

Sound Expertise

Season 2, Episode 10 - Britten's Operas and British Identity with Imani Mosley

TRANSCRIPT prepared by Andrew Dell'Antonio

SPEAKERS

Will Robin, Imani Mosley

Imani Mosley 00:00

Elizabeth stood up for -- it's reported about... at least five minutes after the opera was over, in the royal box clapping. So she clearly was okay with it, and had no problem with the story that was being depicted. But everyone was mad. They were big mad. Because, again, this went against the national mood of what everyone was trying so desperately to convey, that this is the beginning of a new era for England. And this opera is like... uh, maybe not.

00:51

[Intro music]

Will Robin 00:54

So one thing that pretty much all musicologists do these days is what's called reception history. We look at what critics and audiences have thought of a piece of music to better understand what it means. It's widely accepted in our field that yes, music does have intrinsic value unto itself, what's in the score, what we hear in the recording, but that in order to fully grasp the significance of a work and its role in society, we have to look at what's been said about it, and how that has changed over time. Now, for an Americanist like me -- I'm Will Robin, by the way, and this is my podcast, Sound Expertise, where I talk to fellow music scholars about their research and why it matters -- Reception history can only reveal so much. The United States is a big decentralized country that doesn't really care much about contemporary composition. And so when we learn about what critics said about Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, or John Adams's *Nixon in China*, or another important modern opera, it's interesting, but it doesn't really tell us all that much about American identity in the 20th century. That is not the case across the Atlantic, though, and it's definitely not the case in England after World War II, when the operas of Benjamin Britten assumed a huge cultural significance. When Britain the country wanted to celebrate itself, they turned to Britten, the composer, commissioning operas for major national festivals, and even the coronation of Queen Elizabeth the Second, who, as you just heard knew Benjamin Britten and his music pretty well. The stakes for Britten's operas when they were first performed, were pretty high. And that means that when we look at how Britten's operas were received by audiences, we can learn a lot about national identity in a crucial period for England and its people. That is the research focus of my guest today, Imani Danielle Mosley, who is an Assistant Professor at the University of Florida's School of Music. These moments in British musical history, in which weird operas by a queer modernist composer were performed for the actual Queen of England, feel a little bit like deleted scenes from *The Crown*. Let's learn more about them now from Professor Mosley.

03:05

[Intro music]

Will Robin 03:14

So, you clearly have a very long and important relationship with Britain, the country and Britten, as in Benjamin Britten, the composer, which are historically and also in your own research deeply intertwined things. Can you talk a little bit about your history with that -- did you become an Anglophile first, or a Benjamin Britten-phile first, if those are accurate ways to describe your interest in these operas?

Imani Mosley 03:40

Yeah, they totally are. That's really an interesting question, because I do think about that every now and then. When I was a teenager, I should have seen the signs that I was a baby Anglophile, because I was very much drawn to all things English and British. But that didn't really cement for me until I was in grad school. So my introduction to Britten came first, which happened the last year of undergrad. And I was writing a comparative analysis paper about the Ligeti horn trio and the Brahms horn trio. And I had pulled out a recording of horn chamber music literature, and it had the Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and strings on it. And Britten was a composer that was never really on my radar. I knew who he was, but because there's not a lot of -- almost no music, really -- written for bassoon, it's not something that I would have been working on in high school or in undergrad. So I was aware of him but I didn't know much about his music; and I was like, hmm, let me check out this piece, the Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings. And I remember this moment so vividly. I was sitting in the library, and I felt like all time and space stopped. I had never heard music before. I'd never heard English before. And I was gobsmacked. And that turned into me wanting to get my hands on anything I possibly could. So I was living in New York City at the time, and I went to the Juilliard bookstore to buy something. And they had a small Britten biography on sale. And I was like, Well, I have to have this and I just snapped it up, and came home and read it, and devoured it. And I was like, this is the guy, this is the composer, this is who I want to spend the rest of my scholarly life working on. So that happened, that was 2006.

Will Robin 06:03

And were you already heading in a musicology direction at that point?

