After entering North America onboard the Cunard White Star “Ausonia” on May 9, 1939, Benjamin Britten and tenor Peter Pears remained in Canada—both Québec and Montreal—until entering the United States via Grand Rapids, Michigan, on June 12, 1939. At the beginning of these “American Years”—a period that produced nineteen major works—Britten might not have guessed he would remain stateside until March 16, 1942, when he boarded the MS Axel Johnson for a transatlantic voyage back to Great Britain. After traveling from Michigan to New York State at the end of June 1939, staying near Aaron Copland—with whom Britten and Pears would maintain a long, if sometime detached friendship—before settling on Long Island at Amityville, New York, in late August of that year. (Britten and Pears would go on to give the world première performance of Aaron Copland’s “Old American Songs, Book One” in the UK at the Aldeburgh Festival on 17 June 1950, at Copland’s request.)

The following January, Britten was engaged to make his American début in Chicago, Illinois. Prior to that performance, however, the twenty-six year old composer decamped to Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, for a guest appearance on the campus of the University of Illinois. Upon his January 3, 1940 arrival in Champaign, Britten—who relished puns and schoolboy humor in much of his correspondence—sent a typically witty night telegram to Long Island quipping about “Champaign until Sunday” [See Image 1].
In the January 5, 1940 printing of the University of Illinois’ *Daily Illini*, an article identifies Benjamin Britten as having attended the previous day’s 11th Annual Music clinic on the campus of the University of Illinois in Smith Music Hall. “Delegates of 16 States, England Gather for 3-Day Program,” the headline proclaims. “The London musician attending the clinic, which annually attracts noted directors, composers, publishers, and conductors, is Benjamin Britten, composer.” Events during the “Music Meet” took place in the Band building, the Auditorium (now Foellinger Auditorium), and Smith Music Hall. The famous American band director A.A. Harding lectured at the clinic. [See Images 2a/b.]

“Before I embark on another day of this madness,” Britten penned on stationery from the Inman Hotel in Champaign, Illinois, dated January 5th 1939 [recte 1940], “I want to write you a little note in return. I'll be short but scarcely sweet – that’s to say with regard to the writing – because who could write properly with the temperature 6° below zero?” [See Image 3.] Oh yes, as Illinoisans can attest: Britten was experiencing the perfect Illinois winter—about which his correspondence remarked frequently.

On January 9, 1940, Britten wrote in a letter from Chicago to Amityville, New York, describing the hospitality of Midwesterners and especially noting the “bluff bandsmen of Champaign”!

The January 8, 1940 program for the Illinois Symphony Orchestra proudly announced “with pleasure the American début of Benjamin Britten, who will give the first American performance of his Concerto No. 1 in D major for piano and orchestra.” That performance occurred in the Blackstone Theatre on January 15, 1940—Britten’s first in the United States—and marked the beginning of an illustrious career that would intersect the State of Illinois time and again. Britten thanked Albert Goldberg, conductor of the Illinois Symphony Orchestra, writing: “I feel […] very honored by the trouble you are taking in order to give me good publicity. It is an excellent start for me in Chicago.”

Not just Chicago, but the United States as a whole.
In the January 15, 1940 Chicago Daily News, under the headline “School Band Din Called Vital by British Pianist,” the premise states that while the general public might eschew a band rehearsal, to Britten, “those same sour cornet notes are the voice of America’s musical vitality.” Writing to his sister Beth Welford on January 21, 1940, Britten again referred to his time in Champaign, Illinois—expressly the below freezing temperatures—and his article for the Chicago Daily News that noted his experience hearing a number of “wind bands.” Such bands, while unusual to the English, Britten regarded as “vital.” Emboldened, Britten asserted: “composers should give attention to high-school virtuosos.”

Britten’s brief time on the campus of the University of Illinois may have been but an interval before his upcoming Chicago début. Yet his delighted participation underscored his interests in future generations of young artists, forming part of a still greater urge to absorb quintessentially American musical trends. Indeed, in Britten’s compositional output, his desire to foster musical acumen in young children is met out in numerous works for school-aged children’s ensembles, Anglican boys’ choirs, and generations of students not yet distracted by the immediacy of online gaming, the endless barrage of television stimuli, and the excision of thriving music programs in elementary and secondary schools.

“A time there was…”

NB — Britten researchers in the twenty-first century are indebted to the wide-ranging inclusion of correspondence, and exhaustive annotations therein, found in the six volumes of Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1913–1976. The first three volumes, through 1951, are published by Faber and Faber Limited, while the remaining three volumes are published by The Boydell Press. Over the nearly quarter-century of the series’ production, the editors have been Donald Mitchell, Philip Reed, and Mervyn Cooke.
Inman Hotel
FIREPROOF
ON ROUTES NO. 10 U.S. NO. 45-150
CHAMPAIGN'S FINEST HOTEL
DELIA BROWN, MANAGER

Champaign, Illinois

Jan. 5th 40 (1940)

My dear Elizabeth,

Your sweet note has just arrived, I
begin to feel a certain degree of inner restlessness. It
would be nice to write you a little note, but...I

I don’t know if I can write...a letter...to you...I

In the evening—I should write properly...still
the temperature is 6° below zero.

I hope you’ll arrive by night, and if you

be there. How the weather ford

would bring me up to you. Now, please let

your folks bring me an answer for your letter,
because I don’t want a week alone in Chicago!

So far things have been entertaining to write her.

I can’t attempt to describe the journey, but believe

me, my dear, it’s like another world. I’ve like a

visitor from New York town—there’s no one...I

like to talk about me...I’ll admire yet

later on...