

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Four Sea Interludes from *Peter Grimes*

Peter Grimes is undoubtedly the work that propelled Benjamin Britten to stardom. Like Bartok and the Concerto for Orchestra, the work came at a time of dejection, isolation and self-doubt. Unlike Bartok, Benjamin Britten and his partner the fine tenor Peter Pears had much more injury to add to the list. They were socially outcast, not just because of homosexuality but because of their conscientious objection to World War II. Furthermore, the artistic conditions for the large amount of works between 1935 and 1937 led to under rehearsing and critical dismissal from the press. They had left for the US as conscientious objectors, along with Auden, Isherwood and other likeminded individuals. Though initially in Canada and then New York where the operetta *Paul Bunyan* was premiered at Columbia University in 1941, both men left for California's southland and spent the rest of the time in the coastal town of Escondido.

It was here that the whole fascination for the *Peter Grimes* story developed. It was here they read E.M. Forster's introduction to the poet George Crabbe whose character Peter Grimes is set in the original poem *The Borough*. This Grimes was a Dickensian industrial age figure beating boys whom he bought from the work houses. The adaptation of the character into Britten's modern, socially psychopathic, possibly pederastic creature was as much a reason for the propulsion to fame as the score itself. By the time Britten and Pears made the transatlantic crossing back to England in 1942, they were jointly creating a scenario that was not only powerful and tragic, but abhorrent and addictive. This is the stuff of good opera. Lord Harewood who presided over the premier at Sadlers Wells Opera in 1945 declared it the finest English Opera since Purcell's Dido and Aeneas in 1689, suggesting a revival of great British music. The popularity of the opera is well noted, and I quote from the writings of a critic for the New Statesman as he conveys the opera's enormous popularity.

"I can vouch for the truth of the following incidents on a single-track bus journey last Saturday. They seem almost to amount to proof that we are becoming a nation of high-brows. A friend boarded a 38 bus at Green Park, asked the conductor whether he went past Sadler's Wells. 'Yes, I should say I do,' he replied. 'I wish I could go inside instead. That will be threepence for Peter Grimes.' All the way to Roseberry Avenue, a young man sitting next to my friend whistled the Tarantella from Walton's *Façade*; it is not an easy tune to whistle and the whistler did not get off at Sadler's Wells. But my friend did, and as he left the bus he heard the conductor shouting at the top of a loud voice: 'Sadler's Wells! Any more for Peter Grimes, the sadistic fisherman!'"

The popularity of the opera is also in its great scoring and no more evident than in the Interludes. There are six interludes and the Four Sea Interludes with the Passacaglia are most often played in concert. One can immediately sense the tautness of the drama. The writing is not only an ambitious palette of colour for the listener, filled with wonderful sonorities - it is a tour-de-force for the orchestra. The interludes 'Dawn', 'Sunday Morning', 'Moonlight' and 'Storm' each provide power to the story, interweaving pictorial elements with the underlying, ever present psychosis. They are also marvelous as standalone orchestral pieces – hallmarks of vintage Britten.