COMPOSING MADNESS: REALISM IN *PETER GRIMES*

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SARAH BORGATTI

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ADVISER: ALESSANDRA CAMPANA

ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

ABSTRACT

The premiere of Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* on June 7, 1945, at Sadler's Wells Theatre, reverberated throughout London and quickly spread beyond the city to permanently impact postwar audiences. The success of the opera was chiefly due to Britten's ability to fine-tune a specific kind of realism in portraying Grimes's descent into madness. This thesis examines the way in which Britten tackles the difficult task of composing an opera centered on a "sadistic fisherman." After a reading of the Act III mad scene, it describes how the character of Peter Grimes was shaped both dramaturgically and visually through a highly collaborative process. Finally, a short review of the opera's early reception confirms that its impact on contemporary audiences cannot be reduced to mere empathy for the eponymous anti-hero and his psychic demise. The complex dialectics of realistic premises and operatic conventions endowed the work with the potential to create a safe space in which to consider the recent horrors and utter devastation of World War II. More generally, this thesis proposes that by offering these distinct spaces for introspection, opera has the significant potential not only to teach us about our own past, but also to shape our ability to act in the future.

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I also wish to extend my appreciation to the librarians and staff at the Britten-Pears Foundation in Aldeburgh, for their kind and generous assistance with this project. Having the opportunity to visit Aldeburgh and conduct research there truly made Britten's intimate connection to this place come alive. Not only was it easy to imagine the Borough springing up right before my eyes (although with much, much nicer inhabitants), but this experience was immeasurable both to me as a person, and in my ability to write this thesis.

My family has not only steadfastly encouraged me to pursue my dreams, but they have been my biggest fans through it all. Thank you for wholeheartedly embracing my interests, and being there for me every step of the way.

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PREFACE

> To Benjamin Britten, who, as a brilliant composer, performer, and interpreter through music of human feelings, moods, and thoughts, has truly inspired man to understand, clarify and appreciate more fully his own nature, purpose and destiny.[1]

With this citation, Benjamin Britten was presented the First Aspen Award on July 31, 1964. Although these words were written when he was a well established composer, having since composed such significant works as *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* and the *War Requiem*, Britten had manifested since early on in his artistic career, a special ability to provide insight with his music, an insight that tests art's ability to delve into matters of everyday life. One work that testifies more that any other to this peculiar capacity is Britten's 1945 opera *Peter Grimes*. Through its portrayal of male madness, *Peter Grimes* constructs a space where thoughts and ideas about a man's fraught relationship with himself and with his community can be considered differently.

Peter Grimes was able to achieve such an impact through Britten's ability to fine-tune a specific kind of realism in portraying Grimes's descent into madness. In his influential study of the representation of illness, Sander L. Gilman has provided a compelling model to understand this phenomenon:

> The portrait of the sufferer, the portrait of the patient, is therefore the image of the disease anthropomorphized. Our examination of the

[1] Benjamin Britten, *Britten on Music*, ed. Paul Kildea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 255.

> image of the sufferer provides us with rigid structures for our definition of the boundaries of disease, boundaries that are reified by the very limits inherent to the work of art—the frame of the painting, the finite limits of the stage, …or the narrative form of the novel. In placing such images within culturally accepted categories of representation, within "art," we present them as a social reality, bounded by a parallel fantasy of the validity of "art" to present a controlled image of the world.[2]

The world of opera lends itself well to examining representations of disease, particularly madness. Through the boundary of the stage, the boundary of the story's setting, and the element of spectacle present in the combination of music, text, and drama, opera is a medium that provides multiple levels on which to examine this representation. Opera is a valuable art form for examining madness and its intrinsic complexities, but this requires the presence of a certain degree of realism. It is this realism that allows audiences to relate to an opera's story, and use it as a tool for questioning and considering broader ideas and concepts.

Chapter 1 of this thesis examines how Britten achieved this level of realism through working closely with his collaborators, the staging, the libretto, and the music. It then offers a close reading of Grimes's Act III mad scene, focusing on how the mad scene manages to have such a disconcerting effect, and that this effect is but the result of a complex combination of all these factors. Building on this examination of realism and madness, chapter 2 traces the construction of the character of Peter Grimes, from the one-dimensional, sadistic fisherman incapable of evoking sympathy in

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[2] Sander Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988): 2.

George Crabbe's *The Borough*, to a complex character with whom audiences could relate.

This intricate path from Crabbe to Britten fully emerged during the course of my research at the Britten-Pears Library in Aldeburgh. Examining the transformation of Grimes's character during each step of Britten's compositional process revealed that, while certain ideas were present from the very first scenario drafts—such as the chorus as a main character—others took shape much more gradually. This transformation was present throughout the materials I worked with as I sought to learn more about the compositional process, premiere, and early critical reception of *Peter Grimes*. In studying the compositional process of the opera, I examined the scenario drafts where Britten and Pears wrote down their initial ideas for the opera, the later libretto fragments that sketched out individual scenes, and finally the three typescript libretto drafts that preceded the final libretto.

I also looked at materials surrounding the opera's premiere so I could gain a greater understanding of the postwar London environment in which it occurred. These included programs from the concert-introduction and premiere of the opera, other publicity materials, documents concerning the Sadler's Wells Opera Company's other performances during the 1945 season, programs from performances Britten gave around the time of the premiere, Kenneth Green's original costume and set designs, and photographs from the first production. My interest in the opera's early critical reception led me to focus on the Library's substantial collection of press materials related to the

premiere, as well as their valuable collection of oral histories from Britten's friends and colleagues. I also looked at news items and other print materials concerning the first performances of the *Sea Interludes* and early performances of the opera abroad, as an added way to gauge its impact.

Studying these materials highlighted the collaborative nature of Britten's work. Scenarios created by him and Peter Pears each had their own unique aspects, but overall were closely related. The three libretto drafts were also telling, with each subsequent version bearing edits from an increasing number of colleagues. Finally, the Library's interviews of Britten's close friends and colleagues, similarly attest to this collaborative approach. These interviews focus on several of his collaborators' memories of working with Britten, but they also frequently describe a lively environment rich in the exchange of thoughts and ideas.

While these sources were illuminating in learning more about the transformation from Crabbe's Grimes to Britten's Grimes, being in Aldeburgh itself also proved crucial for better understanding the opera. The extent of Britten's connection to this area was readily apparent, and while walking around Aldeburgh, it seemed that a combination of the realistic everyday and the theatrical picturesque came together right before my eyes. Although Britten's presence was clearly felt throughout the town, it was fascinating how much the presence of George Crabbe—the original creator of the "sadistic fisherman"—could be felt as well. An impactful example of this is located in the Aldeburgh Parish Church. Directly across from a large stained

glass window created in memory of Britten, sits a bust of Crabbe, who preached at the church during his time as a curate in Aldeburgh. It is a striking reminder not only of the degree to which both poet and composer were intimately connected to the same countryside, but also of their deep connection to one another.

The impact of *Peter Grimes* cannot be fully grasped without first understanding the context of its premiere in postwar London. *Peter Grimes* not only marked the reopening of Sadler's Wells Theatre after it had been closed for almost five years during World War II, but it marked the permanent return of opera to London and a renewed optimism for a rebirth and flourishing of English art music. In order to comprehend more fully this impact, I examine the circumstances surrounding the premiere of *Peter Grimes*, including how the British artistic landscape had changed during the War, events leading up to the premiere, and what happened during the first performance on June 7, 1945. To situate the opera's impact, I conclude with a review of its early critical reception centered on the themes and observations that were emphasized.

My aim in looking at realism in the madness of *Peter Grimes* is to show by what means and strategies Britten and his creative team endeavored to reach their audience; without such a level of realism, the audience would have only experienced the opera as a form of entertainment, and not something they could relate to. And yet, this realism required some sort of foil or filter found precisely in the genre of opera. Without its operatic filter

that works against the grain of the reality of madness, *Peter Grimes* would not have attained its celebrated emotional cogency. In combining realism and anti-realism, Peter Grimes's madness is brought closer to the audience, becoming an artistic medium for introspection, growth, and new ways to consider life experiences. Thus it is my hope to show how opera allows us new insight into emotions, time periods, and perhaps even ideas that we wouldn't otherwise have the resources to consider.

COMPOSING MADNESS: REALISM IN *PETER GRIMES*

CHAPTER 1: TOWARDS REALISM

In constructing Peter Grimes—his madness and his story—Benjamin Britten drew from a substantial repertory of compositional techniques, a libretto that offered many opportunities for musical elaboration, and a number of collaborators. This section elaborates on Britten's use of these techniques and sources, with an eye toward his ability to construct in Peter Grimes an untraditional protagonist, whose descent into madness could resonate with audiences. An examination of the initial set and costume designs shows how director Eric Crozier and designer Kenneth Green worked to realize Britten's vision. This extends to the libretto's stage directions, and the frame they provided for the singers' character portrayals, as well as librettist Montagu Slater's ability to portray the average, everyday routine, thereby creating for the audience a story built out of ordinary life, that provided a backdrop for the protagonist's descent into madness.

Studying how Grimes's madness is shaped over the course of the opera reveals a combination of diverse factors. These factors include Grimes's transformation from coherent and lucid to insane and void of personality, as seen through his interactions with the Borough, his arias, and increasing mental disturbances. This portrayal of Grimes shows not only how Britten achieves such a degree of realism, but also how he constantly builds towards Grimes's mad scene and inevitable fate. More importantly, it illuminates how all of these techniques melded together to arrive at a

character whose madness could be believable and thought provoking for audiences.

STAGING *PETER GRIMES*: 1945

A theme that recurs throughout the composition and production of *Peter Grimes* is realism, with an emphasis on portraying the ordinary and everyday. Britten considered *Peter Grimes* to be the most realistic of his operas.[3] This approach extended to his many collaborators involved with the production, such as director Eric Crozier, scene and costume designer Kenneth Green, and librettist Montagu Slater. This concern with realism is readily apparent in the libretto, music, and staging, but it already appears in the opera's source material, George Crabbe's 1810 poem *The Borough*. In the program for the May 31, 1945, concert-introduction to the opera, Eric Crozier noted that,

> Crabbe was a realist. At a time when poetic fashion shunned "low" subjects, he set out to describe the daily life of the Borough—Aldeburgh—in all its meanness and familiarity. In basing their opera on his poem, the composer and librettist have broken away from the romantic scenes and heroic situations of operatic fashion, setting their action and their people in a homelier native background.[4]

One way Britten accomplished this portrayal of everyday people was through utilizing a much plainer vocal style that emphasized the text, eliminating any

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[3] Philip Brett, "Breaking the ice for British opera: *Peter Grimes* on stage," in *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*, ed. Philip Brett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 90.
[4] "*Peter Grimes*, op. 33, First concert performance (extracts), Wigmore Hall," May 31, 1945, PG/1945/0531, Britten-Pears Library (BPL), Aldeburgh, United Kingdom.

form of virtuosic vocal display. This plainer vocal style in turn was supported by Montagu Slater's libretto, with its emphasis on a conversational style peppered with idiomatic expressions, traditional sayings, and vernacular language, such as "stir your pins," "sea-dames," and "buying drinks by rota."[5]

In creating the mise en scène, director Eric Crozier envisioned a realistic portrayal of a nineteenth-century fishing village. In his production notes, Crozier goes through each scene in detail, explaining the choices he made in consultation with Britten. In particular, he explains why the characters must come across as relatable for contemporary audiences:

> For me, a particular quality of the opera is that it is rooted in the true natures of ordinary people. In costume and manners the characters are English provincials of the early nineteenth century, but their vital interest for modern audiences is not in their period, but in their human stuff.[6]

Similarly, Kenneth Green's original costume sketches provided another layer of visual realism to Grimes's character, further setting him apart from the Borough's other inhabitants. In these sketches, Grimes wears a drab assortment of clothes, with patches sewn on his coat and pant knees, and work boots on his feet. His posture is also telling: he is drawn with his hands

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[5] See Benjamin Britten, *Peter Grimes; Gloriana* (New York: Riverrun Press, 1983). The majority of Slater's use of the vernacular occurs in scenes with the entire Borough, or as part of conversations between individual characters. "Buying drinks by rota" is said by Balstrode instead the Boar during the Storm, "sea-dames" is used by the chorus as they go about their daily work at the beginning of Act I, and Grimes uses "stir your pins" as he tries to get his apprentice ready to go fishing in Act II, scene 2.

[6] Eric Crozier, "Notes on the Production of Benjamin Britten's 'Peter Grimes'" in *The Making of Peter Grimes: Essays and Studies*, ed. Paul Banks (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000), 8.

in his pockets, unkempt hair, an unshaven face, and with an overall sallow complexion. His eyes look vacant and sad, yet his brow appears knitted in concentration (See Appendix A: Costume Designs, p. 79).[7] Green's sketch of Grimes differs from his costume sketches for the other characters in several ways. In general, Green portrays them with healthier complexions, wearing more relaxed expressions on their faces, and with an emphasis on their ordinary lives. For example, the robust Butcher with his gloves and apron, and the Baker, with his tray of rolls, white apron and white baker's hat, both lend an appearance of everyday town life (See Appendix A: Costume Designs, p. 80-81).[8] Green's sketches suggest the normalcy and unexceptional life of the Borough: a place so indistinguishable that it could be any English fishing town.

Amongst the materials in the Britten-Pears Library documenting the opera's composition and production, there are photographs of scale models of the sets. These models show the inside of the Moot Hall, and the main street of the Borough.[9] The Moot Hall consists of a simple interior with a platform for the witness, and a high-backed chair and table placed on a raised dais for the lawyer Swallow. The main street of the Borough shows the pub The Boar as opposite to the Moot Hall. Fishing equipment is strewn about, and the sea appears behind the main buildings. Similarly to Green's set

[7] Kenneth Green, Costume Design for *Peter Grimes* and Retired naval officer, 1945, 5-9600010, BPL.
[8] Kenneth Green, Costume design for a Butcher, 1945, 5-9400327, BPL, and Kenneth Green, Costume design for a Muffin Man or Baker, 1945, 5-9600009, BPL.
[9] "Production Photographs: *Peter Grimes*, 1945-1961," PHPHN/14/1-10, BPL.

designs, these models give the impression of an ordinary and unremarkable fishing town.

The collections of the Britten-Pears Foundation also include Green's circa 1943 watercolor sketch of the Borough with an added handwritten note from 1980 (See Appendix B: Set Design and Staging, p. 82). Entitled "Notes by Kenneth Green," the short description explains his creative process.

> I was staying at Snape, in the Old Mill house, as guest of Ben and Peter. Ben was working all the time on the score of "Peter Grimes." He and I went [*sic*] long walks- he begs me to give some visual ideas about the looks of the stage- just a rough idea! Based on a rough idea of the plot as Crabbe wrote his poem. Ben seemed helped what by [*sic*] visual vague scenery I conjured up! I enclose the rough sketch. This was long before Eric Crozier really got down with brass tacks in St. John's Wood's High St.[10]

While Green's recollections were written long after the premiere took place, they provide a glimpse into Britten's collaborative approach to the opera, and show how connected he was to East Anglia while composing *Peter Grimes*. The painted sketch shows the Boar situated on the top left with two houses on the right, and a boat has been pulled ashore in the right foreground. Green uses bright colors for the buildings that stretch out into the distance, but he has chosen to paint the sky an overall drab gray color. Underneath the watercolor is drawn a rough pencil sketch of the stage. A typed note enclosed with the sketch explains that the watercolor and stage sketch were done around 1943, as an aid for Britten while he was composing the music.[11] Photographs from the premiere demonstrate how Kenneth Green and Eric

[10] Kenneth Green, "Notes," 1980, 5-9400329, BPL.
[11] Kenneth Green, Watercolour sketch of The Borough, 5-9400329, BPL.

