

# *Introducing Benjamin Britten: Some Remarks on his Operas*

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Whenever I play music by Benjamin Britten to listeners who have not known his works before or are generally not at ease with music of the 20th century, I get the impression that they are positively surprised and deeply touched. Many of them wish to hear more because they feel instinctively that there is a fascinating, highly individual personality behind the music. Britten's music is not European mainstream music but something profoundly English. At the same time, the enormous, worldwide success of his operas (see Table 1) demonstrates that his musical language is universally understood.

With this essay I wish to give some insight into Britten's musical idiom and his masterly handling of the human voice as well as of the orchestra. As it is impossible to expose here Britten's life and character in detail, a very short biographical introduction must suffice to set the scene.

## **Early years and *Peter Grimes* (1945)**

Benjamin Britten was born in Lowestoft, County Suffolk, on the East Anglian coast on St. Cecilia's Day, the 22nd of November 1913. At the age of five he began writing music. "I wrote symphony after symphony, song after song, a tone-poem called Chaos and Cosmos, although I fear I was not sure what these terms really meant", he remembered later.<sup>1</sup> Britten was 10 years old when he heard Frank Bridge's symphonic poem *The Sea*, and afterwards knew that he wanted to become a professional composer. A few years later, he took lessons from Bridge who was his most influential teacher.

It was in a way symptomatic that Britten's decision to take up a career as composer was stirred by a piece of music about the sea. All during his lifetime Britten was very conscious of his roots and preferred rural Suffolk to any other place. He had grown up by the sea, he

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Kennedy, *Britten* (The Dent Master Musicians), rev. edition, London, 1993, p. 3.

knew all about sea-birds and he loved to take long walks in the marshy countryside. This does not mean that he was a provincial bore – on the contrary, he liked to travel and explore, also to incorporate the music of foreign countries into his own compositions. However, his native part of England was the only place where he really felt at home. Like many other English composers since the Renaissance, Britten also took great pleasure in arranging folk-songs. They provided a great opportunity for combining elements of England’s musical heritage with his own contemporary style of piano accompaniment which serves as a very personal, often witty commentary on emotions and stories. The results are not “folky” but rather echo the simpler, strophic type of Schubert’s lieder.

In 1937, when Britten was already an accomplished composer and a successful pianist, he began his friendship with the tenor Peter Pears. They lived together until Britten’s death in 1976. Many people, of course, were scandalized by their homosexual partnership.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Britten and Pears were conscientious objectors in the Second World War and thus they were made to feel like social outsiders on some occasions. After the War, this disregard vanished and in the end both were celebrated and honoured for their contribution to England’s musical history in the 20th century. Britten was the first musician ever to be raised to the rank of a lifetime peer in 1976, the year of his death, by Queen Elizabeth II, and Peter Pears was knighted in 1977.

From living and working with Pears, Britten gained perfect knowledge of the potential of the human voice upon which he based his vocal writing. He was always most attentive to the blending of voice and instruments because he knew that his friend did not possess a great voice. Pears, however, had complete control of his singing and worked very hard on his breathing technique and declamation.<sup>3</sup> The result was a rather high, pure tenor voice with perfect intonation, very well suited to performing baroque music like Bach’s passions or Purcell’s songs. Britten wrote his most successful early work, the *Serenade* op. 31 of 1943, for Pears and the fabulous young horn-player Denis Brain. It is a cycle of songs about night, sleep, dreams and death. The English musicologist Michael Kennedy hit the point when he wrote:

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<sup>2</sup> The influence of Britten’s sexuality on his music has been the subject of much debate; see for instance Kennedy, *Britten*, pp. 115–117, for a careful assessment while Humphrey Carter in *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*, New York, 1992, assigns primary importance to the matter.

<sup>3</sup> Contrary to many other singers’ attitude, Pears never thought of his voice as being perfect and still took singing lessons with Lucie Manén (1899–1991) in the 1970’s. Her careful training enabled Pears to create the most demanding role of Aschenbach at an age when other tenors retire from the stage.

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In this series of wonderfully beguiling works Britten demonstrated again and again that his enviable ability to win his audience at first hearing was because he could convey the originality of what he was saying in a way that his listeners could relate to their traditional musical experience [...] It seemed that English poetry had never before been set to music like this, with such intensity, such musical penetration and saturation of the text, and with such unity of atmosphere as Mahler attained in his cycles.<sup>4</sup>

With the *Serenade*, Britten announced what was to come on a greater scale in his operas. Listening to his setting of Charles Cotton's 17th-century sunset poem "The day's grown old", one finds that the first bars of the vocal part (see music ex. 1) have a special, unmistakably "Brittenish" quality. Once heard, these notes, moving calmly down and up again in wave-like patterns, will always be remembered.

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the vocal part of "Pastoral" from Britten's *Serenade*. The score is written on two staves in G major (one sharp) and 3/8 time. The tempo is marked "Lento" and the dynamics "dolcissimo". The lyrics are: "The Day's grown old, the faint - ing Sun Has but a lit - tle Way - - - to run - - -". The melody consists of a series of eighth notes that move in a wave-like pattern, starting with a quarter rest, then descending and then ascending.

