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Abstract

This article describes the friendship between Sylvia Townsend Warner, Peter Pears and Benjamin Britten in the 1970s. It draws on previously unpublished correspondence held at the Britten-Pears Archive and the Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive. It describes the role that John Craske's paintings played in establishing the connection between Warner and Pears, details some visits and covers Britten's illness and death. The article also describes the concert in Warner's honour planned by Pears and given in Aldeburgh in July 1977.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; Peter Pears; Benjamin Britten; music; John Craske; Aldeburgh.

Friends were important to Warner. She made friendships easily and maintained them with entertaining letters. Her friendship late in life with the tenor Peter Pears was no exception; but, unlike others, this was anchored in the joy of music coupled with the agony of the loss of a life partner.

Sixteen letters from Warner to Pears were published as 'Sylvia Townsend Warner's Letters to Peter Pears' in *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society 2004*.¹ A further six previously unpublished letters by Pears and 18 completely or partially unpublished letters from Warner show in more detail how the friendship flourished and became important to both Pears and Warner in a relatively short time. Their correspondence dates from 1970 to 1978; the content of the letters is often musical, or addresses musical subjects, but Warner also hints at the

devastation of grief – Ackland had recently died – and later she comforts Pears as he copes with Britten’s failing health and eventual death in 1976.

Warner knew and admired the music of Benjamin Britten for many years before her friendship with Pears began in 1970. Her knowledge of Britten’s music is shown in a diary entry for December 1950 as she calms an angry cat:

Today I have finished typing *The Hostage* ... Niou, ravaged with jealousy, hauled around the last pages, and finally hurled himself on my shoulders, and was rocked to consolation by a tune about a kitten in the manner of Britten.²

A year later, having listened appreciatively to Britten’s opera *Billy Budd* on the radio, Warner met the composer at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden with the conductor Mark Lubbock, husband of her friend Bea: ‘I had tea with Ben and Mark and saw Bea again at Covent Garden in the intervals of *Billy Budd* ... the music becomes very familiar on a second hearing, and winds itself into the mind’.³

In 1946 Britten and Pears had formed the English Opera Group with the aim of creating an English opera repertoire, to include the commissioning of new works and giving concert performances of old and modern English music. Its manifesto declared:

We believe the time has come when England, which has never had a tradition of native opera, but has always depended on a repertory of foreign works, can create its own operas ... We believe the best way to achieve the beginnings of a repertory of English operas is through the creation of a form of opera requiring small resources of singers and players, but suitable for performance in large or small opera houses or theatres.⁴

This enterprise would have been a perfect vehicle for Nordoff and Warner’s opera *The Sea-Change*. It was the powerful and absorbing story of the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, needed little scenery and featured only a small group of singers across the vocal range.⁵ It is surprising that Warner does not appear to have approached the Opera Group despite having met Britten at Covent Garden in 1951. There is no mention of the *The Sea-Change* in the English Opera Group Archive, part of the Britten-Pears Foundation in Suffolk, nor in any letters between Warner and Pears, although Nordoff was mentioned in their correspondence.

The English Opera Group was also the foundation of the Britten-Pears Aldeburgh Festival. Christopher Headington in his biography of Pears gives information on how the festival came about. He says that Eric Crozier, part of the management team of the Opera Group, described how, when sitting one evening over pre-dinner drinks, they expressed some pride in what they were doing:

England was at last making some contribution to the traditions of international opera. And yet – there was something absurd about travelling so far to win success with British operas ... It was at this point that Peter Pears had an inspiration. ‘Why not make our own Festival?’, he suggested. ‘A modest Festival with a few concerts given by friends? Why not have an Aldeburgh Festival?’⁶

Pears’s idea became a reality the following year. It has continued ever since as a premier music festival in England.

Warner’s love of the human voice, whether in motets, operatic arias or lieder, is shown throughout her diaries as she describes concerts heard on the radio. The music transmitted from Aldeburgh was a highlight: ‘In the evening I listened to the music of Aldeburgh – Pears singing *‘Auf dem Wasser’* exquisitely, and Britten’s sharp, infallible composer’s accompaniments.’⁷ She would, I think, have been especially delighted to have attended the concert that Britten and Pears gave in Dorchester in February 1954. Whether she met them there is not known, but she gives her opinion of both musicians in the diary entry for that day:

The Britten-Pears concert, with Britten’s new cycle of Hardy poems. All have power, and his particular forthrightness, and poetic reading of the words ... Pears was singing very well, his *Nacht & Träume* superlative, and a Schubert I didn’t know, *Sprach der Liebe*, most beautifully phrased ... As for Britten, a head with no chin, a pounce like a weasel, and a total attentiveness and identification with the music. He has a goblin look, like the child in the *Carpaccio Annunciation* who peeps down when she ought to have been at her lessons.⁸

There is also a diary entry that shows Warner in awe of Britten’s musicianship: ‘Re-lay from Aldeburgh – B.B. conducting the *Unfinished*. It was a *transfiguration*’.⁹ Here Warner declaims as a musician and composer,

profoundly moved by the interpretation of a twentieth-century composer's dazzling performance of the music of a nineteenth-century acknowledged master, Franz Schubert. Music is central to another memorable comment by Warner on Britten, in which she appears to have breached the outer defences of this self-protecting man:

I am haunted by the sight of Ben's rather shrewish features melting into love when we began to talk about Mozart. I only knew him slightly before then, and no more since; but that conversation made me know him forever.¹⁰

Warner came to know Peter Pears through her friend Reynolds Stone, whose wife Janet was a cousin of Pears. Warner wanted to find a permanent home in East Anglia for her collection of paintings and embroideries by the Norfolk artist John Craske. Stone advised Warner: 'Write to Peter Pears; he likes pictures'.¹¹ Warner did so in February 1970:

Dear Mr Pears,

Reynolds Stone has advised me to write to you about my collection of pictures by John Craske. I enclose an article about him, this I should like to have back.