Crozier sought to bring the theme of realism to the stage. These photographs focus on the main characters and their expressions, posing them in various scenes of the opera, but they also provide a glimpse of the overall set, which closely matches the original set models (See Appendix B: Set Design and Staging, p. 83-84).[12]

Britten's emphasis on certain parts of Borough life comes through in his stage directions. The central importance of the sea to the Borough is a recurring theme throughout the opera, often shown by having the Borough's inhabitants stare out at and interact with the sea.[13] The stage directions also help provide the audience with a better understanding of the development of Grimes's madness over the course of the opera. Stage directions for Grimes from Act II on particularly reinforce the idea of his gradual decline. This begins with Grimes's sudden violence towards Ellen, written as "He cries out as if in agony, then strikes her. The basket falls." Several moments later, as Grimes and Ellen part ways, their opposing emotions of anger and sadness regarding what has taken place are clearly displayed, as "The boy runs from him. Peter follows," while "Ellen watches, then goes out the other way."[14] This moment seals Grimes's fate, and marks the beginning of his end. The following scene offers audiences a glimpse into Grimes's private life, including where he lives, and his demeanor when alone with his apprentice. Grimes's hut is described as "…an upturned boat. It is on the whole

[12] "Production Photographs: *Peter Grimes*, 1945-1961," PHPHN/14/1-10, BPL.
[13] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 38.
[14] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 49.

shipshape, though bare and forbidding. Ropes coiled, nets, kegs and casks furnish the place. It is lighted by a skylight."[15] Seeing Grimes's hut provides the audience with additional information about his character, such as his isolated living conditions from the other Borough inhabitants, and emphasizes the fact that not only is his life completely devoted to fishing, but his identity as a fisherman is his tenuous connection to the rest of the Borough.

Act II's stage directions for Peter Grimes also provide the singer with a frame that emphasizes the quick changes and unclear intentions displayed in Grimes's behavior. As Grimes addresses his apprentice while getting him ready to go fishing, he begins by recounting his earlier conversation with the retired merchant skipper Balstrode, where he tells of how he will fish the sea dry and marry Ellen. When Grimes suddenly pauses, while still trying to get the boy ready to go fish out in the shoal, the stage direction specifies that "Peter changes tone and breaks into another song."[16] While this quick fluctuation of mood becomes more commonplace later on, particularly during Grimes's mad scene, these early changes are jarring, especially since they occur while in the company of the young apprentice: "He stops. The boy watches him in fascinated horror, and Peter turns on him suddenly."[17] Following this scene in Grimes's hut, all remaining stage directions for his character specifically shape his increasing madness. However, once Grimes's

[15] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 52.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.

actual mad scene begins, Britten provides the singer much more freedom in portraying Grimes, focusing on the imprecise side of madness and allowing for a less stiff and scripted portrayal. Here, Grimes's only directions occur in his interactions with the offstage chorus, as he repeats his name, echoing their cries. In the moments preceding his death, Ellen appears, telling Grimes she will take him home, but "Peter does not notice her and sings in a tone almost like prolonged sobbing. The voices shouting 'Peter Grimes' can still be heard but more distantly and more sweetly."[18] These directions emphasize the importance of showing Grimes as broken, extending to how the chorus has changed in calling after him.

In describing Grimes's madness, Britten differed in several significant ways from the well-known nineteenth-century topos of the opera heroine going mad, where the soprano displays her madness over the course of a long solo scene replete with vocal embellishments, melismas, and coloratura, showcasing the soprano's vocal talents.[19] Musically, such mad scenes would oftentimes include earlier thematic material from the opera, particularly material from an earlier love duet.[20] Most dramatically, Britten departs from this earlier style of mad scene by having the Borough's inhabitants, whose collective voices form the offstage chorus, play a central role in Grimes's madness. Rather than positioned as silent bystanders, watching the mad character with growing alarm, here the Borough plays an active and vital role

[18] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 58.
[19] Mary Ann Smart, "The silencing of Lucia," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4, no. 2 (1992): 127-128.
[20] Smart, "The silencing of Lucia," 137-138.

through their singing, even though they are offstage, taunting Grimes as they pursue him in their manhunt.[21] Grimes's mad scene also differs in his word delivery, which is unembellished and has more of a focus on the text. While he does musically refer to earlier moments in the opera, significantly there is no love duet for him to recall.

Grimes's final descent into madness is explicitly hinted at in several scenes over the course of the opera, helping to reinforce and move toward his mad scene in Act III. For example, in Act II, scene 2, Peter Grimes and his apprentice are readying themselves to go fishing, but this everyday activity is suddenly interrupted by Grimes's momentary disconnect from reality, as he hallucinates the figure of his former apprentice, whose death sparked the Inquest during the opera's Prologue. His hallucination carries him out to sea with his first apprentice, and Grimes vividly relives the moments before the boy's death.

> Stop moaning boy! Water?
> There's no more water. You had the last yesterday.
> You'll soon be home!
> In harbour still and deep.[22]

As Donald Mitchell has suggested, starting with the Prologue, Britten has begun a story that can only conclude with Grimes's death.[23] Right from this moment, when Grimes is called forward to testify in the Moot Hall, the audience can already begin to realize his isolation from the rest of the

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[21] Smart, "The silencing of Lucia," 125-127.
[22] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 52.
[23] Donald Mitchell, "Peter Grimes: Fifty Years On" in *The Making of Peter Grimes: Essays and Studies*, ed. Paul Banks (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000), 152-153.

Borough. The Prologue neatly unfolds the background and storylines of individual characters, but it also initiates the Borough's judgment of Grimes.[24] As Grimes begins to testify, he curtly answers the lawyer Swallow's questions. After Swallow delivers his finding, that the apprentice died under accidental circumstances and Grimes should not procure another boy apprentice, Grimes tries to plead his case, saying that like every fisherman he must hire an apprentice for help. While Swallow begins to dismiss the onlookers, Grimes argues that he should be able to stand trial, so that the members of the Borough can hear his side of the story, and hear as he says, "the truth itself, the simple truth."[25]

In Act I, the audience sees Grimes interacting with the other inhabitants of the Borough, self-assured and boastful, fully aware of his skill as a fisherman. Grimes is also hopeful, looking toward the future when he will earn enough money to marry Ellen and be secure in providing for her, in the process winning the Borough's approval. He displays this attitude during a conversation with Balstrode, as they stand together outside the Boar before the start of the Storm at the end of Act I, scene 1, proclaiming,

> These Borough gossips
> Listen to money,
> Only to money:
> I'll fish the sea dry,
> Sell the good catches—
> That wealthy merchant
> Grimes will set up
> Household and shop,

[24] Philip Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 32-37.
[25] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 36.

You will all see it!
I'll marry Ellen.[26]

His words display a belief that he can change. Behind them though also lies a sense of revenge: that he will become successful by the Borough's terms, and in the process beat them at their own game. Early on in the opera, Grimes is also able to explain to Balstrode the terror he felt the day his first apprentice died, a lucidity that disappears by the end of the second scene of Act II, when he can only access and reference these earlier events through his hallucinations. Here with Balstrode in Act I, scene 1, though, Grimes clearly remembers that day, telling him,

Picture what that day was like,
That evil day!
We strained into the wind,
Heavily laden.
Plunged into the waves'
Shuddering challenge.
Then the sea rose to a storm
Over the gunwales,
And the child's silent reproach
Turned to illness.
Then home
Among fishing nets,
Alone, alone, alone
With a childish death.[27]

He appears connected to what transpired, neither delusional nor unable to control his actions.

The most evident transformation of Grimes's character occurs during Act II, scene 1. While the rest of the Borough is attending church, Ellen sits by the sea with the apprentice and discovers that his coat has been torn, and

[26] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 42.
[27] Ibid.

there is a fresh bruise on his neck. When Grimes enters, she confronts him about this, telling him they have failed at her plans to improve his circumstances, and their efforts at a better life have been futile. In an unexpected outburst of violence, Grimes reacts by striking Ellen, knocking her basket to the ground. Before rushing off, Grimes sings a prayer, whose musical theme will become the marker that seals his fate: "So be it!—And God have mercy upon me!"[28] As Philip Rupprecht shows, this moment decisively marks the beginning of Grimes's decline, as the events that follow, including the chorus's transformation into a mob, the posse that goes to his hut, and the Sixth Interlude are all created musically out of the theme of this prayer.[29]

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These devices have all been employed in such a way that allows the disintegration of Peter Grimes's character to be acutely felt. It is a portrayal that accomplishes a sense of realism in many ways, all of which center around Grimes's growing madness over the opera's first two Acts. It is through these techniques that the mad scene is heightened, to which I will now turn.

[28] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 49.
[29] Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 50-52.

DESCENT INTO MADNESS

The culmination of realism in *Peter Grimes* is achieved during the Act III mad scene. It is an arresting moment, one that binds together the contributing factors to Peter Grimes's breakdown and makes obvious the extent of his mental disintegration. This culmination begins with the Sixth and final orchestral Interlude, which prepares the audience, through its musical content, for what is to come.

After examining the various functions of this Interlude, this section then moves into a detailed reading of the structure of the entire mad scene. An emphasis is placed on how Britten accomplishes this realistic portrayal through his musical quotations of earlier events, an insistence on a fragmented and constantly changing speech, and rapid mood swings. Special attention is given to the role of the offstage chorus as the Borough and how they interact with Grimes, while at the same time provide a backdrop to the events playing out onstage. The section ends by looking at Grimes's final moments and not only their lack of a conclusion, but how they make clear that Britten was moving towards Grimes's madness and eventual death from the opening notes of the Prologue.

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The Sixth and final orchestral Interlude is positioned between the Borough's inhabitants angrily denouncing Peter Grimes as they begin their search for him, and the start of Grimes's mad scene, toward which it directs the audience's attention. Britten utilizes sections of the orchestra to recall

musical fragments from earlier in the opera, which in turn reinforces the fact that this moment has been built towards the entire time. Many of these recollections are found in the woodwinds, which recall snatches of earlier motives. As Rupprecht describes, these include the flute's recollection of "listen to money," where Grimes describes the Borough's motivations, the oboe's quotation of "who can turn?" from Grimes's "Now the Great Bear and Pleiades" aria that shows a thoughtful and contemplative side of him, and the clarinets' "wrong to plan?" found in Grimes's angry response to Ellen's question of whether their dreams have been misguided.[30] Each of these fragments are quotations of musical ideas from past moments that have contributed to Grimes's deterioration, thereby highlighting the gradual process by which he goes mad. Rupprecht shows how Britten also includes distortions of earlier themes: for example a violin line that recalls the Act I pub song where Grimes's position as an outsider is made clear, and a transformation of Ellen's questioning "were we mistaken?" from Act II, scene 1, into a bass line.[31]

The Sixth Interlude also functions as a way to shift the attention away from the mob's growing aggression towards Grimes, and instead focus on Grimes's internal thoughts and feelings. The townspeople have steadily built toward this aggression over the course of the previous two Acts, but in the first scene of Act III, they ardently express it. Swallow, in his role as mayor, tells the townspeople they must find Grimes and may use whatever help they

[30] Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 68.
[31] Ibid.

need, intimating that Grimes is dangerous and must be dealt with. The mob begins their hunt, showing their anger towards Grimes by singing,

> Him who despises us,
> We'll destroy.
>
> Our curse shall fall on his evil day;
> We shall tame his arrogance!
> Ha! Ha! Ha!
> We'll make the murderer pay for his crime.[32]

In concretely splitting apart the two scenes of Act III, the Interlude finally builds to a restatement of Grimes's earlier prayer theme from Act II, scene 1, although Rupprecht points out that the Interlude does not conclude with this theme, instead passing it on to the two-notes of the foghorn, which announce the start of Grimes's mad scene.[33]

As the mad scene begins, the offstage chorus repeatedly calls out "Grimes!" as they search for him off in the distance, accompanied only by the occasional sounding of the foghorn. From the moment Grimes appears, his final disintegration begins. All his hopes and dreams of becoming a wealthy fisherman and merchant, of marrying Ellen, thinking he might win the Borough over through his newfound success, by now have all faded away. The audience is left with a character who exists only as a madman, a character dependent on the music he sings to show the depths of his mental deterioration. Once Grimes enters, the chorus and their cries alternate with Grimes's own words, as if engaged in a dialogue, although they cannot see

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[32] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 57.
[33] Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 67-68.

each other.[34] Even though they are not face-to-face, their interaction highlights the fact that madness is not restricted to a person's internal self, but is also greatly influenced by their circumstances and shaped by their surroundings. Their relentless singing in pursuit of Grimes also provides something steady and constant that the changes in Grimes's speech can be measured against.

One of the most striking aspects of the libretto is the fragmented nature of Grimes's speech. He begins by talking to himself, as if he is trying to calm down and focus his mind:

> Steady. There you are. Nearly home.
> What is home? Calm as deep water.
> Where's my home? Deep in calm water.
> Water will drink my sorrows dry,
> And the tide will turn.[35]

Grimes's words from the start tumble forth like a stream of consciousness, as one idea quickly replaces another. As the scene progresses, his speech continues in this manner, moving quickly from one idea to the next, featuring rapid changes of mood and free associations, all serving to manifest a deeper, once underlying disturbance that can no longer be ignored.[36] Grimes's sentences are often incoherent, especially evident in how he repeatedly confuses his pronouns when addressing the Borough chorus. These vocal aspects of Grimes's disintegration appear starkly in contrast to his singing earlier in the opera, because he delivers them without the orchestra,

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[34] Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 68.
[35] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 57.
[36] Roy Porter, *A Social History of Madness: The World Through The Eyes of the Insane* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), 32-33.

accompanied only by the sounds of the offstage chorus and foghorn. Here, the audience has no choice but to focus on his words and struggle.

Quickly turning to thoughts of his boy apprentices, Grimes appears deeply affected by their memory, as he recalls "the first one died, just died," and "the other slipped, and died."[37] Grimes turns from thoughts of the past to ones of the future, singing about the fate his third apprentice will meet: "And the third will…'Accidental circumstances'…" His prediction recalls an earlier time, as his music quotes a theme from the Prologue, when Swallow pronounced his finding that Grimes's apprentice, William Spode, died under accidental circumstances. This time however, Grimes's words are delivered with a sinister edge, as he utters them in a singsong, conspiratorial manner, suggesting that perhaps Grimes knows something the audience doesn't.

The next time Grimes speaks, he refers to the theme of Gossip and the weight the Borough places on it, which he has referred to before, but now his delivery has changed to be erratic both in tone and pace. His words tumble out faster and faster as he sings,

> Peter Grimes! Here you are! Here I am!
> Hurry, hurry!
> Now is gossip put on trial.
> Bring the branding iron, the knife…
> What's done now is done for life…
> Come on! Land me!
> 'Turn the skies back and begin again!'[38]

[37] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 57.
[38] Ibid.

His words echo the very words of the offstage chorus at the end of Act II. As they look for Grimes, the members of the chorus build on each other's voices in an increase of sound:

> Now is gossip put on trial,
> Now the rumours either fail,
> Or are shouted in the wind,
> Sweeping furious through the land.
> Now if they've cheated we shall know.
> We shall strike and strike to kill
> At the slander or the sin!
>
> Now the whisperers stand out,
> Now confronted by the fact,
> Bring the branding iron and knife,
> What's done now is done for life.[39]

Now, their words intertwine with Grimes's, relentlessly searching off in the distance, but still close enough to be clearly heard, a solid wall of confident sound. When Grimes delivers these same words, they are blurred together, and serve as a buildup to his taunts of "Come on! Land me!" In a reversal, his exhortation is delivered without the words tumbling out one after another as they have been, and instead is measured and bold.

