

Reeds That Don't Leak

Julian Roberts reveals his personal tips for some critical stages of the reed-making process.

As far as I'm concerned making reeds is a total waste of time. I aim to make as few as possible and find that they last several months if alternated with others. There are plenty of guides on how to make reeds and probably lots of better ideas and methods than mine; however I've managed to make a living playing First Bassoon in various orchestras for 42 years, making noises through my own reeds. Some students I know were having trouble with their reeds leaking, so I put this together for them and offer it here in case it's also useful for you. So this is not a 'how to make a reed' article, it is a focus on a few interesting moments of the process that may apply whatever methods you use in the general construction.

The cane is bevelled in a taper between the 2nd wire and the end. However, if like me you use a thicker than standard gouge (1.5mm in my case), don't bevel the full depth of the cane as you get to the end. Half way down will be enough.

When the cane is folded over, the 1st wire is put on. At this moment it is easy very slightly to misalign the two halves of the reed. Check that they are sitting directly on top of each other as you wrap the wire round them. Check the alignment before you twist the two wire ends together and, if it's out, take that bit of wire off, chuck it and start again. It's as you make the very first bends of the wire that you have to be sure to hold the cane firmly together, exactly aligned.



Checking the alignment – the next bend is the critical one

The next critical moment is when you form the end of the reed. The aim here is to form as round a tube as possible. The cane must be in a very pliable and malleable state. It should have been soaked several hours prior to the profiling, shaping and construction stage. Now when forming it into a tube, as well as it being well saturated, I steam it by sitting it on the lid of a saucepan full of rapidly boiling water, right where the lid has holes for the steam to escape. You may cut right through the cane as I do, or just score it. Whichever method, the tube must be persuaded into as round a state as possible. The best tool here is smooth-jawed parallel pliers, gently coaxing all the cane to conform to the shape of the mandrel as you gradually push it in.



Coaxing with smooth-jawed pliers

A proper shaper should have left you with the right width of cane at the end to give a circle of the actual diameter that will sit on the crook at the correct distance from its end. The tapering mandrel normally has a mark showing how far it should be pushed in to give this same diameter. Be prepared, however, if your piece of cane fails to conform. What matters is that every bit of the tube is sitting properly against the mandrel; it is important that you push in the mandrel far enough to make sure none of the 'fingers' of cane are too squashed together causing marginal overlapping. If necessary, push the mandrel beyond the mark to ensure this.

As you finish forming the tube wrap the 3rd wire round, pull it tight, then twist the slack to lock. With the third wire on, take the reed off the mandrel and check (while the cane is still pliable) that the end looks even.

Ideally the tube should have formed at the correct point of the taper to give a perfect circle and the end will be where the mark is. What matters is not the mark,



Here marginal overlapping can be seen on the left side of the reed

but getting the circle round, without overlaps or gaps. A tiny gap between fingers of cane is better than an overlap. If any gaps are too big, take the reed down towards the mandrel tip a millimetre or two and go through the massaging and retightening process again. If there is a gap on one side and not the other, 'persuade' and rearrange the fingers of cane around with the pliers.

When satisfied, the 3rd wire is done up tightly. Check again that the tube is all smoothed down on the mandrel up to the 2nd wire. Leave the reed on the mandrel for 24 hours minimum to dry out. Ideally you have mandrels that detach from their handles so you can make more than one reed at a time.

After 24 hours the wires will be loose on the dried out reed. Now the aim is to make the tube an integral self-supporting circle. Check the circle and tube; it should be a good circle if you did the previous process just right but at this stage you can still correct or improve it if necessary. Carefully, without disturbing the blade alignment, retighten the 1st and 2nd wires sufficiently to hold it all firmly together. Tighten up the the 3rd wire, checking it is a circle and tube without gaps, sufficiently to give a snug grip but not more than that. Where precisely the mark on the mandrel comes is not as important as getting this tube just so.

Now take the reed off the mandrel. If the 3rd wire is now loose, the circle is not sufficiently self-supporting. Put the reed

back on the mandrel and tighten the wire a little more. Repeat until the wire is snug without the mandrel inside, yet with a perfect circle formed without gaps. If necessary move the reed slightly down the mandrel. Finally, after getting the wire just right, push the mandrel firmly into the reed to wedge it on for the binding process, so that the cane is compressed equally by the mandrel and the binding thread.

I may end up with the reed just short of the mark. All the time I'm trying to establish the ideal diameter of the tube end for the actual cane dimension. Every piece of cane behaves slightly differently as a combined result of the imperfections of my preceding techniques and the fact that we're dealing with what was until recently, and will continue to behave as if, a living organism.