Music ex. 1  
"Pastoral" from *Serenade*, beginning of vocal part

When Britten wrote the *Serenade*, he was already planning his most famous opera, *Peter Grimes*. For a young English composer, it must have been a daring venture to write an *English* opera because there was virtually no tradition on which he could base his own work. Since the 18th century there had been discussions about whether the strong tradition of English spoken drama and the musical form of a fully sung opera could be combined at all. Ballad operas which are spoken plays interspersed with songs, choruses and dances were very popular, while imported operas from the Continent remained an entertainment mainly for the upper classes which never really took roots in Britain. Some composers like Balfe and MacFarren tried to improve the situation by writing English operas on highly sentimental or patriotic subjects which were not much in favour with the educated music-

<sup>4</sup> Kennedy, *Britten*, p. 155.

lovers. To sum it up, the general situation was far from favourable, not the least because the Second World War had brought great suffering to the people of London where *Peter Grimes* was to be first performed at the re-opening of the Sadler's Wells Theatre on the 7th of June, 1945. As this is the most important of Britten's operas and, indeed, the most influential English opera of the 20th century, some of its aspects will be analysed here in detail. Afterwards I shall consider a chamber opera, *The Turn of the Screw*, and Britten's last opera *Death in Venice*.



*Benjamin Britten (right) and Eric Crozier at Aldeburgh, 1949*

This photograph shows Britten and the stage designer Eric Crozier against a background which could nicely serve as a stage backdrop for *Peter Grimes*. Aldeburgh, where Britten lived, may have been the model for the fishing village which is only called “the Borough” in the opera. The libretto is based on a poem by the 19th-century writer George Crabbe, like Britten a native of Suffolk.<sup>5</sup> He portrays a brutal, villainous fisherman, Peter Grimes, who stands as an outlaw against the respectable inhabitants of the Borough. Of course this seemed the least suitable subject for turning into an opera, but the story of an out-

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<sup>5</sup> Britten picked up an article on Crabbe during his long stay in the USA (1939–1942) in 1941. Subsequently Peter Pears, who was with him, managed to buy a copy of Crabbe's poem *The Borough*, and Britten was deeply impressed: “I suddenly realised where I belonged and what I lacked” he wrote two decades later, “I had become without roots.” Thanks to a grant from the Koussevitzky Foundation, he could start working on *Peter Grimes* soon after his return to England. – See Kennedy, *Britten*, p. 32f.

sider confronted with bourgeois society appealed to Britten.<sup>6</sup> Together with Pears and the writer Montagu Slater he transformed Grimes into a more human, torn character who struggles to find his own way of living and finally fails. Although he is still violent and stubborn, he also shows tender feelings towards Ellen Orford, the local schoolmistress, and at certain moments he appears as a desperate soul seeking nothing but peace and a quiet place where no storm can reach him. It is the sea that has made him the man he is, the terrible sea which he hates and loves at the same time, and which will be his last refuge when he drowns himself to escape the people who hunt him for murder.

The full account of the story is given in divers opera handbooks. What I wish to demonstrate here is how Britten made the opera work and how he managed to bestow such an overwhelming impression on the listener. The answer may be that he conveyed a profound sense of atmosphere not only by giving the Borough people lots of individual and sometimes ironical musical traits, but also by setting the landscape and the weather to music – in a way that makes all previous attempts at creating a *couleur locale* look pale. It has often been observed that the sea plays the most important part in the opera.

Instead of an overture and entr'actes Britten wrote a scenic prologue (showing the coroner's inquest concerning the death of Peter's apprentice boy and thus introducing the subject) and six orchestral interludes by which he painted six different musical seascapes – sometimes with fine, sunny weather, sometimes stormy and frightening. The beginning of the first interlude (the overture, so to speak) depicts the calm sea on a greyish, cold workday morning. Right at the beginning the flutes and violins imitate the cries of sea-birds, with a half-tone motive (see music ex. 2) which later develops into one of the most important motives of the opera. It is almost everywhere, like the distant bird-cries one hears day and night at the coast where Britten lived.



Music ex. 2  
*Peter Grimes*: the half-tone motive  
(beginning of Interlude I, flutes/violins)

<sup>6</sup> In an interview with Michael Schafer Britten said: "A central feeling for us was that of the individual against the crowd, with ironic overtones for our [his and Pears's] own situation. As conscientious objectors we were out of it [...] we experienced tremendous tension. I think it was partly this feeling which led us to make Grimes a character of vision and conflict, the tortured idealist he is." See Kennedy, *Britten*, p. 117, with the afterthought: "Is it to be seriously doubted that 'and homosexuals' were unspoken but implied words in that statement?"

Speaking in terms of art, I should say that Britten was not only an excellent painter but also an ingenious architect. One splendid example of his ability to create and organize huge musical structures is the Storm Scene from the first act of *Peter Grimes* (see Table 2). Within this scene Britten offers us character pictures of nearly all main figures of the opera against a background of enraged nature. The two levels of human affairs and threatening elements are combined in a very simple but highly effective way.