You will see he is an artist whose work should be on view in East Anglia, and I would like to leave my collection to The Maltings or some centre in Aldeburgh. I have ten: four needleworks and six paintings. All are framed. The largest is 35 inches by 26.

Obviously you cannot decide without seeing them. But if you, or Mr Britten, would consider this proposal perhaps you could combine seeing them here with a visit to Reynolds and Janet Stone.

Yours sincerely,
Sylvia Townsend Warner¹²

It is not known when Pears responded to Warner's letter, but he did take up her offer of a visit to Frome Vauchurch to view the Crasques, as her diary of 10 May states:

Peter Pears (with sister) came to see the Crasques. And in five minutes SAW them; and in fifteen had conceived a Craske exhibition for 1971. I liked him a great deal: he has the ardour of his singing.¹³

The liking was reciprocal as Pears returned the following day ‘and sat talking about Mozart productions, et.al. & singing folk-tunes mezza voce’.¹⁴

What Pears immediately appreciated is encapsulated in Julia Blackburn’s *Threads* (2015), as she describes her own first view of Craske’s work:

I cannot begin to explain how much the pictures [and embroideries] impressed me. They were images of the sea and boats on the sea and the coast seen from a boat, but they were also images of life itself and its precariousness and how we struggle to keep afloat and to stay alive in the face of fear and uncertainty.¹⁵

Something of the juxtaposition of fragility and stubborn strength in adversity that is represented in Craske’s work must have appealed to Valentine Ackland when she ‘discovered’ him in Norfolk. She was the first buyer of his work and laid the foundation for what was to become Warner’s collection of Craske artworks and those of many of her friends. In recounting the story of Ackland’s Crasques and Aldeburgh, Warner tells her friends Joy and Marchette Chute that

It was she who found Craske, going to his house ... finding it full of pictures painted on any surface he could lay hands on ... and instantly recognised his quality, was his first buyer, his first promoter. So this will be a lovely and living memorial to her.¹⁶

Warner’s immediate rapport with Pears would ensure that she told him all of the details surrounding the acquisition of the Crasques offered to him for display at Aldeburgh, as well as the intended tribute to Ackland. After his visit to view the Crasques, Warner wrote to him twice within a week, once to declare her pleasure that the artworks would be going back to their home in East Anglia, then again to say how much she had enjoyed his visit. The first letter is undated but formally addressed to ‘Dear Peter Pears’. The second addressed to ‘Dear Peter’ is akin to a conversation:

... Anise is the basis of that revolting French liqueur. You see, I have read your *Artemesian Holiday*. It delighted me: the cottage-loaf wife, and all that generous happiness. I have a passion for people being happy. One of the worst things about bereavement is that it makes one mistrust one’s capacity for enjoying – which is impious

ingratitude for the past. You were very restorative while we sat in the garden. I had hoped you might admire the Craske but I had not foreseen that I would get a new friend by it. Please come again if you are anywhere nearby. There will always be coffee, and soup of the day, and a very welcoming Sylvia.¹⁷

This early letter to Pears shows the kind of personal warmth towards him found in her letters to other, more established friends. It demonstrates that she had set great store by this developing friendship.

Warner's correspondence with Pears throughout the following year largely concerned her attempts at cajoling friends to lend their Craske works for the exhibition. Her excitement about this enterprise is shown in a letter to Pears of 10 June 1970: 'This is no moment to write to you, when you are in full Festival, but I am so excited with the latest Craske development that write I must or die of tight-lacing'.¹⁸ The piece in question was a large embroidery that Warner and Ackland had once owned. Warner concludes the letter with elan: 'There! I have cut my laces and feel much better. Love, Sylvia'.¹⁹

No surviving letters from Pears to Warner could be found from June 1970 until 17 March 1971, when Warner replies to one of his letters:

Dear Peter,

Your letter and the brochure arrived this morning (six days in transit, God help us all!). You are extremely kind, and I most gratefully welcome your kindness...

I see with majestic pride that I am arranging the Craske Show. But though it would be bliss to spend days and days hanging, do you think June 1st to 4th perhaps a trifle lavish? On the other hand, I have great gifts for self-entertainment and could never feel eternity too long in East Anglia. Do with me as thou wilt. And I look forward to seeing you on May 10th.

Love from Sylvia.²⁰

The brochure would have been the large, beautifully illustrated programme of events for the weeks of the Festival. In it Warner had written the information about Craske for the exhibition. She also wrote the bibliographical matter and introduction to the small Craske Exhibition catalogue and replies to what must have been Pears's compliments on it:

... It was a great pleasure to write the piece about Craske. I am glad you like it – and that I was able to get a word in about Laura Craske. She was a Gluck character. If it hadn't been for her we should not be writing to each other about a Craske exhibition.

