

13/26

## Benjamin Britten at 100

*BFI Southbank celebrates the centenary of one of Britain's most innovative composers, with Peter Morley OBE, Dame Josephine Barstow, Tony Palmer, Phyllida Lloyd, John Bridcut and Paul Kildea all appearing onstage*



2013 marks the centenary of the birth of **Benjamin Britten**, one of Britain's greatest composers. Beginning in September and running into the first week of October, **BFI Southbank** will be holding a season to celebrate the ways in which Britten contributed to cinema and television, either through writing film scores or adapting operas, or as the subject of remarkable documentaries about his life and work. *Benjamin Britten at 100* will include screenings of documentaries from the **GPO Film Unit** (for which Britten composed the music), plus a re-mastered screening of *The Turn of the Screw* (1959) introduced by director **Peter Morley OBE**. Further highlights will include **special previews** of new films by **Tony Palmer** and **John Bridcut** (*Nocturne* and *Britten's Endgame* respectively) followed by director **Q&As** and a **Season Introduction** by Britten biographer **Paul Kildea** (which will include rarely screened home movie footage which has been digitised by the BFI National Archive). This season will give audiences a unique opportunity to augment their understanding of this remarkable composer, whose career was so inextricably linked to film and television.

In 1935 aged only 21, Benjamin Britten was plucked from relative obscurity by (depending on which version of events you read) either **John Grierson** or **Alberto Cavalcanti**. Grierson was at that time the head of the **GPO Film Unit**, with Cavalcanti as his assistant, and required a young and talented composer to write scores for him. Over the next three years Britten would contribute remarkably varied scores to 27 documentaries including *Coal Face* (UK 1935. Dir Alberto Cavalcanti), *Sixpenny Telegram* (UK 1935. Dir Donald Taylor) and *Night Mail* (UK 1936. Dir Harry Watt); all these and more will be screened in a programme dedicated to **GPO Documentaries**.

However, Britten's links with the moving image go far deeper than the GPO Film Unit. His opera *Owen Wingrave* (BBC, 1971) was actually composed for television, and the versions of both *Billy Budd* (BBC, 1966) and *Gloriana* (Illuminations/BBC, 2000) included in this season are

fascinating and original television productions in their own right - very much more than simply filmed operatic performances. *Owen Wingrave* was based on a ghost story by Henry James, and was conceived as an opera specifically for television, with the Maltings in Aldeburgh being turned into a television studio for the occasion. *Billy Budd* is a painstakingly remastered version of the first of Britten's full length operas, this was also the last time Peter Pears sang the role of Captain Vere, which Britten had created for him. **Phyllida Lloyd's** *Gloriana* is an innovative film version of her Opera North production of the opera about Elizabeth I. We are delighted that **Dame Josephine Barstow** will join Phyllida Lloyd to introduce this screening.

The season will feature an introduction by **Paul Kildea**, author of *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century*. He will examine the development of Britten's operatic aesthetic in a cinematic age and how film influenced his visual imagination from childhood. The event will be richly illustrated with footage from the **BFI National Archive** including very rarely seen home-movie footage of Britten. A further highlight will be a *Missing Believed Wiped* screening of ***The Turn of the Screw*** (*Associated Rediffusion*, 1959) with an introduction by director **Peter Morley**. Long believed lost, and presented here in a beautiful BFI re-mastered version, this is a rare opportunity to see a television production which Britten himself declares "quite convinced me that serious opera works on that [the television] screen". Further operatic works which audiences will be able to experience on the big screen will include **Derek Jarman's** *War Requiem* (1989) featuring **Tilda Swinton** and **Laurence Olivier**, **Tony Palmer's** imagining of Britten's final opera *Death in Venice* (1981) and **Peter Grimes** (1969) starring **Peter Pears** in the first major operatic role that Britten created for him.