Now with the reed at its optimum position on the mandrel, regardless of the mark, I bind the reed. After filing a little nick each side on the tube to give the thread a place to grip, I 'paint' it with a generous layer of proper Evostik (only obtainable from hardware stores) from the 2nd wire to the end, particularly ensuring it gets into what remains of the crevices where the two halves meet. After half an hour or so this is sufficiently dry that you can bind the thread round without getting the glue onto your skin, but tacky enough to grip the thread.

People who value appearance above all else waste their time making a pretty 'Turk's head', but I think the less binding the better. All this stuff that holds the reed together is damping the vibrancy of the reed and killing the sound. I don't even bind all the way from the 2nd wire. I don't bind it pulling very tight, just reasonably firmly, as with the wires at this stage. To play on, the reed has to be soaked and will swell up; so I aim not to constrict it more than is necessary in this dry state, to keep it together for its life time, as what I primarily want is vibrancy in the sound. The vibrations of the blades should as far as possible travel into the instrument freely. A free-blowing reed is what I'm after.

After binding I put clear nail varnish on to the completed reed between the 2nd wire and the end, again as generously as I can, especially along the crevices. Now I leave

the reed as long as possible: minimum one day, but a week or month is better, or even more.

When it is time to use the reed, if it had to be made short of the mark now is the time to ream it so that the end comes to the correct place. *It shouldn't need to be reamed to make it into a circle!* Reaming should always be done with the reed dry, using a rat tail file to get rid of the last little shreds left by the reamer. If you do this process when wet, it is a real bore trying to get all these loosened fibres out from between the blades. If the reed doesn't go to the mark it will not go sufficiently far onto the crook, which will make the tenor register harder to 'sing' properly as it will tend to be flat relative to the lower registers. However good your reed, if you're flat you will sound just that: flat, dull and boring. (Though if you read my previous article for DRN you will know it is vital that the bassoon is never sharp, and that a major third should be played slightly below pitch when it's in the middle of a chord.)

The reed must be reamed so that it is not short of the mark on the mandrel. The aim here has been to make it unnecessary to lose cane using the reamer in order simply to make it circular. If the reed goes further than the mark this is unlikely to be any problem; though if you worry it might make it too sharp then leave that little more length of cane when you cut the tip.

So now it's ready to be used. I soak it a whole morning or the equivalent before cutting the tip as I don't want it to split after all this work. The wires, which had been tightened on the dry reed, now become too tight. For playing on I loosen the wires so that they are snug: but not over tight with the cane wet, so they can be *very slightly* rocked back and forth when held at the twist. With my minimal binding the third wire is accessible: I slightly loosen this one, though being covered with glue and varnish I'm not sure there's much effect.

From here on, in the playing life of the reed, the problem becomes the reed gradually swelling inwards. Perhaps a reed box with miniature mandrel stubs would be ideal. From time to time it will need to be reamed out to continue to go on the crook the right distance. All the

more reason for using the reamer as little as possible during the original construction. Following these ideas you should hopefully never be in the situation where there is so little cane left that it won't go onto the crook at all, because there is no cane left inside the bark to ream out!



The finished reed, kept on a mandrel until needed

If the reed fully dries out between playing sessions, the first two wires become actually quite loose, though the binding holds it together. To play on, the reed must be wet, and that means *the whole* reed, not just the blades. The wires become snug again as the wet cane swells. A proper airtight seal around the crook is needed and wet cane is better than dry. If after all this trouble you still have any leak, beeswax can be used, but I have had almost no experience of this.

Lastly it's worth saying that the flexibility of soft brass wire of a given thickness (or 'gauge') does vary between suppliers. The definition of 'soft' seems to have become harder over the years! It should be malleable, not at all stiff. It can be softened by holding in a flame, but better to try to find some soft stuff to start with. At all stages, I'm trying to have as little as possible stopping the reed doing what we want, providing vibrations freely into the instrument.

Benjamin Britten's Temporal Variations

An Enigma Explored, Part II

George Caird continues his discussion on the background to the creation of *Temporal Variations* by looking at the significance of two of Britten's great collaborators, W.H. Auden and Montagu Slater. (Part I was published in DRN124.)