Imani Mosley 06:07

I was. So I was finishing a performance degree. And I was applying to... I was thinking about applying to grad school for performance. But I had come into college not really knowing what musicology was, and thinking that there was a thing that I wanted to do, specifically... so I had done a minor in communications, I was taking all of these writing classes and journalism classes, and I thought, oh, maybe the thing that I want to do is to go into music journalism. And then one of my professors, Anne Stone, was like, You need to be a musicologist. And I was like, Oh, is that the thing that I've been thinking of all this time? And she's like, Yeah, it is. So that shifted everything. And that was how I was put on the track to musicology, and I decided that I wanted to do performance and musicology for grad school. So I was already going in that direction. So when I found Britten, that was when I decided, yeah, this is what I'm going to do as a musicologist.

Will Robin 07:17

Britten is not Beethoven in that there's multiple shelves of books about him. But he's also not a total obscurity. There's a subfield of Benjamin Britten studies. How did you both get to know that literature and then realize that there were gaps that you wanted to fill in?

Imani Mosley 07:39

I think that I was very lucky to be placed at the right time in Britten scholarship. So the end of my time at conservatory was getting closer to the time of the Britten centenary. And so a lot of stuff was starting to happen and galvanize. And so when I was in grad school, doing a terminal Master's, and reading and writing and working on my master's thesis, which was on Britten's Rape of Lucretia, I was devouring everything. But realizing that there was a lot that needed to be discussed, and that the same handful of people were coming up all over the place. So whether it was editions of things or articles, I kept seeing the same names. And in 2010, I went to my first Britten conference, where I met all of the people who have become a part of my life as a scholar, and are sort of the biggest names I would say right now in in Britten scholarship. And it was in that moment that I realized, and I think we all realized in that moment, that there was a new burgeoning community that was on the cusp of adding to Britten scholarship, and really filling in those gaps. And that's when I learned about a sort of timeline in Britten historiography where a lot of things were written while Britten was alive. And they were intensely hagiographical. And if Britten had his eye on them, but he wasn't particularly concerned, but he knew that people were writing these things about him. And then Britten died. And there were still those people who had been writing about him while he was alive. And they were very much trying to safeguard and protect Britten's legacy. But as we got further away from Britten's death, there was the desire to write about things that I think a lot of scholars felt they didn't have the opportunity to write about while Britten was alive. So that's when you see stuff like Philip Brett and others who are really looking at Britten's sexuality, and how that plays into his works, and so that kind of pervaded the period of the 80s and 90s. And then there's kind of a fallow period where people are writing about Britten, but it's not really intense. And it isn't until the mid 2000s, sort of 2005 on, where my advisor, Phil Rupprecht, wrote his book, Britten's Musical Language, that this sort of wheel of Britain scholarship started to re-turn. And that people who are writing about Britten were saying, Okay, well, we've done the biographical stuff, and we've done the stuff that's focused on sexuality, now is the time to write all of the other stuff that maybe people would have written about other composers at another period of time, that hasn't just happened for Britten yet. And that's where we are now, there's this freedom to write about all of these far more intricate things, because all of the big stuff is sort of out of the way.

Will Robin 11:15

And how did you come to your own version of that? You're working on these four operas in your dissertation and the idea of reception history, looking at what people said about them, critics, audiences, and how they were in dialogue with these different moments in British postwar history, right?

Imani Mosley 11:35

Yeah, well, I had always been an opera girl. And... because opera as a genre, and as something that interacts so interestingly with other non-musical, social things really fascinates me. But the more that I ... so again, the British history stuff had always been there and kind of lodged in my mind. And so I was

really aware of all of the things that happened in British history in the 20th century, specifically, after the postwar.

Will Robin 12:07

Just like all of The Crown, basically.

Imani Mosley 12:10

All of The Crown! I cannot tell you, there was a period of time where I would sit down with Phil and say, Well, you know, I'm watching the crown for dissertation research. And he's like, yeah, that tracks.

Will Robin 12:22

I mean, I've now watched... I watched half of the first season and then I got kind of trailed off. And now I'm in the fourth season, and I've also been reading the... Have you read the Wolf Hall trilogy?

Imani Mosley 12:32

Oh, yes.