Completing the season will be screenings of films old and new by **John Bridcut** and **Tony Palmer**. Britten cared passionately about young people and music education and his numerous working relationships with children gave rise to speculation; *Britten's Children* (2004) features interviews with adults whom Britten befriended as children, dispelling the rumours and telling us everything we need to know about this subject. A preview of Bridcut's new film *Britten's Endgame* (2013) will see Britten's creativity in the face of death explored. This rich and poignant film looks at Britten's final years as he raced against medical advice to complete *Death in Venice*. Finally there will be screenings of Tony Palmer's posthumous portrait of Britten *A Time There Was... A Portrait of Benjamin Britten* (1980) and a preview of his new film *Nocturne* (2013). *Nocturne* is a dark coda to Palmer's four other films about Britten, exploring Britten's uneasy relationship to the bloodiest century in history, not simply because he was a committed pacifist, but on a much deeper level.

Season presented in collaboration with the Britten-Pears Foundation  
[www.britten100.org](http://www.britten100.org)



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#### ***Screenings taking place in the season:***

**TV Preview: Britten's Endgame**  
*2013 Crux Production for BBC Four. Dir John Bridcut. 120min*

John Bridcut's new film explores Britten's creativity in the face of death. Those closest to him watched anxiously as he raced to complete *Death in Venice* in defiance of medical advice, tackling a challenging subject with resonances in his own life. His heart operation left him incapacitated, prematurely old and frail, yet he rediscovered his creative urge to produce two late masterpieces. This is a rich and poignant film about Britten's final years, and the impact of what Peter Pears called 'an evil opera'.

**Followed by Q&A with John Bridcut**

**Thu 3 Oct 20:15 NFT3**

### **Preview: Nocturne**

*Isolde Films/Sky Arts. 134min*

*Nocturne* is a dark coda to Tony Palmer's four other films with and about Britten, and explores Britten's uneasy relationship to the bloodiest century in history, not simply because he was a committed pacifist, but on a much deeper level. What is the role of the artist in such a troubled world? What are his responsibilities? What is the nature of creativity itself? What is its function? Does it have a function? Man's inhumanity to man – now, and always – is the subject matter that preoccupied Britten, and is the subject of this film.

**Introduced by Tony Palmer**

**Mon 2 Sept 18:00 NFT1**

### **Seniors' Matinee: A Time There Was... A Profile of Benjamin Britten**

*Isolde Films / LWT 1980. Dir. Tony Palmer.*

Director Tony Palmer will introduce and discuss this posthumous portrait of Benjamin Britten in which he balances home movies, archive documents and Suffolk locations with glorious moments from the composer's output. Extracts from operas *Billy Budd*, *Peter Grimes* and *Death in Venice* combine with interviews with friends, family and colleagues to provide a rich account of this major musical genius of the twentieth century.

**Free for over-60s; otherwise tickets available at normal price**

**Introduced by Tony Palmer**

**Mon 2 Sept 14:00 NFT1**

### **Season Introduction: Britten's Visual Imagination**

Paul Kildea, author of *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century*, introduces our season with a talk examining the development of Britten's operatic aesthetic in a cinematic age – looking particularly to the 1930s and Britten's work with the GPO Film Unit, and how film influenced his visual imagination from childhood. Richly illustrated with documentary footage, including an extract from *Instruments of the Orchestra* (1946) and remarkable – and little-seen – home-movie footage of Britten held in the BFI National Archive, the talk will also explore why Britten's life was so ripe for documentation.

**Mon 3 Sept 18:20 NFT1**

### **GPO Documentaries**

***Coal Face*** (UK 1935. Dir Alberto Cavalcanti. 12min); ***Sixpenny Telegram*** (UK 1935. Dir Donald Taylor. 5min); ***Night Mail*** (UK 1936. Dir Harry Watt. 24min); ***The Way to the Sea*** (UK 1936. Dir John B. Holmes. 16min); ***Around the Village Green*** (UK 1937. Dir Evelyn Spice. 12min); ***Mony a Pickle*** (UK 1938. Dir Richard Massingham. 10min); ***The Tocher*** (UK 1938. Dir Lotte Reiniger. 5min)