Britten and W.H. Auden

Britten first met the poet W.H. Auden on 5th July 1935 when the documentary film-maker, Basil Wright drove him to the Downs School in Colwell to begin talks about films for the GPO film unit. Both Britten and Auden had already contributed to the film unit's *Coal Face* earlier in the year, and now plans were made to work on *Night Mail* and a film about the introduction of slaves to the West Indies.¹ By early September that year, Britten and Auden were meeting regularly on these projects and the influence of the older Auden soon became apparent to the composer:

'Spend day with Coldstream and Auden in Soho. Sq. and British Museum etc. ...I always feel very young and stupid when with these brains – I mostly sit silent when they hold forth about subjects in general.'²

Despite this remark Britten, in the ensuing months, absorbed a huge amount from Auden who, with Christopher Isherwood, was writing the play *The Dog Beneath the Skin* and subsequently collaborating on *The Ascent of F6*, both for the Group Theatre. *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, like an earlier work of Auden's, *The Dance of Death*, was taken up with satirical and parable-like comment on the rise of leader-driven power and the loss of cohesive social order.

For Auden himself, the thinking behind these works came from ten years earlier when, in the wake of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and as an emerging poet he became influenced by the ideological ideas of D.H. Lawrence as set out in his *Phantasia of the Unconscious* and his novels *Kangaroo* and the *Plumed Serpent*.³ Lawrence believed that it was necessary to suppress education for all but a few, and to appoint a supreme Leader to govern in order to achieve the right balance between conscious controlling action and unconscious



Benjamin Britten and W.H. Auden

natural desires. Nevertheless and paradoxically, Lawrence argued that civilisation had opted wrongly for 'cerebral activity' over spontaneous living:

'It is impulse we have to live by, not the ideals or the idea.'⁴

Auden's first major works, *Paid on Both Sides* (1929) and *The Orators* (1932) developed these ideas and were to set the tone for a generation of poets and authors that included Cecil Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice and Christopher Isherwood. Both of these works are parable-like in form and charade-like in structure; works that on the surface might seem comical and unintelligible but at the core have layered and nuanced meaning. Interwoven themes of the positive and negative power of love, the value of leadership and the importance of group organisation over the individual addressed the tensions in the 1930s created by the 'wasteland' of post-First World War Europe and the marked rise of far-right politics. *The Orators* begins with four prose 'orations' which build on the ideas of D.H. Lawrence whilst incorporating in the opening 'Address for a Prize-Day' another idea, gained from the German philosopher Georg Groddeck, that we are all guilty of differing crimes against love (excessive love, defective love, perverted love).⁵ The following *Journal of an Airman* and *Six Odes* complete this

highly influential work which in its dedication to the poet Stephen Spender captures the anxiety of the age in pitting the individual or 'hero' against the power of the state:

Private faces in public places
Are wiser and nicer
Than public faces in private places.⁶

At the time when Auden and Britten first met in 1935, the poet had also developed yet another theme on the Marxist idea of the decline of the middle class and its metamorphosis towards militarism and revolution. *The Dance*

of Death made use of a Dancer and an Announcer to lead changes that the bourgeoisie seek, always resulting in failure. The parable ends with the death of the dancer (leader) and the collapse of the class's dreams. The metaphorical death inside the middle classes is portrayed by the dancer who, through a process of escapism, nationalism, idealism and finally cynicism, finds release only in death. Auden invokes the structures of the music pantomime and cabaret to create a damaging critique of a 'sick' society. At the climax of the play, the dancer becomes a Pilot whose 'ambition is no less than to reach the very heart of Reality'.⁷ This theme of the pilot should be compared with Auden's *Journal of an Airman* from *The Orators*.

On 17th September and again on 6th October 1935, Britten attended the Group Theatre for productions of Auden's plays,⁸ and on the latter occasion he was impressed by *The Dance of Death*. Thereafter, the composer became involved in the Theatre's activities accepting commissions to compose for productions, the first being Rupert Doone's and Robert Medley's *Timon of Athens*. Robert Medley's recollections of the power and idealism of the Group Theatre leave us with an impression of how influential its work was:

'In spite of its potential for propaganda, under Rupert's direction the Group Theatre put art first as a way of discovering truth, but it could have not existed at all without a degree of political and social awareness. For one thing it was impossible to ignore the tragic consequences of the slump – the poverty and unemployment. The Group Theatre inevitably took on the left-wing colouring of its time, but its aims were always to produce plays and performances that were intrinsically interesting, and well done.'⁹

Thus in the autumn of 1935, as poet and composer worked closely together, Britten had exposure to many of Auden's burgeoning ideas, and in addition, not least his views on the power of good and the power of love, derived from the writings of Homer Lane:

'Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice.'¹⁰

Amidst the whirlwind of activities and interests that both poet and composer were involved with at the end of 1935, it is therefore important to note Britten's diary entry for 2nd January 1936 where he records that he and Auden 'talk amongst many things of a new Song Cycle (probably on Animals) that I may write'.¹¹

