage to Hollywood beefcake Ryan Reynolds. Leighton Meester (Blair) has yet to match that level of success, but an eye-catching turn in the Hugh Laurie comedy *The Orange* could change things. As for Taylor Momsen (Jenny), the child star-turned-rock singer, 14 when the first series was filmed, recently made headlines thanks to a one-minute video clip featuring her naked and reciting her latest lyrics.

Of the boys, Penn Badgley, who played the sensitive Dan, has chosen the James Van Der Beek path of indie redemption and will next be seen playing troubled singer Jeff Buckley; the likeable Chace Crawford (Nate) popped up as eye-candy in a couple of rom-coms; and British actor Ed Westwick (Chuck) gets another chance to smoulder-with-menace as Tybalt in the latest *Romeo and Juliet*.

Who knows if any of them will make the transition from teen star to serious contender; but tomorrow night I'll settle down for one final fling with the "non-judging Breakfast Club" as Blair memorably labelled them. After all, as *Gossip Girl*'s famous sign-off almost had it: "You know you loved them. XOXO."

The final episode of 'Gossip Girl' is on Wednesday at 7pm on ITV2



Teen queens: Blake Lively and Leighton Meester
GIOVANNI RUFINO