Much love,
Sylvia.²¹

Warner's opening paragraphs of that catalogue are immediately engaging:

When John Craske, aged thirty-nine, emerged for a few months between his recurrent comas and thought he would like to do a painting, he faced the problem of what to paint with, and what to paint on. Paper would cost money. Fortunately, his home supplied flat surfaces. He painted on door-panels, window-boards, box lids, trays, the back of Laura Craske's pastry-board. Not until he had exhausted these did he buy paper – cheap and regrettably flimsy, as the *James Edward* shows. For paints he used the only paints he knew: heeltaps of house paint, distemper, poster-paint. ...

But as to what he would paint, Craske was never in doubt. He would paint what he knew: ships, because he understood their behaviour, the North Sea whose behaviour he had experienced, the East Anglian coast ... They were life and death matters to him, and he painted them as such, seriously and truthfully ... He painted like a man giving witness under oath to a wild story.²²

Forty-seven paintings and needleworks were displayed in the exhibition. Fourteen were owned by Warner and given, not loaned, to the Snape Maltings Art Centre. The number of works collected for this exhibition indicates the dedication with which Warner set about persuading her friends to loan their works; she and Ackland had been instrumental in persuading them to purchase Craske works in the first instance to help the artist financially. Warner's cousin Janet Machen loaned items, as did Joy Finzi, wife of the composer Gerald Finzi, and Bea Lubbock and Elizabeth Wade White among others. Warner also prised out works from The Shell Museum near Holt in Norfolk and The Minorities, Colchester.

On 1 June 1971 Warner travelled to Aldeburgh to mount the Craske exhibition and to attend concerts during the opening days of the Festival as a guest of Pears: 'I should love to hear *King Arthur* on the 4th and

both the Blytheburgh concerts on the 5th. No one travels the Winter Journey like you and Ben do'.²³ Her journey brought back memories of happy times spent in Norfolk with Ackland and she arrived dispirited and unsure of herself in the novel situation of hanging an exhibition. Warner gives no information about this or whether she enjoyed the experience. She did, however, say in a letter to William Maxwell shortly after her return from Aldeburgh that Pears and Britten were kind and welcoming to her. During her stay, her poignant diary entries are filled with memories of past times and her enduring grief at the loss of Ackland. Climbing out of a bath she decries her 'clumsy body':

I thought of past love & pleasure and wished it dead, so that I could escape it.

But all the wings of my spirit, love & beauty & the sea and music & art & all knowledge & enlightenment and sorrow & pleasure & joy ALL came to it via the body I was wishing dead. *My body was the hostess*. And even now my sight totters to my eyes to see the wind and the sunlight on the sea.²⁴

It is not known for how long Warner suffered this resurgence of intense grief; there may have been a hiatus at this time as she no longer had the task of gathering Crasques for display in Ackland's honour to occupy her, but she continued writing to her friends. Where she could, she made connections between them. One such connection was forged between Britten, Pears and Paul Nordoff. Warner had spoken to them of Nordoff's musical work with disabled children, after which Britten wrote the preface to Nordoff's book *Therapy in Music for Handicapped Children*. Warner writes to Pears that

Paul Nordoff was here a couple of weeks ago with tapes of his Therapy by Music sessions. He was very happy about Ben's preface to the book. So was I. So will a great many readers be, for the book is selling well. It – the preface – is as convincing as if Ben had written it as music. That is what I feel about Ben's music: I believe every note of it.

Much love to you both. Sylvia.²⁵

The flow of letters between Dorset and Norfolk increased during 1972, the year before the onset of Britten's health problems. Pears visited

Warner at least twice in that year, possibly in conjunction with singing engagements in the West Country, and Warner expresses her pleasure at the prospect of the first visit: 'I have put a ring of roses round July 13. It will be a *great* pleasure to see you. I hope you will stay the night and we can breakfast in the garden'.²⁶ This visit, of unknown length, was a comfort to Warner as her note to Pears a few days afterwards shows:

Come again! – endeared Peter – and don't let the next interval be such a long one.

You are the most comfortable of visitors, the most reviving, the most reassuring. You make me feel as stroked as the cats. I bless the fortune which brought you here to look at the Craskes and began our friendship. Come again!

With love, Sylvia.

ps. You are very good for me.²⁷

Another visit from Pears was planned for October and her letter in response to a lost one of Pears's shows her pleasure. It also reveals that she was composing again, and it could be conjectured that the shared love and knowledge of music between herself and Pears reignited this old passion. For the first time she addresses Pears as 'Dearest Peter':

This is delightful. I shall love to see you on the 13th, better still if you will spend a night, or both nights here? ... I have been composing a piece for two violins.²⁸

Warner follows this surprising information by sending him the completed work with a note: 'Here is my boasted-of composition for two violins. No need to return'.²⁹

Britten's long-standing heart problems intensified in 1973 and he was admitted to the National Heart Hospital in early May for major heart surgery. He had been working intensely on his opera *Death in Venice*, which may have contributed to his failing health. Warner says effusively to Pears in a letter that

I have been haunted all day by *Death in Venice*. I hope it will haunt me for the rest of my life. It was like listening to a stained-glass window, but the glass pliable as a piece of silk ... Ben is an alchemist and a magician, and every note he says is true.³⁰

She is concerned here solely with Britten's music, not the libretto. As a librettist herself, it might be expected that Warner would comment on this aspect of the opera, but as a friend she appears anxious only to pay a compliment where it was due. As Janet Montefiore notes regarding the content of letters, this may have been 'a model of discretion and kindness, not to mention ordinary good manners'.³¹ Warner may perhaps have had her own opinion of the libretto of the opera, but she has not recorded it in her diary.

