

Pears, Benjamin Britten and the Purcell Singers, conducted by Imogen Holst, on 20 May 1958. I remember particularly enjoying a bellringer's song, *Das Gläut zu Speyer*, arranged by Ludwig Senft, and four *Peasant Songs* arranged by Igor Stravinsky. When conducting folk music, Imo's feet couldn't help dancing!

I have many other memories and among them was the Lidice Commemoration Service at Thaxted Parish Church on 10 June 1956. The programme included *A Rose for Lidice* with words by Randall Swingler and music by Alan Rawsthorne. I think that Mrs Holst gave us lunch that day. I didn't drive then and so my father took me to Thaxted and greatly enjoyed Mr Rawsthorne's company in the local hostelry while we rehearsed!

We gave a number of performances of Britten's Christmas music *A Boy was Born*, which is an early choral work that he had revised. We first sang it at the Grosvenor Chapel, South Audley Street, on 22 November 1955. I believe our next performance was in the impressive chapel of Lancing College and in December 1956 a further one took place at an English Opera Group Concert at the Royal Court Theatre.

The Daily Telegraph:

'Choristers of All Saints, Margaret Street joined the Singers for Britten's *A Boy was Born*. The intricate rhythms and ingeniously interwoven styles showed the musicianship and vocal quality of this outstanding choir. Imogen Holst's direction ensured lively and free-flowing rhythms.'

We later made a recording of *A Boy was Born* at All Saints, Margaret Street, with their choristers and Ben conducting; and we also recorded *Rejoice in the Lamb* with Ben in All Souls, Langham Place.

Imogen Holst was kind and considerate to her singers, arranging accommodation for us in the vicinity of Aldeburgh, when needed, and I remember her taking us all, as a treat, to see Britten's ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas* at Covent Garden.

These are personal reminiscences brought to mind by programmes that I have of some of our performances with Imo, as she asked us to call her. Imogen Holst had a charming, almost girlish speaking voice and I can almost hear her saying "Maaarvellous dears", when she was pleased with us.

The treasured photograph at Blythburgh Church sits on my piano. We had all been given a cornflower by Peter Pears and someone quipped that he had brought them in his tooth-glass, which is why we were laughing. We sang in Blythburgh Church as part of the Aldeburgh Festival and I believe that the Priaulx Rainier *Requiem* was included in the programme.

I now look forward to reading the book, which will evoke even more memories.

Imogen Holst: A Life in Music

Edited by Christopher Grogan. Reviewed by Pastmaster Jonathan Rennert

This is a book which brings into sharp focus not only Anne Griffin's fascinating memories of Imogen Holst (IH), but also my own. As part of the celebrations in 1974 of the centenary of Gustav Holst's birth, I was asked to partner James Lancelot in a piano-duet version of several movements of *The Planets*. It was a crowded occasion, since we were playing a piano in the showroom of Cambridge Music Shop, surrounded by pianos, with the audience standing and perched on and between instruments. The guest of honour was the composer's daughter Imogen.

After we had finished, the throng poured outside into a hot summer's day. IH was not keen on small talk. She went up to a group of well-built American tourists and, without explaining what she was doing, ushered them onto the triangle of grass opposite the entrance to St John's College:

an odd sight, considering how short and petite she was as she looked up at them: she, always moving, they, ponderous; she, full of vitality, they, slumbersome. Italian and French tourists were subjected to the same treatment ... and some postgraduate students ... and a porter from Trinity College. She arranged them in a circle, dancing around in front of them, almost weaving a spell. In no time she had persuaded these rather unlikely musicians to sing a Somerset folksong after her; line by line; and in five minutes they were performing with real confidence in four-part canon!

I have always known that IH was more than the daughter of a well-known composer.

Now that I have read Christopher Grogan's painstaking, immensely detailed but very readable biography, I understand what a many-sided musician IH was. She played piano, violin and horn, and studied composition with Dyson, Vaughan Williams and Gordon Jacob; she was a scholar at the RCM; and she was known in the 1920s and 30s as a promising composer and conductor. But this was not all. She was also an accomplished folk dancer, who travelled to several countries with the English Folk Dance Society. She had enormous enthusiasm for dancing, as she did for folk

song. Indeed, she had a genius for radiating enthusiasm; so it was hardly surprising that she was appointed to be one of six government 'music travellers' during the Second World War; to inspire and organise music making in rural areas. She was apparently skilled in drawing beautiful music from even the most unwilling members of the Women's Institute (just as she did thirty years later from those tourists in Cambridge). Then at Dartington, where she ran a music course for trainee teachers and local adults, she coaxed amateurs of all standards (including many who could not read music) to play, sing, conduct, arrange, compose and repair instruments. After three years' rehearsal with these raw forces, she achieved a fine performance of Bach's *B minor Mass*.

Last Christmas we had a very brief taste of another side of IH. At the Company

Carol Service, in honour of the centenary of her birth, the choir sang a short carol which she had written. Unfortunately perhaps, despite considerable praise from critics for her early compositions, she did not fully develop this aspect of her work. She spent much effort in promoting her father's music after his death in 1934; and later she became a fierce advocate for Benjamin Britten's music, and an important assistant and emotional support to Britten himself. The

biography's analysis of this relationship (he as a sort of surrogate father; she as a confidante and mother substitute) is persuasive.

IH's life spanned a period of immense change in the musical world: she witnessed Rachmaninov playing the first performance of his fourth piano concerto (in Berlin), her father's *Egdon Heath* being hissed in Paris, Hindemith as the soloist in the premiere of Walton's *Viola Concerto*, *Façade* recited by Edith Sitwell and Constant Lambert; later she shared the excitement of successive Aldeburgh Festivals, in which she took such an important part. She was a central figure in the musical world, but not perhaps a prominent one, at least to the general public.

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