Britten is referring here to what was to become *Our Hunting Fathers*, the song cycle that he discussed with his teacher, Frank Bridge on 23rd March having received some of the texts from Auden:

'I show him Auden's stuff for me and he is impressed. Also find he is very sympathetic towards my socialistic inclinations...'¹²

Britten began composing *Our Hunting Fathers* on 13th May 1936 and completed the work by 28th July with the first performance sung by Sophie Wyss at the Norwich Triennial Festival

on 25th September. Auden juxtaposed three poems – two anonymous and one attributed to the sixteenth century Thomas Ravenscroft – about animals and death, framing them with a Prologue and an Epilogue that seek to define the 'poles between which our desire unceasingly is discharged. A desire in which love and hatred so perfectly oppose themselves...'¹³

There have been a number of significant readings of *Our Hunting Fathers*, from Donald Mitchell's view of the work as a stand against the rise of fascism in Europe,¹⁴ to Stephen Arthur Allen's connecting the work to Britten's growing awareness of his sexuality guided by his collaboration with Auden.¹⁵ Paul Kildea adds another dimension of Auden at that time that 'his eye remained on a disintegrating Europe and the iniquity of the English class system... Both themes informed the new piece'.¹⁶

More recently, Joanna Bullivant revisits these themes and adds important observations including the connection between the poems of the song cycle, and Auden's poem, 'Journal of an Airman' from 'The Orators' which 'consists of an earlier exposition of some of the core themes of *Our Hunting Fathers*: the comparison between humans and animals, the constant juxtaposition of levity and violence and musings on the nature of love'.¹⁷ Bullivant concludes that a full understanding of Britten's work demands exploration of its literary context and 'provides new insights into how Britten implemented a modernist musical language in a work that remains a monument of 1930s political art'.¹⁸

Returning to Britten's works for oboe, whether the choice of animals in *Our Hunting Fathers* has any connection with the composer's work on his *Insect Pieces* is tenuous but this possible link must nevertheless be pointed out. Auden would have become aware of the oboe work that was on Britten's mind during the last months of 1935 and could easily have steered this in a direction that suited the emerging ideas behind the new Song Cycle. It is worth noting that Britten hinted at an earlier agreement on the commission in a meeting in London on 18th February 1936:

'Lunch at Victoria with Mr. Graham Goodes (the very objectionable, self-important, ignorant, bumptious and altogether despicable secretary of the Norwich Festival). I find it not difficult to make him come round to letting me do a vocal suite (Sophie Wyss) for the Sept. festival.'¹⁹

Could it be that Auden developed the idea of a more powerful analogy between nature and human political ambition from an earlier plan to write an *instrumental suite* as Britten had recorded earlier in 1935? Certainly something led the two collaborators to fix on such a theme. Both artists are known to have been deeply concerned by the rise of nationalism in Germany, in Italy and later that year in Spain, and it appears that the creative process for *Our Hunting Fathers* did progress Britten's preoccupation with what Donald Mitchell has described as 'acts of violence, their consequences and the "climates" that unleash them'.²⁰



Photo: Enid Slater (Slater Estate)

(l-r) Christopher Isherwood and W.H. Auden

Another important dimension to point out is that the relationship between Auden and Britten rapidly became close from autumn 1935 onwards. For Britten this was primarily driven by his admiration for Auden's phenomenal intellectual and artistic abilities but in Auden's case there was, in addition to his recognition of Britten's musical gifts, a strong personal attraction. As Auden attempted to 'bring

him out',²¹ most significantly the poet was to produce the poem *Underneath (an) the abject willow* that Britten would set and include in his *Two Ballads* which received their première on the same night as the *Temporal Variations* in December 1936. The poem exhorts the reader (Britten) to be bolder:

All that lives may love; why longer
Bow to loss
With arms across?
Strike and you shall conquer.²²

In September 1936, as an apparent afterthought to his earlier play, *The Dance of Death*, Auden wrote a remarkable poem, *Death's Echo*, that encapsulates a nihilistic rejection of the ambition of humanity. Now with the Spanish Civil War raging, both Auden and Britten reacted with great concern, Britten stepping up his pacifist activities and Auden making plans to join the republicans in Spain. The exhortation of *Death's Echo* to turn away from empty endeavour and dance, seems in step with the mood of the second part of *Temporal Variations*:²³

The desires of the heart are as
crooked as corkscrews
Not to be born is the best for man;
The second-best is a formal order;
The dance's pattern; dance while you can.
Dance, dance, for the figure is easy,
The tune is catching and will not stop;
Dance till the stars come down
from the rafters;
Dance, dance, dance till you drop.