Earlier, Grimes had shared his dreams of normalcy and marrying Ellen, but by the opera's midpoint, her questioning the plausibility of their plans to accomplish this changed his behavior towards her. Here in the mad scene though, Grimes hallucinates Ellen as he saw her when they were full of dreams and plans, but in a much more scattered way. His hallucination of Ellen momentarily shows a more tender side of him, as he expresses his need for her, telling his imagined Ellen that she cannot take away her hand

[39] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 53.

because she alone holds his hope. He suddenly changes his mind though, and declares their friendship over, as he sings in a more hurried and clipped tone,

> The argument's finished,
> Friendship is lost,
> Gossip is shouting,
> Everything's said.[40]

Grimes ends by referring once more to the overarching theme of Gossip and its power to influence, a force he has continually contended with since the opera's Prologue, as he struggled to find his place in the Borough, but by now has surrendered to.

As the chorus calls out for Grimes yet again, he shows a more intense flash of anger, containing a glimpse of the sane Grimes, the one who is cocky, self-assured, and doesn't listen to the Borough's judgments. He tells them:

> To hell with all your mercy!
> To hell with your revenge,
> And God have mercy upon you![41]

In a twist, Grimes has ended this outburst with a version of his earlier prayer theme, but this time he directs it towards the inhabitants of the Borough. This is the only time when Grimes directly articulates his anger at all of the Borough's townspeople. Unaffected by this pronouncement, the Borough answers by calling out for him yet again, only this time their calling of his name begins to build, with more and more voices joining and intertwining with one another.

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[40] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 58.
[41] Ibid.

After the voices of the Borough pause, Grimes slips further away. He incoherently exclaims:

> Do you hear them all shouting my name?
> D'you hear them?
> Old Davy Jones shall answer:
> Come home, come home.[42]

It is during this moment, as Rupprecht has noted, that Grimes appears to break the fourth wall between character and audience, as he unequivocally asks, with no one onstage to answer him, if we can hear them calling his name.[43] At this point, the audience is drawn to identify with Grimes by hearing the same offstage chorus as he does. By the final moments of the opera though, they will again be distanced from his character, as they once more become the omniscient spectators, clearly able to see and hear Ellen, which Grimes cannot.[44] Grimes now proceeds to answer his own question, saying that Davy Jones will answer the Borough's search by saying "Come home, come home." Grimes has referenced Davy Jones before, during the Storm scene when he enters the Boar and disrupts the round being sung by the patrons, as he breaks into a song of his own. In his pub song, Grimes shows a crack in his exterior, as he alludes that he and someone else once found Davy Jones, before he switches back to the present and exclaims that Davy Jones must be brought in with horror, terror, and sorrow.[45] Here in the

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 71.
[44] Willard Spiegelman, "Peter Grimes: The Development of a Hero," *Studies in Romanticism* 25, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 559.
[45] See Britten: *Peter Grimes*, 46. The complete text of Grimes's song sung during the Storm scene in Act I, scene 2, reads:

mad scene, during what will become part of Grimes's final moments, Davy Jones has come to represent the final promise of home, instead of his typical association with being someone to fear.

The Borough calls out for Grimes again, and he summons one last burst of energy, "roaring" back his name at the Borough.[46] This force and energy expended by Grimes is the final straw, for now his personality, his ability to function at all, vanishes. These final moments of his mad scene also conclude the references to home that have ended each preceding Act. As Peter Garvie has drawn attention to, in Act I the Borough derides Grimes about his home while he collects his new apprentice, in the Second Act, the Borough must accept Grimes's hut as his home after seeing that it is neat and well kept, and now, in the final Act, as Ellen and Balstrode come upon him, Grimes is about to come home to his death.[47] These references to home have provided a recurring theme throughout the opera that draws attention to the contradiction of the Borough's isolation of Grimes, while at the same time their inability to sever all connections with him. This final reference is a very

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When I had gone fishing,
When he had gone fishing,
When You Know'd gone fishing,
We found us Davy Jones.
Bring him in with horror!
Bring him in with terror!
And bring him in with sorrow!
Oh, haul a-way!

[46] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 58.

[47] Peter Garvie, "Plausible Darkness: 'Peter Grimes' after a quarter of a Century," *Tempo* 100 (1972), 14.

different one though, as this is a permanent and distinct idea of home found in the aftermath of his suicide.

By now Ellen has caught up to Grimes, and she approaches him, saying she and Balstrode have come to take him home, out of this bad weather. What appears as a simple offer of help is soon transformed when she realizes with alarm that Grimes cannot, in fact, hear her. He instead lies there mutely for a moment, before singing one last aria. These final words, sung while in the company of Ellen, recall happier times, when he first sang the lines of "What harbour shelters peace?" while standing outside the Boar as the Storm began to grow at the end of Act I. Standing alone, his words seemed to come from a contemplative and calmer place. In a striking change, Grimes's words are now accompanied by the foghorn and searching voices of the Borough, a very different sound than the orchestra that accompanied his words in Act I.[48] In this reprise, Grimes repeats what he sang outside the Boar, only he omits two lines: "With her there'll be no quarrels, With her the mood will stay."[49] Without these lines, Grimes's aria has changed from one that contains hope, to one that evokes a sense of finality. It instead poses abstract questions that move beyond the story and will ultimately remain unanswered, as his sings,

> What harbour shelters peace,
> Away from tidal waves,
> Away from storms!
> What harbour can embrace

[48] Philip Brett, "Britten and Grimes," *The Musical Times* 118, no. 1618 (December 1977): 997.
[49] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 42.

Terrors and tragedies?
Her breast is harbour too—
Where night is turned to day.[50]

Not only has the meaning of his words changed, but these two contexts are radically different. At the end of Act I, Grimes sang alone as the Storm approached. His words, accompanied by a lush, bright orchestral sound, had a grand and optimistic quality to them. Now, at the end of the opera, Grimes sings these same words in the arms of Ellen, no longer physically alone, but mentally devastated and vacant, uttering words that simply linger onstage.

Grimes's final scene with Ellen and Balstrode similarly features a completely different Peter Grimes from the opening. Balstrode enters the stage, approaches Grimes and Ellen, and speaks his final commands to Grimes, telling him to sail his boat out until he loses sight of the Moot Hall and then sink it. Balstrode's words are chilling; in a drastic shift that startles the listener, he is speaking rather than singing, which brings with it the sense that his will be the final judgment.[51]

An alarming realization that accompanies this final scene is the extent to which Ellen and Balstrode's interactions with Grimes have changed over the course of the opera. From beginning the opera as Grimes's only friends and confidants, even standing up for him, such as when Ellen reproaches the other townspeople for their hypocrisy, their change in demeanor comes at the start of the final Act. After Ellen finds the boy's jersey washed up on the

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[50] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 58.
[51] Clifford Hindley, "Homosexual Self-affirmation and Self-oppression in Two Britten Operas," *The Musical Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 151.

beach, she and Balstrode confer about what they should do and question whether they even have the ability to help Grimes. Their conclusion is a chilling one, as they resolutely affirm their view that his fate is now unavoidable, and there is nothing they can do.[52] Balstrode's final words on the subject match this decision, as he sings,

> Nothing to do but wait
> Since the solution
> Is beyond life, beyond
> Dissolution.[53]

Now, in their final interaction with Grimes, Balstrode's command has an air of unquestioning resolution, while Ellen's exclaimed "No!" feebly attempts to prevent what is about to happen, but contains no real weight behind it.

Grimes isn't even able to question what Balstrode instructs; he simply and silently does what he is told. In dying offstage though, Grimes's suicide concludes his mad scene in a very different way than what is typically found in opera. He has not committed suicide because of love or out of duty to his country, or in a moment of self-sacrifice, but rather he has done so in a fit of insanity.[54] The fact that Grimes dies offstage further frames his death as a result of his madness. For the audience, there is no sense that a heroic act has just occurred, nor the feeling that a wrong has been righted.[55] As suicide often does, his death lacks closure. In the opera's final minutes, after Grimes sails out, Balstrode and Ellen leave, and the orchestra returns, dawn begins

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[52] Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 52.
[53] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 56.
[54] Garvie, "Plausible Darkness," 13.
[55] Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: The Art of Dying* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 187.

to rise over the Borough. Reports come in from the Coastguard that a boat is sinking out at sea, but no one seems to care, singing that the boat is out of reach, and anyway no one can see whose boat it is. Grimes's madness, like so many other instances of madness in society, is not deemed worthy of notice. As the curtain falls, it becomes apparent without a doubt that Grimes's suicide is not the climax of the opera. There is nothing that will come after it, no conclusion other than that life in the Borough will go on unchanged. Rather, his death is the inevitable fate toward which Britten has been building since the outset.[56]

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What audiences have experienced as a realistic portrayal of madness in *Peter Grimes* found its basis in the opera's source material, George Crabbe's *The Borough*. Throughout the compositional process, changes were made that enabled Peter Grimes to become a character able to represent other, broader themes and ideas. These changes created a more nuanced, multi-dimensional portrayal of Grimes's character, allowing audiences to simultaneously view him with both disdain and sympathy.

These revisions not only resulted in the use of more realistic elements, but they also moved the opera from the specific to the abstract. This was accomplished through allowing *Peter Grimes* to function on two levels, as a story within the specific parameters of life in a mid-nineteenth-

[56] Joseph Kerman, "Grimes and Lucretia," *The Hudson Review* 2 (1949): 279.

century fishing town, but also as a portrayal of characters and events with more universal themes that can be removed from this context.

In the second chapter, I will examine this representation of male madness through its process of realization, drawing on sources located in the Britten-Pears Library. I will then move into an examination of the events surrounding the opera's premiere as a way to provide a glimpse into just how significant an impact the opera had. Finally, I discuss the opera's reception, as a way to learn how such a realistic portrayal in turn resonated with audiences and critics following the opera's premiere.

CHAPTER 2: THE MAKING OF *PETER GRIMES*

The realism Britten achieved in *Peter Grimes* was a process of shaping the original protagonist found in George Crabbe's *The Borough* into a multi-dimensional character who could not only elicit reactions of sympathy and disdain in audiences, but who could also help them understand and question views on male madness. This chapter focuses on the evolution of the text into a libretto that in tandem with the music could depict such a character. In the second section, I turn to the events surrounding the premiere, describing how the post-World War II climate created conditions that in turn furthered the opera's impact. Finally, I examine the early critical reception, with regard to the realism and subject matter of the opera. These examples of reception in turn create a lens through which other readings of the opera may be considered and explored.

THE LIBRETTO

In choosing George Crabbe's poetry as the source material for his opera, Britten found an author, like himself, closely connected to everyday life on the Suffolk coast. Crabbe, born in Aldeburgh in 1754, had an ambivalent relationship with the town, yet his birthplace had a deep impact

on him, and was a driving force in his poetry.[57] Various occupations brought him back to live in Aldeburgh as well, first as an apothecary during the 1770s, and later, after entering the clergy in 1781, as a curate at the Aldeburgh parish church.[58] Crabbe spent much of his life writing poetry, with his first poem published in 1780, and his last appearing in 1834, two years after his death.[59] His poetry often featured rich depictions of character and place, earning him a reputation as a writer with an eye towards realism.[60] Frank Whitehead, in his 1995 book *George Crabbe: A Reappraisal*, examines several of Crabbe's characters, to determine how the author's portrayals relate to the idea of realism in writing. He finds that Crabbe's characters resonate with readers on two different levels in their depictions.

> In the first place, they are presented as socially typical…But Crabbe's characters are also put forward as representative on a second and more fundamental level. They exemplify deep-rooted traits in human nature, so that the moral issues and conflicts that they embody have a wider and more enduring significance that that belonging to one particular time and place.[61]

While Britten and Crabbe both aspire to a realistic portrayal, the Peter Grimes of Crabbe's Borough bears little resemblance to the Peter Grimes that Britten brought to life onstage almost a century and a half later. Grimes is only one out of many townspeople Crabbe described in detail in his 1810

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[57] E. M. Forster, "Two essays on Crabbe," in *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*, ed. Philip Brett (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983), 3-4.
[58] "George Crabbe: The Poet," *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 3708 (January 30, 1932): 202.
[59] Arthur Pollard, introduction to *George Crabbe: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Arthur Pollard (London: Routledge, 1995), 2-4.
[60] Frank Whitehead, *George Crabbe: A Reappraisal* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna Press, 1995), 163-164.
[61] Whitehead, *George Crabbe*, 166.

poem *The Borough*. Structured as a series of twenty-four letters written in heroic couplets by an anonymous narrator, *The Borough* describes life in an eighteenth-century English fishing town. Several of these other townspeople also appear in the opera, including Swallow, who appears in Crabbe's representation of practicing law in the Borough, and Ellen Orford who, like Peter Grimes, is included in the poem as one of "the poor of the Borough."[62] *The Borough* isn't a poem structured around one person's life as is the opera, but rather it presents each inhabitant as a portrait of everyday life, while also describing ordinary town activities, such as the practice of religion, available forms of entertainment, how elections are conducted, and what their prisons and schools are like.[63] "Letter XXII, The Poor of the Borough: Peter Grimes," is the biography of a fisherman who, as Philip Brett succinctly puts it in his article "Britten and Grimes," is a less complicated and less decent character than the Peter Grimes that Britten creates.[64] In *The Borough*, Grimes's cruelty towards his apprentices is clearly shown, and after the death of his third apprentice, who the townspeople think he may have murdered, Grimes is forbidden to have any more apprentices.

In a moment that foreshadows what happens to his operatic counterpart, Grimes is ostracized by the townspeople following his third

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[62] Swallow appears in "Letter VI. Professions—Law," while Ellen Orford is in "Letter XX. The Poor of the Borough. Ellen Orford," and Peter Grimes is in "Letter XXII. The Poor of the Borough. Peter Grimes."

[63] Letters II-IV deal with religion in the Borough, entertainment is described in "Letter IX. Amusements," elections appear in "Letter V. The Election," prisons are the topic of Letter XXIII, and schools are in the final letter, Letter XIV.

