A ‘Triumvirate’ Birthday: Celebrating the Lives and Works of Verdi, Wagner, and Britten

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This year marks the birth of three influential composers, which has resulted in many performances, conferences, and celebrations held worldwide in their honor. Hundreds of University of Illinois students, faculty, and alumni have taken part in these festivities, both on and off campus. A snippet of their activities follows.

Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901)

Simultaneously the most memorable and terrifying time Interim Director of Choral Activities Kristina Boerger sang Verdi’s Requiem was in the Grant Park Festival in Chicago.

“I was positioned right by the bass drum and in the Dies Irae, you whack that thing as hard as it can be whacked; I never knew that a bass drum could be that loud,” she said.

The work is one she knows well, through performing and rehearsing. In 2008 she prepared the Collegiate Chorale for a performance of the Requiem with the New York City Opera Orchestra in Carnegie Hall. Most recently, she prepared the University Chorale and Oratorio Society for their November 21 performance with the Men’s and Women’s Glee Clubs and Sinfonia da Camera, under the direction of Ian Hobson. Associate Professor Ricardo Herrera (bass) was one of the soloists.

Hobson contacted Boerger early in 2013 about his plans to perform the work for the bicentenary celebration of Verdi’s birth.

“It’s really one of the great pieces in the Western concert art. I mean, it’s really beloved of players and singers,” Boerger said. “It’s just a beautiful,
engrossing, powerful, demanding work. There are few of its caliber. . . . There are few huge pieces for chorus and orchestra that bring such rewards to everyone involved.”

Primarily an opera composer, the Requiem is one of the five sacred pieces Verdi wrote and the only one that requires full choral and orchestral forces. In addition to the four soloists, approximately 260 musicians crowded the stage of the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts Great Hall. The vocal parts for both the soloists and the choir are challenging in part because of the dramatic singing required.

“It can really be heard as a powerfully dramatic musical piece about death,” she said. “About our fears about death, our hopes for the possibility of a glorious after-death, the fear that we’re not going to have that.”

Less than 10 years later, Verdi embarked on his final work, the comic opera Falstaff, which was staged in November by the UI Opera Division under the baton of Eduardo Diazmuñoz, who chose the opera to celebrate both Verdi’s bicentennial and his career.

“This was his last work, and I consider it a gracious, exemplary, and marvelous way to bid farewell to opera and life,” he said.

Diazmuñoz met with stage director Kathleen Conlin in January 2013 to begin conceptualizing the stage design. Originally a Shakespearean play, the opera was performed in a traditional staging, as close to Verdi’s instructions as possible, but set a century later than the composer intended.

Auditions were held shortly after school started and rehearsals continued up until the performances, November 14–17. Approximately 100 UI students participated in the production, from singing specific roles or chorus parts to playing in the orchestra to working behind the scenes in stage management or the costume shop.

Diazmuñoz said Falstaff includes some of the most complex compositional techniques, such as an eight-part fugue sung by 10 singers. This craftsmanship is all the more surprising when one remembers that an aging 80-year-old composer was responsible for it.

“It contains everything Verdi looked for and even more. It is an excellent story and a well crafted and funny libretto,” he said. “It has gorgeous melodies—not the themes one would expect from his previous operas—but the melodies and the inventiveness of his lines are there, a magnificent and intelligent treatment of leitmotives, extraordinary orchestration, excellent dramatic direction, good taste, extraordinary sense of timing, and the overall texture.”

Richard Wagner (1813–1883)

As a musicologist specializing in Wagner studies, Katherine Syer has looked forward to celebrating this Wagner bicentennial year, but now looks forward to its conclusion. The year began with three simultaneous Wagner conferences, which led to a constant flow of Wagner-related activities. One particular event that she presented at was the Wagner 200 conference in London, featuring a series of concerts, symposiums, and lectures held throughout the year.

“It is, of course, very rewarding to know that the field I work in is so vibrant and that there’s such a strong following, and then the audiences have been fantastic and keenly interested. The debates have become richer, farther ranging . . . in many ways very rewarding,” she said.

Syer presented her research at conferences held worldwide, including in South Carolina, the University of Leeds, London, Barcelona, and Melbourne. Her presentations have ranged in topic from historical source studies to the genesis of libretti and contemporary production history.

This past summer, she and her family, including husband and musicologist William Kinderman, spent time in Europe where they were in the center of Wagner-related action. Their trip included taking in Kent Nagano’s last
Ring Cycle with the Bavarian State Opera and watching an epic Wagner vs. Verdi battle—complete with enormous puppets—in the center of Munich.