Will Robin 12:32

Yeah. Which I'm reading. I'm on the third one. Now. They're, like, totally amazing. So I feel like between those two things, and your dissertation, I feel like I have in the last three weeks learned more about British history than I knew in my entire previous life.

Imani Mosley 12:47

That's really all I can ask.

Will Robin 12:48

Anyway sorry. But the period, this period of your focus also, obviously is an important one in British history.

Imani Mosley 12:55

Yeah, as anyone who's watched The Crown will know, a lot of stuff was going on. And it didn't make sense to me that these things were not in conversation with each other, especially because of the relationships that Britten had with Queen Elizabeth, which is very well known and documented, beyond writing an opera for her coronation.

Will Robin 13:23

What was that relationship?

Imani Mosley 13:28

She was a fan of his music, and had been a fan for a very long time. And she came to the opening of the Maltings at Snape to do a sort of royal opening kind of thing that monarchs still did at that time. And if you go to the Red House, they have... Britten and Pears kept a signature book in their front entryway. And they have ... at the Red House now they keep it open to where Her Majesty and Prince Philip came by; and their signature, of course, is only on one page. There are no other signatures on that page. And

she wanted Britten to be her Master of the Queen's music. He said no, he didn't want that position. He also ... she also offered to give him a CBE. So she offered to knight him and he didn't want that either. What he ended up taking was a peerage. So he has an O M, which means he's a Lord. So, the Lord of Aldeburgh [laughs], and of course Pears was knighted. And when Britten died, she sent a letter to Pears.

Will Robin 14:50

Right? I remember reading this. Yeah.

Imani Mosley 14:52

And so it means more to us because this is a sort of tacit understanding of their ... of Britten and Pears's relationship, which is huge considering the state of affairs around homosexuality in Britain at that time. And so just the fact that she sent a note of condolence to Pears when Britten died is a huge thing. So, obviously, they are only going to be as close as someone could be in that kind of relationship. But the Earl of Harwood, who is the Queen's cousin, was very close friends with Britten. So on some level, Britten moved in these very royal circles. And that was a huge part of how we understand the social aspects of his life.

Will Robin 15:51

And so, that's the biography. But that also connects directly to what we were just talking about, which is this kind of larger question of reception and social history. So what is the way in which -- the kind of broad way in which Britten's operas are being received that relates to this larger postwar climate?

Imani Mosley 16:08

Yeah, so he... when you write an opera like Peter Grimes, and it becomes as successful as it was immediately, and this is in 1945-1946, he was vaulted into the public sphere pretty rapidly, even though of course, he had been writing for quite some time before that, and was known as a good composer, but he'd also left the country. And so coming back to England, and writing Peter Grimes, and it captivating the public the way that it did, made him this sort of national figure that I think he wasn't really prepared for. And it came at a time when Britain the country, or Britain is not a country, but when...

Will Robin 17:00

What is it, a Commonwealth or something? I don't ... these are all words I'm learning about via Thomas Cromwell. [laughs]

Imani Mosley 17:07

It's complicated, the United Kingdom is made up of four countries — anyway,

Will Robin 17:13

we're going to end up offending some Irish somehow... [laughs] One of the things that's always so striking about reading reception history in Europe versus, I'm an Americanist where it's like, well reception history is interesting, but it's so low stakes and when you have small country big composer, it's like, oh, yes, the reception is something that everyone knew about and that the Queen is probably

reading those papers and, yeah, it's just so different. So maybe let's move chronologically through the different operas and how they relate to these questions of postwar identity. So Billy Budd is tied in with this huge festival of Britain project. Can you talk a little bit about what the festival was and its significance and how Britten gets tied in as a composer?

