Purpose built Britten-Pears Archive opens at The Red House

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It has been built in the grounds of The Red House, Aldeburgh, the home which Benjamin Britten shared with Peter Pears from 1957 until his death in 1976.

The new archive building is the first major purpose-built composer archive in the UK. It follows a £4.7million investment in this internationally significant heritage site by the Britten-Pears Foundation (BPF) and the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) which has included the re-creation of Britten's composing studio in situ. The space freed up on the site has been used to develop exhibition and education facilities, which will enable the BPF to bring Britten's life and music to many more people.

The Britten archive is the most comprehensive collection of any composer in the world. It tells the story of Britten's creative and personal life in extraordinary depth and breadth, including manuscripts for over 700 pieces of music, diaries, 80,000 letters, countless photographs, recordings, films, costumes, set models, art, books and much more. In 2005 the collection was awarded Designated status by the MLA in recognition of its cultural significance.

Designed by Stirling prize winning architects Stanton Williams, the building achieves archive conservation standards through a pioneering low-energy design. The sustainable red brick archive building complements the listed Red House and gardens.

The opening of the new archive centre is complemented by a new exhibition exploring Britten's life and music with objects and documents form the BPF's rich collections. The exhibition will also be interactive including replicas of the original animal headdresses from Noye's Fludd, which visitors can try on. The exhibition has been designed to appeal to all members of the family.

Richard Jarman, Director of Britten-Pears Foundation, says: "To mark the centenary of Benjamin Britten's birth the BPF has made a big investment in the site of The Red House, supported by the HLF. The resulting buildings will ensure that our unique collection can be kept in optimal conditions for generations to come and will bring alive to all our visitors what makes Britten one of the greatest composers of the twentieth century. What we have at The Red House is exceptional – a rich and illuminating collection held in the very place where Britten lived and composed, with all its extraordinary spirit of place. It is destined to be a site of pilgrimage for music lovers all over the world."

Dame Jenny Abramsky, Chair of the Heritage Lottery Fund, said: "The Red House is not just bricks and mortar but rather a cornucopia of music, literature, art and learning brought together under one roof. It reflects the energy and joie de vivre of Benjamin Britten and his partner Peter Pears, and following a programme of conservation and redevelopment is now truly a fitting tribute to both men. We have played a major role in funding a number of elements of this innovative project and particularly applaud the Britten-Pears Foundation for its plans to widen the appeal of the site to visitors, both tourists and those living more locally. Britten, meritocratic to his core, would have approved of this desire to share the house and its contents with people from all walks of life."

Notes to editors

The design of the new archive roots the building firmly in its context and forms an appropriate response to the listed Red House and gardens. A pioneering low-energy approach provides optimum environmental conditions for preservation of the significant collection.

Inspired by the design concept of an ‘egg in a box’, thick, well insulated walls enclose the main archive storage room, surrounded by a buffer space which helps moderate the temperature and relative humidity between the outside environment and the material within.

The building is expressed as two interlocking forms, which reflect the archive’s daily activities. A volume to the north contains staff offices, support spaces and a study room, with generous windows on the west and north façades allowing views out to The Red House gardens. A southern volume houses the archive collection, raised from the ground to protect it from flood risk. This functional and efficient concept is based on a tradition of building treasure houses, granary stores and shrines and gives form to the ‘precious’ nature of the collection.

Solid red brick outer walls connect the building visually with the rest of the site and offer intrinsic thermal to meet the sustainability requirements of a passive environment. A limited materials palette of fairfaced concrete and timber contributes to the high environmental standards and provides warmth and texture.

The collection housed in the new archive includes:

Manuscripts and printed music:

- Vast majority of Britten’s original manuscripts written from early boyhood until his death
- Vast collection of printed music including all new Britten publications and reprints, the continuation of collected and complete editions to which Britten and Pears subscribed
- Complete published works of Benjamin Britten
- Collected editions by composers such as Bach, Purcell, Schütz, Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Schubert and Schumann
- Printers' copies, proofs and early editions of Britten's works and English vocal music, from the 16th century to the present day.