The set shows the interior of the Boar Inn, a warm and comfortable place where people meet to take shelter from the storm and enjoy the company of others. As a closed room, this is at the same time a symbol of the closed community of the Borough. During the first part of the scene nothing serious happens. We listen to the little jokes and squabbles of the patrons but there is a growing feeling of disaster in the air. Every now and then people come in, and while they are struggling with the door, we hear the noise of the hurricane. Britten found the model for this combination of inside and outside music in George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, a performance of which he heard during his stay in America. In Act II, Scene 4, of Gershwin's opera, the storm blows Crown into Serena's room. The door is bursting open, and the noise of the storm illustrates Crown's violent thoughts. Britten, in *Peter Grimes*, used this device not just once but several times. Whoever enters the Boar Inn will invariably tell news about some kind of catastrophe caused by the storm: From the flooding of the main road the level of horror gradually rises until we hear that part of the cliff coast has been washed away. This aggravation of nervous tension is basically worked out by applying a simple serial pattern. One might also call it a kind of rondo structure with the little drama of people struggling with the door as refrain while the episodes are constantly growing from dialogues to choruses and intricate fugues. After four entries it comes as a splendid surprise when another man opens the door, which makes the storm audible for the fifth time, and does not say *anything*. It is Peter Grimes who needs not bring any bad news because for the people of the Borough he himself is the catastrophe – "Talk of the devil and there he is" they are whispering in a muffled chorus. Peter's complete isolation, even within this meeting-room, becomes only too obvious when he then sings a soliloquy about the stars and their influence on man's fate ("Now the Great Bear and Pleiades where earth moves / Are drawing up the clouds of human grief"). These bars, sung in "pianissimo espressivo", stand out against the rest of the scene like a song from another world. At their end, Peter breaks into the desperate question "Who can turn skies back and begin again?" Slater and Britten have frequently been criticized for bestowing such poetical and philosophi-

cal words on a crude fisherman like Peter Grimes. But as in another scene, when Peter imagines for himself a calm and peaceful bourgeois family life with Ellen Orford as his wife and “children by the shore”,<sup>7</sup> here he is allowed to give way to his emotions and show that there is something touchingly human beyond his harshness and brutality. If he were not forced by poverty, the cruelty of the sea and the hardships of his profession to behave as he does, he might be, with all the problems of his character, quite a likeable man.

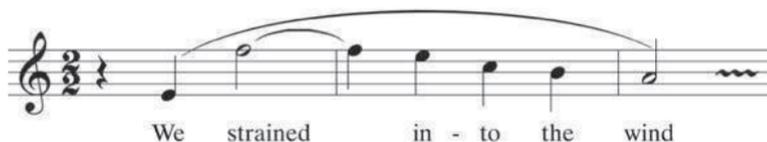
After Peter’s soliloquy the chorus starts again with a double fugue about Peter’s supposed madness. The sopranos, singing the words “His song alone would sour the beer” on the note E, which was the central note of Peter’s soliloquy, are clearly mocking him. Then Mr Boles, a Methodist preacher, attacks and accuses Peter in such a way that the old Captain Balstrode requires someone to start a song to calm the quarrel. Ned Keene tries a jolly fisherman’s song, “Old Joe has gone fishing”, and from his line there develops a magnificent quadruple fugue (in 7/4 measure!) – until Peter joins the singers. He sings about fishing too, and meeting a certain Davy Jones who is nobody else but Death himself. The others are shocked but return to their fugue and bring it to an end. In any other opera this huge fugal chorus would make the perfect finale of an act – yet Britten had to go on because the dramatic action requires it. Therefore after the fugue he took up the old basic scheme again and repeated the opening of the door, the noise of the hurricane and the arrival of more people, that is of Ellen Orford and the carter Ned Keene who brings in a new prentice boy for Peter. When Peter leaves the inn with the boy at the end of the scene, the storm is heard for the last time.

*Peter Grimes* is a traditional number opera with recitatives, soliloquies or arias, duets, ensembles and choruses. Britten deliberately used this old-fashioned structure because he felt that it gave him freedom to concentrate for a while on one emotion or character, then focus on another and thus create tension from contrast. Within this frame, he achieved musical unity not only from planning such intelligently organized sections like the Storm Scene but also by using some kind of leitmotiv throughout the entire opera. The first one (see music ex. 3) may be called “Peter’s motive”, the second one is the descending half-tone motive which is audible already in the First Sea Interlude (see

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<sup>7</sup> “In dreams I’ve built myself some kindlier home  
Warm in my heart and in a golden calm  
Where there’ll be no more fear and no more storm.  
And she will soon forget her schoolhouse ways  
Forget the labour of those weary days,  
Wrapp’d round in kindness like September haze [...]” (Act II, Scene 2)

music ex. 2 above). The significant use of this motive is not restricted to *Peter Grimes* only; it is also a prominent feature of the *Serenade* op. 31 where its most pungent appearance occurs in the central song, “O Rose, thou art sick” (Elegy) after William Blake (see music ex. 4).