Imani Mosley 20:16

Yeah, so in 1945, there was an election. So Winston Churchill had been Prime Minister, and the Tories had been ... the conservatives had been in charge of the government. And they were kicked out unanimously, in favor of Labour. And the Labour Party decided in this moment to engage in all of these big social schemes. That's how we got the NHS, all of that stuff is happening in these years. And there's a big artistic project that was in line with all this called the festival of Britain. And it was modeled loosely off of the World's Fairs. But the idea was that this festival would showcase all of the best aspects of British art. And so that included architecture, design, fine art, music, dance, everything. And, again, it was part of this project of showing to the world that Britain was still important, and still had something to offer after World War II, even though they were mired in austerity. And so Britten was asked to write an opera for it. And that ended up being Billy Budd. And what's interesting about that is because Billy Budd was written for the festival of Britain. It was understood at that moment as this history opera, because it takes place during the Napoleonic Wars, which is not not-true. But there was more of a focus on that setting, and the story that ... the very sort of face value story that Britten was telling in the opera, than any kind of deep introspective look into what was happening. But as a result, it was a huge success. People really loved it, they thought it was too long... it was. [laughs] Britten then revised it, it was initially four acts, and he cut it down to two. But it was deeply tied with, again, the feeling behind this project, because it was historical in nature, and showcasing one of the things that England is the most proud of, which is its Navy. So again, the fact that it was a story about -- again, on a very surface level -- the British fighting the French, a wonderful, lovely pastime [laughs] between the two nations. And of course, us knowing history, knowing that they were successful later on. All of that, I think fed into why the opera was so popular, in addition to people just actually liked the sound of it. And so once you remove Billy Budd from the Festival of Britain, it's only then that people start to think a little bit more intensely about what's going on in the story and see it as this incredibly deep psychological drama.

Will Robin 23:34

One of the themes that you're engaging with this, this idea of how masculinity changes in different periods in post war Britain and so, Billy Budd famously has an all-male cast, how does that relate to post war ideas of masculinity? How were those changing? And, and obviously, this is an opera that has, I don't even know if you'd call them queer undercurrents, I think overcurrents! But yeah, talk a little bit about that.

Imani Mosley 24:03

Yeah. So martial masculinity is a huge part in how England -- Britain -- understood itself as this imperial martial power. And a lot of that is built into the Navy. And so again, in this moment, showing this ship with an all male cast is feeding into these larger feelings of military power and might that is reinforced by masculinity. And it's something that people don't want to let go of, and don't let go of. And so again, because of that connection, the masculinity that's portrayed here is seen differently than how it seemed

later. But nothing in the opera has changed. It isn't anything that Britten has done, it becomes the public's relationship to masculinity, or types of masculinities, that changes that allows people to see the opera in a different way. So once we finally reach the end of empire, and people are thinking about British masculinity differently, when that's separate from separate from the military, there is this new emerging type of masculinity that comes into play in the 60s, that -- it's not that it's more queer, because that's definitely not the case. It's just, it resides in a different place. It's young, it's social, it's still incredibly heterosexual. But it's not connected to this really intense feeling of Empire. And so people are able to think about what these stories and seeing a whole bunch of men singing together looks like, differently. But initially, yeah, it's just a reinforcement of British power, British sea power, and that's what makes a strong Englishman.

Will Robin 26:40

And so critics are gradually beginning to talk about the queer aspects of the story and the opera, especially -- homosexuality is decriminalized in the late 60s, is that right?

Imani Mosley 26:51

Yeah, it's decriminalized in 1967. There's the Wolfenden report that happens 10 years prior, in 1957, where they're like, maybe we should think about this idea of homosexuality in relation to the law. So yeah, you see an immediate change in the language of the critics, post 1966, which is when the BBC did their film version of Billy Budd. So in the 50s, no one is using ... not even coded language to talk about the relationships between Billy, Vere, and Claggart. Every now and then you'd have a critic who would say something that might intimate to Britten's own homosexuality. But it's very thinly veiled, very flimsy, but it's not about the work itself. And then all of a sudden, in the late 60s, you see writers just saying, this is a gay opera. [laughs] You know, they're using the language homosexual, they're talking about erotic desire, like it's there in plain English. And it's almost as if the combination of the TV version, which critics say, it allowed for a type of new interiority, because of televisual aspects, we can linger on people in a way that you can't when you're watching something on stage. You can really ... because of camera shots and things like that, you can really think about what's happening in the character's mind.

Will Robin 28:44

It's not just all these fancy men marching around, it becomes more about the intimacy of their relationships...