Britten finished his setting of *Our Hunting Fathers* in July 1936 and spent the early part of August on holiday in Cornwall working on his Rossini suite, *Soirées Musicales*. But it is reasonable to assume that he was also turning his thoughts towards the oboe work by mid-August and certainly was writing it by the time of his diary entry on 10th September. Could the oboe work be a further 'take' on the ideas that he and Auden put into *Our Hunting Fathers*? Could the ironic dances, *Waltz* and *Polka*, reflect the mood of *Death's Echo*?

The relationship between Britten and Auden was undeniably a close one in 1936, but the poet's travels to Iceland in July and the composer's exceptional workload were also factors in keeping the

two apart. Auden's decision during the autumn of 1936 to turn away from absolute pacifism and to join the war effort in Spain must have been a big facer for Britten as 1936 drew to a close and as the première of the *Temporal Suite* approached. After that concert and in the New Year, the two met on 8th January 1937 to say goodbye:

'He goes off to Spain (to drive an ambulance) tomorrow. It is terribly sad and I feel ghastly about it, tho' I feel it is perhaps the logical thing for him to do – being such a direct person. Anyway it's phenomenally brave. Spend a glorious morning with him (at Lyons Corner House, coffee drinking). Talk over everything and he gives me two grand poems – a lullaby, and a simple folky Farewell – that is overwhelmingly tragic and moving. I've lots to do with them.'²⁴

These were *Danse Macabre*, 'It's farewell to the drawing room's civilised cry' that Britten used in his *Ballad of Heroes* in 1939 and 'Lay your sleeping head my love'. It is interesting to note that the former of these follows Auden's dance theme and makes reference to Britten's duet playing with Adolph Hallis:

It's farewell to the drawing-room's
mannerly cry,
The professor's logical whereto
and why,
The frock-coated diplomat's polished
aplomb,
Now matters are settled with gas and
with bomb.

The works for two pianos, the
brilliant stories
Of reasonable giants and
remarkable fairies,
The pictures, the ointments, the
frangible wares
And the branches of olives are
stored upstairs.

Britten had set other Auden works from this period including, *Night Mail* and *O lurcher-loving collier* for the GPO films and *Stop all the clocks* which was initially part of the play *The Ascent of F6* in April 1936, but later was set as *Funeral Blues*. In addition, *Let the florid music praise*, *Now the leaves are falling fast*, *Look, stranger, at this island now* and *As it is, plenty* were poems that in 1938 would be

part of his Op.11 song cycle, *On this Island*, and all part of Auden's seminal publication *Look, Stranger!*, published in 1936.²⁵

Finally, this very collection also contained the poem, *Underneath the abject willow* that has already been discussed and formed part of the *Two Ballads* performed at Wigmore Hall concert on 15th December 1936. Significantly, the other ballad, *Mother Comfort*, was by Montagu Slater whose relationship with Britten at this time now needs consideration.

Britten and Montagu Slater

Britten first met the poet, playwright, critic and left-wing activist Montagu Slater in 1935 working on *Coal Face* for the GPO Film Unit. The two had probably met via Group Theatre events that Britten had been drawn into by Auden. After Britten started to write scores for the Group Theatre productions in September 1935, it is interesting to note that, on the 2nd December, he had 'lunch with Montagu Slater at Bertorelli's, and talk over sounds for his new Easter play... See Slater & his orchestral leader again...'.²⁶ This was to involve the composer in the work of the Left Theatre that Slater was heavily involved with. The music and sounds that Britten provided for *Easter 1916* were insubstantial but the collaboration led to greater things in 1936.



Photo: Enid Slater (Slater Estate)

Montagu Slater by Enid Slater

Born in Millom Cumberland in 1902 to a working class family, Slater was sixteen when the First World War ended and, as Arnold Rattenbury has written:

‘...the world of his adolescent awareness was one of collapsing trade, of strikes, of returning soldiers, of wounded begging in the streets, of homes unfit for anyone, leave alone returning heroes, and of the utter ineffectualness of his father’s or anyone else’s religion.

‘Insofar as Time can ever be pigeonholed away from the flow of events which make up History, those 1930s of Montagu’s unregeneracy were years in which slump, unemployment, immiseration, rearmament, approaching war, the emergent various fascisms of Italy, Germany, Japan, Spain and England drew in massive movement a popular anger, determination for peace, and increasingly practical thinking about social justice.’²⁷

Slater won a scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford and thereafter pursued a career in journalism, firstly with the Liverpool Post and later in London.²⁸ He was drawn to socialism and in 1927 joined the Communist Party whilst also involving himself in left-leaning enterprises such as the Left Theatre (founded 1932) and the Left Review (1934 – 1938). His early writing combined a strong feeling for social equality with his innate opposition to the misuse of political power as exemplified by his first two novels, *The Second City* (1929) about life in a major provincial town and *Haunted Europe* (1934) based in 1929 Berlin.