Music ex. 3  
*Peter Grimes*: Peter’s motive (Act I, after cue 41)

Two staves of musical notation. The top staff is for Horn in F, 4/4 time, starting with a rest for two measures, then playing a half note G4, a half note A4, a half note B4, and a half note C5. The bottom staff is for Voice, 4/4 time, starting with a rest for two measures, then playing a half note G4, a half note A4, a half note B4, and a half note C5. The lyrics are "O Rose, thou art sick;".

Music ex. 4  
“Elegy” from *Serenade*, beginning of horn part and vocal part

Underlining the cry of despair about the loss of innocence in the *Serenade*, the half-tone motive retains much of this character in *Peter Grimes* where it paints the atmosphere of the Suffolk coast first but also stands for loneliness, despair and death.

The motives are always clearly audible and frequently combined in a meaningful way, thus adding a second level of interpretation to the action. Nowhere does this become more distinct than in the penultimate scene. Peter, who has lost another apprentice boy by another accident and is chased by the Borough people as murderer, appears demented and longing for death. The half-tone motive which was a symbol of his home and native coastal country at the beginning of the opera now makes up Peter’s entire recitative, and is a cipher for death (see music ex. 5). One could also say that death – suicide at sea – will bring Peter to his true and only home (cf. the phrases “What is home?” and “Come home!”). A last time he repeats his wavy motive which

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is now accompanied by the ghostly chorus of the man-hunt in the distance and a fog-horn (imitated by the tuba) sounding the half-tone motive which can be interpreted here as a symbol for Peter's complete isolation. He is separated from society like a boat lost in the fog which cannot find the way back to its anchorage, even if the signals from the harbour are still audible. After this last soliloquy Peter will sail out and sink his boat.

*ad lib.*

Stea - dy! There you are! Near-ly home!

Old Da - vy Jones shall an - swer: Come home!

Music ex. 5

*Peter Grimes*: the half-tone motive in Peter's last recitative (Act III, after cue 47 and after cue 50)

The opera ends with a chorus of the Borough people which mirrors the first chorus from the beginning of Act I. While that introductory chorus sets the tone by telling of the fisherman's daily work ("O hang at open doors the net, the cork"), the final one ends with a praise of the sea *sub specie aeternitatis*:

In ceaseless motion comes and goes the tide  
Flowing it fills the channel broad and wide,  
Then back to sea with strong majestic sweep  
It rolls in ebb yet terrible and deep.

Did Britten think this chorus (which has often been called a hymn to the sea) necessary just to give his opera a nicely closed overall form? At first sight it may look like a traditional finale but, if seen as the end of Peter Grimes's story, it is there to show us how people react on the highly dramatic events of the previous night. While the chorus is being sung, one hears some fishermen discussing whether it is possible to save a boat – Peter's boat – the coastguard has seen sinking. They decide that because it is "out of reach" they cannot do anything. Like his boat, Peter Grimes during his life was "out of reach" for the Borough people who return to their usual business as if nothing has happened. They do not even think about the moral of the story but carry on at

the rhythm of the tide and will continue to do so forever. Peter is not mentioned again; he will soon be forgotten. The last chorus leaves the message to us that in the Borough nothing ever will change and that outsiders like Peter Grimes will always despair and fail when confronted with the bourgeois society and its self-righteous rules.

From the first performance *Peter Grimes* was a resounding success.<sup>8</sup> It was the first English opera that made its entrance into the repertoire of music theatres on all continents, and in spite of its composer's youthful age it was not an experiment but an outright masterpiece.<sup>9</sup>

### Twelve notes for Henry James: *The Turn of the Screw* (1954)

Each single opera or church play<sup>10</sup> coming after *Peter Grimes* would deserve a special essay, considering their wealth of the finest musical craftsmanship and individual stylistic features. A particularly interesting one is the chamber opera *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) which is based on the story by Henry James. Apart from the gripping 19th-century tale about a young governess who has to take care of two strange orphaned children and encounters two ghosts who are trying to exert power on these children, this opera presents another excellent example of how Britten achieved musical and structural unity. *The Turn of the Screw* was commissioned by the organizers of the Biennale festival in Venice to be performed at the Teatro La Fenice. There are only six vocal parts, no choir, and a small orchestra of 13 players. This reduction of musical forces was necessary because Britten wanted to perform the opera with the English Opera Group, a small company that toured places all over England where fully scored operas could not be given.

Henry James's complicated story<sup>11</sup> was transformed into a work-

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<sup>8</sup> For critiques of the first performance from the most important English papers and music periodicals see Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed (eds.), *Letters from a Life: Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten 2* (1939–1945), London, 1991, pp. 1253–1265.

<sup>9</sup> Britten did have stage experience when he wrote *Peter Grimes*. He had already composed an operetta, *Paul Bunyan*, in 1941 which, however, he did not like much in his later life.