Imani Mosley 28:49

Exactly, exactly. So the combination of that, and this loosening of language that comes the following year with the decriminalization of homosexuality, people... it just broke it wide open. And so immediately, you see people, not just reevaluating the opera, but writing about it very differently. So I remember being in the Royal Opera House archives and looking at their reviews of when they Budd in the late 60s, and immediately you see people saying, Yeah, this is an opera about three men, and their queer, erotic, complicated relationship with each other. No one is mincing words at this point. And I think it's fascinating how on a dime, that language changed.

Will Robin 29:46

So, queerness operates as this overarching framework throughout the different operas you look at in your dissertation. And that's also very much some of the most important work in queer musicology on Britten's music, which is by the late musicologist, Philip Brett, who you mentioned earlier, how did you develop this framework to understand these operas as kind of queering aspects of opera? How do you see it relating to Brett's work on Britten?

Imani Mosley 30:14

That was a long process, a lot of discussion with queer theorists who are not musicologist. Who, funnily enough, everyone that I worked with, was a fan of opera, and had these sort of peripheral thoughts about Britten. It was really just trying to bring these two worlds together in a way that didn't seem hackneyed or ham-fisted. Because I remember getting questions about this early on in my scholarship, where people were asking me if this was going to be more of a hermeneutical exercise, to which my answer was always, no, I feel -- and I still feel this way -- that anyone could have written operas that address these things, and address opera as a queering agent. It didn't have to be Britten, and it didn't necessarily have to be someone who was gay. Now, the fact that that is what happened, I think opens up a whole new can of worms for us, but I am not making that sort of connection that because Britten is gay, and because these themes appear ipso facto...

Will Robin 31:43

... it's kind of biographical.

Imani Mosley 31:45

Right. And I pushed on... I push back against that a lot, especially while I was writing the dissertation. And that was the hardest thing for people to understand, which I get, because it was hard for me to develop as a methodology. So really trying to look at the source material and the way stories were being told, and thinking about other ways that people use these kinds of methodologies in other works, and trying to replicate that process in these operas was really important. So a lot of stuff that's in my dissertation is not by musicologists. It's by social historians, and cultural historians, and queer theorists. Because they're doing this kind of work in other places. And actually, they were talking about Britten a lot in these moments of social change in the UK at this time. So really trying to point out the fact that, I think if anybody had said, Billy Budd, which already comes with these issues in its original source texts, that they could have had the ability to set the work in such a way that it queers these heteronormative narratives about opera. Because there are no women in the original story, why would there be? So you could make a choice as a composer, you could say, well, I feel that because operas for the last 400 years have always been the domain of heterosexual, heteronormative relationships, that even though there are no women in the story, I'm going to put women in the story, you could make that decision. But if you choose not to make that decision, then you're actively working against the model that is presented to you as an opera composer. So anybody could do that. It's just the case that nobody had. And I say that nobody had, I don't know why no one else had. But it's not just because Britten was a prominent gay composer. He definitely wasn't the only one.

Will Robin 34:38

And, also, if we have this, very loosely, "death of the author" model to look at these works, the reception of any of these operas tells us more about what people in Britain are thinking about these ideas than

what Benjamin Britten is thinking. Right? It seems like there's this thing that happens with all these operas, whether they're successful or they're failures is, the success or failure has very little to do with the weird thing that Britain himself is doing. Everyone sees what they want to see. And then Benjamin Britten is ultimately doing something a lot weirder that people kind of figure out later.

Imani Mosley 34:57

Yeah. Yes.

Will Robin 35:21

That's maybe a good way to talk about *Gloriana*, too, which is one of these great ... scholars who get to write about big catastrophes in opera history, that's always kind of the juiciest stuff to write about. Can you talk a little bit about *Gloriana*, and an opera being written for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II and the stakes of that?