[64] Philip Brett, "Britten and Grimes," 995.

apprentice's death, and with no one to help him, spends his days alone fishing, or anchoring his boat in a channel to hide from the townspeople. Hints of Grimes's impending breakdown appear soon after, when he begins experiencing, as Crabbe writes,

> Cold nervous tremblings shook his sturdy frame,
> And strange disease—he couldn't say the name;
> Wild were his dreams, and oft he rose in fright,
> Waked by his view of horrors in the night, —
> Horrors that would the sternest minds amaze,
> Horrors that demons might be proud to raise[65]

After experiencing this "strange disease," Grimes eventually stops going into the town altogether, instead choosing to stay on his boat. Isolation then is a key theme in both the poem and the opera, but in the opera Grimes's isolation is only a mental state. While Britten's Grimes is often on his own or accompanied by just his apprentice, he still interacts with the Borough's other inhabitants throughout the opera. In the poem, his isolation is also noticeably a physical one, once Grimes finally stops going into the town or interacting with any of the townspeople. When, several months later, the townspeople find him, they immediately bring him to a parish bed. At this point Grimes rapidly unravels. The townspeople think he is conscious and alert when he isn't, and once a Priest arrives, he begins the tale of what he has experienced and seen, through fragmented speech and rapidly changing ideas.[66] Grimes recounts the daily appearance of the ghosts of his father and two of his apprentices, who persistently urge him to drown himself, and at

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[65] George Crabbe, *George Crabbe's Poetical Works*, with an introduction by A.C. Cunningham (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1877), 466.
[66] Ibid.

one point turn the water into red-hot blood. When Grimes's story comes to an end:

> Then dropp'd exhaused, and appear'd at rest
> Till the strong foe the vital powers possess'd;
> Then with an inward, broken voice he cried,
> "Again they come," and mutter'd as he died.[67]

Grimes's madness manifests itself in several ways that are not present in the opera. The initial symptoms he experiences in his dreams are described as horrors that demons might create, a description that suggests other worldly elements. When he sees his father and two of his apprentices, they are likewise described in terms that lean more towards the supernatural, as Grimes sees them as spirits, and speaks of their turning water into blood. The other feature absent from the opera, but part of Grimes's madness in the poem, is a religious one, as his final moments of confession happen in the presence of a Priest. Religion is present in the opera as well, with the townspeople attending church services at the beginning of Act II, but it does not act in a similar vein as the poem, where it functions as an avenue for Grimes to confess. As Peter Garvie writes, Christianity is typically used in a story to indicate redemption, or to imbue an act with meaning, neither of which is present in the opera. Garvie continues that the only aspect of Grimes's experience that could be seen as an element of Christianity occurs as a form of intercession, which happens in Grimes's climactic Act II, scene 1, "So be it!—And God have mercy upon me!"[68]

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[67] Crabbe, *Poetical Works*, 469.
[68] Garvie, "Plausible Darkness,"13-14.

Although traces of similarities between Crabbe's and Britten's Grimes do exist, each character is ultimately quite different from the other at a fundamental level. Crabbe's Grimes is a one-dimensional sadist, while Britten's is a complex character, capable of eliciting conflicting reactions of both disdain and sympathy from an audience. This was not always the case though, because initial scenarios for the opera written by Britten and Pears show a crueler and more violent Grimes.

The tale of Britten and Pears finding an issue of *The Listener* with an essay by E.M. Forster on the poet George Crabbe, which in turn led them to *The Borough* and sparked the idea for an opera, is an often repeated one. Forster's text focuses primarily on George Crabbe and his connection to England. He begins his essay "George Crabbe: The Poet and the Man," by resolutely establishing this fact.

> To talk about Crabbe is to talk about England. He never left our shores and he only once ventured to cross the border into Scotland. He did not even go to London much, but lived in villages and small country towns. He was a clergyman of the English Church. His Christian name was George, the name of our national saint.[69]

Forster goes on to describe Crabbe's specific connections to Aldeburgh and its presence in his poetry. The fisherman Peter Grimes is one of the examples he provides to show Crabbe's abilities in accurately capturing Aldeburgh and its surrounding countryside. Forster is not actually taken with Crabbe's poetry, even explicitly stating that he is not attracted to any of his poems, but in his characterizations of Crabbe and writings about a countryside with

[69] Forster, "Two essays on Crabbe," 3.

which the composer was intimately familiar, one can easily imagine how Britten found that this essay made him nostalgic for England and "evoked a longing for the realities of that grim and exciting seacoast around Aldeburgh."[70] Britten and Pears may have started sketching out plot ideas while still in America and before Britten received Serge Koussevitzky's opera commission in February 1942, but they had surely started by the time they left for England in March 1942.[71] The result was the drafting of six scenarios containing initial ideas, outlines, and plots of what would become *Peter Grimes*.

From the first scenario onward, Britten represented Grimes as a disturbed fisherman. Other early ideas that made their way into the final opera include Ellen's friendship with Grimes, the chorus as a main character, and the constant presence of the sea, a site of danger and destruction, yet also the source of the townspeople's livelihood. Tracing changes in the portrayal of Grimes's madness over the course of the compositional process illuminates how the character of Grimes, his actions, and his madness, gradually shifted from sharing many similarities with Crabbe's Grimes, to becoming a Grimes who is essentially a different character.

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[70] Benjamin Britten, "Introduction," in *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*, ed. Philip Brett (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983), 148.
[71] Paul Banks, "Bibliographic Notes and Narratives," in *The Making of Peter Grimes: Essays and Studies*, ed. Paul Banks (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000), 173-174.

The first scenario, a sketch of Act I with two scenes by Britten, begins with the threat of a coming Storm.[72] In this scenario, information about Grimes's state of mind comes from Ellen, who describes Grimes's actions to the other townspeople: he has been drinking, isn't working, and is without an apprentice since the death of his last one. The theme of Grimes drinking appears regularly throughout the scenarios, but here in the first one, the chorus tells Ellen that Grimes should commit suicide. A clue as to why comes immediately after, as Ellen defends Grimes, saying he is innocent, presumably in the death of his apprentice, and asserts that the sea should be blamed instead. Scene 2 is written on the back of the page, and takes place in the Public House at the height of the Storm.

The second scenario draft, written by Peter Pears, is more detailed, with a focus on Grimes's relationship with his apprentice that is also present in the early libretto drafts. This scenario is the first document that raises questions of how Britten and Pears initially saw the relationship between Grimes and his apprentice. Here, in a sketch of a possible Act II, nothing is hinted at that foreshadows Grimes's eventual descent into madness. Rather, in the outline of a monologue for Grimes, he admits how the boy hurts him, but also questions the apprentice's feelings towards him.

> P's monologue to boy- admits his youth hurts him, his innocence galls him, his uselessness maddens him. He had no father to love him, why should he? "Prove yourself some use, not only pretty- work- not be only innocent- work do not stare; would you rather I loved you? You are sweet, young, etc- but you must love me, why do you not love me?

[72] Benjamin Britten, "*Peter Grimes*. Act I. Scenario, draft," BPL 2-9401374, BPL.

Love me damn you.[73]

Philip Brett cites this scenario as evidence scholars have used in positing the existence of homoerotic elements in the opera's final version. Brett offers an alternative reading of this scenario, one that emphasizes the juxtaposition of conflicting ideas in Grimes's character.

> Perhaps, though, we can also discern in this passage an interesting ambiguity. Looked at one way, Grimes here descends to his lowest point, preying on a young innocent; looked at another, he shows toward the child an honesty and tenderness that elicit greater sympathy for him than Ellen's pleading on his behalf could ever have done.[74]

This is an intriguing idea, one that shows Britten and Pears might have been imagining as early as their initial scenario drafts, a duality present in Grimes, depicting him as simultaneously both a sadistic and a sympathetic character. Still, it would be a hard concept for an audience to accept, one that asks the listener to sympathize with Grimes at the very same time they are viewing him as a predator.

While the gradual process of Grimes's mental decline is not shown here, this scenario still ends with him going mad. Its brief description of Grimes's madness and death is puzzling for precisely how it fails to fit in with the rest of the scenario. He has gone mad, yet he commits suicide in public.

> Sunset Empty stage. Enter Grimes- near crazy- ghosts scene- Grimes monologue.
> The Sea calls him.

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[73] Peter Pears, "*Peter Grimes*. Scenario, draft (PP)," BPL 2-9401375, BPL.
[74] Philip Brett, "'Fiery visions' (and revisions): *Peter Grimes* in progress," in *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*, ed. Philip Brett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 50.

> Just as he is about to leap in- Enter Ellen, ahead of crowd- She calls to him. Too late, he says, and jumps in- Enter crowd. That is impossibly far away
> Peter- The Evil has destroyed itself.
> Curtain.[75]

Unlike the final version of the opera, this proposed ending does not convey the sense that Grimes has lost all touch with reality. Rather, his reply to Ellen of "Too late," comes across as spiteful, not completely crazed. Grimes comparing himself to Evil in this draft creates a powerful image of mental disturbance, but it could also be seen as him believing he is at least partly responsible for what happened to his apprentice, giving the impression that he is guilty. When compared to this, his mad scene in the opera appears all the more powerful for his inability to even speak during his final moments.

The third scenario, the shortest of all six, consists of reference notes for the plot written by Britten. These notes refer to the source material, and are the only direct mention of *The Borough* found in the scenarios. Britten lists the individual letters in the poem that contain material directly used in the plot of the opera. For example, the description of the Storm is in "Letter I," a description of the inn can be found in "Letter XI," and the description of the poor, where the characters of Ellen Orford and Peter Grimes are described, can be found starting in "Letter XVII."[76]

The fourth scenario, by Pears, is a list of all the potential numbers in the opera. For the first time a Prologue is added, although in this instance its main function is as a scene for Grimes and his father. Numbers that mainly

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[75] Peter Pears, "*Peter Grimes*. Scenario, draft (PP)," BPL 2-9401375, BPL.
[76] Benjamin Britten, "*Peter Grimes*. Notes," BPL 2-9401376, BPL.

portray Grimes's mental state and actions are Number 30, appearing in Act II, scene 3, with the description "Grimes with the boy. Murder," and a mad scene listed as Number 35 in the Third Act.[77] Although this is only a simple list of numbers for the opera, it specifies that Grimes has killed his apprentice instead of leaving it to speculation, and like the final version, places his mad scene as part of the opera's ending, but not as its final event.

Britten included two versions of possible plot lines in the fifth scenario. Version 1 is very close to the eventual storyline of the opera, except it has two scenes set in Grimes's hut, during one of which Ellen comes to the hut for the apprentice, but Grimes refuses to let her take him. Version 2 is the same as the first version, except Act III is described as a "Terrific court scene. P.G. forbidden ever to have boy again. P.G. is dismissed in disgrace." This is followed by the Epilogue, where "P.G. on marshes, goes mad & dies."[78] This version raises some possibilities that are quite different from the final opera, such as Grimes going mad and dying on his own, completely isolated from the rest of the community. Likewise, the court's involvement as the instigator for Grimes's final decline provides a more impersonal, bureaucratic context for Grimes's death. Unlike the opera's final version, where Grimes instigates his own downfall with his Act II, scene 1, "So be it!—And God have mercy upon me!" this version makes it difficult to focus on broader themes that can be surmised from Grimes's character, and instead emphasizes specific elements of the plot.

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[77] Peter Pears, "*Peter Grimes*. Scenario (PP)," BPL 2-9401377, BPL.
[78] Brett, "'Fiery visions' (and revisions)," 52.

The final scenario, in Pears' hand, contains an outline for Act II and for Act III, scene 1, which is written on the back of *Axel Johnson* stationary, the ship they traveled on during their return voyage to England. This scenario contains ideas about Grimes and his madness that are also present in the first sketches Britten and Pears created of the opera's potential storyline. Here, Ellen finds out that rumors regarding Grimes are being spread among the townspeople, and sings an aria that addresses both her "doubts of Grimes, & her determination to win."[79] The relationship suggested here between Grimes and Ellen is much more complicated than in the opera. Grimes is also portrayed as a drinker, which lessens the blame directed towards him, since alcohol can excuse part of his actions. Once night falls, Grimes appears onstage alone. During his mad scene, he has hallucinations, seeing the ghosts of his father and two apprentices, and calls out for Ellen. Pears describes him as crazy, and as dawn breaks, Grimes jumps from the breakwater into the sea, drowning himself as Ellen enters. The opera ends with a lament sung by Ellen before the start of a new day in the Borough. Here, Grimes is acting completely on his own in drowning himself. In the final version, Grimes's inability to protest Balstrode's command to kill himself, and the fact that his death occurs offstage, both help to emphasize the complexities of his madness.

In addition to the handwritten scenarios, there are several typescript libretto fragments of potential scenes that provide a glimpse into the

[79] Peter Pears, "*Peter Grimes* Scenario, Act 2, Scene I," BPL 2-9401379, BPL.

evolution of Peter Grimes's character. In the first typed version of the Prologue, Ellen testifies that the apprentice told her Grimes named his boat the "Boy Billy" after him.[80] This line is kept in the second version of the Prologue as well, only now when Swallow questions Grimes about this piece of information, he refuses to answer.[81] This shift from other characters providing the audience with information about Grimes, to this information being provided by Grimes himself, is one that continues in the final version of the opera. Grimes's ability to speak for himself permits the story to more completely revolve around his character, and focus on his mental disintegration.

The first libretto fragment from Act I, scene 1, contains an inserted chorus that describes the desolation of the Market Town where apprentices are procured. The first stanza alludes to the Borough being aware of the ill-treatment of these children, which they ignore in the opera's final version.

> The road is rough to Market Town
> Where a strange bargaining is done
> Head of cattle, souls of children
> Whose sad feet have taken them
> The workhouse road to Market Town[82]

Although this chorus was cut in the final version of the opera, here it is a sad description of the life the boy apprentice has been fated to live. The song by Grimes that follows this chorus continues earlier ideas for the opera by going into greater detail about his relationship with his apprentice. Although he is

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[80] "*Peter Grimes*. Prologue. Libretto (typescript)," BPL 2-9401380, BPL.
[81] "*Peter Grimes*. Prologue. Libretto (typescript)," BPL 2-9401381, BPL.
[82] "*Peter Grimes*. Act 1 sc. 1. Libretto, typescript," BPL 2-9401382, BPL.

alone, Grimes addresses his apprentice and the possibility of new times ahead:

> These mice are frightened, frightened. They
> Who sleep at night are numb by day.
> We know no land unless we plumb the sea.
>
> Young stranger we do well to be
> Outside the painted doors that they
> Both on the spring tide and our gaiety.
>
> Our fishing hut is bare. At least
> No father rules its empty feast.
> Young stranger. Shall we sail till we are lost?
>
> I have a father in the sea
> Scolding from the tides, and it was he
> Who made the laws we shall disobey.
>
> Young stranger, shall we sail beyond
> The borough streets, the timid land
> And drown in our own sea the daily round?
>
> This time there'll be no quarrels, this
> Time our wills not cross
> Shall we find, Stranger,
> what the others missed?
>
> Two others sailed the boat with me.
> We shared luck. It was all unlucky.
> Young Stranger, we'll sail far out, but they---but they….[83]

The world Grimes paints at first glance appears to be an idyllic one without rules or disapproval from other people, just an existence of being one with the sea. On closer inspection though, it is a world containing several large cracks. Grimes's last two stanzas hint at a reality that is not as he hoped. He says there will be no more fighting, but he ends by trailing off after referring to his first two apprentices, filling his original words with doubt.

[83] Ibid.

The libretto fragment of Act II, scene 1, not only names the apprentice John, but gives him lines, and shows him having a close relationship with Ellen. An example of this takes place while Ellen and the apprentice are together, as the rest of the townspeople attend church. John asks Ellen if she's forgotten he is there, and she responds with an aria that oscillates between saying she has not forgotten, while also expressing her desire to forget, and finally admitting that yes, she has in fact forgotten. After John asks if he should leave, Ellen tells him they will make a bargain to spend their Sundays together, as a special day for just the two of them. Grimes then enters, his violence and cruelty soon on display.

Peter Are you trying to quarrel with me?

Ellen I've finished. You shall have your way.

She goes out leaving her basket. Peter kicks it away savagely

Peter (turns on the boy who cringes)
Now we'll see-young stranger, come-
Who holds the whip.

John (half rises and screams) No Peter.

Peter (furious, hand raised) Home!

John runs away screaming Ellen! Ellen!