Britten provided the music for no less than 27 documentary films between 1935 and 1938, the majority made for the GPO Film Unit, and the most famous being *Night Mail*. The scores varied from the abrasively modern (*Coal Face*) to arrangements of Rossini (*The Tocher*), the latter subsequently being published as *Soirées Musicales*. Britten averred that it was 'extremely good practice for me as a young composer to take exact instructions', and it was also at the GPO that his ideas began to shift further leftwards, not least because of the influence of WH Auden; their work together on *Night Mail* was the first of many collaborations. Britten's biographer Humphrey Carpenter argues that 'if they are closely analysed, his film scores prove to be as carefully constructed as anything he wrote during the '30s.'

**\*Introduced by Julian Petley**

**Sun 8 Sept 16:00 NFT2**

**\*Fri 20 Sept 20:30 NFT2**

### **Peter Grimes**

*BBC 1969. Dir Brian Large. With Peter Pears, Heather Harper, Bryan Drake, Owen Brannigan. 144min*

A unique opportunity to see Peter Pears in the first major operatic role that Britten created for him. The performance, at the Maltings, Snape, was filmed during winter 1969 and was conducted by Britten himself. The opera was produced by the legendary John Culshaw, who had produced much of Britten's work for Decca but had now moved to the BBC as head of music programmes.

**Introduced by director Brian Large**

**Remaster courtesy of Decca International**

**Mon 9 Sept 17:50 NFT1**



### **Billy Budd**

*BBC 1966. Dir Basil Coleman. With Peter Pears, Peter Glossop, Michael Landon, John Shirley-Quirk. 159min*

A painstakingly remastered version of the first of Britten's full-length operas produced by the BBC, this employed key figures from the Britten circle and is an early example of an opera on television by a contemporary composer. This was the last time that Pears sang the role of Captain Vere, which Britten had created for him. The man-of-war on which the action is set was vividly reconstructed in the studio to claustrophobic effect.

**Remaster courtesy of Decca International**

**Sun 15 Sept 15:10 NFT2**



### **Gloriana - A Film**

*Illuminations/BBC 2000. Dir Phyllida Lloyd. With Josephine Barstow, Tom Randle, David Ellis. 140min*

An innovative and visually striking film version by Phyllida Lloyd of her Opera North production of Britten's opera about Elizabeth I, with a stunning performance by Josephine Barstow at its heart. Rather in the manner of Bergman's *The Magic Flute*, the story of Elizabeth and Essex is paralleled by backstage scenes with the company (although please note that this does involve cuts to the original text).

**Introduced by Dame Josephine Barstow, Phyllida Lloyd and producer John Wyver**

**Tues 24 Sept 18:00 NFT1**

### **Missing Believed Wiped: The Turn of the Screw**

*Associated Rediffusion 1959. Dir Peter Morley. With Jennifer Vyvyan, Arda Mandikian, Janette Miller. 111min*

Long believed lost, and presented here in a recently remastered version by the BFI National Archive, this is a rare opportunity to see and hear two members of the original cast (Vyvyan and Mandikian) of Britten's spellbinding adaptation of Henry James' disturbing novella. This is television opera in its early stages and a relatively rare, but highly effective, foray by ITV into the genre. Using John Piper's original designs, this was ITV's first full-length opera.

**Introduced by Peter Morley**

**Wed 18 Sept 18:20 NFT2**

### **Britten's Children**

*BBC 2004. Dir John Bridcut. 90min*

As this season demonstrates, children loom large in Britten's work (*Peter Grimes*, *The Turn of the Screw*). He also cared passionately about music education and young people's involvement in music, and enjoyed numerous working relationships with children (most notably a young David Hemmings). While this has given rise to speculation, John Bridcut's film (the basis of his book of the same name) is a wonderfully open-minded, well informed and above all extremely moving chronicle.

