

# BENJAMIN BRITTEN: Three Letters to Anthony Gishford

ANTHONY GISHFORD, who was a Director of Boosey & Hawkes from 1947 to 1958, had a long personal correspondence with Britten. The last letter he received from Britten was dated January 1975, the month of his own death. He bequeathed the complete correspondence to me, and I am grateful to Britten's executors for permission to use three of the letters. They seem to me particularly appropriate for reproduction in this issue of *TEMPO*.

Letter 1 was handwritten, Letters 2 and 3 were typed. I have added only minimal annotations.

DONALD MITCHELL

## LETTER 1

4 Crabbe St  
Aldeburgh  
Suffolk  
Nov. 6th 1952

Dear Tony,

So sorry not to have answered your letter before,  
but my plans are a bit *distract* . . .

Yes, as Erwin<sup>1</sup> suggested, the 2nd is fine for me—it's actually very nice indeed, as it's one of those anniversaries. Guess which—(it's not Christmas).<sup>2</sup> Let me know when you're arriving & I'll meet you. Gloriana<sup>3</sup> is being a bit troublesome at the moment, but I suppose one must expect truculent periods from such a strong character!

Love and excuse haste please,

Ben

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Annotations © 1977 Donald Mitchell.

## LETTER 2

4 Crabbe St  
Aldeburgh  
Suffolk

31st January, 1954

A. Gishford Esq.,  
Messrs. Boosey & Hawkes, Ltd.,  
295, Regent Street,  
London, W.1.

My dear Tony,

Thank you very much for returning the Spanish letter so beautifully translated. I shall reply in equally flowery terms.

Thank you also for the lovely party after "Gloriana"; we all enjoyed ourselves enormously. I hope you liked the performance. I thought it was a great improvement, and hope that the reception at the end may prove that the tide is slightly turning.<sup>4</sup>

I am here working all this week in case anything arises about important matters—you know what I mean. Maybe with luck I shall be penning the first notes of the Henry James opera now provisionally called "The Tower and the Lake".<sup>5</sup>

I have just received the winter edition of "Tempo"<sup>6</sup> and was delighted to see the Grimes' photos. Who took these? You could not bully whoever the excellent photographer was to send me a complete set for my collection, could you?

I hope you are warmer in London than we are here. We could scarcely be colder. With all the different types of heating known to man we are keeping a few rooms habitable although the plumbing has gone haywire. With best wishes to you and many thanks for all\* your support.

Yours ever,

Ben

P.S. Could you ask whoever controls these things to send me half a dozen catalogues of my works?

\* This word added in ink—D.M.

## LETTER 3

The Red House  
Aldeburgh  
Suffolk

5th February, 1958.

My dear Tony,

Forgive this brief typed letter, but I am laid low with gastric 'flu with the result that I cannot come to London these next few days as I had hoped. One result may be that I get the score of Noe' done before I go away, which may be a good thing for everyone's sake. Will you please tell John Andrewes<sup>8</sup> that I am posting off the first twenty pages as soon as possible? Would you

also remind him that I am going off for about a month on Monday week, and somehow I must do the rest of the proofs before I go?

One other tiny matter; I enclose a notice of "The Turn of the Screw" in New York which nice and enthusiastic Albert Felmar has sent me. My knowledge of American Christian names (sorry, *first* names) is not extensive and I am sure yours is greater, but it does not look to me as if they are using a boy to sing Miles in either of the casts. I may be quite wrong about this, and I wish you could tactfully find out for me. I do not want, in a first performance anywhere, a wrong tradition to be started for this. The part, as you know, is not difficult, and easily singable by a child if trouble is taken to find one.

I hope to be up next week, and shall try to see you then.

Yours ever,

Ben

A. Gishford Esq.,  
Boosey & Hawkes Ltd.,  
295 Regent Street,  
London, W.1.

#### NOTES

- 1 The distinguished musician and writer Erwin Stein (1885-1958), who worked at Boosey & Hawkes and was Britten's close friend and adviser on publishing matters.
- 2 22 November: Britten's birthday.
- 3 The composition of the Coronation opera, *Gloriana*, Op. 53, was completed in December 1952.
- 4 *Gloriana* had been first performed at Covent Garden on 8 June 1953, as part of the Coronation celebrations, when the highly formal nature of the occasion did not produce a particularly sympathetic audience. Britten's letter refers to a later series of performances when the work was brought back to Covent Garden for the 1953/54 season and, as his letter suggests, warmly received.
- 5 This title was of course abandoned and the title of James's novel reinstated. *The Turn of the Screw* was first performed by the English Opera Group at Venice on 14 September 1954. It is interesting to note that although Britten did not start writing the work down until February, the opera was nonetheless on the stage by mid-September—a remarkable compositional pace, even allowing for all the preparatory thinking and planning that would have been done.
- 6 TEMPO NO. 30, Winter 1953. Anthony Gishford was editor at that time.
- 7 *Noye's Fludde*, the composition of which had been completed the preceding December. 'Noe' is one spelling of Noah that appears in the Chester Plays.
- 8 John Andrewes: a member of the music staff at Boosey & Hawkes who was closely involved in the editing of Britten's music.