Warner then did not hear from Pears for almost a year. During this time, from mid-1973 until mid-1974, Britten had been ill. He had suffered a post-operative stroke and was unable to compose or conduct. How much detail Warner knew of Britten's condition is not known. Her letter of 1 May 1974 shows that she was missing the correspondence with Pears:

Dearest Peter,

I have thought of you and thought of you, and each time with a sadder heart; one climbs up a steep hill called Hope, and from the summit looks down and recognises the prospect of descent stretching in front of you ...

The last news I heard of you was when I was at Boughrood, not long after you had stayed there, sitting in the sun considering emendations to *Death in Venice*. It has been a picture in my mind ever since.

I listened to your reading of the Sonnets. They could not have been more perfectly, more unaffectedly read ...

As for me, I am well, and to my surprise for the last year have been writing story after story in a new way: my posthumous manner. There is one in this week's *New Yorker* if you would care to know more.

'Your' room will always be ready for you. Your rooms, indeed, for Valentine's sitting room, with its views of the river and walls of books, would be yours if you wanted to be by yourself. And you know how happy I would be to see you.

True love to you both.

Sylvia.³²

Pears responded to this letter rapidly; something of Warner's sadness and anxiety may have communicated itself to him. He writes:

Dearest Sylvia,

Thank you very much for your marvellous letter. It was dear of you to write and a great lift to my spirits.

Ben in fact is quite a little better, and I am hoping. We are today hearing the tapes of *Death in Venice* which we made last month. They are good, Ben is happy and finding the listening not too exhausting.

How *good* that you are writing. Will the New Yorker stories turn into a book? I do hope so. We cannot have too many STW books!

The nightingale's in full voice on the golf-links and, I never heard such blackbirds as this year. But oh! we need rain.

Much love to you, my dear, from Ben as well as Peter.³³

Warner's joy at the news in Pears's letter is evident in her reply of 22 May 1974. She writes of Spring being the time to get better, that lilacs are in bloom and strawberries are imminent. Her hopes have been lifted. But it is the opening lines of this letter that would have resonated with Pears:

The postman has just delivered your letter. He must have known how happy it would make me for he went away whistling (it should have been *Dalla sua pace*) ...³⁴

This is Don Ottavio's aria from Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* and scored for tenor voice. It is undoubtedly a part that Pears would have sung. The title of the aria is part of Warner's point as it references Britten's improving health and the subsequent raising of Pears's spirits. '*Dalla sua pace la mia dipende*' roughly translates as 'On her peace of mind depends mine too', a loving reassurance for Pears.

Later in 1974 Pears writes again to Warner:

Dearest Sylvia,

For months I have been hoping that the letter I would write to you would begin 'Ben & I are coming down to Dorset'. We had planned a two week excursion in March, and long ago last autumn I had hoped. But it is no good. Ben cannot do long journeys, and Kings Lynn was as far as we dared go in March. The operation of a year ago has *not* worked. It looked better for some time but now it has gone right back, and I do not know how long or short he will last.

I have much missed seeing you. As a correspondent I am wretched always and have not even thanked you, I believe, for last year's Craskes, which are still in London waiting to go or stay. I would [have] loved to have seen you and I do hope you are well and that the dear river flows as usual past 'my' window.

We have just made records of *Death in Venice* for Decca at Snape, and Ben did just manage to attend some of the sessions but was v exhausted after. The records are good, I think. Now I am on *Owen Wingrave* at Covent Garden. I had so much pleasure when I was asked to read Shakespeare Sonnets for the BBC. What things!

Dearest Sylvia – I send you much love, as does Ben. Peter.³⁵

Towards the end of 1974 Pears was singing in the United States and must have written to Warner from there as her reply to a letter is ecstatic at the news that Britten was composing again. There is little correspondence of note between Warner and Pears in 1975; presumably this was a better time as Britten's health appears to have stabilised and Pears could expand his singing commitments. However, there must have been an underlying unease among his friends, as Warner reveals in a letter to William Maxwell:

I understand your resentment at the death of people you love. I feel even angrier at the death of those who are cut short; or their frustration; like Ben Britten, who cannot write the flute part at the top of an orchestral score without having his arm lifted for him ...³⁶

Britten's stroke of 1974 would have caused this disability, but this comment by Warner is the first time that it has been mentioned in any letter.

In a letter to Pears in January 1976 Warner's prose is playful, her mood positive. She had heard from friends in America that Ingmar Bergman's film of *The Magic Flute* had been praised as 'charming'. Warner's response to Pears was that

I went about hissing 'kitsch' like a nest of serpents. When I produce the *Flute* I shall aim to go back to the original theatre: garret, rather dirty and reach-me-down with quantities of Woolworth jewellery for the Queen of the Night.³⁷

Warner was obviously dismayed at the prospect of a ‘charming’ production, with its intimation of pretty costumes overlaying the power of Mozart’s music. *The Magic Flute* is a complex and sophisticated opera, but Warner is alive to its more rustic origins in folklore. The ‘Woolworth’ jewellery is a delicious snub to the imperious character of the Queen of the Night.

Shortly after Warner’s letter of 21 January 1976, Pears sent her what must have been a surprising invitation:

Dear Sylvia,

I have a little plan.

I would very much like to put on a programme next year ‘77 in the Festival about *You*. Would you allow it? And will you think slowly what it should be? Some poems, a story, some songs – the Ireland ones or others? Some of the music you like, a motet or a madrigal?

