

Imogen Holst, Benjamin Britten, and related activity

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Imogen Holst is regarded by many as an absolutely indispensable support to Britten during the time she assisted him at Aldeburgh during the 1950s and early '60s. She was amanuensis, fellow director of the Aldeburgh Festival, a professional who loved amateurs, a musical influence with considerable experience and authority, and perhaps above all a loyal friend, a good listener. She spent an enormous amount of time in the company of Britten and Pears, often late at night or on excursions, and her help and influence far exceeded that of a normally employed assistant. This paper seeks to outline her life, illustrate the relationship that she had with Britten as a musical assistant and as a mentor and friend, and to turn the focus on her own work as an editor and composer.

WHO WAS IMOGEN HOLST? Musician, author, conductor, composer – and the daughter of Gustav Holst, who passed on to her such interests as music for amateurs and early music. Her musical studies at school included the piano and violin but, prior to formal study, the first musical sounds she had experienced were of her father at the piano, playing the *Lyric Pieces* of Grieg, and she danced to these before she could walk – dancing is how she began to move! Ever since these childhood days she thought of music in terms of dance. In 1921, at the age of fourteen, she went to dancing school. She had been longing for the day to arrive, and she began her training under Ruby Ginner. Alas, this was short-lived: ill-health forced her to accept that she could not withstand a physical education of this kind. She later attended St Paul's Girls' School where her father was Director of Music. She took up the horn in preference to the violin, the piano remaining very much her first study under Adine O'Neill. Arriving at the Royal College of Music in 1926, she remained a student for four years until the summer of 1930. On admission, she took principal study piano with Kathleen Long and second study composition with George Dyson. Ralph Vaughan Williams covered paperwork. By the end of her first term she had already added conducting as another second study, and during the following year, 1927-28, composition was elevated to partner the piano as joint principal study. Later, with continuing trouble from neuritis, she abandoned the piano altogether, composition thus assuming prime importance. She left George Dyson at the end of the summer of 1928, and became a pupil of Gordon Jacob. She won a number of scholarships and prizes, notably an Open Scholarship in 1927 for composition, the Cobbett prize in 1928 for her *Phantasy String Quartet* (Grace Williams was placed second) and the Octavia Travelling Scholarship in 1930. She also won the Morley Scholarship in 1928 for the best all-round student.

She found time for a significant amount of foreign travel towards the end of the 1920s. She visited Bruges in 1927, went to Germany with a Morris Dancing group in 1928 and spent the prize money from her Cobbett success on a holiday in Switzerland in the same year. During 1929 a private visit to the Scilly Isles was followed by a trip to Canada and New York with Douglas Kennedy of the English Folk Dance Society. This seemingly limitless passion for travel was as yet unabated, and in 1930 the Octavia Travelling Scholarship took her to such cities as Copenhagen, Hamburg, Liege and Vienna.

Imogen Holst began her professional career with a varied portfolio, initially based at Citizen House in Bath where, for a period in 1931, she was music director. She joined the full-time staff of the English Folk Dance Society in 1932, an appointment stemming from work as a stand-in pianist during the late 1920s, and spent much time with the dancers and pipers of the folk movement; she believed in their art and gave lectures all over England at society meetings. She took on some teaching and during the 1930s she published many choral arrangements, usually for female voices. She worked in these capacities whilst also writing her father's biography which was published in 1938.

An important turning point arrived in 1938 when at the age of thirty-one her life quite suddenly took fresh direction. She became one of the five original travellers for the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), based in the South West. She was physically hardly up to the strenuous round of county visits; conditions of wartime transport were appalling and she overworked herself. However, the positive outcome was an invitation by Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst to live at Dartington Hall, one of her calling points on CEMA travels, in 1942. She continued her travels for a while, and then was invited to direct the music in the Arts Department at Dartington. It turned out to be another pioneering job, and if CEMA had not brought her out of the amateur musical world but rather given her a different view of it, Dartington was a step in the right direction to the professional musical world in which she belonged. Imogen Holst herself has said of this time that she welcomed the opportunity to continue the kind of work her father had done at Morley College:

'... a composition class every week for grown-up beginners, some of whom didn't know their notes. They could hear a tune in their minds but had never thought how to write it down. They were elementary, and were of all ages – some retired, some still working as tram drivers, office workers or school teachers. That impressed me a lot. So, when my father died in 1934, I thought, if ever I had the chance to carry on that tradition I would do so because no-one else was doing that ... but when Chris Martin said "how can we start at Dartington" I thought "what a wonderful opportunity!"'.¹

While these Dartington years were productive, and years which Imogen was to look back on with great fondness, she had further ambitions for her career in mind by 1945:

