

Benjamin Britten's *Billy Budd* has always occupied a curious position among the composer's operatic masterpieces. Premiered at Covent Garden in 1951, it arrived in the immense shadow of *Peter Grimes*, yet from the beginning many musicians sensed that Britten had created something even more remarkable: a taut, psychologically charged music drama of extraordinary concentration and power. The opera's all-male world aboard HMS *Indomitable*, adapted by E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier from Herman Melville's novella, offered Britten a setting in which innocence, authority, repression and violence could collide within the closed society of a Royal Navy vessel during the Napoleonic Wars.

Yet the original four-act structure posed problems. Britten himself remained dissatisfied with aspects of the work's pacing and theatrical flow, and by 1960 had undertaken a substantial revision, compressing the opera into two acts while tightening transitions and reshaping parts of the score. This BBC studio performance, broadcast on 13 November 1960 under the composer's own direction, preserves that revised version at a crucial moment in the opera's evolution, several years before the revised score became firmly established in the repertory.

Contemporary critics immediately recognised the significance of the revision. Writing in *The Observer* shortly after the broadcast, Peter Heyworth described the opera as "a score stripped for action" in which "every incident fulfils a musico-dramatic purpose". He argued that the revised structure clarified the drama and intensified the work's already formidable psychological tension. Heard today, the performance still carries precisely that sense of dramatic concentration. Britten's orchestral writing moves with tidal inevitability: from the brutal percussion and shouted labour of the lower deck to the eerie stillness surrounding Captain Vere's moments of moral isolation.

The cast assembled for the broadcast was a distinguished one even by Britten standards. Peter Pears, for whom the role of Captain Vere had been written, brings an inwardness and verbal sensitivity unmatched in this repertoire. His Vere is not merely an officer trapped by naval law, but a man haunted by moral hesitation and private self-knowledge. Joseph Ward's Billy is warm-hearted, physically vivid and touchingly direct, while Michael Langdon gives a darkly compelling portrayal of Claggart, the Master-at-Arms whose obsessive hatred of Billy drives the tragedy toward its terrible conclusion.

The supporting cast is drawn largely from the strong pool of British singers regularly associated with BBC opera productions of the period, while the BBC Men's Chorus and BBC Symphony Orchestra respond magnificently to Britten's direction. The composer had always possessed sharp instincts as a conductor of his own music, particularly in works requiring rhythmic precision and transparency of texture. Those qualities are everywhere apparent here. Even in the opera's busiest scenes, Britten maintains remarkable clarity, allowing the intricate orchestral detail and sharply characterised vocal writing to emerge with unusual vividness.

Historically, the broadcast occupies a fascinating place within Britten's career. The late 1950s and early 1960s saw him revisiting several earlier works while simultaneously moving toward the more austere language of compositions such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the *War Requiem*. In revising *Billy Budd*, Britten was not fundamentally changing the opera's meaning, but refining its dramatic architecture. The central conflict remained untouched: Billy's innocence, Claggart's corrosive evil, and Vere's agonised inability to reconcile justice with compassion.

What makes *Billy Budd* endure is the ambiguity Britten and his librettists preserved at the heart of the story. Vere understands Billy's innocence yet permits his execution. Claggart's hatred seems inseparable from fascination. Billy himself, despite his physical strength and instinctive goodness, cannot survive within the rigid machinery of naval discipline. The opera offers no simple villains or heroes, only human beings trapped within fear, law, duty and desire.

Prepared here in a new Ambient Stereo XR remastering from surviving archive sources, this historically important BBC broadcast emerges in remarkably vivid sound, restoring much of the drama, urgency and orchestral colour of Britten's original transmission. As part of Pristine Classical's ongoing series marking the composer's anniversary year through significant historic recordings, it preserves not merely a performance, but a vital stage in the evolution of one of Britten's greatest operatic achievements.

BRITTEN
Billy Budd
REVISED TWO-ACT VERSION

— LIVE 1960 BROADCAST —

Edward Fairfax Vere • **PETER PEARS**
Billy Budd • **JOSEPH WARD**
John Claggart • **MICHAEL LANGDON**

BBC MEN'S CHORUS
Chorus Master
ALAN G. MELVILLE

BBC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Leader
PAUL BEARD

BENJAMIN BRITTEN
Conductor

PRISTINE AUDIO XR
AMBIENT STEREO
PACO 236

BRITTEN Billy Budd

DISC ONE: ACT I (76:58)

Prologue

1. I am an old man... (4:36)

Scene 1

2. Pull, me bantams! (6:36)
3. Boat ahoy! (3:09)
4. First man forward! (2:05)
5. Your name? (2:24)
6. Billy Budd, king of the birds! (2:13)
7. I heard, your honour! (3:28)
8. Come along, kid! (3:23)
9. Christ! The poor chap... (1:23)
10. What's that? What's those whistles? (1:08)
11. Starry Vere we call him (2:10)
12. Boy! (3:28)

Scene 2

13. Gentlemen, the King! (5:02)
14. Ay, at Spithead... (1:03)
15. We are, sir. Claggart is an able one (6:36)

Scene 3

16. Blow her away (2:26)
17. We're off to Samoa... (3:29)
18. Hi! You... a...! (2:48)
19. Over the water... (6:38)
20. Come here (4:26)
21. Billy!... Hist! Billy Budd! (3:57)
22. Dansker, old friend... (4:30)

DISC TWO: ACT II (70:14)

Scene 1

1. I don't like the look of the mist... (2:17)
2. With great regret I must disturb (1:06)
3. Deck ahoy! (3:10)
4. Volunteers! Call for boarding volunteers! (7:09)
5. There you are again, Master-at-Arms (4:29)
6. Oh, this cursed mist! (4:22)

Scene 2

7. Claggart, John Claggart, beware! (3:13)
8. Master-at-Arms and foretopman... (3:05)
9. God o' mercy! (1:58)
10. Gentlemen, William Budd here... (1:24)
11. William Budd, you are accused... (5:07)
12. Poor fellow, who could save him? (3:58)
13. I accept their verdict (4:34)

Scene 3

14. Look! Through the port (5:02)
15. Here! Baby! (3:41)
16. And farewell to ye... (4:12)

Scene 4

17. Interlude (2:51)
18. According to the Articles of War (1:53)
19. Down all hands! (2:14)

Epilogue

20. We committed his body to the deep (4:29)

CAST

Edward Fairfax Vere - Peter Pears
Billy Budd - Joseph Ward
John Claggart - Michael Langdon
Mr Redburn - John Noble
Mr Flint - Denis Dowling
Lieutenant Ratcliffe - Roger Stalman
Red Whiskers - Max Worthley
Donald - Tudor Evans
Dansker - Trevor Anthony
The Novice - Alexander Young
Squeak - Andrew Gold
Bosun - George Hancock
First Mate - Stanley Riley
Second Mate - George Packnell
Maintop - Lloyd Strathsmith
The Novice's Friend - Ranken Bushby
Arthur Jones - George Stern Scott
Four Midshipmen - Robert Finlay,
David Green, Andrew Pullinger,
Nicholas Tong
Cabin Boy (spoken) - John Tibbett

Choir of Watford Boys' Grammar School
BBC Men's Chorus

BBC Symphony Orchestra
Associate Conductor: Meredith Davies
Producer: Basil Coleman
Conductor: Benjamin Britten

BBC Third Programme studio recording,
broadcast 13 November 1960

Revised two-act version prepared by the
composer for this BBC production.

XR Remastered by Andrew Rose

Cover artwork based on a photograph of Benjamin Britten

Total duration: 2hr 27:09

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