

I SANG THE UNSINGABLE: MY LIFE IN TWENTIETH CENTURY MUSIC

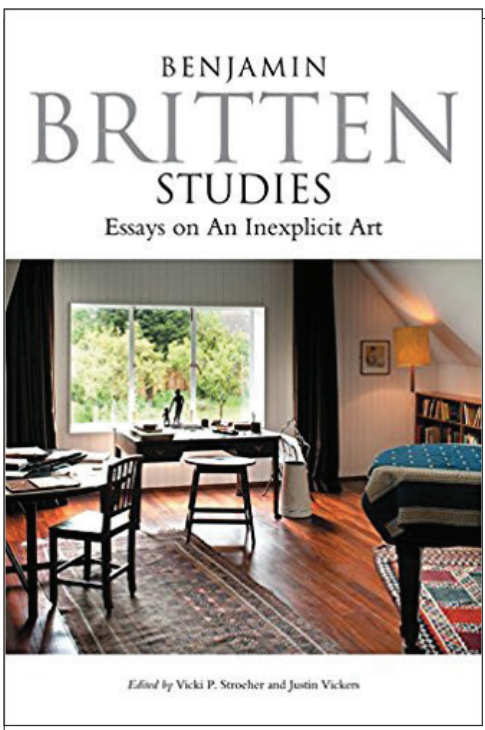
By Bethany Beardslee
(with Minna Zallman Proctor)
University of Rochester Press, 2017
(399pp.)

By Mark Zuckerman

it's difficult not to recall a footnote from the Editor's Preface: "Britten notoriously despised analysis of his works" and wonder if these articles are not precisely the type of analysis he despised.

The final essay, by Lucy Walker the Britten-Pears Foundation Director of Public Programming and Learning, is a somehow appropriately navel-gazing examination of the archival work of the Foundation through the lens of Sartrean Existentialism.

Individually, the enthusiasm and devotion of each of these authors for their subject is plainly evident and, given their credentials, one can only assume that the scholarship involved is beyond reproach. Current and future scholars who endeavor to plumb even further into the depths of detailed Britten scholarship will undoubtedly find this book a valuable resource. But whether or not this attractively packaged collection of minutiae, as the editors claim, "coalesces into a volume that not only serves as a model of on-going and future Britten research but which generates a greater understanding of the overall trends within the ever-synthesizing and interdisciplinary musicological field of the twenty-first century" is a matter of less certainty.



Soprano Bethany Beardslee is widely regarded – by critics, composers, and performers alike – as a major figure in American classical music in the latter part of the Twentieth Century. Her body of work over a more than three-decade career bears out this assessment. It includes what many consider landmark recordings of the works of the Second Viennese School composers—some regard her 1963 recording of Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* with Robert Craft as definitive—as well as numerous world premieres and recordings of some of the most challenging music by American modernist composers (Milton Babbitt in particular).

Now, at the age of 92, she has published her autobiography, a chatty and entertaining yet lean, unpretentious, and honest account of a remarkable musical life. It is sprinkled with anecdotes and confessions but also contains shrewd observations about the musical scene and practical issues of musical performance, things of interest to composers and singers as well as general readers. It is lavish with detail, from a seemingly prodigious memory aided, evidently, by diaries, about matters both private and public. (In the interest of full disclosure: my name is mentioned in two passing references regarding Beardslee's late husband, Godfrey Winham; he and I were friends.) Despite a few trivial factual errors, it illuminates a critical period in American classical music, one that today receives scant attention from the musical mainstream, both applied and academic.

As told in her book, Bethany Beard-

slee was born on Christmas Day, 1925 to a middle class family in Lansing, Michigan. She grew up in Lansing and East Lansing, not venturing much outside either until after graduating from Michigan State College (now Michigan State University). She began singing late in her high school career and initially pursued it because it made her popular among her classmates. She developed a passion for classical music and for performance in her college years. Her life took a definitive turn after an aunt arranged an audition for her at Juilliard and took her to New York City.

The New York she came to in 1948 was arguably the Mecca of American classical music as it was entering its golden age. Four radio stations offered classical programming. Four daily newspapers and more than a few magazines sent knowledgeable critics to cover classical musical events and gave them the column inches for detailed and considered articles about them. Columbia Records had just introduced its LP format, precipitating a public passion for "high fidelity" (and soon, stereo) audio equipment and recordings. Leonard Bernstein was to take the reins of the New York Philharmonic just 10 years later and broadcast the Young People's Concerts series on the CBS TV network, popularizing classical music nationwide.