<sup>10</sup> The church plays or parables were written in an effort to re-create the liturgical play of the Middle Ages. Britten, however, did not imitate medieval models but created something new in the old spirit; *Curlew River* for instance is his English, Christianised adaptation of a centuries-old Japanese Noh play.

<sup>11</sup> Originally it is a tale within a tale on two different time levels, i.e. the written recollections of the long deceased governess are read to the author and his friends. The reader can never be certain whether the story reports reality or the hallucinations of a nervous young woman who is a typical product – or victim – of prudish and asexual Victorian education.

ing libretto (an admirable achievement in itself!) by the Welsh writer Myfanwy (Janny) Piper. She chose to arrange a series of key scenes within the formal frame of two acts and a prologue. Each act has eight scenes, each of which focuses on a single person or a special situation, like one shot in a movie. Each scene also has its own set which made short intervals for changes necessary between the scenes. They would appear isolated and disparate had Britten not invented an ingenious pattern to glue them together. He wrote short interludes which are variations of a twelve-note theme which, if isolated from the setting, looks like a screw itself (see music ex. 6). Each scene runs into a variation, the lights are off while the small orchestra is playing, then the next scene begins without any interruption of the musical flow and the lights come in again – frequently, movie-like, as spot lights on the most important person.



Music ex. 6  
*The Turn of the Screw*: twelve-note theme

Britten knew Arnold Schoenberg's technique well but in transforming the twelve-note theme he did not use the strict twelve-note rules. As with the Interludes in *Peter Grimes*, he aimed at creating atmosphere. Only by reading the score does one realize that the variations in the first act use the keys of A major, B major, C major etc. which correspond to the white keys on the piano. They symbolize the innocence and purity of the two children. Then, in the second act, the ghosts of a former man-servant (Peter Quint) and a former governess (Miss Jessel) interfere as messengers of unnamed malicious forces, and the black keys are used.

The opera is about the endangering of childish innocence, if you look at the story with the eyes of the young Governess, or about the desperate struggle of two highly intelligent children against Victorian morals and a stifling world of adults who will not allow them to gain knowledge of life and sexual matters.<sup>12</sup> Thus the nervous tension reaches fever level at the end. Miles, the boy in his puberty, dies under

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<sup>12</sup> It is hard to swallow that a boy of eleven and a girl of eight years should still be playing with a rocking-horse and sing nursery rhymes, as they do in the opera, while at the same time they are learning Latin. This shows how the adults would love them to be: they are to be kept "little ones" as long as possible – which in the case of girls meant right until their marriage.

the immense pressure which is exerted on him by his own desires, stirred by Peter Quint, and by his fondness for the utterly inexperienced Governess (a vicar's daughter) who tries to "save" him. In all her own tragic innocence, she makes heroic efforts to do what she thinks is good, but causes evil because – and this is the horrible irony of James's story – she does not know evil.<sup>13</sup>

Britten's use of leitmotiv in this opera is more pronounced than in *Peter Grimes*. Each person has his or her individual motive, and it is illuminating to hear the governess's motive and that of Peter Quint, the ghost who tries to draw Miles into the sphere of evil. They are almost identical and are coming closer to each other during the opera until, at the moment of the catastrophe, Quint and the Governess sing their motives in unison. Thus it is made clear that the governess's desire to "possess" the children, especially Miles, and form them after her ideal of innocence is as destructive as the amoral power personified by the ghost.

Yet within the eerie overall atmosphere of this short but straining opera the listener is given some relief through an instrumental and vocal piece of outstanding beauty. In Scene 4 of the first act Britten demonstrated again his superb gift for painting musical landscapes without ever producing *kitsch*. The stage set shows the lovely grounds of Bly, the manor house where the children live, and one sees the Governess all alone, taking in the air on a sweet summer evening. The instrumental introduction (Variation III of the twelve-note theme) abounds with imitations of birds and blissful, calm string chords. Then the Governess, happy and free of fear, begins her soliloquy with the words "How beautiful it is. Each day it seems more beautiful to me." I know of only one other piece of operatic music which so overwhelmingly conveys the sounds and the spirit of paradise-like nature: The orchestral introduction to Orfeo's aria "Che puro ciel!" from Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (Act II, Scene 2) bears such a strong resemblance to Britten's summer evening soundscape that it seems most plausible to regard it as the model which Britten with his excellent knowledge of music history must have known. In Gluck's aria, there is the "sound carpet" of birdcalls, too, and when Orfeo begins to sing, he is as strongly enchanted by the beauties of the Elysian Fields as is the Governess by the peaceful surroundings of Bly. Here is one example of Britten's adoption of older musical prototypes which ought to become a subject of further, more exhaustive research.

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<sup>13</sup> In the Prologue the Governess is characterized as "innocent", and in Act II, Scene 1, she sings, "I know nothing of evil, yet I feel it, I fear it, worse – I imagine it."