It would be a lovely occasion. Do think it over, dear Sylvia.

Much love,
Peter.³⁸

Warner’s response on 1 March is eloquent and appreciative of the offer. She relates her joy at the signs of spring and knows immediately that she would want Mozart’s music to be part of the programme:

Dear Peter,

Your letter came this morning; and with it all the crocuses opened and bees hurried into the crocuses. It is a lovely and glorious plan.

I am primed up with Majestic Pride. Thank you very much for thinking of it.

I will think slowly about what it could be. But I *know* instantly one thing I would like: the Fire and Water music in the *Magic Flute*. I took myself to hear the *Flute* in 1912 ... I was Mozart’s for life. If I heard it on a tin whistle and a dustpan lid I would be on my knees.³⁹

However, here there is another instance of what Janet Montefiore terms the ‘discrepancy’⁴⁰ between what Warner writes to friends and what she records of her feelings in her diary. The joy of the reply to Pears is not evident in her diary entry for that date. Her enduring grief at Ackland’s loss is expressed in bleak terms, qualifying – she even thinks that she may be dead by then – her appearance of warmth and happiness at the proposed

event: 'A letter from Peter Pears about an S.T.W. day at Aldeburgh. My first dishevelment was abated when I realised it would be 1977, & I might well be dead by then.'⁴¹ She did, however, note the crocuses and the bees in her diary. Her reply to Pears is effusively well-mannered. It is her social self speaking, and in that guise she *is* grateful for his kindness in wanting to honour her, her writing and her influence on musicians who had set her poetry to music.

Between letters discussing his recitals on the radio and inviting him to visit ('I wish you would be glad to come here later on. Daffodils? Strawberries? A seasonal soup? I often talk to you in my mind. Give my love to Ben and yourself. Sylvia'),⁴² Warner had her last *Kingdom of Elfin* story, 'The Duke of Orkney' accepted by the *New Yorker* and survived floods in her river valley in Frome Vauchurch. In June 1976 she wrote to Pears about Britten's becoming ennobled as Baron Britten of Aldeburgh. She also comments that Paul Nordoff had telephoned her to say how happy he had been when visiting Britten and Pears and that it had 're-made him';⁴³ the connection initially fostered by Warner had continued, seemingly to the benefit of all.

Warner began to plan the content of her tribute day at Aldeburgh, which, like the time-consuming work assembling Craske artefacts for the 1971 show, would have been a distraction from her abiding widowed grief. She applies the same resolution to choosing music, poems and a story:

About one thing I am categorical. *You* must read my poems, and a story if you please. I have listened to you reading poetry on the 3rd [programme], and I realised the quality of poetry read with breath control instead of the usual puff-and-pant. I think you have King Duffus. Shall I send you a few more recent ones? Because of breath control, I would like to hear you read the one in KD [King Duffus] about the river full of trees – *You* would make that river *flow*.⁴⁴

The poem in question is untitled:

There is a mountain's-load of trees in the water.
From bank to bank the river is brimmed with trees.
Perhaps because of the smooth brushwork of the water
They do not seem to be this year's trees.

The river has no room for the shape of the mountain.
Beneath that glass runs no warrant of place or time.

It is plumed with the trees of no particular mountain
And green with a summer of no time.

This passing summer writes no word on the river
Except where a few small apples bob on the tide,
Cast off by some wilding further up the river
And carried onward by the tide.⁴⁵

Warner's letter continues:

There is a volume of Elfin stories due out early next year and I will send you a copy. One about the power of choral singing – it moved a Welsh mountain – might be suitable.

This story is 'Visitors to a Castle' and it includes this memorable evocation of the power of music:

At sundown precisely, they met to sing. ... At first they sang in unison. Then they sang in thirds. As the power of song took hold of them, they threw in some spontaneous descants. When they realised that the song could be sung in canon, like Three Blind Mice and Tallis's Evening Hymn, their joy knew no bounds. They sang. They sang. The Poet's nephew, singing himself and conducting with both hands, led them from an ample *forte* to a rich *fortissimo* and tapered them down to a *pianissimo espressivo* and roused them again and again calmed them. Each sang, and at the same time felt the anonymous ardour of those singing with him.⁴⁶

Warner then writes about the settings of her poetry:

I would like to hear the Alan Bush cycle in real life. I only heard it by sight. I am not overly attached to the J. Ireland settings. Would it be possible to have the second and fourth of Paul Nordoff's *Lost Summer*? The other two didn't work out with a piano accompaniment very satisfactorily. Too many notes, like wasps around the sugar. And please, one or two madrigals. I can never hear Wilbye often enough. And will you sing?

It is unclear if Warner received many letters from Pears during the summer and autumn of 1976. The letter that she did receive from Pears in late November 1976 brought the news that Britten was dying:

Dearest Sylvia,

I should have written long since. Forgive me – but I am in touch with you through the *New Yorker* anyway!

I am writing this at Ben's bedside. He is slowly sinking into eternity.

In your letter you wrote of Paul Nordoff's settings of your poems. I do not know them. Are they available in print? If you have them, could you send the ones you like to me, and I will have them photographed and return them. I will send copies to Kenneth Bowen and Alan Bush (if you think they can do them).

Fire and Water Music will only be heard, I fear, through loud speakers, but it can be made to sound good. Whose performance do you prefer? Your own, of course, but, like mine, it is not available!