It was also arguably the golden age of new American classical music, before the culture of contemporary art music became intermixed with celebrity and identity politics, and before the ascendance of performer-centric popular music values in both musical discourse and musical distribution models. Composers – and recent music – were considered vital to the musical culture rather than some exotic fringe. Two observations illustrate:

- Of the New York Philharmonic's 166 performances in 1948, 119 – better than 70% – featured at least one

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO CHORAL CONDUCTING

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By Clara Longstreth

piece (many had more than one) written within the previous 50 years, with roughly half of these from the previous 25 years. The pieces from the previous 50 years were written by 51 different composers of whom 22 were Americans (15 native-born and 7 immigrants).

- The Composers' Forum (now defunct), originally a creation of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration and revived in 1947 under joint sponsorship of the New York Public Library and Columbia University, presented a regular series of concerts, each with the music of two composers who were present to take questions from the audience.

Bethany Beardslee fit right in with this culture and rapidly became known as a champion of new music. She got along well with composers. In fact, she married two of them, both brilliant men and both European: first the Frenchman Jacques Monod, a fellow Juilliard student, whom she later divorced; and later the Englishman Godfrey Winham, with whom she had two children and who died young of Hodgkin's Disease.

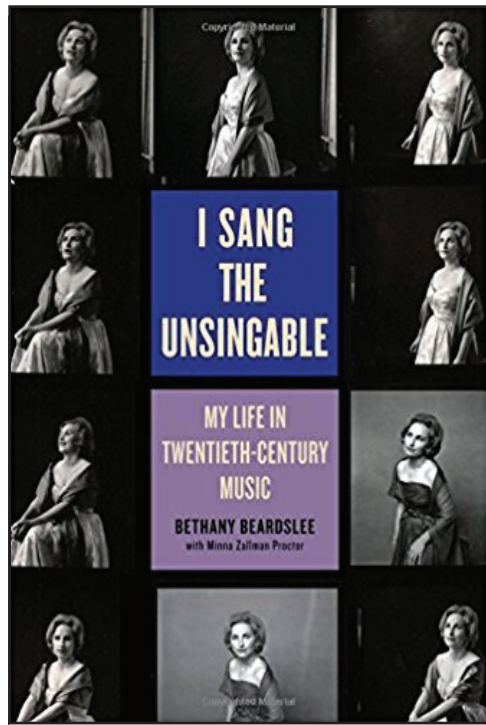
Monod was not only her husband. He was also her performing partner (on the piano) and coach. He introduced her to the music of the Second Viennese School—Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, and Alban Berg—and demanded extensive rehearsal and painstaking attention to detail. It's easy to understand how this perfectionism and work ethic could offer musical benefits to a performer, especially a singer of challenging music—but also could be wearing in a personal relationship.

Beardslee became close friends with composer Milton Babbitt and his wife Sylvia, who had an apartment near Washington Square in New York City. It was through the Babbitts that she met Godfrey Winham, whom Babbitt had encouraged to come to Princeton to work with him. The Winhams settled in the

Princeton area after they were married.

Babbitt wrote most of his extensive vocal catalog with her in mind and her performances and recordings of it—especially of *Du, Vision and Prayer*, and *Philomel*—are widely considered classic. Some of the most interesting parts of *I Sang the Unsingable* describe how she learned and performed this music.

In addition to accounts of Beardslee's private life and career, the book has its share of juicy stories of composers and performers and their predilections, behaviors, and issues. These are told with honesty and (where appropriate) compassion. As a whole, the book depicts an engaging life that happens also to be intimately involved with—and prominently featured in—American musical culture of the second half of the Twentieth Century.



There can be no one better qualified to write a practical guide to conducting than Harold Rosenbaum, who has a lifetime of experience conducting choruses of all levels. This book, Rosenbaum's first, is a practical survey of many aspects of the conductor's life and work, with enough humor to leaven the drier aspects. It also contains enough inspirational moments to give deep meaning to the practical. Rosenbaum is a worthy cheerleader for his art, referring to it not as a job or even a profession, but as a "calling".

The book is intended for conductors at all levels, but will probably be most useful to the graduate student or one in the early years on the job. Though daunting, it should be inspiring to read Mr. Rosenbaum on the amount of preparation needed to conduct a score. Even a pro with lots of experience already will find useful ideas here. One may say "yes, of course," but also find suggestions one had not thought of.

"The Practical Guide" is well organized, with an excellent Table of Contents and Index. Half of the book is devoted to fifty specific pieces. They range from Machaut and Josquin through the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's *Messiah* and on to several of Bach's greatest, some Beethoven, and Brahms., ending with Debussy and Webern.

In the Anthology section one finds a wealth of artistic ideas alongside a single page from each score. The intention must be that one read with a full score at hand, since only a few of the suggestions will have the relevant measure on the facing page. (That may be a slight frustration for the casual reader.)