Peter follows[84]

The added narrative of Ellen and her relationship with the apprentice takes the focus away from Grimes, and instead introduces an unclear second storyline. In the final version, the main characters are all introduced and

[84] "*Peter Grimes*. Act II, sc. 1. Libretto, typescript," BPL 2-9401384, BPL.

portrayed through their relationships with Grimes, keeping the emphasis on the story of his downfall.

Grimes's portrayal as a cruel and sadistic fisherman is clearly shown in the next fragment of Act II, scene 2. In this version, there is no possibility for the audience to feel empathy towards or somehow identify with Grimes; he is simply someone to be hated and reviled. Here in Grimes's hut, his control over his apprentice and ability to treat him however he sees fit comes through:

> By God I'll beat it out of you.
> Stand up. (lash) Straighter. (lash) I'll count two
> And then you'll jump to it. One…
> Well? Two. (The boy doesn't move. Then Peter lashes
> hard, twice. He runs. Peter follows)
> Your soul is mine
> Your body is the cat o' nine
> Tails' mincemeat, O! a pretty dish
> Smooth skinned & young as she could wish.
> Come cat! Up whiplash! Jump my son
> Jump (lash) jump (lash) jump, the dance is on.[85]

This scene not only shows Grimes as abusive in his treatment of the boy, but it also hints at his possession of him, as if he is merely a thing, not a person. After the boy falls while Grimes is chasing him, Grimes switches his tone, attempting to soothe him.

> We're seamen, rough, with little talk.
> Fists and whipknots do the work.
> O you'll cry I beat you till
> Body loses grip on soul.
> That's the sea, man, that's our life.
> When blood rises to your eyes
> Throbbing, red and blinding, when
> The whole world is your broken flesh….

[85] "*Peter Grimes*. Act II, sc. 2. Libretto, typescript," BPL 2-9401385, BPL.

Leave clinging. Put your hand down. I
Have no desire to beat you now.[86]

Grimes's attempt to soothe the apprentice does not match his words however, as he chillingly describes life as a fisherman, while simultaneously seeming to justify his earlier actions. As compared to the final libretto version, these libretto fragments contain more convoluted storylines, such as those involving Ellen and the apprentice, and the presence of Grimes's father. Here the apprentice's story has less of an impact as well, because in giving him lines, he is no longer a nameless victim of Grimes's maltreatment.

Each of the three typescript libretto versions, dating from around September 1942, not only provide insight into changes made to the initial libretto, but also illustrate the high degree to which Britten collaborated with others while composing *Peter Grimes*. The first libretto, labeled "La" in Philip Brett's description of the libretto drafts, bears only Britten's annotations. The following one, "Lb," has annotations by both Britten and Slater, and is a carbon copy of "La." The final version, "Lc," belonging to Eric Crozier, is also a carbon copy of "La," and contains annotations by Crozier, Slater, and Britten.[87] All three libretto versions share ideas and themes that exist in the final version of the opera, but their differences are extremely insightful, as they predate Britten's composition of the score by almost two years.[88] A comparison of three crucial plot points in each version demonstrates Britten moving away from portraying Grimes as sadistic and cruel to a character who

[86] Ibid.
[87] Banks, "Bibliographic Notes and Narratives," 177.
[88] Brett, "'Fiery visions' (and revisions)," 58-59.

instead allows for a more complex audience response. These three points in the opera, to which I will now turn, are Grimes's conversation with Balstrode in Act I before the Storm, his treatment of his apprentice while they are in his hut during Act II, and finally his mad scene in Act III.

The initial libretto already included the conversation between Balstrode and Grimes immediately before the Storm, when Balstrode asks Grimes why he doesn't leave and try his luck at some other maritime profession, Grimes asserts that his roots are in the Borough, and finally Balstrode suggests that maybe Grimes was not to blame for the deaths of his apprentices after all. In this version, Grimes's reply, during which he tells Balstrode about the day his apprentice died at sea, places a greater emphasis on how he felt towards his apprentice, instead of the more straightforward, rational account that appears in the final version of the libretto.

> Have you ever been afraid of the fear
> Of a cringing child?
>
> Or known life being bound
> To a scared companion?
> Have you tried solitude
> Doubled by a shy one?[89]

In the last stanza of Grimes's description of the death of his first apprentice, he seems more involved and present to the boy's plight. He still refers to the apprentice in relation to how he himself felt, but in describing the boy as scared and shy, he seems more in touch with the boy's experience, or at the very least with what he perceives as the boy's experience, as he asks,

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[89] "*Peter Grimes*. Libretto. Typescript (La)," p. 18, BPL 2-9401387, BPL.

Have you tried nursing
Among fishing nets
Alone, alone, alone
With a childish death?[90]

The greatest difference between Act I in this first libretto version and the final one is that this scene with Balstrode does not end with Grimes's aria "What harbour shelters peace?" which he recalls during his mad scene. Now the earlier references to Grimes's father are gone, but instead of an aria that evokes themes beyond the opera's plot as does "What harbour shelters peace?" here Grimes is singing to his apprentice. Like the earlier Act I, scene 1, libretto fragment, he begins with an almost idealistic tone, implying that this apprentice will not make the same mistakes as his last ones, and they will spend their life together at sea with no problems. Similarly, Grimes also ends by trailing off with an incomplete thought, suggesting that something sinister might happen in the future.

Young stranger shall we sail beyond
The borough streets, the timid land?
Is the way out to sail against the wind?
This time there'll be no quarrels, this
Time our wills not cross.
Stranger, we'll find out what the others missed.

Two other youngsters sailed with me.
We shared luck. It was all unlucky.
Young stranger, we shall sail-but they-but they[91]

The beginning of Act II, scene 2 in "La" begins the same way as the final libretto version, but when Grimes tells the apprentice to get ready, he appears more encouraging:

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[90] Ibid.
[91] "*Peter Grimes*. Libretto. Typescript (La)," p. 20, BPL 2-9401387, BPL.

Look. We'll make a record catch.
The whole sea's boiling. Get the nets.
Come John.[92]

Grimes justifies their need to go fishing by telling his apprentice that they will "Swamp their market!" and then continue on to Billingsgate.[93] By deleting in the final version this reference to a specific place, Britten moves from fixed plot details of time and place, to a story that is broader and more abstract, in the process making the opera more easily relatable for audiences.

In this early version, Grimes only describes his hallucinations, instead of experiencing one in front of the audience.

Sometimes I see three devils in this hut.
They're here now by the cramp under my heart –
My father and the two I had
As prentices till you arrived.
They sit here and their faces shine like flesh.
Their mouths are open but I close my ears.
We're by ourselves young stranger.
Shall we then
Make a pact before they come?[94]

While Grimes's description of his hallucinations is vivid, as only a description of an event, but not one the audience actually witnesses, it is less powerful in capturing Grimes's decreasing lucidity. Grimes suddenly experiences a shift in mood and accuses his apprentice of talking to the Borough. He continues in a way that more concretely suggests questionable and inappropriate behavior towards his apprentice:

You sit there silently. Your eyes
Are like old Ellen's womanly.

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[92] "*Peter Grimes*. Libretto. Typescript (La)," p. 47-48, BPL 2-9401387, BPL.
[93] "*Peter Grimes*. Libretto. Typescript (La)," p. 48, BPL 2-9401387, BPL.
[94] "*Peter Grimes*. Libretto. Typescript (La)," p. 49, BPL 2-9401387, BPL.

You sit there yearning like a girl
Whose face has the wrong tale to tell.
You sit there. You never speak
Till I bring out the nine-tailed cat.[95]

Grimes's words are full of accusation and blame, and his comparison of the apprentice to Ellen suggests that he might not only have positive feelings towards her.

Grimes's mad scene in the final act is structured differently in his interactions with the rest of the Borough, and also places a greater emphasis on his apprentice. Grimes still tries to comfort himself during the scene, and the idea of home is present as well, a theme that will have greater significance in the final version. He references his father's death though, and also tries to justify why the apprentice died, claiming that he was too weak. In this version, dying at sea is a central theme, as Grimes says that in addition to his apprentice, his father also died at sea, and he will die there as well. There is an offstage chorus, but they call out for Grimes much more infrequently, decreasing their level of interaction with him. Grimes is also capable of talking to Ellen, although his words are slightly cryptic.

Was it you who called?
I'm alone now as you foretold.
I am alone. The argument
Is finished and the money spent.
The drinking's over, wild oats sown.
You hear them shouting? I'm alone.[96]

These words are reminiscent of someone who has lost all the markers of a productive member of society, not someone who is in the clutches of insanity.

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[95] "*Peter Grimes*. Libretto. Typescript (La)," p. 50, BPL 2-9401387, BPL.
[96] "*Peter Grimes*. Libretto. Typescript (La)," p. 63, BPL 2-9401387, BPL.

Grimes hallucinates the voices of the chorus calling his name, but the audience must rely on Ellen for this explanation, and is unable to experience them solely through Grimes.

Saying she will get Balstrode to help him with his boat, Ellen leaves Grimes alone for his last aria. This aria doesn't contain ideas that go beyond Grimes's own experience, as his words are directed only at his apprentice:

> Stranger forgive. I did not mean
> That your need should give way to mine.
> Young stranger come
> Young stranger home.
>
> Young stranger if your candle flame
> Of little life dies in the dawn
> Young stranger come
> Young stranger home.[97]

His seeming repentance is not enough to save him though, for Balstrode soon enters and tells Grimes he will help him with his boat. This time Grimes can still speak, and he asks Balstrode why he would help him with his boat, and what he wants with him. Balstrode's directive that Grimes must drown himself results in a different perception, because Grimes is aware of what is going on and can somewhat object. Although he is present and part of the conversation to a certain extent, in the end Grimes does what Balstrode instructs, and the opera ends with the dawning of a new day. The second typescript libretto version "Lb," is similar to the first typescript version, but in it can be seen the beginnings of a movement from specific plot details to

[97] "*Peter Grimes*. Libretto. Typescript (La)," p. 64, BPL 2-9401387, BPL.

including more abstract and general ideas.[98] References to particulars such as that Grimes and his apprentice will take their catch to Billingsgate have been removed, and Grimes's last aria is now an early version of "What harbour shelters peace?" with questions that move beyond life in a nineteenth-century fishing town.

The libretto referred to as "Lc" belonged to director Eric Crozier. Grimes's description to Balstrode of what happened the day his apprentice died has been rewritten on a handwritten page taped over the original words. He ends with the boy's illness like in the final version, but here he begins by asking Balstrode to picture what his life was like surrounded by his apprentice's despair, instead of picturing the actual day his apprentice died. He also asserts the comfort he finds in fishing, which is present in earlier versions, but absent from the final one. Here the scene ends with another handwritten sheet taped over the original words, replacing Grimes's aria addressing the apprentice with an early version of "What harbour shelters peace?"

In "Lc's" version of Act II, scene 2, Grimes has only one former apprentice, who he describes along with his father as part of his hallucinations. While this scene still contains elements that are absent from the final opera, such as Grimes describing his hallucinations instead of actively experiencing one, addressing his apprentice in a way that suggests some sort of subtext might be taking place, and referring to his father, it also

[98] "*Peter Grimes*. Libretto, typescript (Lb)," BPL 2-9401388, BPL.

moves toward the final version with its sense of each event unfolding one after the other in the direction of Grimes's inevitable fate.

Act III, scene 2, begins with the directions "Scene as in Scene One. Some hours later. The dance is over, the borough is asleep." Here, "asleep" has been crossed out, with the insertion of the words "out hunting" to describe the activities of the Borough's inhabitants, in a description closer to the eventual mob mentality of the Borough.[99] Grimes begins his mad scene comforting himself as in the other versions. His exchange with Ellen is shortened, and as Ellen goes to fetch Balstrode, Grimes's aria is a version of what eventually becomes "What harbour shelters peace?" The final exchange between Balstrode and Grimes hasn't changed, with Grimes still asking why he must kill himself. All in all, while the mad scene in "Lc," like the other libretto versions, contains many of the themes and phrases that become part of the final mad scene, it still contains many differences, which were removed when Ronald Duncan and Britten rewrote the majority of the mad scene in the early part of 1945, changes which subsequently became the final version.[100]

In 1946, Montagu Slater published his own version of the text to *Peter Grimes* as part of a collection of poems, largely because of his disagreement with changes that had been made to his original text. There are several discrepancies between the version Slater published and the final text of the

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[99] "*Peter Grimes*. Libretto, typescript (Lc*)*," p. 62, BPL 2-9401389, BPL.
[100] Ronald Duncan, *Working with Britten: A Personal Memoir* (Welcombe: The Rebel Press, 1981), 37-39.

opera, which are especially notable in Acts II and III**.** In Act II, scene 2, Grimes begins by addressing the boy in a much friendlier manner than in the opera:

> Lay off the blubbering. We can be
> Friends when the town's not standing by.
> Not happy youngster? O the salt
> Drowns 'em all, we'll keep afloat.[101]

Here Grimes's tone towards the boy hints at an attempt to win him over, as he suggests a mentality of them against the Borough.

The buildup for Grimes seeing the ghosts of his father and former apprentice is the same as in the opera, with Grimes suddenly switching topics to describe these apparitions. Slater's version, however, contains a more detailed description of what Grimes sees, and ends differently as Grimes again entreats the boy to share in his existence.

> Sometimes I see two devils in this hut.
> They're here now by the cramp under my heart—
> My father and the boy I had
> As prentice until you arrived.
> They sit there and their faces shine like flesh.
> Their mouths are open, but I close my ears.
> We're by ourselves young prentice. Shall we then
> Make a pact before they come?[102]

Slater's version of Grimes's mad scene is also different than the one in the opera, and yet it is much the same as the early typescript libretto, except for three major differences. First, Slater's Grimes is still able to converse with other characters, namely Ellen. Second, the chorus does not interact as

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[101] Montagu Slater, *Peter Grimes and other poems* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1946), 42.
[102] Slater, *Peter Grimes and other poems*, 43.

much with Grimes, and Ellen dismisses them as hallucinations, granting them a less powerful role than in the mad scene's final version. Finally, Grimes's last song is not a reprise of "What harbour shelters peace?" Instead, he asks for the apprentice's forgiveness, in the same version that was deleted from the typescript librettos early on. Slater's mad scene ends similarly to the one in the opera with Grimes not questioning what Balstrode tells him to do.[103] Britten's final portrayal of Grimes alone onstage, visibly battling his demons, and isolated in his final rapid disintegration, is a much more effective image than Slater's Grimes, who can still interact with the other characters, and appears to be functioning. In choosing not to have Grimes's final words be the reprise of "What harbour shelters peace?" Slater also has no allusion to earlier events in the opera, recalling a time when Grimes was lucid and coherent, and in the process drawing a path of Grimes's descent into madness.

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From Britten and Pears' initial sketches onward, there is a clear attempt to create a Peter Grimes who not only could be represented onstage, but also would be a character audiences could find relatable. In order to arrive at a character who was multi-dimensional in his thoughts, hopes, and interactions with the rest of the Borough, Britten had to make Peter Grimes less sadistic and cruel. Murder had to be hinted at but not specified, and a hint of tenderness occasionally had to come through, in order to prevent

[103] Slater, *Peter Grimes and other poems*, 55.

audiences from having only negative feelings towards him. The success of Britten's work is unmistakable once we consider the impact the opera had at its premiere. Not only was it a pivotal moment for English art music and contemporary opera, but its success is all the more remarkable in the cultural climate of post-war London.