Benjamin Britten’s direct involvement with Slater’s creative work began with his writing of the scores of his next major works *Easter 1916* (December 1935) on the Irish uprising of that year, and *Stay Down Miner* (May 1936) on the legendary strike at the Nine Mile Colliery in Cwmfelinfach in 1935. These works were dramatised for the Left Theatre with music by Britten. In addition, Britten and Slater worked on a number of films notably *Calendar of the Year* (March – September 1936).

Stay Down Miner is of particular interest here because of its account of the struggle of the Welsh miners against closed-shop control and in favour of proper unionised representation, and raises the wider question on the morality of protest. In its original book form, Slater finishes with a reflective conversation with a miner in the Nine Mile Point dispute. The miner, named Howard, articulates the connection of ‘fighting for ones rights’ (in the dispute) with his strong chapel religious beliefs:

‘When the money-changers were thrown out of the Temple it wasn’t because they hadn’t got a perfect right to be there. They had. Their right had become a public wrong and it became right to expel them... I think you have no religion unless you believe in *the right* for every man to have sufficient to live a full, happy and honourable life.’

‘But that means socialism.’

‘I think Christianity implies it.’²⁹

Whilst this exchange is not present in the script of the play that was to be published as *New Way Wins* at the end of 1936, it is indicative of Slater’s sensibilities and arguably in accord with Britten’s own religious and left wing sympathies. Graham Elliott has pointed to the composer’s: ‘My duty towards God is to believe in him, to fear him, and to love him, with all my heart’ from 1928, the year of his confirmation and goes on to describe the changing relationship he had with his beliefs in the light of his mother’s adherence to Christian Science.³⁰ In any case, Britten’s use of two ‘spiritual’ titles (*Commination* and *Chorale*) in the *Temporal Variations*, a work that has strong connotations of protest, can be attributed to influences that persisted throughout the 1930s.

During 1936, the relationship with Montagu Slater became a warm-hearted and special one. Britten recorded meetings with moments of relaxation as on 8 April:

‘Meet Slater for tea at M.M. at 5.0 and after discuss at length the music for his new play, a little ping-pong after...’

And meetings with Slater often remarked on how nice a man he was, such as the diary note for 2nd July 1936:

‘Lunch with Montagu Slater – who is a dear and exceptionally intelligent of course. We are thinking of a ballet on Gulliver...’³¹

So, where the relationship with Auden was characterised by the composer’s feelings of inadequacy, here was a relationship that was more relaxed and based on true friendship. More specifically and at this early stage of their friendship, Britten and Slater found a mutual interest in pacifism, significantly demonstrated by their attendance, mentioned above, at the International Peace Society on Armistice Day 1936. Britten wrote in his diary on that day:

‘In the morning I go with Montagu Slater up to a meeting of the International Peace Society (Film, Theatre and Music Section) at Vaudeville Theatre. There aren’t many people there – everyone is enjoying remorse and glorifying the noble military (sic) profession at the cenotaph. However it gives one some satisfaction that something is being done (in 33 countries) to propagate pacific settlement of disputes (if disputes there be)...’³²

The mutual understanding between Slater and Britten on pacifism can be seen in contrast to the work achieved by Auden and Britten in *Our Hunting Fathers*, in being more practical and idealistic in opposing war. In 1936, Auden was articulating a more complex view that would involve him in joining the Spanish Civil War, albeit as an ambulance driver, but this was a different position from that of other writers like Christopher Isherwood, who remained fervently pacifist throughout his life. These opposing positions were ones which Britten must have weighed up at the time and his own emerging pacifist beliefs would have separated him from Auden to an extent. It is therefore understandable that the composer took strength from Slater, a friend who would uphold a more pure form of pacifism in these turbulent times.

In the years after 1936, Britten and Slater were to remain united on this issue and

Slater may have tried to persuade Britten towards writing a war requiem.³³ Britten was to dedicate his *Ballad of Heroes* to Slater and the isolationism of being a pacifist may have brought the two together in creating the composer's first and great opera, *Peter Grimes* whilst, as this work was being premièred, Britten toyed with the idea of a 'post-Hiroshima oratorio entitled *Mea Culpa*³⁴ under the influence of Ronald Duncan. And later still, Britten continued to ponder this theme eventually producing his *War Requiem* in 1962 and *Cantata Misericordium* in 1963.