Much love dearest Sylvia.

Peter⁴⁷

Warner's response is intimate and shares Pears's undoubted desolation at Britten's imminent death. It would have been a painful reminder of Ackland's last days and her own sense of helplessness:

Dearest Peter,

My mind often pauses to sit with you at Ben's bedside. His death after these years of hope and disappointment is like a long-prepared enharmonic modulation. He will pass from making music to being music;⁴⁸ though it must wring your heart – it does mine – to think of the music he will carry with him.

About Paul Nordoff ... he is in a German hospital, dying. I had a leave-taking letter from him a fortnight ago. It is so long since he had a settled place that I don't know where to seek his manuscripts. The two songs I had in mind are in *Lost Summer*, voice and orchestra ... All I have here is a setting, voice and piano, of a poem of mine called 'The Arrival'. This I will send tomorrow. The 'Fire and Water Music' would be ideal loud-speakered. It belongs to disembodiment ... It is strange to be planning for such a benefit ahead.

With my love,
Sylvia.⁴⁹

'The Arrival' was first published in *Time Importuned* (1928).

When I set out I did not know
Whether an ash tree or an elm
With branches waving slow
And a soft summer voice would overwhelm
My questing thoughts with the certainty of arrival;

But now on the dusky lawn I stand
And neither ash nor elm tree greet:
A deeper plumage is fanned,
The air wanders enchanted with one sweet,
And in the lime tree a nightingale is singing.⁵⁰

Warner heard of Britten's death on the radio on the morning of 4 December 1976. She immediately wrote to Pears:

Dearest Peter,

I have just heard the announcement on the radio. It came to my mind that a thousand hearers must be thinking of you with compassion, and with gratitude for all you have done in making Ben's music known to them. It was the voice of many waters on this cold silent morning.

Love, Sylvia.⁵¹

Nordoff was to die the following January in Germany. Warner would have felt the loss of these friends keenly; she 'wrenched her vitals'⁵² writing an obituary for Nordoff for *The Times*. Later Pears writes in reply to Warner's last letter:

Dearest Sylvia,

Thank you for your very sweet note about Ben. He stopped breathing gently, not without discomfort in those last days, with my hand in his.

I am coming to Wessex on Mon 7th to my sister in Sherborne and Osian and I do a concert there on Tues 8th, and in Salisbury on the 9th, thence, I fear, to London. Could I aim at seeing you in the middle of the day of the 7th? – and I must also see Reynolds that day.

I have *King Duffus*, *Opus 7* and *Boxwood*, but not your other poems. I have just ordered the new book. How lovely!

Much love,

Peter

ps. Any luck with Paul Nordoff's songs?⁵³

Pears did visit Warner on 7 February 1977; it was the first time she had seen him since Britten's death. Although he had other visits to make that day, his sister's borrowed car broke down and he spent the entire afternoon with Warner, who wrote about the visit to William Maxwell:

I have spent today with Peter Pears: that is to say, he came to lunch ... We discussed the problem of going on living after one has been cut in half. He has found his solution in the harp. There can never be another accompanist like Ben; and pianist after pianist has played beautifully in his pianist's compartment, and nothing came of it; but Osian Ellis the harpist & he get along very nicely, and Ravel's songs, especially *Sainte*, bloom on harpstrings. I suggested they might try Moore's Irish melodies. It was one of my good ideas. He looks so gaunt, so solitary, that except for his height and his speaking voice I think I could not have recognized him.⁵⁴

Warner's musical choices for her tribute day and the difficulties that arose with the lack of orchestration – there was to be only piano accompaniment – and the location of music, led to the final programme being radically different from that originally envisioned. There was no Mozart 'Fire & Water Music', no Wilbye madrigal and no music of Britten's. Warner's preferred story, 'Visitors to a Castle', which referenced her work in Early Music, was dropped in favour of what Pears called 'the rather wicked story'⁵⁵ – 'The Cold' from *The Museum of Cheats*. And she did have to listen to the John Ireland works that she did not care for. These changes must have occurred during the Spring of 1977 when Pears was in the first trials of grief; Warner would have wanted to make the arrangements as easy as possible for him.

The programme for the 'Tribute to Sylvia Townsend Warner' on 21 June 1977 in the Jubilee Hall, Aldeburgh was as follows:

Poems from *Time Importuned* (1928),
The Espalier (1925) and
King Duffus (1968)

Four songs:

The Arrival	Paul Nordoff (1909–1977)
The Maiden	Paul Nordoff
The Soldier's Return	John Ireland (1879–1962)
The Scapegoat	John Ireland

Short Story: 'The Cold'

(from *The Museum of Cheats*, 1947)

Virelai and Rondeau for Two Voices Guillaume de Machaut (1300–1377)

Recent Poems

Song Cycle: 'The Freight of Harvest' Alan Bush (Born 1900)

The 'Recent Poems' were I think chosen by Pears, who says of them: 'She had written these in the last few years and I think they are very fine, characteristic of her late work, worthy of a good musician and a wise woman.'⁵⁶ The poems were 'Azrael', 'Three Poems', 'Dorset Endearments', 'Ballad Story', 'Graveyard in Norfolk', 'Earl Cassilis's Lady', 'December 31st St. Silvester', 'In April', 'Gloriana Dying' and 'A Journey by Night'. These poems were read again by Pears in a BBC programme following Warner's death in May 1978.