THE PREMIERE

London's theatres went dark in September 1939, soon after the start of Great Britain's involvement in World War II. This didn't last long though, and within two months Neville Chamberlain and his government ordered the theaters to be reopened, and the London art scene once again sprang to life.[104] The reason for reopening the theatres was foremost a practical one; the arts provided entertainment, and could be used to keep public morale high. The Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) was founded in the fall of 1939 for these reasons. As Richard Weight writes in "'Building a new British culture,'" the British government hoped "that by raising popular sensibilities, ordinary Britons would become more aware of the common heritage for which they were fighting."[105] This was reflected in the Council's mission statement of "the best for the most," as well as in their

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[104] Norman Lebrecht, *Covent Garden, The Untold Story: Dispatches from the English Culture War, 1945-2000* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 20-21.

[105] Richard Weight, "'Building a new British culture': the Arts Centre Movement, 1943-53" in *The Right To Belong: Citizenship and National Identity in Britain, 1930-1960*, ed. Richard Weight and Abigail Beach (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 158.

description that they sought "to maintain the highest standard of art in war time, and to bring to people everywhere all the refreshment and recreation which music, drama and painting can give."[106] Britten was a member of the CEMA Music Panel, which he was invited to join in March of 1945, and was a member of until December 1947.[107] He also regularly performed in concerts put on under the auspices of CEMA. One such concert took place several weeks after the premiere of *Peter Grimes*, where Britten appeared as pianist alongside Peter Pears and cellist Norina Semino in a program that was broadcast from the Temple Newsam Leeds. This concert was part of the "C.E.M.A. Concerts from Historic Buildings arranged in collaboration with the B.B.C."[108]

The Sadler's Wells Opera Company was also a beneficiary of CEMA's programs, and was able to remain a company during the War by touring under their support. They mounted productions in towns throughout England, fulfilling CEMA's goal of bringing culture to local communities, while also leaning toward what Heather Wiebe has called CEMA's "high-culture-oriented vision."[109] During the first years of the War, the Company

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[106] Programme from a performance by Peter Pears, Norina Semino, and Benjamin Britten at Temple Newsam Leeds, June 28, 1945, PG/1945/0628, BPL.
[107] Britten to R.A. Butler, 20 March 1945, in *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten, 1913-1976*, ed. Donald Mitchell, vol. 2, 1939-1945 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 1246.
[108] Programme from a performance by Peter Pears, Norina Semino, and Benjamin Britten at Temple Newsam Leeds, June 28, 1945, PG/1945/0628, BPL.
[109] Heather Wiebe, *Britten's Unquiet Pasts: Sound and Memory in Postwar Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 25-27.

almost exclusively spent their time touring the provinces. After they finally returned to London in 1942, they performed in a variety of the city's venues, while continuing to spend a good deal of time on tour.[110] Sadler's Wells was just one of many groups CEMA sent on tours around England. They also sponsored tours of orchestras, theatre companies, and mounted traveling art exhibitions. These performances were often held in make-shift venues, such as air raid shelters, rest centres, and factories. CEMA also employed artists to travel around England with the goal of encouraging amateur groups and individuals to participate in their local arts scene.[111] These programs were particularly vital to keeping the arts alive in London, where companies were deprived both of their home theatres and of regular sources of income such as going on lucrative international tours.

Sadler's Wells Theatre had several uses throughout the approximately five years it was closed, starting in 1940. At first it functioned as a rest centre for people who had been bombed out of their homes, and after the theatre suffered minor damage in 1941, it became the home of the London offices for the Ballet, Opera, and Drama Companies, a British organization that put on tours for troops and factory-workers.[112] Other theatres were used for different purposes, such as the Royal Opera House, which was leased by its owner, Covent Garden Properties Ltd, in December 1939 to Mecca Cafés for use as a Palais de Danse for five years, with an option for the lease to be

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[110] Michael Kennedy, *Britten* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 41-42.
[111] Weight, "'Building a new British culture,'" 158.
[112] Dennis Arundell, *The Story of Sadler's Wells, 1683-1964* (London: H. Hamilton, 1965), 217.

renewed.[113] Mecca Cafés, a popular chain of dance halls, were advertised as places for both distraction from wartime shortages and affordable fun, with dancing hailed as providing "'Amusement. Fitness. Happiness. Poise & Good Figure' and 'Enjoyment for Energy: "Mecca" Nights mean Brighter Days.'"[114] These dance halls were located throughout England in a variety of places, such as the Ritz in Manchester, the Grand Casino in Birmingham, and a second location in London at the Paramount.[115]

By April 1944, after Koussevitzky cancelled the Berkshire Festival at Tanglewood for the remainder of the War, it was decided that the premiere of *Peter Grimes* would take place in London rather than in the United States.[116] Boosey and Hawkes' New York division had received a letter from Koussevitzky giving permission for the opera to be performed the following season at Sadler's Wells, and discussions with the Theatre soon began.[117] It was an uncertain time, with questions about when Sadler's Wells could reopen, as well as whether the premiere should take place at Covent Garden instead.[118] In a later interview with *The Times*, Joan Cross recalled discussions that took place concerning where *Peter Grimes* would be premiered.

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[113] Lebrecht, *Covent Garden*, 40-41.
[114] Christina Baade, "'The Dancing Front': Dance Music, Dancing, and the BBC in World War II," *Popular Music* 25, no. 3, Special Issue on Dance (Oct. 2006): 353-354.
[115] Baade, "'The Dancing Front,'" 355.
[116] Eric Crozier and Nancy Evans, "After Long Pursuit: Eric's Story Continues; Fifty Years of *Peter Grimes*," *Opera Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (1994): 13.
[117] Reed, "A *Peter Grimes* Chronology," in *The Making of Peter Grimes*, 34.
[118] Reed, "A *Peter Grimes* Chronology," in *The Making of Peter Grimes*, 37

> The Royal Opera House, very much a rival to Sadler's Wells in the reopening stakes, had also wanted *Grimes*, but Britten chose the smaller theatre for the premiere because he thought the work would have greater impact in an intimate house.[119]

Another reason Britten favored Sadler's Wells was because of his admiration for their Opera Company, which he saw as talented and full of enthusiasm. Britten was passionate about the formation of a national opera, and he believed Sadler's Wells had the potential to fill such a role.[120] An article about the reopening of Sadler's Wells summarized its differences with Covent Garden:

> Covent Garden may have had international prestige and glamour, but Sadler's Wells more often represented the best of English contemporary creative effort.[121]

Britten also had more of a connection to the Sadler's Wells Opera Company than he did to Covent Garden, since Pears had joined the Company after they returned from America.

In the end though, the Royal Opera House wasn't ready to reopen that summer. In fact, the opera house was still under the control of its tenants, Mecca Cafés, until October 22, 1945, over four months after *Peter Grimes* had premiered, and didn't officially reopen until a ballet performance on February 20, 1946.[122] At the time of the premiere of *Peter Grimes*, Sadler's Wells was the only English opera house that was open.[123]

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[119] John Higgins, "Giving birth to Peter Grimes," *The Times*, June 1, 1985, 20.
[120] Paul Kildea, *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Allen Lane, 2013), 249.
[121] "Lights Go On Again," *Newsweek*, June 18, 1945, 87-88.
[122] Lebrecht, *Covent Garden*, 43-44, 56-57.
[123] Crozier and Evans, "After Long Pursuit," 13.

Holding the premiere at Sadler's Wells was also a question of governmental and business politics. A blow for reopening Sadler's Wells came when Covent Garden's new owners, Boosey and Hawkes, persuaded the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company to transfer to Covent Garden.[124] In fact Tyrone Guthrie, the administrator of Sadler's Wells, believed at least as late as February of 1945 that Covent Garden was going to take away the Company's best singers, and acquire both the Sadler's Wells Ballet and Opera Companies instead of only the Ballet Company.[125] John Maynard Keynes, chairman of the Covent Garden Committee and also Chairman of CEMA, was largely responsible for why Covent Garden didn't also pursue acquiring an opera company for its opening season. He preferred the ballet to opera, and luckily for Sadler's Wells, was only focused on finding a ballet company for the Royal Opera House.[126]

Diaries kept by both Britten and conductor Reginald Goodall provide a glimpse into the short and harried rehearsal schedule for *Peter Grimes*, that began while the Sadler's Wells Opera Company was still on tour. These rehearsals took place while the Company was maintaining their busy schedule of both touring and performing at various London theatres. For instance, while in London from February 12th to March 3rd, the Company gave performances of seven rotating productions: *Cosi Fan Tutte*, *La Boheme*, *Madam Butterfly*, *Il Tabarro* and *Gianni Schicchi*, *Barber of Seville*, *Rigoletto*,

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[124] Lebrecht, *Covent Garden*, 40-44.
[125] Lebrecht, *Covent Garden*, 46.
[126] Lebrecht, *Covent Garden*, 38-42.

and *The Bartered Bride*.[127] Director Eric Crozier wrote of his experience rehearsing *Peter Grimes* on the road,

> Our stage rehearsals for *Grimes* began on tour—at a Methodist Hall in Sheffield, at a gymnasium in Birmingham, and in the Civic Hall at Wolverhampton. During that period, we continued to stage eight performances of the standard repertory each week…There was a regular policy of rerehearsing productions. We would drop one or two and take others in…So it was an unusually busy time for everybody.[128]

Britten had finished composing the opera in February 1945, although rewrites were still made in the text up until the opera's premiere.[129] Goodall records that Act I was played through on March 22nd with the composer at the piano, while Britten mentions attending rehearsals at the beginning of May, with dress rehearsals beginning on June 4th.[130]

The last performance given by the Sadler's Wells Opera Company in the Theatre had been a production of *Faust* on September 7, 1940, during the first major air raid on London.[131] For the reopening of Sadler's Wells almost five years later, many members of London's high society were in attendance, with one journalist remarking that they "showed up in more furs, white ties and tiaras than Londoners had seen since the war began."[132] The evening was also an event for the common opera lover, with many who were in the

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[127] Sadler's Wells Opera programme, February 2, 1945, PG/1945/0212, BPL.
[128] Crozier and Evans, "After Long Pursuit," 14-15.
[129] Brett, "'Fiery visions,'" 58.
[130] Reed, "A *Peter Grimes* Chronology," 44-45.
[131] Scott Goddard, "Sadler's Wells Drew Its' Old Crowds" *News Chronicle*, June 8, 1945.
[132] "Opening Night," *Time*, June 1945.

gallery having claimed their spaces in ticket lines the evening before.[133] Prominent musicians were in the audience too, including Vaughan Williams and Yehundi Menuhin.[134] Sadler's Wells of course had its own dedicated patrons who eagerly anticipated being able to attend performances at their theatre again, but this was an evening with much further reverberations. Performances had still taken place in London during the War, but it was as part of a much different landscape. For example, shows in the West End started at staggered times, so audiences weren't arriving all at once for different performances.[135]

The upcoming premiere received ample coverage in the press, including the production of a video reel that provided a glimpse into the rehearsal process, showing Eric Crozier looking at set models with Kenneth Green, supervising the building of the stage and approving costume designs, and going over the score with Britten at the piano.[136] An article entitled "The Birth of a New Opera" appeared in the *Picture Post* on February 24, 1945, describing the staging process, with photographs of the stage models, as well as photographs of Britten with Eric Crozier and Kenneth Green.[137] Ads for an upcoming concert-introduction of the new opera also began appearing in programs. One such ad for the upcoming concert-introduction appeared in

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[133] Goddard, "Sadler's Wells Drew Its' Old Crowds."
[134] Beverly Baxter, "One Man Against the Mob," *The Evening Standard*, June 9, 1945.
[135] Basil Coleman interview by William Kerley, May-June 2004, Oral Histories, Box 1: A-Cro, transcript, BPL.
[136] *"Peter Grimes" is Born*, British Pathé, March 9, 1945, filmstrip, 2:06, http://www.britishpathe.com/video/peter-grimes-is-born.
[137] "The Birth of a New Opera," *Picture Post*, February 24, 1945, 20.

the joint program book for a March 21st performance of Britten's *Ode to St. Cecilia* and a May 28th performance of Britten's *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*. These concerts both took place at Wigmore Hall as part of a concert series sponsored by Boosey and Hawkes, and the program announced that the opera itself would be performed in early June.[138] The concert-introduction took place on May 31st at Wigmore Hall, and featured a general introduction by Sadler's Wells' administrator Tyrone Guthrie, an outline of the opera by director Eric Crozier, and musical examples from the cast.[139] The one person who didn't speak about the new opera, however, was the composer himself. In his article "A Long Pursuit," Eric Crozier recalled how Britten similarly did not like writing about his works.

> When Ben had to write an article (a task he hated), we would sit at either side of the fire with pencil and paper, and by gradual questioning I would get from him what he wanted to say. I still possess the manuscript of his 1945 essay on the composition of *Peter Grimes*, which is partly in his writing, partly in mine.[140]

The impact of *Peter Grimes* is all the more remarkable when one considers the fact that conditions surrounding the premiere were not ideal for several reasons. There were issues even before the premiere, not only with the difficulty of rehearsals taking place on the road, but also due to multiple grievances other Company members voiced about the new opera.[141] In his notes on the first production, Eric Crozier emphasized the constraints

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[138] Program for the Boosey & Hawkes Concerts at Wigmore Hall (Fourth Season, 1944/1945), March 21-May 8, 1945, PG/1945/0321, BPL.
[139] "*Peter Grimes*, op. 33, First concert performance (extracts), Wigmore Hall," May 31, 1945, PG/1945/0531, BPL.
[140] Crozier and Evans, "After Long Pursuit," 11.
[141] Crozier and Evans, "After Long Pursuit," 15.

the smaller size of the stage placed on him and Kenneth Green in realizing the set. The main singers overall received positive reviews for their singing and acting, but hearing every word was difficult because of Sadler's Wells' acoustics.[142] Reginald Goodall experienced problems with his orchestra, but most reviews applauded the orchestra members' playing. Despite these shortcomings, reviewers often noted the audience's reaction. Edmund Wilson, for example, emphasized how intently the audience watched the performance and the level of suspense felt in the theatre.[143] The performers also noticed this reaction. Joan Cross recounted what the cast experienced, telling *The Times* some years later that after the final curtain:

> At first we didn't know. There was silence at the end and then the shouting broke out. The stage crew were stunned: they thought it was a demonstration. Well, it was but fortunately it was of the right kind.[144]

There was no denying that the average Londoner was aware something important was happening. Even bus drivers got into the spirit, with a newspaper story appearing that one driver, when announcing the stop for the Theatre said, "Sadler's Wells! Anymore for Peter Grimes, the sadistic fisherman!"[145] Edward Downes, a horn student at the Royal College of Music, was one of several students hired to play in the orchestra for the opera season. In a talk given as part of the 48th Aldeburgh Festival, Downes recalled not only how much playing in the first performance meant to him,

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[142] Ernest Newman, "'Peter Grimes'—III," *The Sunday Times*, June 17, 1945.
[143] Wilson, "An account of 'Peter Grimes,'" 161-162.
[144] Higgins, "Giving birth to Peter Grimes," 20.
[145] "I can vouch for the truth," *New Statesman and Nation*, Summer 1945.

but also provided a picture of the other musicians who made up the orchestra. Many were older, since the younger ones had all joined the service, and hadn't returned home yet. Downes remembered that during the short orchestral rehearsal period, several of the older musicians did not like Britten's music, but he felt that in the end many of them were greatly affected by the music and understood how powerful it was.[146]

Additionally, the reality remained that, as one reviewer commented on the premiere,

> The reopening of Sadler's Wells Theatre on June 7 was the first positive sign in London music that peace is upon us. It was also a sign that the spirit of the house is fully alive and kicking, for the company gave the first performance of a British opera on an evening when anything, however familiar, would have done to fill the house and make an occasion of it.[147]

Perhaps it is true that any opera could have reopened Sadler's Wells and met with the same level of success. The fact is, however, that *Peter Grimes* was picked over any other of the season's more traditional offerings, which the Opera Company already knew very well from regularly performing them while on tour. Instead of choosing one of opera's great masters, a contemporary British composer with hardly any experience writing for the genre had been chosen. It was a musical reflection of a country caught up not only in rebuilding, but also in shaping its postwar image and formulating plans for a future of growth and prosperity. *Peter Grimes* not only brought

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[146] "Peter Grimes Symposium (Edward Downes's Contribution)," 48th Aldeburgh Festival, June 15, 1995, Notes from Oral Histories, Box 2: Cue-Hem, BPL.
[147] W. McN.,"'Peter Grimes,'" *The Musical Times* 86, no. 1229 (July 1945): 215.

great fame for its thirty-one year old composer, but more importantly, for many critics, musicians, and music lovers throughout England, it also marked the rebirth of English art music.

