

## Britten



'Peace and Conflict'

A film by **Tony Britten**

Capriol Films © CAPO8

(105' • NTSC • 16:9 • DTS5.1 & PCM stereo • O)



This film by Tony Britten (no relation as far as I know) concentrates on the youthful background to the composer's pacifism, especially his years at the liberal Gresham's School in Norfolk. A major part of the story is re-enacted and invented (although closely based on fact and the composer's own diaries and letters) using actors on location. Among these, Alex Lowther's young Britten seems a first-rate choice, both visually and atmospherically. The collection of his school contemporaries – some, like the spy-in-waiting Donald Maclean, soon to be famous in their own right – are also sketched in in some detail. The narrative goes up to the composer's return to Britain from America but does not dwell too much

on familiar *Peter Grimes* territory, focusing more on the traumatic memory of the composer's concert in (just) post-war Auschwitz with Yehudi Menuhin.

The director's difficult work of making living fiction out of 'real' people is convincingly done. It always feels 'real' rather than just a parade of lookalike marionettes quoting texts. The editing is tight and pacy, and Britten (Tony) achieves a real sense of climax when he finally allows his narrator John Hurt – superbly neutral even when describing contentious issues such as Britten's sexuality or the Communist-leaning 1930s Left – to appear on screen for the final summing up.

As one might expect from a composer/director, the musical side is thoughtfully handled and by no means just concentrates on influences on individual compositions. Performance excerpts – some by current Gresham's pupils – amount to what one might term a 'Young Britten's Greatest Hits', including passages from early film and theatre music (*Stay Down Miner*), *Winter Words* and *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*. Composer Joseph Horowitz, cellist Anita Lasker Wallfisch and Gresham's teacher Simon Kinder are fluent among the film's talking heads. This is a fresh, unusual and genuine contribution to the Britten centenary. **Mike Ashman**