To further heighten the celebration this year, her book *Wagner’s Visions* will be released. The book addresses Wagner’s operatic scenes where a character enters an altered state of consciousness, though simultaneously experiencing a distorted form of the past and elements of the future. She situates these scenes into the psychological thought and political currents of Wagner’s time to better evaluate his relationship to culture and politics.

In July, Kinderman released his new book, *Wagner’s ‘Parsifal’*, which is a topic that has occupied his interest since the 1980’s. A combination of manuscript studies and historical context, Kinderman focuses on the rich political and ideological heritage of Wagner’s last work. He has written a blog about his new book, accessible at: blog.oup.com/2013/03/richard-wagner-parsifal-stassen-lorenz/.

“As an artwork I’ve always found *Parsifal* very impressive and, having taken seminar groups to Bayreuth many times, I’ve seen how powerful an effect it can have on others,” he said.

Topics addressed in the book have also materialized into lectures he gave in South Carolina and at a 10-day festival in Leipzig. Significantly, he was invited to speak on *Parsifal* and Beethoven’s Diabelli Variations at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

“Wagner is a highly controversial topic in Israel, because of the way the National Socialists used Wagner’s work and exploited his reputation,” he said. “My lecture on ‘Wagner’s *Parsifal* as Art and Ideology, 1882–1933,’ concerned darker issues in Wagner reception related to the rise of National Socialism. It also deals with the contradictions that invest *Parsifal* and its reception, since that work in some ways does not lend itself at all to the National Socialist ideology.”

Kinderman and Syer also integrated Wagner and Verdi repertoire into their semester syllabi. This past semester Kinderman’s work on *Parsifal* was discussed in his musicology seminar and during his six-day residency at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario, in October.

In Spring 2013, Syer used the later works of Verdi and Wagner as the focus of her graduate seminar class.

“Everyone was passionately and deeply interested in the material. There was a lot of close score study, and it was a really harmonious and intelligent group,” she said. “I really appreciated them very much. It was a very rewarding experience for me.”

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

As an undergraduate at UI Justin Vickers (BM ’96, DMA ’11) found himself drawn to Benjamin Britten, whose
music he frequently sang at recitals. Little did he know the music would impact his life and career.

“I certainly didn’t know then that he was going to captivate me,” Vickers said. “Something about the music just makes sense. It’s like a friend. It’s like a familiar spirit somehow.”

Britten’s life and music continue to captivate Vickers. Recently, he recorded song cycles in Britten’s music room to accompaniment coming from the composer’s piano. He also resided briefly in the Red House in Aldeburgh—the home Britten lived in with partner Peter Pears.

Now a faculty member at Illinois State University in Bloomington-Normal, Vickers co-hosted his own Britten centennial conference with Illinois State University Professor and UI alum, Karyl Carlson. Held October 24-27, the conference included presentations by nearly 30 scholars from throughout the world—including two from the University of Illinois. The conference began with a performance of the War Requiem, in which Vickers sang the solo tenor part. Other events included concerts, lectures, film screenings, art exhibitions, and a dance recital accompanied by Britten’s music. The keynote speaker of the event was Lucy Walker, director of Learning and Development at the Britten-Pears Foundation, who was introduced by UI musicology Professor Emeritus Nicholas Temperley. University of Illinois voice faculty members Yvonne Gonzales Redman, and Jerold Siena, and pianist Julie Gunn performed at a recital during the conference.

Plans began to materialize in late April 2012—just a little over a month after Vickers was offered the job at ISU. Though his appointment did not begin until August 2012, the university started his contract four months early so he could continue working on the conference.

“It was very heartening to realize that the university would celebrate and support the scholarly and research interests of their faculty in such a big way, especially for someone virtually unknown to them,” Vickers said.

That the conference occurred so closely to Champaign-Urbana is fitting, considering Britten’s links with the area. Britten is also a favorite composer of the Jupiter String Quartet, who made sure to include his three quartets in its repertoire this year. Violinist Nelson Lee said the quartets were written at different points of Britten’s life and each expresses a wide range of colors and timbres.

“I think his musical language is very identifiable and unique,” Lee said. “He has a really strong and recognizable voice in his music, and we are most familiar with the quartets, having played them. All three of his quartets are very different, but you definitely hear his voice coming through all of them.”

On May 25, the Jupiters were invited to perform all three quartets at Esterházy Palace in Eisenstadt, Austria. This was the first time the group performed on the Haydn-saal stage (named for the famous resident composer/conductor, Joseph Haydn), and Lee said the acoustics and atmosphere were incredible.

“It was great to play them all in one concert like that and to be in that environment; the palace was very inspiring,” he said.

The concert in Austria is the only time this year the Jupiters will play an all-Britten concert, although they will continue to play the quartets individually throughout the semester.