The premiere of *Peter Grimes* marked the beginning of a seven-week opera season at Sadler's Wells. It was the only contemporary opera performed during the season; the remaining productions consisted of operas that were part of the standard repertoire, such as *Rigoletto*, *Così fan tutte*, and *La Bohème*.[148] *Peter Grimes* also closed the Opera Company's season on July 21st, having enjoyed a reported sold-out run.[149] Even though it was a new opera, *Peter Grimes* performed as well as the season's other offerings, which can be discerned from records of royalty payments that were determined by box-office sales. The same was true when Sadler's Wells staged the opera again the following year.[150] Far from being a novelty, *Peter Grimes* had decisively entered the standard repertoire.

Britten's name was soon everywhere, and he was kept busy with interviews, performances, and commissions**.** He also conducted the first concert performance of the *Sea Interludes* with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, which took place on June 13th at the Cheltenham Music Festival.[151]

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[148] Sadler's Wells Opera performance calendar for June 1945, June 7, 1945, PG/1945/0607A, BPL. The operas performed by the Sadler's Wells Opera Company during their seven week season were: *Madam Butterfly*, *La Bohème*, *Peter Grimes*, The *Bartered Bride*, *Rigoletto*, and *Così fan tutte*.
[149] "Music in the Making," *Tempo* 12 (September 1945): 15.
[150] Paul Banks, preface to *The Making of Peter Grimes, The Making of Peter Grimes*, xvi-xviii.
[151] "Programme for Wednesday, June 13, 1945, Cheltenham Music Festival," June 13, 1945, PG/1945/0613B, BPL.

Britten's compositions had been performed in European concert halls prior to the start of World War II, but *Peter Grimes* rapidly spread throughout Europe, with productions mounted in Stockholm, Basel, Antwerp, and Zurich the following year. Not only were these performances all sung in languages other than English, but they were also treated as major operatic events. For example, the premiere in Basel on May 6, 1946, was broadcast over Swiss radio and preceded by the British National Anthem, and in the Zurich performances, Joan Cross and Peter Pears reprised their roles.[152] Britten had found a great success in the story of the "sadistic fisherman," but the opera itself was also quickly finding its way into the operatic canon, thanks in large part to the public's and critics' positive reaction to its premiere and initial run. *Peter Grimes* received great attention in the press, with reviewers often engaging in critical analysis and interpretations of the opera and its title character. The sizable amount of information that can be gleaned from studying this critical reception provides more tools to understand the significance of Grimes's madness.

THE RECEPTION

Press coverage following the premiere of *Peter Grimes* was generally enthusiastic. One review in the *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* recognized both the opera's power and success, while at the same time noting its deviations from operatic convention. The commentator, Ferruccio Bonavia,

[152] "'Peter Grimes' Abroad," *Tempo* 15 (June 1946), 17-20.

wrote of the opera's "force, vitality, [and] beauty," while also pointing out the opera's unconventional lack of either a love-duet, or a heroic character.[153] This theme of unconventionality was often mentioned in reference to the opera, ignoring that Britten's music was in many ways quite conventional, even if it did not appear so at first. Reviews also showed varying degrees of belief in Grimes's culpability, as well as related feelings of empathy towards him. For an article published in the *New York Times* about a month after the British premiere, Bonavia perceptively observed that Grimes

> …also sees visions of better worlds and the composer has found here the opportunity for music of great tenderness. It is not enough to humanize the madman. Child murder is repugnant to any conscience—no matter how modern the outlook. This is, and is meant to be, life in the raw. As such it is powerful. Life was then violent and we see it in its naked realism. In other days the drama might have been taken as a tract indicting the workhouse that bound children apprentices to any master. The world of today has known cruelty in many forms, but it has done away with that particular barbarity long ago.[154]

Most articles tended to focus on Grimes's character rather than on his relationship with his apprentices or with the other main characters. His character is described in relation to the Borough as a whole, with passing references to Ellen as his only friend.

The cruel and sadistic aspects of Grimes's character, was also a common subject. Elspeth Grant's review for the *Daily Sketch* was tellingly entitled "New Opera is Savage and Cruel," and described *Peter Grimes* as "a

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[153] Ferruccio Bonavia, "' Peter Grimes' Opera: Another Success for Composer," *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*, June 8, 1945, 5.
[154] F. Bonavia, "'Peter Grimes' at Sadler's Wells," *New York Times*, July 8, 1945, 18.

savagely moving piece and the music is stirring and cruel, exactly right for the theme."[155] In *The Evening Standard*, Beverly Baxter wrote in "One Man Against the Mob," that "This new work *Peter Grimes* has an integrity, a sincerity and an arrogance which made the hearing of it one of the most exciting events of years." Later on he commented also on Acts II and III: "In the next two acts the cruelty remains, but beauty begins to emerge, fitfully, reluctantly, and one's senses become stirred to unusual excitement."[156] The opera's atypical structure and subject matter was also noted, such as in the *News Review*.

> Sombrely [*sic*] realistic, the piece has no catchy airs. But its cunningly conceived, superbly executed music demonstrated decisively that English opera on the grand style and in the grand manner is plainly possible.[157]

Several critics wrote follow-up reviews, which are illuminating in showing a development of thoughts and ideas about *Peter Grimes*. For example, Ernest Newman's first of three articles for *The Sunday Times* deals with how Britten and Slater transformed Crabbe's Grimes into one more suitable as an opera character. Newman applauds their transformation of the minor characters, and wisely points out that the character of Grimes:

> …would not have made, just as it stands, satisfactory material for opera, if only for the reason that brutality and final madness so unrelieved would have chilled the sympathies of the audience.[158]

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[155] Elspeth Grant, "New Opera is Savage and Cruel," *Daily Sketch*, June 8, 1945.
[156] Baxter, "One Man Against The Mob."
[157] "New Opera," *News Review*, June 14, 1945, 23.
[158] Ernest Newman, "'Peter Grimes'—I," *The Sunday Times*, June 10, 1945.

He goes on to write that "The character is wholly consistent, and excellent material for music."[159]

Newman's second article explores the idea of how opera developed the ability to portray the metamorphosis of a character, while at the same time found a way to close the gap between aria and recitative, advances that he attributes to Wagner. He sees Britten as achieving this in much the same way, with a few allowances provided for the age he is writing in. Newman's final article is written as a criticism of problems he found with both the theatre and to a lesser extent the singers, but it does so in a particular way that, like other reviews, doesn't find the composer at fault for any of these shortcomings. Newman emphasizes that unlike other operas, here the words and music are so deeply interconnected that they must be given equal weight. His last sentence illustrates how *Peter Grimes* was already being set apart from other operas; for him, "'Peter Grimes' must be sung from first to last in terms of itself, not in those of other operatic genres the rules of which do not apply to it."[160]

Music critic Desmond Shawe-Taylor wrote two articles for *The New Statesman and Nation* on his views concerning *Peter Grimes*. His first article was written after attending the concert-introduction at Wigmore Hall, looking at the score, and studying the libretto and other sources. Shawe-Taylor voiced some different ideas on the Grimes of Crabbe and the Grimes of Britten. The former is for him the "Perfect S.S. Camp Commandant," while

[159] Ibid.
[160] Ernest Newman, "'Peter Grimes'—III," *The Sunday Times*, June 24, 1945.

Britten's Grimes is a "romantic, Byronic and misunderstood" outcast.[161] Seeing Grimes as a Byronic figure often appeared in criticisms and even in scholarly literature as a way to categorize his character. The article ends on a more skeptical note, with Shawe-Taylor asking whether there isn't something shocking in Britten asking the audience to feel sympathy for a character only because of his actions and isolation from society. He concludes that:

> What I am quite prepared (especially after the Wigmore Hall concert) to believe is that the richness and dramatic power of Britten's music will enable us to ignore (for the time being) an adolescent conception of man and society which is in sober truth indefensible. In the theatre we may well be lulled into acquiescence; but at home, shall we not begin to wonder?[162]

Here, Shawe-Taylor brought up another point that reviewers struggled with in contemplating Grimes's characterization: although he is the protagonist of the opera, he in no way fits the common mold of the heroic tenor. Desmond Shawe-Taylor's second look at *Peter Grimes* appeared on June 16, 1945, after he had attended several performances of the opera. It featured a much more enthusiastic tone, as he speculated on what this new opera could mean for the future of English opera. Shawe-Taylor also picked up on one of Britten's compositional techniques from when he was composing film music for the GPO Film Unit in the 1930s.

> There is the device, borrowed from broadcasting, of "fading up" and "fading down" the two component parts of the scene, and there is a subtle musical interrelation between them; as when a theme is picked

[161] Desmond Shawe-Taylor, *The New Statesman and Nation*, "Peter Grimes-I," June 9, 1945, 371.
[162] Ibid.

> up from the church service and adapted, in a most affecting manner, to form the substance of Ellen's lament. Such things are "tricks"; but, like a poet's skill in versification, they are the necessary foundation for the noblest ideas.[163]

Such compositional devices, while not automatically associated with successful techniques of opera composition, provided Britten with other ways to give his opera a more realistic feel through the music.

For the positive tone taken in many of these reviews, there were also as many that viewed Britten negatively when compared to other older English composers. In a representative example, anonymous articles published in *The Times* between the opera's premiere and its 1947 revival at Covent Garden demonstrate a marked shift towards Britten and his music. The early articles are enthusiastic and positive, and draw interesting conclusions. For example, the anonymous reviewer writes about Britten's use of the chorus:

> By every argument of tradition and probability an English opera is likely to do well on a choral foundation, but in point of fact this opera is more like some Slavonic models in its dramatic use of the chorus than any of the more familiar types of opera.[164]

This reading of the role of the chorus as influenced by "Slavonic models," is one that has often been taken up by critics and Britten scholars alike, who have frequently drawn comparisons between *Peter Grimes* and Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. But as Eric Walter White writes, this was often accompanied by the incorrect view that the Borough, as represented by the chorus, was the

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[163] Desmond Shawe-Taylor, "Peter Grimes-II," *The New Statesman and Nation*, June 16, 1945, 387.
[164] "'Peter Grimes': Second Thoughts," *The Times*, June 15, 1945, 6.

opera's protagonist, not Peter Grimes.[165] By the final article in the series, which appeared a little over two years later on the occasion of the opera's revival at Covent Garden, the reviewer took a decidedly more unfavorable view towards Britten as a composer. This is made clear from the first sentence:

> The revival of *Peter Grimes* at Covent Garden last night proved three things: that it is a great opera, that its success is deserved and inevitable, and that its successors from the same pen are by comparison progressive aberrations after mistaken ideals.[166]

This *Times* review reflects a general move toward a more negative assessment of Britten and his music. As Philip Brett argued, much of this later criticism marked a turn from viewing Benjamin Britten as a national hero to seeing him more as an inexperienced composer.[167] Britten made a great splash in the operatic world with the premiere of *Peter Grimes* and its attendant excitement about not only opera returning to London after the War, but also the possibility that Britten was the one to continue the tradition of English art music. Once the initial excitement about this young composer faded away, and he was firmly established as one of the leading composers of his day, these more critical views began appearing.

One insightful commentary was by the American writer Edmund Wilson, who gave an account of the opera in "London in Midsummer," a chapter in his 1947 book *Europe without Baedeker*. Wilson begins by

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[165] Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 137.
[166] "Covent Garden," *The Times*, November 7, 1947, 6.
[167] Brett, "Breaking the ice for British opera," 92-93.

confessing that he had not planned to see the opera at all, but a friend bought tickets and convinced him to go. In spite of that, what he saw had a great impact on him. In comparing this to other operas, he writes,

> The ordinary composer of opera finds his conventions there with the stage; but, when you are watching *Peter Grimes*, you are almost completely unaware of anything that is artificial, anything 'operatic'. The composer here seems quite free from the self-consciousness of contemporary musicians. You do not feel you are watching an experiment; you are living a work of art. The opera seizes upon you, possesses you, keeps you riveted to your seat during the action and keyed up during the intermissions, and drops you, purged and exhausted, at the end.[168]

Wilson's observation that in attending a performance of *Peter Grimes*, one became part of a living work of art is a key observation, which could be made because of the opera's realism. At the same time, Wilson still resolutely experiences the opera as a work of art, in an affirmation to the simultaneous anti-realism that is present in *Peter Grimes*.

What has led scholars to single out Wilson's account are his observations concerning the opera's effect in connection to the recent end of World War II.

> …I do not remember ever to have seen, at any performance of opera, an audience so steadily intent, so petrified and held in suspense, as the audience of *Peter Grimes*. This is due partly to the dramatic skill of Britten, but is due also to his having succeeded in harmonizing, through *Peter Grimes*, the harsh helpless emotions of wartime. This opera could have been written in no other age, and it is one of the very few works of art that have seemed to me, so far, to have spoken for the blind anguish, the hateful rancors and the will to destruction of these horrible years.[169]

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[168] Edmund Wilson, "An account of *Peter Grimes* from 'London in Midsummer,'" in *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*, ed. Philip Brett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 160.
[169] Wilson, "An account of 'Peter Grimes,'" 161-162.

Wilson does not focus on how Britten's madness is portrayed, for he simply accepts it as a crucial part of the unfolding story, and a byproduct of the mob mentality of the Borough. What he does dwell on is the changing characterization of Grimes over the course of the opera, beginning with the plans he confides to Balstrode, through the tension surrounding the death of his second apprentice, to the Borough's hunt for him, and in his final moments. Wilson finds the Borough just as sadistic as Grimes, yet by the end of the opera, he sees Grimes through his disintegration as now able to match what the audience had recently experienced during the War, thereby allowing them to relate to his character. The ability to draw these connections between the opera and the aftermath of World War II, illustrate Britten's accomplishment of an operatic portrayal that was relatable beyond the story of a nineteenth-century fisherman, with overarching themes that could easily be taken out of its nineteenth-century setting.

It soon became clear to Britten that the premiere of *Peter Grimes* marked a more important moment for the genre of opera than he initially thought, in particular both for English opera and the composition of new opera. On June 26, 1945, in replying to a letter from Imogen Holst about *Peter Grimes*, he wrote,

> I must confess that I am very pleased with the way it seems to 'come over the foot-lights', and also with the way the audience takes it, & what is perhaps more, returns night after night to take it again! I think the occasion is actually a greater one than either Sadler's Wells or me, I feel. Perhaps it is an omen for English Opera in the future.