'I want to break away from teaching before I am too old and I want also to break away from that particular sort of amateur music-making that has been my main thing ever since I can remember. There is so much other music still to explore'.²

She did break away, albeit a few years later. She explored music in India in early 1951 on sabbatical before leaving Dartington in the summer. Whatever intentions she may have had for the future (she remained a free-lance musician for a while) were interrupted by an invitation from Britten to go to Aldeburgh and work for him. The move to Aldeburgh was such a major decision; at first it was not a permanent appointment, and it was not properly paid either. Imogen had the greatest admiration for Britten – as I shall explore a little later – but was this the reason for her move, which was to be for the rest of her life? As a single woman, Aldeburgh would provide a musical and welcoming environment and the break from teaching that she sought, and it would give her the opportunity to explore much other music (both old and new) about which she had spoken in 1945. Perhaps, as Gustav's daughter, she felt irresistibly drawn into

¹ Cox and Dobbs, Imogen Holst at Dartington

² Imogen Holst, internal report, Dartington, July 1945

the environment of another great composer? When Britten invited her to become his amanuensis, an opportunity presented itself which must have been difficult to turn down – she had orchestrated his *Rejoice in the Lamb* for the 1952 Festival, and writing to James Butt she said 'I'm still in a state of wild excitement after working for Ben.' As a younger woman, she had not helped Gustav as an amanuensis after his own assistant, Jane Joseph, died in 1929, and maybe this was an opportunity to settle her conscience? Was there some strange but compelling imagination that she owed something more to the composer in her father?

She remained as Britten's assistant from 1952 until 1964 when she retired from full time work as amanuensis as there were more pressing matters that began to concern her. Performances and recordings of her father's music became an increasing pressure, and over the next decade she prepared (for the Holst centenary of 1974) the *Thematic Catalogue of Gustav Holst's Music* (Faber 1974) and four volumes of *Gustav Holst's Collected Facsimile Edition*, edited with Colin Matthews between 1974 and 1983 (Faber). But at the same time, there were a number of commissions for her own music; somehow she made time for it, partly possible because of her decision in 1977 to relinquish her executive position as an Artistic Director to the Festival. Britten's death in the previous year left her in partnership with Pears alone which did not suit her. She had also become increasingly exhausted by endless committee meetings (as she had done during the CEMA days) and in any case she was now President of G&I Holst, and her business life was far from slack. She did however accept the title of Artistic Director Emeritus. As an elder statesman of Aldeburgh during her last few years there were further pleasures for her, not least of which were the opportunities to compose for the festival itself; the fact that she turned once again to composition after having worked for Britten serves as a measure of her musical confidence. She had been an inspiration to Aldeburgh, and Aldeburgh certainly inspired her.

Earlier associations of Britten and Imogen Holst are in the form of correspondence: in 1943, Britten wrote to her

'... it was so moving to learn that my music means so much to you. I am not so self-confident ever to be *blasé* about appreciation, but when it comes from a musician of your standing, and from a section of musical life which I had hitherto imagined so unsympathetic to me, it is inexpressively moving and valuable to me. It is also encouraging that you too sense that "something" in the air that heralds a renaissance. I feel terrifically conscious of it, so do Peter, and Clifford, and Michael Tippett, and so many that I love and admire – it is good to add you to that list. Whether we are the voices crying in the wilderness, or the thing itself, isn't for us to know, but anyhow it is so very exciting ... One mustn't and can't decry the many genius' of the last century, but it is also a greater sympathy with the earlier centuries that marks this thing perhaps the most clearly ... Did I ever tell you that I have the strongest recollection of riding on top of a bus with your father – I think from Notting Hill Gate, to Kensington High Street? That was the only time, alas, I ever met him. With best greetings to you, from Peter too. Benjamin'.³

The letter raises the subject of 'a renaissance' which was to be a closely shared belief, and the 'greater sympathy with the earlier centuries' which was to bear such fruit between the two: indeed, a common interest in Purcell had resulted in their joint realisation of *Dido and Aeneas* (Aldeburgh Festival 1951) before her move to Aldeburgh.