During the Festival, the Craske embroideries and paintings gifted by Warner were displayed in the South Bar of Snape Maltings. The programme note reads: 'It seems appropriate to show these remarkable works again at this Festival to mark the visit of Sylvia Townsend Warner.'⁵⁷ Pears had also linked Warner's tribute, given in the late morning, with an evening performance of music solely by Britten with the mezzo-soprano Janet Baker singing; there could have been no greater affirmation of their friendship than this.

Surprisingly, Warner does not write of this special day in her diary. She does give information about it in two letters, however: one to David Garnett immediately after her return from the Festival, the other to William Maxwell a little later, describing her pleasure at Pears's reading of her poetry:

I think I told you I was going to Aldeburgh ... Peter Pears read a number of my poems, ancient and modern, so beautifully that I forgot to be constrained and sat enjoying them ... The finest part of the programme was when he and t'other tenor (who was there to

sing various settings of me) leaped back over six centuries and sang two *a capella* pieces by Machaut.⁵⁸

Letters between Warner and Pears became less frequent, but in October 1977 Warner, still firmly attached to her musical lifeline, the radio, wrote to him about a recital of his that had been broadcast: ‘Just to say what rapture it was to hear you in those Canticles – your voice as pliable and tenacious as the bindweed in my garden.’⁵⁹

By now Warner’s health had begun to fail. She writes to Pears in musical terms about it: ‘I have been ill, and am an aged rubbish heap. I am tremolando as if Vivaldi had composed me, and fall over at a touch.’⁶⁰ She was editing the letters between herself and Ackland – for what was much later to become the publication *I’ll Stand by You* – and steeped herself in memories of the past. The radio became more and more of a lifeline, and she records that ‘Snow blocks the northern roads, the wind is spiked with it. But the late Schubert 4th [Symphony] looked after me. It is remarkable how his music encompasses one, its youth and outgoing.’⁶¹

Warner became increasing frail, falling frequently. On 3 March 1978 she wrote a final letter to Pears:

Dear Peter,

This may be my last letter. I want to send you my love and my thanks for all the beauty that your music has meant to me.

And keep an eye on the Crasques.

I’ve just been told that your singing of *Die schöne Müllerin* with Murray Perraia [sic] accompanying was beautiful, deeply felt and a hymn to Ben. Sing on my darling.

My love, Sylvia⁶²

Pears’s moving response speaks of love and deep friendship, something that Warner inspired in many people:

Dearest Sylvia,

Your letter was precious. I love you and you will go on forever. As Ben does with his eternal spring-like music so you with your fastidious, joyful words. I will go on singing as long as I can for you and Ben.

With my devoted love, Peter.⁶³

Pears captured the essence of Warner's writing in his parting letter; her carefully chosen words *do* give extraordinary life and exuberance to her works, in which her knowledge and love of music are so frequently evident. And for those who know her life in music, it is the love shown to her by her fellow musicians, who knew how well she understood their world, that reveal another aspect of this exceptional woman.

Note on Contributor

Lynn Mutti spent a long working life as a professional librarian in universities, private companies and museums in the UK and Canada, and also as a freelance researcher. Although not a musician, she is passionate about classical music and some of the materials in the Warner–Ackland Archive in the Dorset County Museum led her to research Warner's early life as a musicologist. In 2019 she received her PhD, for a thesis entitled *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Musical Life* from UCL.

Declaration and Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work.

Notes

- 1 'Sylvia Townsend Warner's Letters to Peter Pears' in *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society 2004*, 33–44; henceforth 'Letters to Pears'.
- 2 From Warner's unpublished diaries in the Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive, hereafter 'Unpublished Diaries', 13 December 1950.
- 3 Unpublished Diaries, 8 December 1951.
- 4 The English Opera Group: <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk>. In 1975 this company became 'The English Music Theatre Company'.
- 5 The libretto is published in *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society 2015*, 14–34.
- 6 Christopher Headington, *Peter Pears: A biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 150.
- 7 Unpublished Diaries, 25 June 1953.
- 8 *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994); 10 February 1954.
- 9 *Diaries*, 346; 23 June 1970.
- 10 *Letters*, ed. Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), 266, letter to Marchette and Joy Chute, 8 April 1973.
- 11 *Letters*, 247, letter to Marchette and Joy Chute, 20 May 1970.
- 12 Sylvia Townsend Warner, letter to Peter Pears, 19 February 1970; Britten-Pears Foundation Archive, 'Correspondence from Sylvia Townsend Warner to Peter Pears (1970–71)'. All subsequent quotations from the letters from Warner to Pears were transcribed at this archive.