**Sun 6 Oct 15:45 NFT3**

### **War Requiem**

*UK 1989. Dir Derek Jarman. With Nathaniel Parker, Tilda Swinton, Laurence Olivier. 89min*

Derek Jarman uses the famous first recording of the *War Requiem* from 1963 in its entirety as the basis for a powerfully moving and entirely characteristic visual meditation on the theme of 'the pity of war' – not just WWI but all wars, as Jarman's use of footage from the twentieth century's many brutal conflicts makes abundantly clear. *Plus Peace of Britain* (1936), a film directed by Paul Rotha demanding 'peace by reason', for which the committed pacifist Britten provided the music.

**Fri 4 Oct 20:40 NFT2**

### **Owen Wingrave**

BBC 1971. Dir Brian Large. With Benjamin Luxon, John Shirley-Quirk, Peter Pears, Janet Baker. 112min

Like *The Turn of the Screw* this opera was based on a ghost story by Henry James, but what clearly fascinated Britten was the central figure of the young man from a military family who denounces war and finds himself an outcast. Unlike Britten's previous collaborations with the BBC, this was actually conceived as an opera specifically for television, with the Maltings being turned into a television studio for the occasion.

**Remaster courtesy of Decca International**

**Sat 5 Oct 18:15 NFT1**



### **Death in Venice**

Isolde Films UK 1981. Dir Tony Palmer. With Robert Gard, John Shirley-Quirk, James Bowman. 132min

A hyper-sensitive artist, sick and dying, is fatally attracted to a beautiful boy – a truly fitting subject for Britten's last full-length opera, and undoubtedly one of his greatest works. After Britten died in 1976, Peter Pears asked Tony Palmer to film the opera in Venice with the original cast. By the time this was possible, Pears was too old for the central role (here taken by Robert Gard), but this is still a striking production, particularly in its remastered version.

**Tue 8 Oct 18:00 NFT1**

### **NOTES TO EDITORS:**

#### **About the BFI**

The BFI is the lead body for film in the UK with the ambition to create a flourishing film environment in which innovation, opportunity and creativity can thrive by:

- Connecting audiences to the widest choice of British and World cinema
- Preserving and restoring the most significant film collection in the world for today and future generations
- Championing emerging and world class film makers in the UK
- Investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

The BFI Southbank is open to all. BFI members are entitled to a discount on all tickets. BFI Southbank Box Office tel: 020 7928 3232. Unless otherwise stated tickets are £10.00, concs £6.75 Members pay £1.50 less on any ticket. Website [www.bfi.org.uk/southbank](http://www.bfi.org.uk/southbank)

**Tickets for FREE screenings and events must be booked in advance by calling the Box Office to avoid disappointment**

#### **BFI Shop**

The BFI Shop is stocked and staffed by BFI experts with over 1,200 book titles and 1,000 DVDs to choose from, including hundreds of acclaimed books and DVDs produced by the BFI.

#### **The benugo bar & kitchen**

Eat, drink and be merry in panoramic daylight. benugo's décor is contemporary, brightly lit and playful with a lounge space, bar and dining area. The place to network, hang out, unpack a film, savour the best of Modern British or sip on a cocktail.

There's more to discover about film and television through the BFI. Our world-renowned archival collections, cinemas, festivals, films, publications and learning resources are here to inspire you.

#### **About Britten–Pears Foundation (BPF)**

BPF promotes worldwide the music and legacy of Benjamin Britten and his work with singer Peter Pears, and is based at the home they shared, The Red House in Aldeburgh. It aims to develop his vision and inspire new audiences by: preserving, and encouraging engagement with the heritage of The Red House and its collections for future generations; working with young people to encourage their interest in Britten and their regional culture; developing relationships with the local community in Aldeburgh and the East of England, supporting the cultural life of the area; encouraging performances and better understanding of Britten's music throughout the world; supporting the commissioning, performing and

recording of new British music. BPF is at the heart of Britten 100, the widest ever global celebration of a British composer.

**\*\*\* PICTURE DESK \*\*\***

**A selection of images for journalistic use in promoting BFI Southbank screenings can be found at [www.image.net](http://www.image.net) under BFI / BFI Southbank / September 2013**