³ 27.10.43 Britten Pears Library

One example of her many letters in admiration of Britten speaks of her own perception of the renaissance in English music. A few days after the first production Peter Grimes at Sadler's Wells she wrote 'You have given it to us at the very moment when it was most needed, not only as the full flowering of the renaissance in music, but also as a lesson in understanding the diseased minds in the world'.⁴

Following a performance given by Britten and Pears at Dartington, Imogen wrote interestingly about the difficulty of expressing genuine praise for a composer, as experienced by her own father. She revealed what seems an infatuation for Britten, or certainly his music, but she also made interesting comments on the state of English music as her father viewed it:

'I find it impossibly difficult to tell you how much your music means to me, because I'm haunted by appalling memories of all the unnecessary things people used to say to my father when they happened to like his music. What one thinks and feels about music doesn't matter to anyone else, but there are times when a thankyou goes to such enormous proportions that it bursts all bounds and my gratitude for the string 4tet and the sonnets and the sinfonia and the carols has reached that stage. Your music seems to me the only valuable thing that is happening today in a world where everything else goes wrong all the time. It is a real security and one can hang on to it as one hangs on to Bach and Mozart and Schubert. It oughtn't to make any difference that you are English, but I can't help being glad about that too, because I was brought up to believe that one day there would be a renaissance of English music – my father thought it would happen after the reprinting of the Tudor composers and the revival of folk song, and then year after year he got more and more disillusioned as one 'young' English composer after another turned out nothing but mild and pleasant little tone poems. And now it's all right. There are other people who have helped – Tippett and the others: but it is to you that we owe so much. whatever chaos and coldness we've got to put up with in other ways, there'll be all your warmth and strength to be had for the asking'.⁵

Affection and respect also worked the other way. Britten had huge respect for Imogen well in advance of her move to Aldeburgh. Along with his frequent visits to Dartington, here is further evidence to suggest that he had such good reason to invite her to Aldeburgh: he wrote

'You have brought so much happiness into our world, the true happiness that comes from affectionate, critical appreciation, and really true friendship, artistic and personal. I feel there is nothing I could not talk to you about, and to which you would not give an honest, sympathetic ear to...' He goes on to say how he wants to write her a long letter about 'your lovely B minor mass' (he attended this at Dartington) but that matters 'important and unimportant, musical and unmusical' are currently getting in the way. The letter is signed 'Your devoted Ben'. *FN 15.7.50 BPL* Similar admiration came from Pears. He was a resident tutor at Dartington in February 1951 and wrote to Britten 'She is quite brilliant – revealing, exciting'.⁶

At the time of Imogen Holst's move from Dartington she had already been professionally involved with the Aldeburgh Festival. Having attended the opening

⁴ 12.6.45 Britten-Pears Library

⁵ 12.10.48 Britten-Pears Library

⁶ 21.2.51 Britten-Pears Library

performance of the first Festival, Britten's St Nicolas, in 1948, and the festivals of 1949 and 1950, Britten asked her to write a set of songs, and thus *Welcome Joy and Welcome Sorrow* for female voices and harp was first performed under her baton at the 1951 Festival.

The presence of Imogen at the 1952 festival had clearly gone down very well with all concerned, and this is the letter of invitation which would eventually lead to her move to Aldeburgh for the rest of her life. Britten wrote

'I didn't have time to write to you and tell you how immensely grateful and moved Peter and I were by your contribution to the Festival - both behind the scenes and very much on them! It has been an indescribable comfort to us to have you with us, working so closely. It has been wonderful to know there was someone one could trust, not only to do the things, but to do them with a skill and efficiency which amounts to genius... Now the next thing is - next year!... will you count yourself as definitely engaged - in the preparation, and running of Aldeburgh Festival nos 6, 7, 8, 9.....? 'Please say yes!... And with much love, infinite thanks, and great anticipation for next year - Your devoted Ben'.⁷

The years spent at Dartington gradually receded, but Imogen still managed to retain contacts with her musical past, returning to Dartington Summer School on occasions during the 1950s. Although no longer salaried as a teacher, her contributions to education continued uninterrupted in other ways: for example, the books prepared for publication during this busy decade include *The Dolmetsch Recorder Book* (1957), *The Story of Music* with Britten (Rathbone 1958), *Tune* (Faber 1961) and *Purcell* (B&H 1961). But perhaps more important contributions of an educational nature went on almost unnoticed, as Malcolm Williamson pointed out:

'The first performances of my music were at the [Aldeburgh] Festival under the umbrella of the English Opera Group in London. Imo conducted my choral work; Peter sang my songs, and I played keyboard works. Imo went over most of these things between what I thought was the final version and what was to become the final version. The benefit of her clear and profound mind was incalculable. There was a concert of music by young composers at the Festival in 1957 that included settings of William Blake for which there had been a competition. Imo was actively helpful to all young composers (including Richard Rodney Bennett, Alexander Goehr, Cornelius Cardew), and also entertained us. What she gave us made more practical musicians of us all. I am certain that the young singers who worked with Imo in the Purcell Singers also came away with artistic, technical and professional benefits'.⁸