### **Summing up a life: *Death in Venice* (1973)**

Britten's last opera is based on the famous short story by Thomas Mann, first published in 1912.<sup>14</sup> As usual, Britten wrote the main tenor part for Peter Pears who was sixty-three when the opera was first performed in 1973. Britten knew of course that he had to be even more careful not to strain Pears's voice. With the role of the ageing novelist Gustav von Aschenbach Britten wrote "his last, greatest, most testing and most moving tribute to the vocal, interpretative and intellectual qualities of his friend."<sup>15</sup> Because this role is very long, Britten set a great part of it in recitative with piano accompaniment which suits the character with his extensive monologues very well and avoided Pears's voice being drowned by the orchestra. These recitatives have frequently been likened to those of Monteverdi or Heinrich Schütz, of which Peter Pears was an excellent performer.

*Death in Venice* is linked thematically with Britten's previous operas by many aspects. The hero is a kind of outsider again – an elderly, famous German author in Italy who tries to overcome his writer's fatigue and falls in love with beauty in the shape of the handsome Polish boy Tadzio.<sup>16</sup> The quest for beauty and wisdom is the central subject, and in a way Aschenbach has similarities with Peter Grimes

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<sup>14</sup> Again, Britten chose Myfanwy Piper to write the libretto. He refused to see Visconti's film on the same subject because he believed this would deter him from his own work. Golo Mann had consented in the making of the opera: "My father [...] used to say that if it ever came to some musical illustration of his novel *Doktor Faustus*, you would be the composer to do it." (Unpublished letter, dated 14 September 1970; quoted after Christopher Palmer, "Towards a Genealogy", in: Christopher Palmer (ed.), *The Britten Companion*, London – Boston, 1984, pp. 250–267; quotation p. 267.)

<sup>15</sup> Kennedy, *Britten*, p. 237.

<sup>16</sup> For the Rosicrucians "Tatius" or "Tatio" is the son of Hermes Trismegistos, the god who gave wisdom to Mankind. In one of the early Rosicrucianist writings (c. 1600) there is a strong connection between Tatius and the regeneration of the soul: "Denn wer in Christo ist, der muß mit Tatio beim Mercurio Trismegisto sagen: Video in me omnibus et omnia in me; ego sum in mari et mare est in me; ego sum in arboribus et arbores in me. Das geschah dem Tatio, als ihn sein Vater Hermes auf den Berg führte und die Regenerationem sui eröffnen wollte." (Who is in Christ, must say with Tatius in the face of Mercury Trismegistus: Within myself I see everything and everything is within myself; I am in the Sea and the Sea is within myself, I am in the trees and the trees are within myself. This happened to Tatius when his father Hermes led him onto the mountain to disclose to him his regeneration.) Quoted after Will-Erich Peuckert, *Die Rosenkreutzer: Zur Geschichte einer Reformation*, Jena, 1928, p. 21. – I have never found this god-like character of Tatius/Tadzio mentioned in writings on Britten's *Death in Venice* but I believe that Thomas Mann knew about Rosicrucianism and named Tadzio consciously so ("I am in the sea and the sea is within myself" sounds as if it had provoked Tadzio's walking "far out to Sea" at the end of the opera). This background would add another, allegorical and philosophical, level to the relation between Aschenbach and Tadzio.

in his search for peace and his longing, unconsciously perhaps at first, for death. And the setting is a beach again, the Lido of Venice, where Aschenbach finally dies in his chair. Of course the sea is in the music too. Britten had been to Venice several times, and he must have found it inspiring because sometimes he went to the *Serenissima* expressly to finish some important work there. So he must have felt sympathetic with Aschenbach who hopes that travelling to the South will restore his creative energy. But Britten was also acquainted with those doubts about style and form which Aschenbach – like the ageing composer’s *alter ego* – muses upon when he has arrived at the Hotel on the Lido:

So I am led to Venice once again – egregio Signor von Aschenbach; the writer who has found a way to reconcile art and honours, the lofty purity of whose style has been officially recognised and who has accepted, even welcomed the austere demands of maturity. Yes, I turned away from the paradox and daring of my youth, renounced bohemianism and sympathy with the outcast soul, to concentrate upon simplicity, beauty, form – upon these all my art is built. Now, in this beautiful, agreeable place, I intend to give myself to the leisured world for a spell. [...] Was I wrong to come, what is there in store for me here?<sup>17</sup>

When Aschenbach opens the window and looks at the glittering sea, his doubts are fading. Here, as in *Peter Grimes*, the music is again “an aural equivalent of the sound, shape and colour of the “long low waves, rhythmic upon the sand””,<sup>18</sup> with the notes graphically illustrating the wave-like motion (see music ex. 7). This time, the sea is not frightening and terrible, but a mirror of light and brilliance and the only part of Aschenbach’s world that remains intact while his obsession for Tadzio and an outbreak of the cholera are changing everything else for worse. For Aschenbach the sea is the Nirvana: “Ah, how peaceful to contemplate the sea - immeasurable, unorganised, void. I long to find rest in perfection, and is not this a form of perfection?”<sup>19</sup>



Music ex. 7

*Death in Venice*: woodwinds motive of the “Sea music” (Act I, Scene 4)

<sup>17</sup> Act I, Scene 4.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Palmer, “Towards a Genealogy of *Death in Venice*”, p. 257.

