

Letters to the Editor



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Campaign to save composer's archive

Sir, Sir Malcolm Arnold (1921-2006) was one of the most important British composers of classical music in the 20th century. From 1979 to 1986 he was in the care of the Court of Protection, and for the remainder of his life the Court of Protection and the Office of the Public Guardian played a significant role in his protection as a vulnerable person. Over this period the court accumulated a considerable archive of records, papers and personal correspondence. This collection is of great importance to researchers, biographers and musicologists. Until recently it had been the stated intention of the Court of Protection that these records would be preserved. However, it has now stated that it intends to destroy the entire collection as it believes that all possible options for preserving the records have been exhausted. We urge the government to intervene to prevent the destruction of the records relating to this significant British artist and to ensure that they are lodged in the National Archives. **Katherine Arnold**, daughter of Sir Malcolm Arnold; **Rachel Bond**, college librarian, Eton College; **William Boyd**, novelist; **Sally Cavender**, Faber Music; **Paul Harris**, Malcolm Arnold Festival; **Sallyann Kleibel**, **Julian Lloyd Webber**; **Dame Monica Mason**; **Michael Meredith**, librarian emeritus, Eton College; **Tony Meredith**, biographer; **David Nixon**, Northern Ballet; **Tony Palmer**, film director and composer; **Dr Kriss Russman**; **Mark Skipper**, Northern Ballet; **Michael White**, music critic; **Barry Wordsworth**

Return sculptures

Sir, The call by the curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum for the Benin Bronzes to be returned to Nigeria (report, Nov 7) overlooks the fact that the Obas of Benin ruled over a slave-owning society and participated in the slave trade. Surely, if we are to comply with present political correctness, any royal images should be melted down. **Stephen Turner**
Stratford-upon-Avon

Wedge of whooper

Sir, Jonathan Tulloch in Nature Notes (Nov 6) mentions a flock of whooper swans. The correct collective noun for swans is either a bevy or, when in flight, a wedge. **Tim Cullimore**
Longworth, Oxon

Corrections and clarifications

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Reform of university admissions system

Sir, Amid all the talk of building back better, Ucas's proposal to move to post-qualification applications, whereby students are offered places on grades already achieved, rather than on predictions made months before the exams, is to be lauded (report and leading article, Nov 9). A switch away from the present system would reduce stress and uncertainty for all applicants, and stop the "gaming" that has inevitably grown up around the process. Most importantly, it would be fairer for all students, particularly those most disadvantaged by the existing system. This would be good news for the universities, too, which would get the best applicants regardless of background. **Jaideep Barot**
Headmaster, Bristol Grammar School

Sir, I am in favour of radical change and "disruptive reform" but I would caution against the presumption that using crude grade outcomes at A-level or its vocational equivalent automatically benefits disadvantaged students. Although formal interviews can often benefit the very confident, more subtle and nuanced admissions criteria can often take account of the background, school experience and

personal circumstances of potential students. Moreover, delaying the start of the academic year to January would have significant implications for overseas students, recruitment and for professional qualifications linked to the world of work. Any change should take account of the reality of the world outside academia. **Lord Blunkett**
Professor of politics in practice, University of Sheffield; education secretary 1997-2001

Sir, That universities are considering a post-results application system is a welcome, and long overdue, reform. A January start in the first year would ensure that all first-year students had a chance to travel or work before university, thereby gaining valuable life experience, and would avoid schools, universities and students themselves acing the stress of securing offers based on predicted grades. This year's centre-assessed grades debacle demonstrated clearly how unrealistic predictions can be, and hence what a lottery offers are for some school leavers. Post-results offers would be much fairer for all concerned. **Louise Simpson**
Head, Exeter School

Sir, It is right to keep university admissions under constant review. As a teacher I hated the weight put on my predicted grades. Later, as a special adviser to the universities minister, I pushed for a review of admissions to be included in the 2011 higher education white paper. But shifting to a post-qualification system is not straightforward. It may be harder for teachers to help disadvantaged pupils to find the right place after if they have already left school. Moving the start of the academic year to January would further disrupt the education of young people who have already missed out. We need an admissions system that works for people who like to prepare in advance and those who want a last-minute dash. The best answer may not be a one-size-fits-all solution. **Nick Hillman**
Higher Education Policy Institute

Sir, With the prospect of an effective vaccine, I trust the government will include among its priority recipients all those pupils sitting GCSE and A-level exams next summer and all those teachers upon whom they rely. **Richard Cairns**
Headmaster, Brighton College

Antivax cyberwar

Sir, Your article "GCHQ in cyberwar on anti-vaccine propaganda" (Nov 9) outlines the government's fight against online antivax misinformation spread by "hostile states". At NewsGuard we have long flagged Russian news sources such as RT and Sputnik as unreliable. Last week, as part of our partnership with the World Health Organisation, we published a report on Facebook pages spreading false information about the coronavirus vaccine to millions of users.

I welcome the government's efforts to tackle head-on this growing problem but we should not ignore the power that UK internet service providers already have to give their users the tools to combat online anti-vaccine content. These companies have long provided families with tools to protect families from various online harms. Helping users to navigate social media by flagging up untrustworthy sources — often originating from "hostile states" — is a logical next step. **Anna-Sophie Harling**
Managing director Europe, NewsGuard

Oral virus weapon

Sir, Stephen Challacombe, discussing the benefits of patients using iodine mouthwash to minimise transmission of the coronavirus to anaesthetists and dentists in an interview with Helen Rumbelow (Times2, Nov 9), asks: "What is the downside of everybody using it?" The potential downside is allergy. True povidone-iodine allergy has a reported incidence that may be as high as one in 250, and can result in swelling of the tongue and respiratory difficulties — dangerous at the best of times and downright hazardous when anaesthesia is being induced. This may be a risk that patients are willing to undergo if there is evidence that it protects those caring for them, but that evidence is, as yet, lacking. **Dr David Bogod**
Consultant anaesthetist (ret'd), West Bridgford, Notts

Wolf at the door

Sir, Like Professor Richard Selley (letter, Nov 6, and report, Nov 5), I am a geologist and have encountered

wolves during the course of my work. I used to wear bells to scare wolves and bears away as I walked alone through the Canadian bush but I had a close encounter once when eating my lunch on a bluff overlooking a lake. The wolf entered the clearing some ten yards from me, sniffed the air, stared at me directly for what seemed an eternity and then, much to my relief, walked off.