As a paid assistant in her new post at Aldeburgh, the first job in hand was to help Britten through his composition of *Gloriana*, which often found him depressed. I shall move to her moral support later, but in practical terms this was the focus of her initial year at Aldeburgh. She would willingly stoop to the most mundane of tasks in order to help Britten: she has written of working ten hours a day with him on *Gloriana* including the preparation of '34 stave pages for him, spacing the bar-lines, writing the clefs and signatures, copying out the vocal lines, and eventually filling in any instruments which were to be doubled'.⁹ Her musicianship came into a more focussed role in other work

⁷ 7.7.52 Britten-Pears Library

⁸ *Aldeburgh Festival Programme Book* 1984, p14

⁹ *The Musical Times* (March 1977)

she undertook, including the production of vocal scores, and advice to Britten on dance. Regarding the former, she commented:

'His pencil sketches were remarkably clear to read. My job was to write out the vocal score so that it could be reproduced for the singers. He gave me helpful advice about my piano reductions, telling me to add a *tremolando* in brackets for a gradual *crescendo* on slow sustained brass chords, and to indicate in small notes above the staff any rapid "out of reach" woodwind passages. He never allowed a convenient pianistic division between the two hands on the keyboard to disguise the clear outlines of the music'.¹⁰

Between 1953 and 1968 she completed nine piano reductions, in the wake of Erwin Stein, Henry Boys and Arthur Oldham; this was ideal work for her, as a trained pianist. She went on to make arrangements of the *Second Lute Song of the Earl of Essex* for voice and piano, and of the *March* of which Rosamund Strode wrote:

'It was the march from the *Courtly Dances* which Imogen Holst scored for the Suffolk Rural Music School. One must not forget that she worked extremely closely with Britten on *Gloriana* and indeed helped him over the matter of the dances (steps, rhythms, etc.) themselves'.¹¹

Regarding the dance steps, Imo was the right person to have close at hand when Britten needed assistance. As a dancer, her knowledge of intricate rhythms was invaluable to him when writing the courtly dances of *Gloriana*. In a diary entry dated 3 November 1952 she wrote:

'I showed Ben the dance steps, and he loved the cross-rhythm in the Galliard, as I knew he would. Spent over two hours going through everything thoroughly and it was worth all the effort of all the journeys in the world.'

(This is a typically exaggerated, positive comment!) Further to this, on 4 November, her diary reveals:

'When we got in, he played over the two tunes- the *Pavane* very lovely; there was one new attack on a forte chord which cut across the middle of a double bar & wouldn't do, so he's going to get a gradual *crescendo* up to it. *Galliard*, which he'd only just written that moment, was excellent...There was a cross-rhythm which made the ordinary coming to rest on the sixth beat very difficult in the middle: - at first I thought it wouldn't do, but decided the choreographer could wrangle things around it.'

The entry continues with further discussion she had with Britten about dance; and on the 19 November she wrote:

'... he corrected my Scene 11 as far as it had gone and he asked me to dance a *Coranto* and I could hardly move having eaten and drunk so much:- (he wrote down the rhythm for the drum, & told me about the ironical march he's writing for the Queen's second entry in the scene.)'

Imogen Holst was clearly the right person at the right time; Britten once told her that she had 'helped with *Gloriana* in more ways than you know'.¹²

Looking beyond *Gloriana* itself, life included copying and checking, being a librarian and obtaining orchestral parts, writing out parts (often for the Festival Choir), correcting

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Rosamund Strode, private correspondence with the author, 3/4/87

¹² IH diary 11.12.52

proofs and general backroom administrative tasks. On occasion she was known to have spent most of the night writing out parts for a morning rehearsal, and she wrote:

'During the 1950s I was the only orchestral librarian on duty, which was a real test of endurance; I shall never forget Britten's look of despair as he told me that one of his leading violinists had lost *all* her orchestral parts just before a Mozart rehearsal'.¹³

During the years after *Gloriana*, Britten completed many major works, with Imogen Holst as a constant assistant, advisor and companion. Although she has referred to his patience over her 'many mistakes', I imagine this is a natural modesty, not reflecting her true worth. Her piano reductions (vocal scores) included *The Turn of the Screw* (1955), *The Prince of the Pagodas* (piano reduction, 1957), *Noye's Fludde* (1958), *Nocturne* (1960), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960) with Martin Penny – she was taken ill during its preparation – the revision of *Billy Budd* (1961), the *War Requiem* (1962), *Cantata Misericordium* (1964), and *Curlew River* (1964). Her job of proof-correcting was always a menial but necessary task during her years as assistant, but her work went far beyond this and with great variety. In *The Turn of the Screw*, she showed the 13 year old David Hemmings how to pretend to be playing the piano, the sound of which would actually come from the orchestral pit. As far as the new ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas* was concerned, matters became so behind schedule that she called in Rosamund Strobe for extra assistance – Rosamund would eventually be her successor as Britten's assistant. Imogen's work on this ballet was not limited to assisting with manuscripts however; she conducted the off-stage trumpets in the first performance. Another example of her wider contributions was in showing Britten how teacups could be made to sound like the raindrops he had imagined for *Noye's Fludde* (1958); and she even rehearsed the 'tongs and bones' for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960). Her 'assistance' seemed boundless.