<sup>19</sup> Act I, Scene 5.

At the end of the opera, Tadzio, the personification of love and beauty, is walking towards the water and another death by the sea occurs:

Remorselessly, unwaveringly, Britten draws the opera towards its end, summoning all the resources of his art for this climactic effort. When Aschenbach relaxes the tension to sing the Hymn to Beauty (based on Socrates' dialogue with Phaedrus, a passage which Mann dwells upon in the novella) – “This is beauty, Phaedrus, discovered through the senses, and senses lead to passion, Phaedrus, and passion to the abyss” – it is not an operatic aria we hear but the most wonderful of the line of lyrical ariosos which Britten had written for Pears from the *Michelangelo Sonnets* to this last epitome of a glory of twentieth-century English music. And as Aschenbach dies on the beach, having seen Tadzio humiliated in a game and seen the boy beckon to him, the opera ends with an orchestral epilogue in which the boy's theme and Aschenbach's, while still separated as they always have been, shimmer into silence together. There are no words to describe the sound of this music, which glows with rare and unearthly and unforgettable colours comparable only with those we see in the late paintings of Turner.<sup>20</sup>

When Britten wrote *Death in Venice* he was suffering from a severe heart disease and knew he would have to undergo a difficult and risky operation. He made a pact with his doctors: he was allowed to finish the opera and then would go into hospital. Working on *Death in Venice* exhausted him, not the least because the libretto touched many subjects which were so important in his own life. A few years after Britten's death in December 1976, Peter Pears put it like this: “For Ben, the opera was, in some sort of way, a summing-up of what he felt, inspired even by the memories of his own idyllic childhood [...] At the end, Aschenbach asks what it is he has spent his life searching for. Knowledge? A lost innocence? And must pursuit of beauty, of love, lead only to chaos? All questions Ben constantly asked himself.”<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps this tension created one of the qualities for which his music has become so much-loved: Britten was a composer who would write out his soul when he came upon words that struck his feelings – not only in his song-cycles and operas but also in unforgettable choral works like the *War Requiem*. Transforming his thoughts into music came naturally to him, so naturally that the listener enjoys but barely perceives the artfulness and compositorial ingenuity of his settings. Another English composer, Michael Tippett, expressed this in his obituary: “He was the most purely musical person I have ever met

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<sup>20</sup> Kennedy, *Britten*, p. 242.

<sup>21</sup> Kennedy, *Britten*, p. 101. The quotation comes from an interview in Tony Palmer's biographical film on Britten, *A Time There Was*, of 1980.

and I have ever known. It always seemed to me that music sprang out of his fingers when he played the piano, as it did out of his mind when he composed.”<sup>22</sup> Almost 300 years earlier the music publisher Henry Playford had lauded Henry Purcell, whom Britten revered, with similar words. They may serve as a final statement describing the special quality which these two greatest English composers had in common:

The Author’s extraordinary Talent in all sorts of Musick is sufficiently known, but he was especially admir’d for the Vocal, having a peculiar Genius to express the Energy of English Words, whereby he mov’d the Passions of all his Auditors.<sup>23</sup>

### Table 1: Benjamin Britten’s Operas and Church Plays

Regarding single works, dates and places of first performances are given.  
l. = libretto

22 Nov 1913	born in Lowestoft, Suffolk
1919	BB begins composing
1927/28	lessons with Frank Bridge (1879–1941)
1930–1933	attends Royal College of Music, London
1937	starts friendship with Peter Pears (1910–1986)
1939	goes to Canada, then USA with Pears
5 May 1941	<i>Paul Bunyan</i> (l. by W. H. Auden; New York)
1941	decides to write opera on subject of Peter Grimes
1942	BB and PP return to England
1943	BB begins work on “Peter Grimes”
7 June 1945	<i>Peter Grimes</i> (l. by Montague Slater; London, Sadler’s Wells)
12 July 1946	<i>The Rape of Lucretia</i> (l. by R. Duncan; Glyndebourne)
1946	BB, PP, Eric Crozier and Joan Cross form English Opera Group
20 June 1947	<i>Albert Herring</i> (l. by Eric Crozier; Glyndebourne)
1948	first Aldeburgh Festival, founded by BB and PP
14 June 1949	<i>Let’s Make an Opera! (The Little Sweep)</i> (l. by E. Crozier; Aldeburgh)
1 Dec 1951	<i>Billy Budd</i> (l. by E. M. Forster and E. Crozier; London, Covent Garden)
8 June 1953	<i>Gloriana</i> , coronation opera for Elizabeth II (l. by W. Plomer; London, Covent Garden)
14 Sept 1954	<i>The Turn of the Screw</i> (l. by M. Piper; Venice, La Fenice)
18 June 1958	<i>Noye’s Fludde</i> (church play, medieval text, Orford Church)
11 June 1960	<i>A Midsummer Night’s Dream</i> (l. by BB and PP after Shake speare; Aldeburgh)

<sup>22</sup> Kennedy, *Britten*, p. 109.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Playford, Preface (The Bookseller to the Reader) to *Orpheus Britannicus*, London, 1702.