Imani Mosley 35:42

Yeah. Oh, my beloved *Gloriana*. I love this opera so deeply, and I'm so glad that I was able to carve out space for it. So *Gloriana* was written for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, there was a huge push to have a lot of music be written for all of these coronation day festivities. So *Gloriana* was supposed to be the big end to several days, of lots of music being written and performed by other well-known composers, Arnold, Vaughan Williams, you know, anyone who was well known as a British composer was involved in this project of writing new music for the Queen. So it wasn't just that, you know, Britten's over here, writing this thing on his own. There's lots of new music that's being written. There's ballets, there's lots of stuff happening. And Winston Churchill is back in power, for his last go at the Prime Ministership. And there is this feeling of this thing called the new Elizabethan age, which is this return to the kind of glory that Britain envisioned — that England envisioned of the 1600s, the late 15 and early 1600s, this period where the first Queen Elizabeth, turns England into this nation with power and might, that then eventually goes on to become the United Kingdom and Great Britain, the British Empire. So, again, that feeling that I mentioned from the end of 1945, where people are like, we're still important. This was a fundamental mission of Churchill's — to be like, we ARE important; that the British Empire still lives, etc, etc. So, in that respect, the music that was being written was either doing one of two things, it was either this incredibly laudatory, celebratory music, or it was specifically reminiscent of music from the Elizabethan period. So like Henry Purcell, John Dowland... Yeah, exactly. So either two of those things were happening. So when people found out that Britten was writing *Gloriana* and that it was a story about Elizabeth I, everyone thought that this was going to be — the UK didn't have a great big historical opera. People wanted a Boris Godunov...

Will Robin 38:37

Or like a Donizetti — not by an Italian!

Imani Mosley 38:40

Exactly.

Will Robin 38:41

A Queen opera.

Imani Mosley 38:42

Yeah, they wanted a Queen opera, that was not by some random Italian. People were really – they were really looking for that... they wanted Nabucco, or Boris Godunov, they wanted something like that, because they felt that that was the only thing that would be worthy of this brand new, young, vibrant monarch. And that, of course, is not what Britten did. Because why would he do that? Instead, he writes about the story of Elizabeth and Essex. This is a towards the end of Elizabeth's life, her relationship with the Earl of Essex, his foiled plot to put down rebellion in Ireland. She's old and crone-like and people wanted to see Elizabeth in her power. You know, Elizabeth of the Spanish Armada Elizabeth as a Tilbury speech. That Elizabeth -- think Cate Blanchett. So they wanted that, and instead they got the end of Elizabeth, the first series from HBO with Helen Mirren. So this was a huge deal, that this was the story that was being told. But we know that Elizabeth II loved it. She loved it. So Britten and Pears and the Earl of Harwood performed ... So there was a meeting with Britten, Pears, the Earl of Harwood, Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, I believe, at Windsor, where Britten ran through the opera on the piano. And it had to be so she would be okay with it. She and Philip had the libretto, they knew the story. There's anecdotal remarks about Philip bringing the libretto to the opera, and like that this was the most studious thing they'd ever seen him do at that point in time. So they were familiar with it. And they clearly didn't have a problem with it. Elizabeth stood up for, it's reported, about ... at least five minutes after the opera was over in the Royal box clapping. So she clearly was okay with it and had no problem with the story that was being depicted. But everyone was mad. They were big mad. Because, you know, again, this went against the national mood of what everyone was trying so desperately to convey was that this is the beginning of a new era for England. And this opera was like, eh, maybe not.

Will Robin 41:37

These are works that remain somewhat in the canon in Britain. And Britten's music has certainly not faded into obscurity. What do you think about the operas... how do you see the operas that you've worked on relating to Britain in 2020, kind of post Brexit identity today? Do you think they have things to tell us now?

Imani Mosley 42:03

I do, especially Gloriana. Because what Brexit has shown me in the last four years, is that the identity crisis of the post war era was never solved. It was sublimated because of Thatcherism, and a deepening of austerity and just a desire to get out of these really bleak economic times, that pervaded the end of the 20th century. But it was always there, underneath the surface, and Brexit pulled all of that out from wherever it was, and put it back in front of us in a big way. And I talk a little bit about Brexit in my dissertation, because I couldn't help myself. But it's only grown more apparent to me in the last maybe year or so, that these issues around Empire and masculinity and relevance, and a kind of xenophobia that comes with all of this, and then insularity, is now the language ... mainly of the British government, but also of a lot of people in Britain. And there have been a lot of discussions around music framed by this sort of identity crisis. Just a couple of months ago, with the Last Night of the Proms, there was a whole hullabaloo about the performance of Rule Britannia that happens every year at the last night. And it wasn't a conversation about music. And it was solely a conversation about what Rule Britannia means, or what it means now, in the age of Brexit. So a work like Gloriana specifically, I mean, all of Britten's works, but especially a work like Gloriana is a reminder of how fragile that identity