Away from Britten's scores and her work on them, her role within the planning of festivals grew very quickly over the early years. She provided an extra guiding mind in discussions over future festivals, and by 1956 she had been appointed an Artistic Director. Much of the planning for the 1956 festival was undertaken while Britten and Pears were travelling and performing in the Far East. This afforded her the opportunity to return to Gustav Holst's *Savitri* which had been dropped from the 1953 festival for financial reasons; now she found some extra financial support from proceeds of *The Planets*, and she programmed *Savitri* as well as Holst's *Terzetto*, and a *Children's Concert*. This was very much an Imogen Holst festival! She conducted Handel's *Samson*, and had her friends the Amadeus Quartet along for two concerts. During these years, she did much work on the programme books, writing numerous programme notes; she undertook research, travelling to various libraries (sometimes on behalf of Britten, to his relief – he did not enjoy poking around in libraries) such as the British Library, the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, and at Christ Church Oxford where she had researched for her edition of John Blow's *Venus and Adonis*. She was included very much in discussions on finance as a welcome and innovative mind (the 1953 festival had lost £900, a substantial sum in those days); she encouraged Britten and Pears to plan further ahead which they eventually did; there were indeed many matters both business and musical in which Britten involved her. She was also very often present to support Britten at meetings of the fledgling 'Friends' (of the Aldeburgh Festival), and indeed one evening she led them in singing, with Britten taking part.

¹³ *Aldeburgh Festival Programme Book 1978* p8

Imogen Holst was a close advisor to Britten, and also a friend who offered moral support. From this viewpoint, she herself stated that she had to be frank to be of any use at all. She spoke of her occasional tactlessness, saying it was ‘what I am employed for, so must risk everything when music is at stake’. She was concerned for Britten and the constant pressure he was under of ‘writing against time’.¹⁴ Ronald Blythe has written of:

‘the total dependency which Britten, the greatest living English composer of the twentieth century, had on her. There was no one else. They were about the same age. They shared a similar music culture and a similar drive, and in some ways they were equals’.¹⁵

Britten relied on her for encouragement too, and her diary often reveals his lack of self-confidence. As early in her working years with him as December 1952 she wrote:

‘He looked at some of my Scene 111 act 11 [*Gloriana*] and then talked a bit about what he was working at and said he hoped it was all right and did I think his music was getting better and he wasn’t fishing for compliments “at least I don’t think I am” so I said very firmly that I didn’t go in for giving compliments and he looked so comically crestfallen that I saw that laughing at him wasn’t enough so I held his hand and then I told him how thrilled I was with the detail of light in “how my lady shines”:- the spacing and context of that chord of the added sixth make it shine, as in the “Etruscan palace” chords in *Lucretia* ...’¹⁶

In the same entry she shows further support, this time in financial terms: ‘Then we got talking about Bach, and I said we’d raise lots of money in the Friends of the Aldeburgh Festival so that he could do more cantatas with solo voices’.

Imogen Holst always thought that a problem shared went a long way towards its solution. On the day that the Amadeus Quartet had revealed in a telephone call at Crag House that they could not, after all, play in the Festival of 1953, she tried to ‘slink out’ of the house without letting Britten and Pears know. He caught her at the front door saying “They can’t come?” Her diary reads:

‘Then he looked very worried so I smoothed the frown out of his brow with the tips of my fingers & then when I’d got rid of it he made a face on purpose, so I said it was our headache, not his.’

There are many references to Britten being depressed in these diaries, for example being ‘rock bottom of depression that morning owing to the dance of the girls and fishermen’ (the fourth and fifth dances of the Masque, Act 11 of *Gloriana*).¹⁷ Imogen understood such problems, being the daughter of a composer. References to her father (‘G’) in her diaries bear relevance: for example, in September 1953, Britten was suffering from severe pain in his arm:

‘His arm was so bad that I couldn’t think of him having to start a concert tour next day. I ran back afterwards with a note imploring him to get his doctor... and telling him he won’t just get through on endurance, as G tried to do’.¹⁸

Britten took note, three days later saying ‘if it wasn’t for you I shouldn’t be taking it so seriously, but should be struggling on with performances’.¹⁹ During the same week, she