> Anyhow I hope that many composers will take the plunge, & I hope also that they'll find as I did the water not quite so icy as expected![170]

Britten did not often voice his views on composing *Peter Grimes*, but he did speak on the subject many years later, in a June 1970 *Gramophone* article entitled "Benjamin Britten talks to Alan Blyth," that scholars have often cited in looking for the few words Britten had to say on the subject of the opera's premiere. The article coincided with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the premiere, and when asked to look back on that time, Britten told Blyth,

> It never occurred to me that the opera would work. My only other operatic experience until then had been in America with *Paul Bunyan*. This had proved disastrous – the wrong piece in the wrong place – and so I had no confidence about *Grimes*. Besides, at that time such an off-beat story was hardly thought right for an opera. This, and the quarrels going on in the company, were not very good auguries. At the dress rehearsal I thought the whole thing would be a disaster. But, of course, once the tension of the first night was over and people flocked to hear the opera, it was very exciting.
> Looking back, I think it broke the ice for British opera. At that time there was hardly a chance of an English work being done; now, it's marvellous how many composers there are writing operas in this country – and getting them performed. It is accepted almost as a matter of course.[171]

The decisive impact made by *Peter Grimes* wasn't something that could be foretold, but the sustained and enthusiastic reaction it received was an indicator of what Britten had achieved.

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[170] Britten to Imogen Holst, 26 June 1945, in *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten, 1913-1976*, ed. Donald Mitchell, vol. 2, 1939-1945 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 1268.
[171] "90th anniversary interviews: Benjamin Britten," *Gramophone*, http://www.gramophone.co.uk/features/focus/90th-anniversary-interviews-benjamin-britten. Previously published as Alan Blyth, "Benjamin Britten talks to Alan Blyth," *Gramophone*, June 1970.

The opera's critical reception, while overall very positive, was also alert to what set *Peter Grimes* apart from other operas. Most critical writings and subsequent reviews similarly made clear what had already emerged at the premiere: *Peter Grimes* had made a sizable impact on audiences, who paid special attention to the title character and his descent into madness.

In creating the operatic Peter Grimes, Britten had taken the sadistic fisherman of Crabbe's poem, who was only able to elicit reactions of aversion, and transformed him into a far more complex character that could be viewed simultaneously with disdain and sympathy.

CONCLUSION

In the interval between realism and anti-realism that exists in *Peter Grimes*, one is prompted to think about what they have just witnessed: the descent of a man into madness, leaving in his wake a tangled web of oppression, guilt, and isolation that, in a nod to real madness, generates more questions, more misgivings, and more uncertainties.

This thesis has focused on the representation of madness in a single opera. Within the conventional boundaries inherent to the operatic art form, there are many possibilities for what ideas and concepts can be pondered, taken apart, absorbed, and changed; ideas that can encompass a myriad of subjects. Not all works achieve such a level of realism, or turn out to be the right opera for the right time. But these boundaries provide the possibility of some manifestation of such a space in all of opera, a space where these works of art have the ability to broaden our horizons.

In Gilman's words, what audiences require in the end is "the *need* to see such a pattern at work behind all 'madness.'"[172] Many events are devastating for our very inability to make sense of the reasons why they occurred. But without some way to examine these events, nothing can be learned from them, and they are doomed to remain an unspoken tragedy. Opera can explore many other instances of devastation that are replete with

[172] Gilman, *Disease and Representation*, 16.

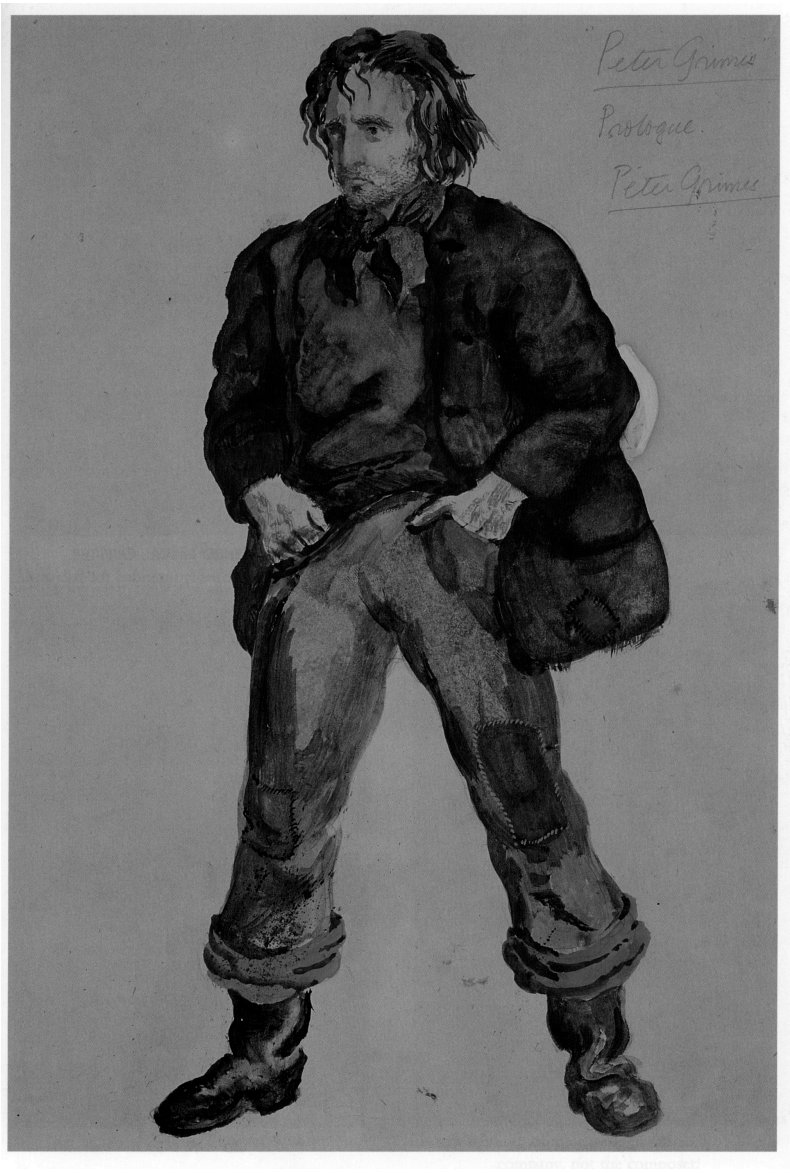
their own madness. With its ability to draw on music, text, drama, and staging, opera is in the unique position of offering us innumerable ways to make sense of these tragic events. Music has the power to bridge past and present. It can provide us with a way to look beyond the opera's story, a space for reflecting on concepts that perhaps at one time we couldn't even consider.

Following Wilson, we can view *Peter Grimes* and its ability to tap into the desperation that rose out of the horrors and the senseless destruction of World War II. The utter and absolute devastation of Grimes's madness may be able to bring us closer to those times and provide a way to view and feel the experience of war. In doing so, most importantly, it has the possibility to teach us about our own past and shape our ability to act in the future.

As director Eric Crozier said about the story of *Peter Grimes*, "In costume and manners the characters are English provincials of the early nineteenth century, but their vital interest for modern audiences is not in their period, but in their human stuff."[173] This "human stuff," with all its trappings and contradictions, is what Benjamin Britten was able to express so well in *Peter Grimes*. In the end, this "human stuff" is what we can relate to, and it is what opera teaches us to comprehend in our tortuous journey for a greater knowledge and understanding.

[173] Crozier, "Notes on the Production of Benjamin Britten's 'Peter Grimes,'" 8.

APPENDIX A: COSTUME DESIGNS

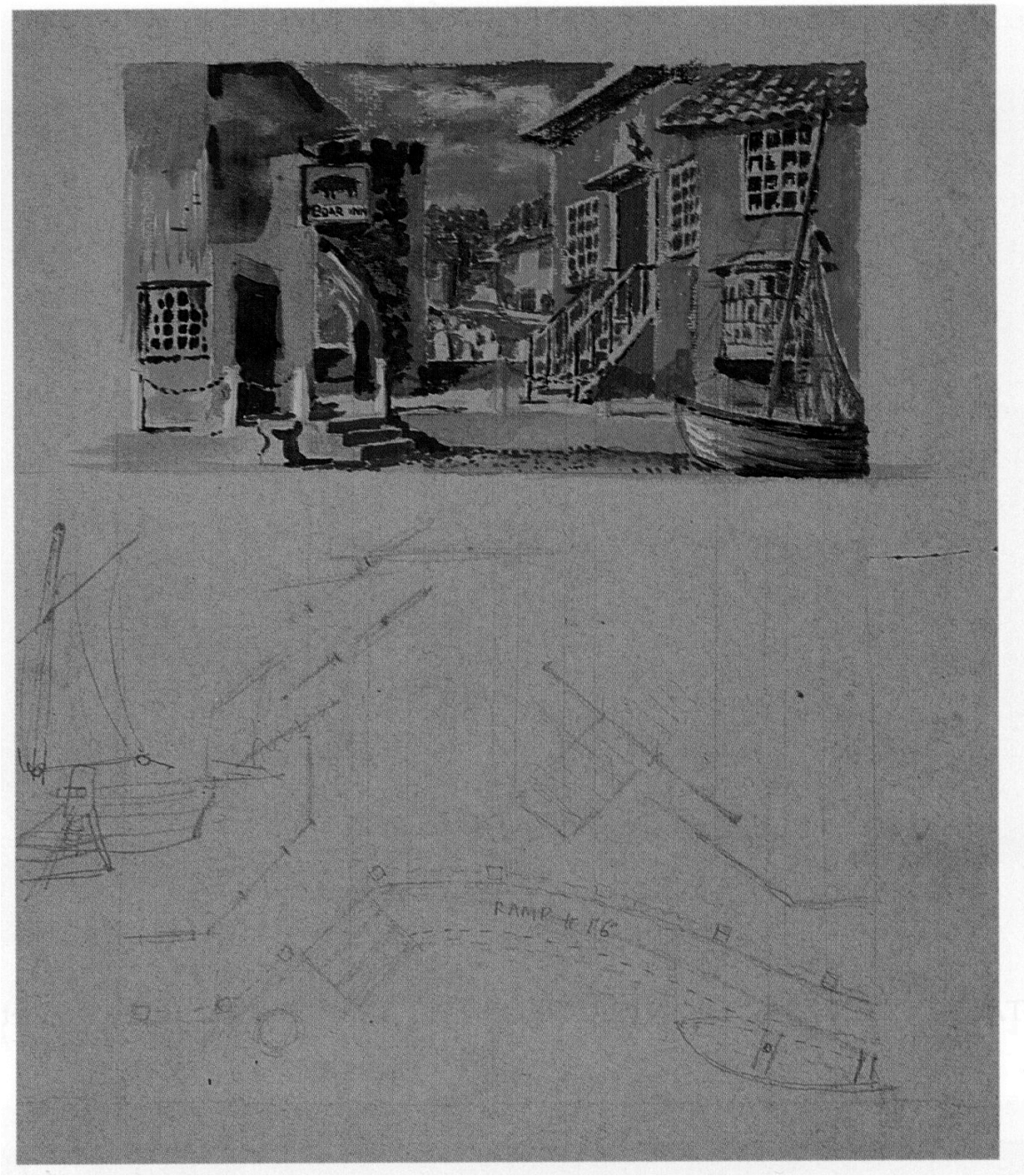


Costume Design for Peter Grimes
By Kenneth Green
From *The Making of Peter Grimes: Essays and Studies*, edited by Paul Banks (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000)

Costume Design for A Butcher
By Kenneth Green
From *The Making of Peter Grimes: Essays and Studies*, edited by Paul Banks (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000)

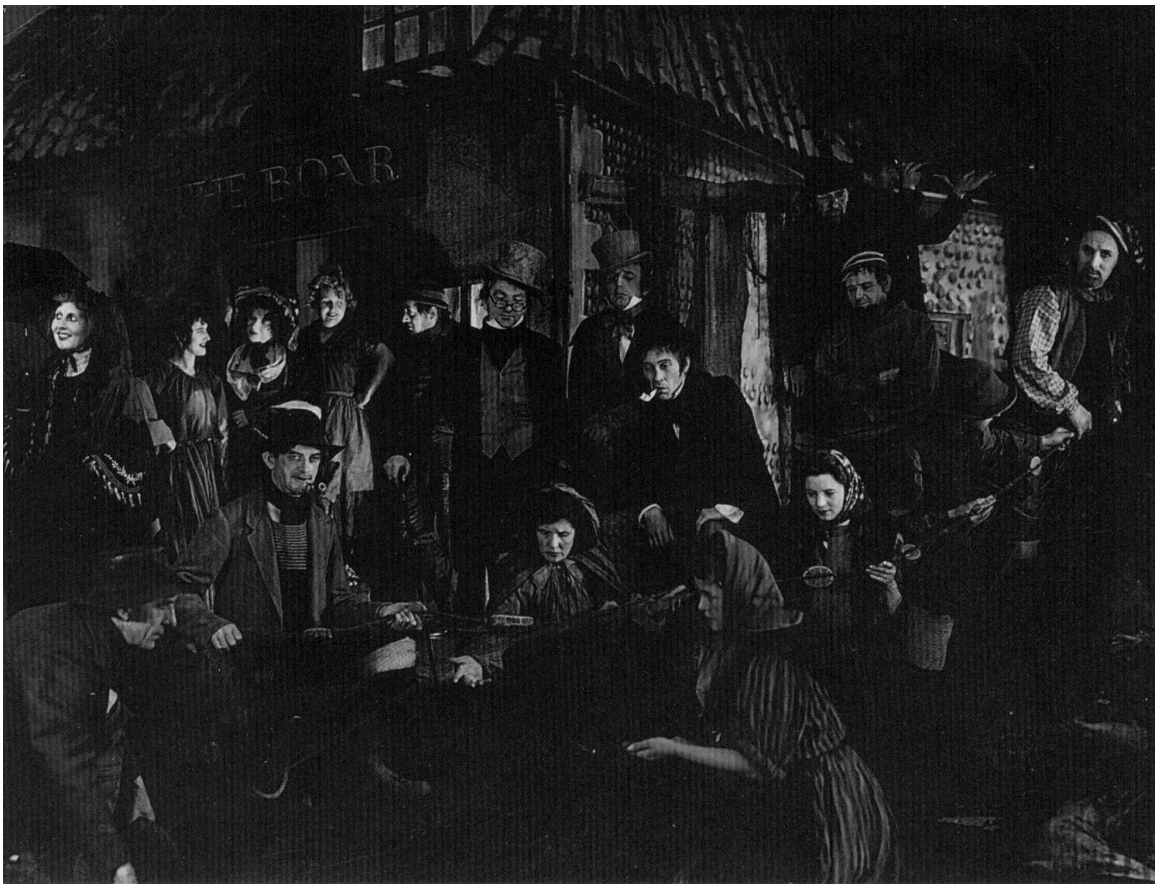
Costume Design for A Muffin Man or Baker
By Kenneth Green
From *The Making of Peter Grimes: Essays and Studies*, edited by Paul Banks (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000)

APPENDIX B: SET DESIGN AND STAGING



Early Sketch of The Borough
By Kenneth Green
From *The Making of Peter Grimes: Essays and Studies*, edited by Paul Banks (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000)

Set Model for Act I, scene 1, Act II, scene 2, and Act III
Kenneth Green
From *The Making of Peter Grimes: Essays and Studies*, edited by Paul Banks (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000)



Act I, scene 1, in the Original Production
Photograph by Angus McBean
From *The Making of Peter Grimes: Essays and Studies*, edited by Paul Banks (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000)

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