Photo: Enid Slater (Slater Estate)

Benjamin Britten by Enid Slater

In the light of the growing friendship between Britten and Slater in 1936, it is significant for this study to note that Slater's poem *Mother Comfort* became the companion Ballad that Britten set alongside Auden's *Underneath the abject willow*, for the *Two Ballads* that received their first performance in Wigmore Hall on the same night as the première of *Temporal Variations*. Where Auden's poem is seen as a plea to Britten to abandon his reticence over his sexuality, Slater's, drawing its title obliquely from Richard III's aunt,³⁵ seems to offer consolation and understanding at the dichotomy of making a choice:

Dear, shall we talk or will that cloud the sky?
Will you be Mother Comfort or shall I?
If I should love him, where would our lives be?
And if you turn him out at last, then friendship pity me!
My longing, like my heart, beats to and fro
Oh that a single life could be both
Yes and No.

With Auden (and probably Slater as well) at the concert, it must have been an extraordinary première of the *Two Ballads* in addition to the power of the *Temporal Variations*.

Britten dedicated the *Temporal Variations* to Montagu Slater, which leaves us with a continuing question as to a possible reason for and timing of such a dedication. Was the creation of the work bound up with the creative discussions that the two artists had had during the year? Is the work an expression of the pacifism that the two men are known to have shared? And what do the lyrics of *Two Ballads* tell us about these questions, if anything?

Synthesis on Auden and Slater

The inclusion of the *Two Ballads* and *Temporal Suite* into the concert on 15th December 1936 could be seen as Britten's way to bring together two important and intertwining threads whilst committing them to separate works in the same performance. In the *Two Ballads* we have a lyric by Auden that seeks to challenge the composer to confront his own sexuality and a lyric by Slater that offers 'comfort' whilst wishing the possibility to say both 'Yes' and 'No'.

But the *Temporal Variations* shows no sign of these personal considerations and every sign of being part of the major theme of the mid-1930s, the rise of fascist power and the need of artists to counter this with heroic stands against war. The logical conclusion would be that Britten deliberately separated his personal 'journey' and his political/social beliefs by programming two separate works in this concert. This thought can hang in the air whilst we now consider the music itself and why the composer decided to write *Temporal Variations* for the oboe.

In part three, George Caird will consider Britten's relationship with the oboe and the four oboists for whom he wrote his renowned works for the instrument.

Author's Correction regarding Part I:

The first modern performance of the *Temporal Variations* was the broadcast made by Janet Craxton with pianist Ian Brown, recorded on 28th March 1979 and broadcast on Radio 3 on 3rd April 1980. The première of *Two Insect Pieces* was on 7th March 1979 at the Royal Northern College of Music played by Janet Craxton with pianist John Wilson. The advertised pianist, Margot Wright had withdrawn from this performance.

Footnotes

- 1 Benjamin Britten, *Negroes* eventually published as *God's Chillun* in 1935.
- 2 John Evans, *Journeying Boy*, p. 278.
- 3 Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation* (Pimlico, 1976), pp. 94ff.
- 4 D.H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious*: see Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden, a biography* (Houghton Mifflin, 1981), pp. 87ff.
- 5 Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden, a biography* (Houghton Mifflin, 1981), pp. 120 – 132.
- 6 W.H. Auden, *The Orators*, (Faber & Faber, 1932), dedication.
- 7 W.H. Auden, *The Dance of Death* (Faber and Faber, 1933). See Joanna Bullivant, 'Our Hunting Fathers Revisited' in *Literary Britten*, ed. Kate Kennedy (Boydell Press, 2018), pp. 212ff.
- 8 John Evans, *Journeying Boy*, p. 278 and p. 281.
- 9 Robert Medley, *Drawn from the Life: A Memoir* (Faber and Faber, 1983), pp. 123 – 124.
- 10 W.H. Auden, *The Poet's Tongue*, (Faber and Faber, 1935).
- 11 John Evans, *Journeying Boy*, p. 323.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 342.
- 13 W.H. Auden, *Our Hunting Fathers* (Boosey and Hawkes, 1936), Prologue.
- 14 Donald Mitchell, 'Our Hunting Fathers abroad and at home' in *Britten and Auden in the Thirties* (Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 19ff.
- 15 Stephen Arthur Allen, 'O hurry to the fêted spot of your deliberate fall' in *Rethinking Britten* ed. Philip Rupprecht (Oxford, 2013), pp. 21 – 26.