¹⁴ IH Diary 9.12.52

¹⁵ Blythe: *The Time by the Sea* p118

¹⁶ IH Diary 11.12.52

¹⁷ IH Diary 20.1.53

¹⁸ IH Diary 29.9.53

¹⁹ IH Diary 23.10.53

reported Britten's difficulties with the Aldeburgh Music Club: 'Ben was looking weary again. Every now and then he looks exactly like G used to – in gesture & expression & tone of voice'.²⁰ A particularly interesting comment of Britten's comes from her diary a little later that year:

'He [Britten] talked of G, and said it was strange that his career was following so much the same pattern as G's, & that the reception of Grimes was like the reception of the Planets, and that people were disappointed with what came afterwards'.²¹

Imogen Holst the assistant, mentor, friend; but what of her as the professional musician? Her professional input to the Festivals was wide ranging, and it must have fulfilled her as much as it pleased Britten. Along with conducting (especially choral), she brought from her father a lifelong interest in amateur music making, and in the early music revival. Imogen encouraged the involvement of children in festivals, on one occasion auditioning in schools for a folk music concert involving 230 children; later, *Noye's Fludde* further met her wishes for children to have opportunities to take part at Aldeburgh. Britten welcomed all this, matching his own aspirations. As an experienced teacher, she had plenty to offer when discussions for a new music school at Aldeburgh occurred, something Britten, and Pears in particular, were keen to move forward; such ideas were floating around almost as soon as she arrived at Aldeburgh, although further progress on this idea had to wait two further decades, until after 'The Maltings' was converted; young professionals began to appear from 1972, leading to what we now know as the Britten-Pears School for Advanced Musical Studies. Britten had at one stage intended that Imogen should be the first Principal of his school.

Choral work was vital to her: she had already published many arrangements and written some fine compositions. She took on the Aldeburgh Festival Choir in 1952, and they hoped that her experience with amateurs would prove suitable for this local group of singers; reports suggest that considerable improvements soon took place. A member is quoted as having said that:

'the correction of the thin, flat East Anglian vowel sounds took a lot of her time. "Choirs living on the east coast" she explained, "only half-open their mouths, to prevent the cold north-east wind from blowing in and giving them toothache"'.²²

But her loyalties were divided and, as has been documented in the history of the Aldeburgh Festival Choir, all was not as happy as it might have been:

'Imogen Holst, in the years between 1952 and 1957, held auditions (for new members only)...Even these auditions went against Imogen Holst's instincts, for her father had always believed in letting anyone who wanted to sing enter his amateur choir at Morley College. She was not at all keen on restricting entry, but realised that she had to for the sake of the increasingly high standards of the Festivals'.²³

She continued with the choir for five years, but the low standard of it concerned her. Her release from the post allowed more time for research and editing and thus the advent of the late night concerts series which ran from 1958. This became her principal

²⁰ IH Diary 20.10.53

²¹ IH Diary 15.12.53

²² Wren, *Voices by the Sea* p25

²³ Iris Lemare, Sylvia Mortimer Spencer *Memorial Article*, Rockliff Brothers Ltd, Liverpool (1979) p. 6

stage for a choir which included amongst its founder members Rosamund Strode, who takes up the story:

'In the autumn of 1952 Imogen Holst, by then in Aldeburgh, wrote to say that, at the suggestion of Peter Pears, she was about to form a small, partly professional group of singers to be available to perform at the Festival and elsewhere, and would I like to join? Of course the answer was 'yes', and what was later to become the Purcell Singers came into being, starting with five voices rehearsing in a London mews office. The next summer the group, by then a little larger, came to Aldeburgh for a week's rehearsal, and from the seventh Aldeburgh Festival in 1954, the Purcell Singers appeared annually for many years – most memorably, perhaps, in the series of late-night concerts in the parish Church given under Imogen Holst's direction from 1958 to 1968'.²⁴

Imogen devised and conducted over fifty festival concerts during that time and the late nights were funded and recorded by the BBC Transcription Service; this was a relief as the experiment of late nights, eventually to be taken on by the increasing number of festivals which began to flower all over Britain, could have proved a rather expensive luxury. There were three concerts at their first festival in 1954: the first included a wide variety of choral music with organ accompaniment ranging from Perotin, a great favourite of hers from Dartington teaching days, to Priaulx Rainier who had recently completed her *Cycle for Declamation*. The other two concerts consisted of a centenary celebration of the birth of Janacek (1854) and a performance of Bach's *St John Passion*. In 1956, that year when she was able to stamp her authority on the Festival, a strikingly fresh and varied programme was prepared: works by Venetian composers of the late sixteenth century were set against early English organ music, and all was followed by a number of British works including the first performance of *New Prince, New Pomp* from a suite of Britten written in 1929. This kind of programming remained the fashion for the Purcell Singers' concerts until 1957 after which the five or six concerts each year were linked together with a common theme. For example, *Purcell and his predecessors* (1959), *Flemish Music 1430 – 1630* (1962), *English Church Music of the Fifteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1965) and in 1966 *East Anglian Church Music 1013 – 1931*. Her choice of music during these years was largely pre- eighteenth century with twentieth century here and there. She did not regard the nineteenth century as her territory and when in 1966 she was unable to avoid it, she asked George Malcolm to conduct.