Introducing wolves in Britain might well create exciting encounters for some but we might be better advised to learn to look after our existing wildlife first, as hedgehogs have dwindled by 30 million in my lifetime to about one million, a sad indictment of our responsibilities to our wildlife. **Roger Cornish**
Oxted, Surrey

English nouveau

Sir, Your leading article ("English Nouveau", Nov 9) flatters Beaujolais producers. They are to the south of Burgundy and, more often than not, Beaujolais is not considered part of the Burgundy region. **Michael Mackenzie**
London W8

THE UNKNOWN WARRIOR

FROM THE TIMES NOVEMBER 10, 1920

From the field of France or Flanders, where his life was given for his country, the body of the Unknown Warrior is to be brought today to Boulogne. French delicacy, French memories of that comradeship-in-arms whose consummation France and we will celebrate tomorrow, will pay to the Unknown Warrior of the British peoples today the honours of a Field Marshal. After that, the Navy of Great Britain will take him to their care — French warships, too, escorting him — and bring him to these shores, for the homage of his King and his fellow-countrymen,

and for burial in the Abbey, with the great men resting there. They lived for their country; he died for his, "glorying to be unknown" as Archbishop Alexander said of such as he in a poem which appeared in *The Times* during the South African War, more than twenty years ago. In him countless memories gather and are hallowed. His honour is the honour that should have been given, but could not be, to the men whom war took, and used, and threw away. With him return in triumph today all for whom the hope of the war was forlorn, all who saw not the fruit of their endeavour, all whose last regret was for the agony of those they left behind. Tears come with him that seemed to have been shed bitterly in vain; and as his bier passes to its last resting-place, there will be many who will hear in imagination the mourning of nations throughout the world. Sad the homecoming of the Unknown Warrior must be, whetting

again the sword-edge of loss. But there is joy too, that can vanquish sorrow. For the Unknown Warrior's coming reminds the nation that the cynicism, the disillusion, the weariness of the years since the Armistice are ugly treacheries to the faith for which he and men such as he fought and died. The war was not for ease, or creature-comforts, or a life guarded against cares. It was a flaming of the unquenched fire of the soul of man, indignant against wrong, and scornful of safety. The Unknown Soldier returns to English shores bearing the banner of a victory greater than any victory of the sword. All that men can do to honour the dead the nation will do tomorrow; for he, dead, returning in the name of all who died as he did, honours his country more than we, living, can honour him.

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US election polls

Sir, It is clear that the errors made by US polls last week need to be investigated. However, those errors should not be exaggerated. The national polls predicted on average that Joe Biden would win the popular vote by 54-46 per cent of the two-party vote; it now looks as if he has won by 52-48 per cent. The two-point error is politically very significant but statistically less so. Assuming Biden wins Arizona and Georgia the polls also predicted the right winner in 48 of the 50 states (admittedly overstating Biden's lead in most of the battleground states).

Of course the polls should be held to account for their mistakes but we need to get away from crude judgments of whether polls are right or wrong. Polls are seldom precisely accurate and seldom totally wrong. Veering between blind faith in their figures before an election and outright condemnation afterwards is a mistake. It devalues the debate we need about how to assess data that, for all their faults, provide the least bad way of assessing public opinion. **Peter Kellner**
Former president, YouGov

Sir, Clare Foges ("I'm pro-Joe but spare me the Trump haters", Nov 9) makes some fair points but surely, after four years of rule-wrecking, narcissistic indulgence by President Trump, we liberals should be allowed a brief wallow in schadenfreude. **Bill Jones**
Beverly, E Yorks

Hate speech laws

Sir, The Law Commission's proposal to extend the jurisdiction of hate speech to private homes (leading article, Nov 7, and report, Nov 5) has unhappy parallels. In 1932 Soviet propaganda had it that a 13-year-old dedicated Young Pioneer, Pavlik Morozov, did the "right thing" by denouncing his father, Trofim, to the Stalinist authorities. Trofim was said to have been executed as a result. Members of Pavlik's family, somewhat unhappy with this, then murdered the youth. In turn they were themselves executed. Pavlik was lauded in the USSR as a martyred hero, an example for Soviet youth to follow. **Michael Olizar**
London SW15

Christmas present

Sir, I always agonise over how long to make my Christmas letters to family and friends (letters, Nov 7 & Nov 9), many of whom are fobbed off at the end with, "We must meet up in the new year". This year, however, they will be brief notes, as we haven't been on holiday; there have been no exams; no big family celebratory gatherings and, like most people, we have spent months walking and gardening. This year's closing sentence will be heartfelt. **Charlotte Fentem**
Haslemere, Surrey

Saint Joan

Sir, At the age of 87 Joan Bakewell is an inspiration to us all ("Bakewell: I'd have quit rather than keep quiet about Trump", News, and "I'm so glad I don't work for the BBC now", Times2, Nov 9). As I am a mere youngster in my seventies, she is now my role model for growing old with grace and intelligence and vigour. **Sue Wood**
Radlett, Herts