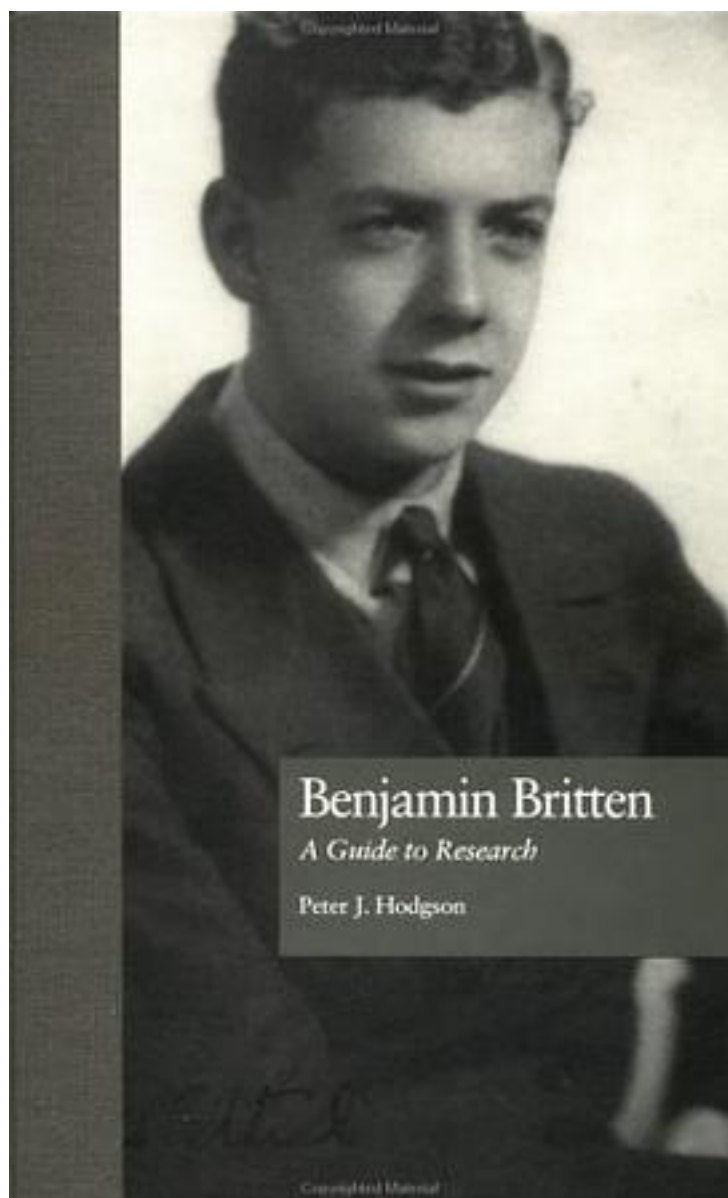


Benjamin Britten



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Since Britten's death in 1976, numerous articles and books have been written about his life and work. Much has been made of the strong influences of his pacifism and his homosexuality. It is often suggested that Britten felt himself to be an outsider from 'normal' society, and that this accounts for the his concern to portray the 'outsider' in his operas. There is no doubt that this is an important aspect of Britten's art, but the present work attempts to show that his music embraces much wider and more universal concerns, and in addressing those concerns there is a clearly defined pattern of spiritual influence. Part One of the book examines Britten's early life, and the strong presence which the Church had in his childhood and adolescence. It explores the way in which certain spiritual influences were first manifested, and how, like the more specifically musical 'themes' which Donald Mitchell has noted, they can be traced throughout Britten's life and work. The author was privileged to have conversations with two clergymen who were influential in Britten's life, as well as gathering valuable insights through a long series of conversations with Sir Peter Pears. Part Two examines a wide range of the composer's music in which a spiritual dimension can be traced. The specifically liturgical music has received rather less critical notice than Britten's larger works. The music is discussed here, and shown to possess musical characteristics in common with the larger works. Britten could not be described as a conventional Christian; still less is it true to describe him, as Eric Walter White has done, as 'keen, wherever possible, to work within the framework of the Church of England'. Nevertheless, his spirituality was rooted in the religious experience of his childhood. This book seeks to demonstrate that Britten retained a sense of the Christian values absorbed in childhood and adolescence, and that these - along with the specifically Christian heritage of plainsong - were strongly influential in his choice and treatment of themes.

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