Her conducting was not limited to choral work, although her performances of Bach's *St John Passion* in 1954 and 1957 were of great importance to her. She directed Holst's *St Paul's Suite* to great acclaim in the opening concert at Snape Maltings in 1967, and conducted the Band and Trumpeters of the Royal Military School of Music at an open air concert in 1975. Ronald Blyth wrote of her conducting:

'Conductors achieve their results very variously. Sir Thomas Beecham obviously believes in a certain amount of terrorisation! Sir Malcolm Sargent gets his best results through his ruthless urbanity, and Benjamin Britten, on the occasion when he conducts, by an equally ruthless kindness. But Imogen Holst is the only conductor I have seen who appears to be 'audience-free'. She is a suppliant at the rostrum. Do it for me, she seems to say – and, of course, they do!'²⁵

²⁴ *The Britten Companion*, Palmer p52

²⁵ *The Lady* 26.6.57

She also, for several years, gave much of her time to the Aldeburgh Music Club, not exactly a choral group but an amateur ensemble of singers and instrumentalists who, along with other appearances, would make 'Music on the Meare' at nearby Thorpeness. On one occasion, recorder players supported the singers: recorders were much admired as instruments for educational purposes by Imogen – she had published a number of arrangements, and indeed compositions, for recorder ensembles during the 1940s, and she arranged and edited with Britten (though she did all the work!) music for recorders for Boosey and Hawkes between 1954 and 1957. One of the two final, unfinished compositions she left in 1984 was, indeed, a recorder concerto.

By the time Imo, as she was universally known, finished work on Britten's scores (the final one for her being the first of the church parables, *Curlew River*), she had become a figure of legendary importance, highly valued as a musician of considerable experience, wisdom and ability. Appearances on the rostrum continued, both in London where she recorded some of her father's works, and in Aldeburgh. She conducted part of the programme at the opening of the Snape Maltings Concert Hall (and the reopening two years later), and she shared concerts with a more recent artistic director, Philip Ledger, in 1971 and 1972. She remained an Artistic Director until 1977.

Despite the drawbacks for her own composition of that move to Aldeburgh so many years before, other fields of her musicianship were richly fertilised. Editing for the festival was much of Imo's bread and butter and although it would naturally be her conducting at the festivals that brought her audience acclaim, the essential work behind her concerts was done not on the rostrum but in the editing room. Published editions include Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* with Britten (B&H 1960), the Schutz *St John* and *St Matthew Passions* with Pears (OUP 1962 and 1965), Purcell's *How Blest are They* with Ledger (OUP 1968), and Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* with Britten once again (Faber 1969). Her prime wish was to bring the music before the public rather than to have her name associated with it. Gustav Holst had given the first concert performance of Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* since the death of the composer; Imogen, in her own way, followed his example: from the recorder arrangements which she made of the music of Pelham Humphrey in the 1930s to the enormous volume of music she edited for performance with the Purcell Singers during the 1950s and 1960s, her contribution in this field at the time was at the forefront of the early music scene in Britain. Choral arrangements and editions extended to several volumes, notably *Singing for Pleasure* and *A Jubilee Book of English Folk Songs* published by OUP respectively in 1957 and 1958. *A Yacre of Land* followed in 1961, arrangements of sixteen songs for unison voices and piano also published by OUP. Although this volume is entitled *Unison Songs edited by Imogen Holst and Ursula Vaughan Williams*, Ursula herself stated that 'it was Imogen who did all the work apart from a little translation'.²⁶

From 1964, when she stood down as Britten's amanuensis, remaining at Aldeburgh without a specific portfolio, her involvement continued unabated even though she was so busy with publications for her father's centenary. Mention has already been made of her conducting during these later years. She also continued to write numerous articles and programme notes for the festival booklets, and gave lectures too. As the Holst centenary approached, more of her father's work was heard, and in the 1974 Aldeburgh Festival, *Savitri*, *The Wandering Scholar* and the *Choral Symphony* were all included.

