

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

From Mark Doran

Since my last communication to *Tempo* was a detailed examination of a piece of programme-making that showed today's BBC at its most culturally clueless and journalistically inept, I hope I may now be permitted to make some public acknowledgement of a more recent broadcast that can only be described as a truly splendid piece of work.

This item was *Britten's Children*, a 90-minute(!) investigation into the complex and ramified relation that connects Benjamin Britten's art with the young people among whom – and frequently, of course, *for* whom – he produced it. The programme was screened on BBC2 (or 'BBC TWO', as apparently we must call it after the latest senseless 're-branding') on 5 June at a distinctly reasonable 9.10 pm, and constituted – not merely in my view, but in the opinion of quite a few acquaintances whose knowledge of this compos-

er cries in the top of mine – as fine a music documentary as BBC TV has shown in at least a decade.

I confess that, having more than once seen the depths to which self-consciously 'modern' documentary-making can sink when faced with a subject as complex, complicated and provocative as Britten, I approached this programme with what can only be termed the lowest expectations. Within five minutes, however, I recognised that I was wrong: the film, written and directed by John Bridcut, walked virtually every tightrope with effortless assurance. Consistently surprising without cheap sensationalising; informative without being stuffy; amusing without being trivialising; respectful without toadying, and well-constructed without ever narcissistically drawing attention to its own technique, this 'psychological and musical portrait' (as the BBC's Press Office called it) also included a frankly astounding amount and range of archive film material, as well as a sizeable quantity of music – in historic as well as specially produced

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recordings – chosen and handled not merely intelligently, responsibly and informatively, but also, on at least one occasion, with real wit: the choice of ‘background music’ for Sir Charles Mackerras’s story of how he was once hauled over the coals for a transgression was quite wickedly funny.

Most important of all, however, were the specially conducted interviews: not only had Bridcut and his team travelled to the USA to seek out such significant figures as Colin Graham and the now very grown-up Bobby Rothman, but they also went to Australia to talk to the octogenarian Wulff Scherchen – and then met up with him on a visit to the UK so as to take him once again around the Old Mill at Snape, where Britten had lived and where the two young men had spent many intensely involved hours more than six decades earlier. It was affecting indeed to see the warmth with which these various individuals – the soon-to-be-deceased David Hemmings among them – spoke of the composer whose strong (and multifaceted) feelings for them were – prurient and sensation-seeking biographers take note! – never at any point described as leading to actual impropriety or illegality. One came away genuinely moved by what had, by the end, established itself as a programme worthy of comparison with the finest work of Barrie Gavin and Christopher Nupen – and a text-book example of how a music documentary should be put together.

Well, almost: I have to say that I winced on those (admittedly few) occasions when the commentary included technical terms (‘arpeggio’, ‘canon’, ‘fugue’...) whose meaning will have been utterly opaque to today’s ‘ordinary’ viewer, who will thus have been – momentarily and accidentally, no doubt, but still (and above all) avoidably – confused and, yes, excluded. Even this failing, however, bespoke a virtue: the terms only arose because this programme – in contrast to the pig’s ear I dealt with in my last letter – was being made by people who actually knew what they were talking about.

Such was the overall quality of the programme, in fact, that one can only be mystified as to how the staff of our anti-cultural, relentlessly dumbing-down BBC could possibly have found themselves broadcasting it (they did not, one

notes, actually make it themselves: the production company was the independent Mentorn). It would of course be quite unworthy to suggest that the answer – any more than the motivation behind the suddenly-emerging ‘Summer of Opera’, into which the programme was slotted – might somehow be connected with the seldom-noticed fact that negotiations concerning the renewal of the BBC’s Charter were due to begin less than four weeks later. But whatever the reason, my spies tell me that ‘Britten’s Children’, which was filmed over an 18-month period, finally came in at a cost of less than £250,000: an unimaginably vast sum to a *Tempo* contributor, but by no means outrageous for a music documentary of real quality and (legalities permitting) international saleability – and an amount of money, in any case, that the BBC latterly saw fit to hand over to Greg Dyke every six months or so, and has recently been paying to someone called Anne Robinson every 30 days for her no doubt inestimable services. In short, if the BBC can show one programme of this standard, then it can show more; indeed, if the Corporation is to deserve to survive in anything like its present form, it *has to* show more – and not just to that miniscule minority of people willing and able to pay for ‘BBC FOUR’.

It would, of course, be unrealistic to assume that with Bridcut’s film the BBC has somehow ‘turned the corner’ – in other words, to conclude from the commissioning of this single item that the kind of spineless, venal philistinism that has evidently come to pervade all parts of the ‘body corporate’ is now losing its stranglehold over programme policy, planning and supply. Yet if there is no cause for actual optimism, there may at least be justification for what Robert Simpson used to call ‘anti-pessimism’: from those same spies I hear that Peter Maniura, now the BBC’s ‘Head of Television Classical Music and Performance’, possesses a deal more musical knowledge and artistic enthusiasm than we are used to finding among such ‘high-ups’ – and that he *also* understands how to advocate and support quality programme-making. So while we cannot by any means pretend that ‘all will be well’, the possibility surely exists that not all will be ill. Time will tell.

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