- 13 *Diaries*, 344; 10 May 1970.
- 14 *Diaries*, 344; 11 May 1970.
- 15 Blackburn, *Threads: The Delicate Life of John Craske* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2015), 11.
- 16 *Letters*, 247, to Joy and Marchette Chute, 20 May 1970.
- 17 Letter to Peter Pears, 19 May 1970, Britten-Pears Archive; 'Letters to Pears', 34. There is no mention in Christopher Headington's biography of Pears of a publication by him called *Artemisian Holiday*. Further research regarding this title has provided no more information. Pears's *Travel Diaries 1936–78* were published in 1995 by the Boydell Press in association with the Britten-Pears Library.
- 18 Letter to Peter Pears, 10 June 1970; Britten-Pears Archive; 'Letters to Pears', 34.
- 19 Letter to Peter Pears, 10 June 1970; Britten-Pears Archive; 'Letters to Pears', 35.
- 20 Letter to Peter Pears, 17 March 1971; Britten-Pears Archive.
- 21 Letter to Peter Pears, 20 March 1971; Britten-Pears Archive.
- 22 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *John Craske, Fisherman and Artist, 1881–1943* (Suffolk: Snape Maltings, 1971).
- 23 Letter to Peter Pears, 17 March 1971, referencing *Die Winterreise* by Franz Schubert; Britten-Pears Archive.
- 24 *Diaries*, 357; 2 or 3 June 1971.
- 25 Letter to Peter Pears, 3 November 1971; Britten-Pears Archive; 'Letters to Pears', 35–6.
- 26 Letter to Peter Pears, 22 April 1972; Britten-Pears Archive; 'Letters to Pears', 36.
- 27 Letter to Peter Pears, 19 July 1972; Britten-Pears Archive; 'Letters to Pears', 37 (where the letter is misdated 19 April 1972).
- 28 Letter to Peter Pears, 9 October 1972; Britten-Pears Archive.
- 29 Letter to Peter Pears, 23 November 1972; Britten-Pears Archive. This music is not now in the Britten-Pears Foundation Archive. However, there is a rusty paperclip mark on the note from Warner which suggests that it was there for some time. A search by an archival assistant did not find the music.
- 30 Letter to Peter Pears, 23 June 1973; Britten-Pears Archive.
- 31 Montefiore, "“Something understood”": Formality and the language of the heart in the letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2009, 11.
- 32 Letter to Peter Pears, 1 May 1974; Britten-Pears Archive; 'Letters to Pears', 38.
- 33 Peter Pears, letter to Warner, undated but probably May 1974. All six letters from Pears to Warner are in the Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive (henceforth STW–VA Archive) at the Dorset County Museum, but were not previously in the Britten-Pears Foundation Archive. Copies have now been sent to complement the holdings of the Britten-Pears Foundation Archive.
- 34 Letter to Peter Pears, 22 May 1974; Britten-Pears Archive; 'Letters to Pears', 39.
- 35 Pears, letter to Warner, undated but the content indicates 1974 as Pears was performing in *Owen Wingrave* at Covent Garden on 7 May 1974; STW–VA Archive.
- 36 *Letters*, 283; 7 December 1975.
- 37 Letter to Peter Pears, 21 January 1976; Britten-Pears Archive; 'Letters to Pears', 40.
- 38 Pears, letter to Warner, undated but possibly late February 1976; STW–VA Archive.
- 39 Letter to Peter Pears, 1 March 1976; Britten-Pears Archive; 'Letters to Pears', 41.
- 40 Montefiore, "“Something understood”", 10.
- 41 *Diaries*, 373; 1 March 1976.
- 42 Letter to Peter Pears, 10 February 1976; Britten-Pears Archive; 'Letters to Pears', 40.

- 43 Letter to Peter Pears, 12 June 1976; Britten-Pears Archive.
- 44 Letter to Peter Pears, 14 August 1976; Britten-Pears Archive; 'Letters to Pears', 41.
- 45 Warner, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Claire Harman (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2008), 348.
- 46 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Visitors to a Castle', in *Kingdoms of Elfin* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), 94–5. Originally published by Chatto & Windus, 1977.
- 47 Pears, letter to Warner, undated but probably towards the end of November 1976; STW–VA Archive.
- 48 Here Warner uses a phrase of Vaughan Williams who, when asked by her what he would be in his next incarnation, replied, 'Music. But in that world I shan't be doing it, I shall be being it'. *Diaries*, 249; 13 August 1958.
- 49 Letter to Peter Pears, 27 November 1976; Britten-Pears Archive; 'Letters to Pears', 42–3.
- 50 *New Collected Poems*, 89.
- 51 Letter to Peter Pears, 4 December 1976; Britten-Pears Archive.
- 52 *Diaries*, 375; 19 January 1977.
- 53 Pears, letter to Warner, undated but probably the end of January 1977; STW–VA Archive.
- 54 *Letters*, 293–4; 7 February 1977.
- 55 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Twelve Poems*, preface by Peter Pears (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), 8.
- 56 Warner, *Twelve Poems*, 8.
- 57 Programme of the 30th Aldeburgh Festival of Music and Arts, 10–26 June 1977, 57. The 'Tribute to Warner' is listed on 39.
- 58 *Letters*, 297–8, 13 July 1977. The letter to Garnett is dated 26 June 1977; *Sylvia and David: The Townsend Warner / Garnett Letters*, ed. Garnett (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), 231.
- 59 Letter to Peter Pears, 3 October 1977; Britten-Pears Archive.
- 60 Letter to Peter Pears, 25 January 1977; Britten-Pears Archive. *Tremolando*: 'trembling' or 'quivering'.
- 61 Letter to Peter Pears, 21 November 1977; Britten-Pears Archive.
- 62 Letter to Peter Pears, 30 March 1978; Britten-Pears Archive; 'Letters to Pears', 43; see also Pears's Preface to *Twelve Poems*, 9.
- 63 Pears, letter to Warner, undated; STW–VA Archive.

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Archives

Britten-Pears Foundation Archive.
Correspondence from Sylvia Townsend Warner to Peter Pears.

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Peter Pears and Sylvia Townsend Warner, 1970–1978.

Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive, Dorset History Centre, Dorchester. Diaries 1930–1978 by Sylvia Townsend Warner.