*Introducing Benjamin Britten: Some Remarks on his Operas*

30 May 1961	<i>War Requiem</i> (Coventry Cathedral)
12 June 1964	<i>Curlew River</i> (church play, l. by W. Plomer after Japanese Noh play <i>Sumidagawa</i> ; Orford Church)
9 June 1966	<i>The Burning Fiery Furnace</i> (church play, l. by W. Plomer; Orford Church)
10 June 1968	<i>The Prodigal Son</i> (church play, l. by W. Plomer; Orford Church)
16 May 1971	<i>Owen Wingrave</i> (l. by M. Piper; BBC TV)
16 June 1973	<i>Death in Venice</i> (l. by M. Piper after Th. Mann; Snape Maltings)
4 Dec 1976	BB dies in Aldeburgh

**Table 2: The Storm Scene from *Peter Grimes* (Act I, Scene 2)**

Cast: PG = Peter Grimes; EO = Ellen Orford; Au = Auntie; Bal = Captain Balstrode; Ho = Hobson; Bo = Boles; NK = Ned Keene; Nie = Nieces; MS = Mrs Sedley; Fi = Fischerman; Boy = PG's new prentice boy  
orch = orchestra

<b>orch</b>	Interlude II (depicting the storm)
Au/MS	dialogue
<b>orch/storm</b>	→ Bal comes in, bad news ("That's a bitch of a gale")
Au/Bal	dialogue
<b>orch/storm</b>	→ Bo comes in, bad news ("Did you hear the tide has broken")
Au/Bal/Nie	dialogues, becoming longer and more complicated → Nie/canon
Solo Au	"Loud man" → <b>small ensemble, 3 parts</b> ("A joke's a joke"), responsorial setting
<b>orch/storm</b>	→ Fi comes in, bad news ("There's been a landslide")
Bo/Bal/Au	dialogues
Solo Bal	"We live and let live" → <b>ensemble + chorus, 3 parts</b> ("We live")
<b>orch/storm</b>	→ NK comes in, bad news ("Have you heard? The cliff is down")
MS/Au/NK	dialogues
<b>orch/storm</b>	→ PG comes in (silent), NO bad news
ensemble/chorus	"Talk of the devil and there he is" ( <b>4 parts</b> )
Solo PG	<b>Great Bear-Soliloquy</b> (a-b-a' structure)
chorus	"He's mad or drunk" ( <b>4 parts + solos, double fugue</b> )
Bal/Bo/Au	dialogues
ensemble/chorus	"Old Joe has gone fishing" ( <b>6 soloists + 3 part</b>
+ Solo PG	<b>chorus, quadruple fugue – CLIMAX</b> )
<b>orch/storm</b>	→ Ho + EO + Boy come in, bad news ("The bridge is down")
Ho/EO/Bo et al.	dialogues
	→ PG and Boy leave
<b>orch/storm</b>	
END of ACT I	

POVZETEK

**Benjamin Britten: nekaj uvodnih pripomb  
o njegovih operah**

Benjamin Britten slovi kot najbolj znani britanski skladatelj 20. stoletja predvsem po zaslugi svojih opernih del. S *Petrom Grimesom* (1945) je dejansko ustvaril moderno angleško opero. Ta opera, tako kot mnoga druga Brittnova dela, prinaša sporočilo o boju posameznika oz. izobčenca proti meščanski družbi in zatiralni moralnosti, ki jo je Britten kot homoseksualec skupaj s svojim partnerjem Petrom Pearsom še kako dobro poznal. Britten je v tesnem sodelovanju s Pearsom, ki je bil izvrsten in inteligenten tenorist, za svojega prijatelja vedno ustvaril vrsto izjemnih opernih vlog, začevši s Petrom Grimesom, vrh pa je dosegel z Gustavom von Aschenbachom, protagonistom opere *Smrt v Benetkah* (1973) po noveli Thomasa Manna. Poleg popolnega poznavanja človeškega glasu je Brittnu zagotovila stalen uspeh tudi njegova izjemna spretnost v glasbenem slikanju posebnega lokalnega vzdušja. K Brittnovi priljubljenosti je pripomogla tudi »razumljivost« njegovega tonskega jezika – v *Vijaku usode* (*The Turn of the Screw*, 1954) je sicer uporabil metodo dvanajsttonskega skladanja, vendar je končni izdelek blizu poslušalčevi tradicionalni glasbeni izkušnji. Katera koli Brittnova vokalna skladba nam razkriva močno individualni pristop in energijo misleče in ranljive skladateljve osebnosti. Michael Tippett je v nekrologu zapisal: »Bil je najmuzikalnejša osebnost, kar sem jih kdaj srečal. Vedno se mi je zdelo, da glasba vre izpod njegovih prstov, kadar je sedel za klavirjem, kakor je bruhal iz njegovega uma, kadar je skladal.«