So, what of her own composition? She had written significant works dating back to her student days before arriving at Aldeburgh, some of which have recently been

²⁶ Ursula Vaughan Williams in conversation with the author, London, 1987

recorded.²⁷ Although the output is not large, the range is impressive, and she particularly excelled in the fields of choral and string composition. Student works include the *Mass in A minor* (1927), the *Phantasy String Quartet* (1928) which won the Cobbett Prize at the R.C.M., a *Sonata for violin and 'cello* (1930), and *The Unfortunate Traveller* for brass band (1930). Her music of the 1930s was largely for amateur and educational purposes, reflecting her work at the time; nearly forty titles of her arrangements and compositions were published during that decade. She returned to compositions for professional performance while at Dartington, all sparked off by a concert at the Wigmore Hall in 1943. A number of her friends wrote to say: 'We all feel it is high time that you had a LONDON CONCERT, both as a COMPOSER and as a CONDUCTOR, but it must be professional, not amateur ...'. The signatories included Maud Karpeles, Dorothy Elmhirst and Marjorie Wise. The resulting works included a *Serenade for flute, viola and bassoon*, a *Suite for string orchestra* and *Three Psalms for chorus and string orchestra*. Later that decade she completed many works, including her *String Trio no 1* (1944), *Four Songs for soprano and piano* (1944), the *String Quartet no 1* (1946), and *Welcome Joy and Welcome Sorrow* (1950) for female voices and harp. This latter made a good link between Dartington and Aldeburgh as it was requested by Britten for the 1951 Aldeburgh Festival. It was later broadcast in 1953, performed by the BBC Singers.

Once at Aldeburgh, her own composition almost completely ceased. During the period 1952 to 1962, there is only one short motet for friends written in 1955; she did continue with arrangements, but in working for Britten she did not compose. However, the time approached when she was to move on from her work as his amanuensis in 1964. Compositions once again began to appear from 1962, the year she completed the vocal score of the *War Requiem*. The first of this later body of works, *Variations on 'Loth to Depart'* (for strings) based itself on a theme taken from the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book; it therefore had something in common with *The Fall of the Leaf* which comprised three short studies which were also based on a sixteenth century tune. This was written for solo cello and given its first performance at the Wigmore Hall by the dedicatee Pamela Hind O'Malley.' Each of these works dates from 1962, and later the same year Imogen completed her second *String Trio*, which was first performed by the Oromonte Trio at the 1963 Aldeburgh Festival. Her setting of *The Twelve Kindly Months* (again, 1963) for female voices, was dedicated to Valda Plucknett, an Aldeburgh repetiteur, thus retaining an Aldeburgh connection. This was written for amateurs, as was *The Sun's Journey* in 1965, a cantata for the sopranos and altos of the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds. At the time she was also composing for amateur orchestras, and even a school band.

At the professional level, she wrote a *Duo for viola and piano* first performed in the 1968 festival by Cecil Aronowitz and Nicola Gruenberg. Something of a break then occurred as she continued work towards her father's centenary, but four years later in 1972 there was a most testing work for mixed choir, *Hallo my Fancy, whither wilt thou go?*, a setting of William Cleland's text written for the Purcell Consort of Voices, and once again the first performance took place at the Wigmore Hall.

Towards the end of her life there was something of an 'Indian Summer' of composition and arrangement, beginning with *February Welcome* for handbells in 1980. The most important late work is without doubt the *String Quintet* of 1982 which has been universally acknowledged. She also completed a *Sextet for recorders* for the Society of

²⁷ *Music for Strings* CLM37601 and *Choral Works* HMU907576

Recorder Players and *Homage to William Morris* (reflecting her Fabian leanings) for bass voice and string bass, both in 1984. She died two weeks before the first performance of the latter. Unfinished works at her death include a concerto for recorder and strings, and a *Duo for violin and 'cello*. The latter was due for performance at the Deal Festival to be performed by Roger Raphael and Steven Isserlis.²⁸

The maturing works of the 1940s and the gems of the 'post Britten' period have a musical value over and above that of other types of works written for different social purposes. The expertise with which she tailored a style to suit amateurs was something to admire; but the imaginative application of technique based on decades of formidable musical experience which can be found in her finest work is worth more than admiration. She never wrote a work in this last era unless invited to do so. But that in itself shows some measure of the respect held for her by fellow musicians. It is so pleasing to be able to report now that some of the best of her music has rightly been recorded, the string music CD gaining the Premier Recording award by the BBC Music Magazine 2010. Further, her *Phantasy String Quartet* (1928) and *Hallo my Fancy, whither wilt thou go?* (for mixed voices, 1972) were performed during the Promenade Concerts season this summer (2013). Britten would surely be proud of his assistant!

Dr Christopher Tinker

²⁸ Private correspondence, Isserlis with author