ego is, and how it may never be resolved, that if there is music, or art or something else that is created that pushes up against this idea of the longest running empire in history. A nation that has thousands of years of history and that being equated to it being the greatest, strongest, most enduring history in the world, that there, are always going to be dust ups when something comes along that pushes against that, especially if the person who is creating the thing is someone who is seen as a person of national prominence. So I think there's going to be a lot more discussion about Britten. I know there will be coming from me specifically. [laughs] But I think there's going to be a lot more discussion about Britten's music in the post Brexit age. And I think there's going to be music by other composers, too, that's also going to be talked a lot in the post Brexit age, Vaughan Williams, and Elgar and Holst specifically, how they figure into these concepts of national identity and ego. So I think Britten is is rife for these times.

Will Robin 46:10

One of the reasons I wanted to talk about your work on Britten is because I feel like on your very vocal use of social media, you've gained, I think, a strong and rightful reputation as an advocate for diversifying or throwing out the Canon to a certain degree, and institutions programming more work by underrepresented composers. And, yes, Britten was gay, but he was also a White guy who's somewhat canonic. How do you square that for yourself, working on a figure who is...

Imani Mosley 46:41

Yeah, absolutely. That is a question that I think and pose to myself often, I don't see Britten as a particularly minoritized composer, especially because there's been so much work peddled around his own sexuality, that it's not so much that it's not important anymore, it's incredibly important, because I think he is one of the most well-known visible out composers, from a period when that was not necessarily viable. And so I think that's important. And that story needs to be told. That being said, there's lots of other work that can be done, that can be programmed, that's not his. Since 2013, Britten's work has been programmed across the board far more than I think it had, since his death, for which I'm very happy. And I don't fear a dearth of Britten programming. People are going to do his work. Just this week I did a pre-concert talk for a Britten Chamber Music Festival. So, people are invested in his work and love his work, and so it's always going to be performed to some degree. And so, you know, I advocate for small things in relationship to him. Like, mainly, I have a gripe with the Metropolitan Opera, as I think all people who know me know. And, I question why of Britten's 13 operas, they've only done four. And of those four, one of them has only been done once. And the other three have been done no more than three times. And as far as repertory goes, I feel like that's a hole that should be filled. Also, at the same time, they should be programming works that are newer, that are by actual minoritized composers. They should be programming new works whenever they have the option to do so. They should be programming works by women composers that maybe are not new, that didn't get large scale performances. And that is more important to me. And that's more important to me kind of across the board. That's just my one little bugaboo in relation to getting Britten's work programmed because I feel like, the Met has never done Gloriana. And I would love for it to have that kind of performance because I think it deserves it. And if they did that, then I could rest a little easier. [laughs] And maybe I wouldn't be, rapping on their door talking about Britain all the time. But that is very different than my feeling about how underperformed new works are.

Will Robin 50:00

Great. Well, thank you so much. This was a really great conversation. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me..

Imani Mosley 50:06

Thank you so much for having me. I love talking with you about Britten and I hope people are interested. [laughs]

Will Robin 50:17

I think they will be Thank you. This is awesome.

50:19

[outro music]

Will Robin 50:24

I'm very grateful to Imani Danielle Mosley, who is assistant professor at the University of Florida's School of Music, for that great interview. I'm sure many of our listeners already know Professor Mosley from her lively social media presence, but if not, you should definitely follow her on Twitter @imanimosley On our website, soundexpertise.org, we've got links to Professor Mosley's scholarship. As always, if you like the sound of our show, check out the music of our producer D. Edward Davis on Soundcloud at warm silence. And if you want to know more about what I'm up to follow me on twitter @seatedovation. Many thanks to Andrew Dell'Antonio for transcribing our episodes to make them more accessible. Our guest next week is the anthropologist Nick Seaver. We'll be talking about streaming services and the cultural meaning of the algorithms that govern our musical lives. See you then!

51:14

[outro music]