Driving Down a Foggy Road: Learning the Britten Suites for Solo Cello, Opp. 72, 80 and 87

by Paul Vance

"Composing is like driving down a foggy road toward a house. Slowly you see more details—the color of the slates and bricks, the shape of the windows. The notes are the bricks and mortar of the house." -Benjamin Britten

My first vision of Britten's "house" was from a long distance. In the late 1980s I was a cellist in the professional core of the South Bend Symphony Orchestra. During the summer of 1988 I was preparing to audition for other, full-time professional orchestras. I was being coached for these auditions by Loren Brown, a friend and section cellist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. After one of my lessons at his home Loren and I were talking casually about repertoire for solo cello, and I made mention of the Britten suites. Loren expressed the view that the suites were extremely difficult and virtually unplayable. This intrigued me quite a bit, and I made a mental note to find music for these pieces and give them a looking over at the least. I had begun a journey that would take me literally inside Britten's house.

In all, Benjamin Britten composed five works for cello at the request of Mstislav Rostropovich: the *Sonata, Op. 65* for cello and piano (1961), the *Cello Symphony, Op. 68* (1963), and the three *Suites* for solo cello, Opp. 72, 80, and 87 (1964, 1967, and 1971, respectively). Prior to meeting Rostropovich, Britten was well known for highly inventive writing for voice and/or instruments. In view of Rostropovich's extraordinary virtuosity, Britten had the chance to explore new heights of creativity that greatly expanded his own technical and musical language in these five works.

In September of 1989 I began a doctoral program in cello performance at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Since my dissertation topic had to do with the sonata literature for cello, most of the pieces I studied and performed while working on the doctorate were duos for cello and piano. Among many others, I learned and performed Britten's *Sonata, Op. 65* for one of my dissertation recitals.

After completing my doctoral degree in 1992, I began my career as a college music professor, in which cello playing and teaching has been the focal point. In addition to the many pieces I learned and performed in my formal cello studies, I added numerous pieces to my repertoire, but never found sufficient time in which to learn the Britten suites, though they were still much on my mind.

When I had the opportunity in 2006 to take a sabbatical leave from my professorship at Winona State University, I chose the Britten *Suites* for the topic of my project. I contacted my friend and colleague Tanya Remenikova, who confirmed that she had learned the first and second suites while studying with Rostropovich, and that she would be happy to help me learn them.

In this photograph I am reading Britten's copy of the Tchaikovsky settings of Russian folk songs, a few of which provided the impetus for Britten's third cello suite. My wife Natalie Filipovich helps with translation of the Russian text.

Piecing together the "bricks and mortar" was a straightforward—albeit arduous—process: several hours of daily practice, with lessons scheduled at regular intervals. Characteristically, Tanya was extremely generous with guidance and abundant insight. After considerable effort, I had the first suite more or less in hand by mid-October, and the second and third in similar states by mid-February and late May.

Upon returning to my duties at WSU in August of 2007 I had gained a full view of the exterior of Britten's "house." By late November of 2008 I had performed each of the three suites in separate recitals in Winona, Rochester, and Northfield, and in May of 2009 I performed all three suites in a single recital in Minneapolis. It was now time to enter the house.

For many years I was in regular attendance at the annual convention of the Eva Janzer Memorial Cello Center at Indiana University. In September, 2006, as I was beginning my sabbatical year, Lynn Harrell was one of the honorees and clinicians at the Eva Janzer gathering. In a question and answer period, someone asked Mr. Harrell how he went about learning a work he did not already have in his repertoire. In response, he reported that he wanted to acquaint himself not just with the piece he was preparing to perform, but to "get into the mind" of the composer as they were writing it. He suggested listening to recordings of pieces that the composer wrote at about the same time they were at work on the piece to be learned, and listening to what the composer was listening to as they were at work on the piece. He also recommended reading any existing letters that the composer wrote as they were at work on the piece, as well as reading any literature that they were known to have been reading at that time.

Heeding Mr. Harrell's excellent advice, I read the Christopher Headington and Humphrey Carpenter biographies of Britten to learn something of his life. I listened to recordings of and read scores for most of the pieces Britten composed during the time he was at work on his five pieces for cello, giving special attention to the instrumental

works. I read several of the books Britten read during this time period (e.g., Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, poetry by Alexander Pushkin, novels and stories by Henry James, and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*). Because Britten was rehearsing, recording, and performing Edward Elgar's oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius* as he was composing the third cello suite I spent some time with the score of that piece. All of this helped me commence the task of "getting into Britten's mind."

As previously mentioned, Britten composed his cello pieces at the request of Mstislav Rostropovich. Britten met Rostropovich and Dmitri Shostakovich in London in 1959, at which time Rostropovich gave the London premiere of Shostakovich's *Cello Concerto No. 2*. These three musicians would become very close friends over the years, and their personalities would often inform each other's work. For example, Tanya Remenikova suggested that there are elements of whimsy and hyperbole in the Britten suites that, while not characteristic of the composer, were all too characteristic of their dedicatee, Rostropovich. Additionally, there is a strong reference to the first movement of Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 5* in the opening measures of Britten's second cello suite. (Britten dedicated his "church parable" *The Prodigal Son* to Shostakovich, and Shostakovich returned the favor by dedicating his *Symphony No. 14* to Britten. Both of these pieces date from the period during which Britten was composing the cello suites.) The relationship between Britten, Rostropovich, and Shostakovich likely has direct correlations to Britten's three cello suites.

Eager to learn even more about Britten, his music, and his environment, I contacted Dr. Nick Clark, Librarian at the Britten/Pears Foundation and requested permission to visit the Britten/Pears archive in Aldeburgh, England. (Tenor Peter Pears was Britten's life partner and musical collaborator.) Arrangements were made for me to read in the archives and from Britten's personal library in July of 2010.

For four consecutive days I wandered the seaside and countryside that surrounded Britten for most of his life, and spent time in his home. I sat at Britten's desk, which has the view of the garden that he saw as he was composing. In succession, I read his manuscripts for all of the instrumental compositions on which he worked as he was writing the cello suites. In Britten's personal library I was pleased to find the book Britten himself used as a source for the third cello suite. This book was from the collected works of Tchaikovsky, and contained settings of Russian folk songs that Tchaikovsky had arranged. From these experiences I began to get a sense of Britten's presence in his creative work.

What I take away from careful scrutiny of Britten's house—in both the literal and figurative sense—is the stuff of a much longer and detailed article. Perhaps I will complete such a piece in the future. For now, it is hoped that at least some of what I learned on my journey is evident in my performances of these three extraordinary works. In observance of Britten's centennial, I will perform all three suites in a recital at Winona State University in November of this year. I invite you all to join me at Britten's house.

Paul Vance is Professor of Cello and Director of Orchestral Activities at Winona State University in southeastern Minnesota.