- ¹⁶ Paul Kildea, *Benjamin Britten, A Life in the Twentieth Century* (Allen Lane), p.118.
- ¹⁷ Joanna Bullivant, 'Our Hunting Fathers Revisited' in *Literary Britten*, ed. Kate Kennedy (Boydell Press, 2018), p. 213.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 222.
- ¹⁹ John Evans, *Journeying Boy*, p. 333.
- ²⁰ Donald Mitchell, 'Violent Climates' in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge, 1999), p. 189.
- ²¹ Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden, A Biography* (HMCO, 1981), p. 187.
- ²² W.H. Auden, 'Underneath the abject willow' in *Look, Stranger!* (Faber and Faber, 1936), XXII verse 2.
- ²³ W.H. Auden, *Death's Echo*, September 1936, in W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 152.
- ²⁴ John Evans, *Journeying Boy*, p. 400.
- ²⁵ W.H. Auden, *Look, Stranger!* (Faber and Faber, 1936).
- ²⁶ John Evans, *Journeying Boy*, p. 288.
- ²⁷ Arnold Rattenbury, Introduction to Montagu Slater, *Englishmen with Swords* (Merlin, 1991), viii.
- ²⁸ Philip Brett, 'Montagu Slater (1902 – 1956), who was he?' in *Peter Grimes* (Cambridge Opera Handbooks, 1983), pp. 22ff.
- ²⁹ Montagu Slater, *Stay Down Miner* (Martin Lawrence, 1936), p. 77.
- ³⁰ Graham Elliott, *Benjamin Britten, the Spiritual Dimension* (Oxford, 2006), p. 12 and p. 15.
- ³¹ John Evans, *Journeying Boy*, p. 361.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 387.
- ³³ Emily Pailthorpe, programme note to *Though Lovers be Lost* (Oboe Classics CC2008, 2003).
- ³⁴ Mervyn Cooke, *Britten War Requiem*, (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 17 and 20.
- ³⁵ William Shakespeare, *King Richard III, II:II:55 – 56.*



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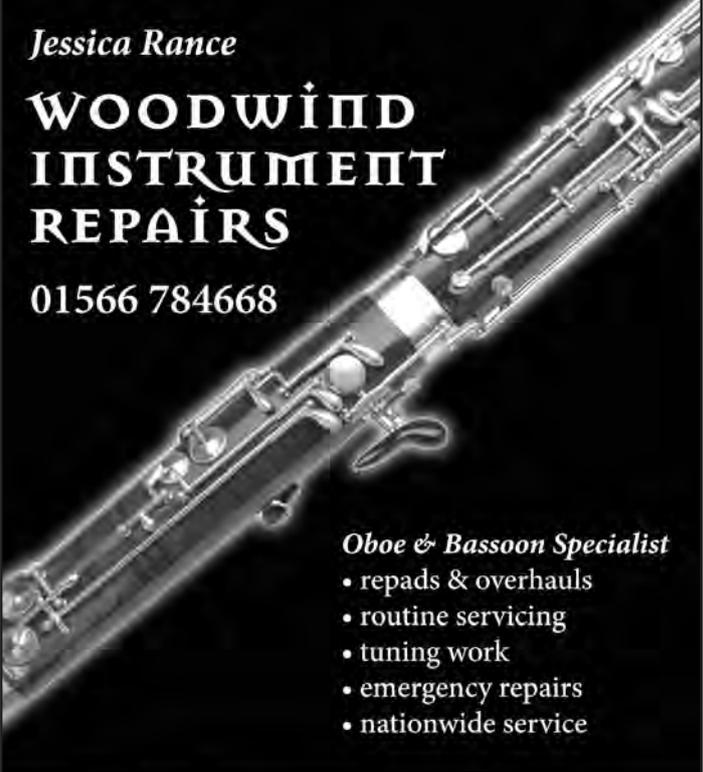
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One aspect that both John and Laurence share is a real enthusiasm for working in depth with amateur musicians, exploring and achieving on both a technical and musical level, and this of course is one of the main ingredients for the success of this national double reed event which has now become an annual fixture in the UK musical calendar.

The courses have now been expanded to include two inspiring course assistants – the oboists have Alec Harmon, and the bassoonists have Amy Thompson, who will be taking very active rôles through the week in the classes and ensemble sessions. Many thanks to Crowther’s of Canterbury (The Oboe Shop) for funding Alec Harmon’s place, and to Howarth of London for funding Amy Thompson’s place.

The courses begin on Tuesday lunchtime 21st April, ending on Saturday afternoon 25th April, with an informal concert of music explored and rehearsed through the week. For those who have been to previous courses, the BDRS Double Reed Day will not be held on Saturday this year – this event will be held at the University of York on Saturday 10th October – details on this double-page spread. Trade stands will however be present at Park Place, giving you the chance to browse and take expert advice on instruments and accessories.