Letters:

- Extensive collection of correspondence to and from Britten
- Key figures of twentieth-century music and culture are represented, including WH Auden, Martin Luther King and Mstislav Rostropovich
- Extensive collection of correspondence to and from Peter Pears, and some correspondence to and from associated people, including letters from Frank Bridge to Marjorie Fass, and from EM Forster to Eric Crozier.

Books:

- Library features fiction of Austen, Kipling, Hardy and James beside modern writers such as EM Forster, Mary Renault, William Plomer, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Arthur Ransome – the last a particular favourite of Britten
- Over over 700 volumes of music and literature printed between the 17th and 19th centuries
- Each book owned by Britten and Pears displays a combined specially-commissioned bookplate by engraver Reynolds Stone (1970) – a present from Britten to Pears on his 60th birthday.

Art:

- Over 2000 paintings, sculptures and objets d'art form part of the fascinating collections at The Red House
- Library is the permanent home of William Blake's watercolour St Paul (at Melita) shaking off the viper, which Pears purchased from the Fine Arts Society in 1950
- Collection of bronzes by Georg Ehrlich; woodblocks by Eric Gill; a portrait by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska; landscapes by John Piper and paintings by Mary Potter, who lived at the Red House before Britten and Pears.

Artefacts:

- Some of the most important artefacts from Britten's music are housed in the Red House including headdresses from the original Noye's Fludde designed by Ceri Richards
- Miniature set design for the first production of Peter Grimes
- Britten's own exercise book in which Britten planned War Requiem
- Assorted artefacts, souvenirs and trinkets are on display from Britten and Pears visits to over 40 countries
- Costume designs for original productions of Peter Grimes (designer Kenneth Green), The Little Sweep (John Lewis), Noye's Fludde (Ceri Richards) and Owen Wingrave (David Myerscough-Jones)
- Set and costume designs for Britten and non-Britten operas produced by the English Opera Group and the English Music Theatre
- 700 fascinating pieces of Juvenilia written by Britten during his schooldays.

Photographs:

- Numerous formal portraits of Britten and Pears
- Photographs of the couple performing in recitals and concerts, of Britten conducting and of Pears in Britten and non-Britten opera roles
- Portraits of friends and contemporaries of Britten and Pears
- Extensive production photographs of Britten operas, staged by various groups or companies and including first performances.

Audio-visual:

- Thousands of audio and moving-image material relating to the careers and lives of Britten and Pears
- The archive acquires a copy of every commercially-available sound recording.

Stanton Williams is an award-winning international architectural practice based in London. The firm has developed its portfolio from an initial focus on museums and galleries towards a wide variety of projects, all of which demonstrate the practice's overarching objective of putting the user's experience of space, light and materials at the forefront of the agenda.

Completed projects include: the new campus for the University of the Arts London at King's Cross, the Stirling Prize-winning Sainsbury Laboratory in the University of Cambridge's Botanic Garden, the Hackney Marshes Centre and the Eton Manor site for the London 2012 Olympics. Current projects include: King's Cross Square, the Grand Musée d'Art in Nantes, an art gallery for Lincoln College in Oxford, a student residential building at King's Cross and a number of high-end residential projects in London. Stanton Williams website.

Britten-Pears Foundation (BPF) promotes worldwide the music and legacy of Benjamin Britten and his work with singer Peter Pears, and is based at the home they shared, The Red House in Aldeburgh. It aims to develop his vision and inspire new audiences by: preserving, and encouraging engagement with the heritage of The Red House and its

collections for future generations; working with young people to encourage their interest in Britten and their regional culture; developing relationships with the local community in Aldeburgh and the East of England, supporting the cultural life of the area; encouraging performances and better understanding of Britten's music throughout the world; supporting the commissioning, performing and recording of new British music. BPF is at the heart of Britten 100, the widest ever global celebration if a British composer. BPF website.

Further information

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