

**Britten**

*Peter Grimes*

**Rafael Kubelík**



**mp LIVE**

**Benjamin Britten 1913–1976**

**Peter Grimes**

*Libretto by Montagu Slater*

*after the poem by George Crabbe, 'The Borough'*

Peter Grimes

Ellen Orford

Balstrode

Auntie

First Niece

Second Niece

Bob Boles

Swallow

Mrs. Sedley

Rector

Hobson

Ned Keene

The Boy (silent)

**Peter Pears**

**Sylvia Fisher**

**James Pease**

**Jean Watson**

**Joan Carlyle**

**Iris Kells**

**Raymond Nilsson**

**Owen Brannigan**

**Lauris Elms**

**John Lanigan**

**David Kelly**

**Geraint Evans**

**Arthur MacKenzie**

**Royal Opera Chorus** *chorus master* Douglas Robinson

**Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden**

*leader* Charles Taylor

**Rafael Kubelík**

Recorded 6 February 1958, Royal Opera House, London

From the Harewood Collection

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### Act 1

1	Peter Grimes!	1'20
2	You sailed your boat	3'03
3	Peter Grimes, I here advise you!	2'04
4	The truth...The pity...	1'55
5	<i>Interlude I: On The Beach</i>	3'27
6	Oh! hang at open doors	3'43
7	Good morning. Good morning	1'04
8	Hi! Give us a hand!	3'11
9	I have to go from pub to pub	2'08
10	Let her among you	3'01
11	Look, the storm cone!	2'21
12	And do you prefer the storm	5'37
13	<i>Interlude II: The Storm</i>	4'04
14	Past time to close!	4'20
15	We live and let live	1'45
16	Have you heard?	1'16
17	Now the great bear and Pleiades	3'44
18	Old Joe has gone fishing	4'06
19	Back announcement	0'08

### Act 2

1	<i>Interlude III: Sunday morning by the beach</i>	2'20
2	Glitter of waves and glitter of sunlight	5'18
3	Child you're not too young	3'31
4	This unrelenting wor	4'32

5	Fool to let it come to this!	3'10
6	People! No! I will speak!	1'54
7	We planned that their lives should have a new start	2'35
8	Swallow! Shall we go and see Grimes in his hut?	1'04
9	Now is gossip put on trial	2'03
10	From the gutter	4'29
11	<i>Passacaglia</i>	5'44
12	Go there!	9'33
13	Peter Grimes! Nobody here?	2'58



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### Act 3

1	<i>Interlude IV: Evening</i>	5'00
2	Assign your prettiness to me	2'13
3	Ahoy! Ahoy!	3'01
4	Come along, Doctor!	2'36
5	Embroidery in childhood was a luxury of idleness	5'29
6	Mister Swallow! Mister Swallow!	1'51
7	Who holds himself apart, let his pride rise	3'54
8	<i>Interlude VI: Fog</i>	4'06
9	Peter Grimes!	3'14
10	Peter, we've come to take you home	4'02
11	To those who pass the Borough	3'14
12.	Applause and back-announcement	1'43

## Peter Grimes with an international twist

*Arnold Whittall*

### The occasion

For half a century ‘the 1958 recording of *Peter Grimes*’ meant the Decca LP version, conducted by Britten himself, made in December under studio conditions in London’s Walthamstow Assembly Hall. It was planned by John Culshaw, produced by Erik Smith, and released in 1959. It was a stressful occasion for Britten, who for all his operatic experience had never conducted the work before, and the sheer physical strain involved meant that Reginald Goodall, conductor of the 1945 world première, had to be called in to help with the final stages. The result was, and remains, a document of the first importance. It is nevertheless very different from a live, unedited performance, in a large theatre, with a conductor of vast experience in the ‘standard’ operatic repertory. The present recording, from the collection of Lord Harewood, enables such comparisons to be made. But it also stands on its own as an outstanding memento of a rare event – the only recording of a Britten opera conducted by Rafael Kubelík.

Kubelík (1914–1996) became music director at Covent Garden in 1955, and moved on after only three years, not least because he was subjected to a good deal of often chauvinistic sniping from those who should have known better – Sir Thomas Beecham, for example. But during that brief period Kubelík’s work on a wide range of operas from the romantic and post-romantic repertoires, including *Die Meistersinger*, *Otello*, *Les Troyens* and *Jenufa*, gave ample evidence of his versatility and imagination. Britten knew and admired him, and Kubelík’s expansive yet highly expressive approach to *Grimes* was evidently one to which all involved responded positively.

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Not surprisingly, there are many similarities between the casts in the theatre in January–February 1958 and in the recording studio ten months later. Both contained regular Royal Opera artists with considerable experience in the Britten canon, especially in the two operas first performed at Covent Garden – *Billy Budd* (1951) and *Gloriana* (1953); and both had two notable survivors of the opera’s première: Peter Pears and Owen Brannigan. The major difference is that Covent Garden had Sylvia Fisher as an imposingly intense Ellen Orford. She was then approaching the summit of her career, having already made a great impression there as the Kostelnicka in Kubelík’s *Jenufa* and as Sieglinde in Rudolf Kempe’s 1957 *Ring* cycle, issued on CD for the first time in 2008.



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#### **From text to music**

Work on *Peter Grimes*, first performed at Sadlers Wells in June 1945, had begun four years earlier, in America. Benjamin Britten had lived there since 1939, and his first extended stage work, the operetta *Paul Bunyan* (to a libretto by W.H. Auden) had been premièred in New York in May 1941. That same month, Britten read an article in *The Listener* by E.M. Forster about the Suffolk poet George Crabbe that vividly evoked those East Coast locations around Aldeburgh so close to Britten’s heart. Even before they left America, in March 1942, Britten and Peter Pears had got hold of Crabbe’s long poem ‘The Borough’, set around the year 1830, and telling the story of Peter Grimes.

Beginning work on a possible scenario, they made the crucial decision that Grimes should be less the wholehearted villain depicted by Crabbe and more the kind of flawed yet visionary outsider standing for oppressed minorities in contemporary culture – including, in the 1940s, the gay community to which

both Britten and Pears belonged. Britten himself was strongly drawn to Grimes's deeply divided personality, and his dramatic depiction of the fisherman's alternating tenderness and aggression, especially with his apprentices, reflected his own anxieties as an adult with a strong attraction to boys. Even though there seems to have been nothing predatory about Britten's friendships with the likes of David Hemmings, who as a treble created the role of Miles in *The Turn of the Screw* in 1954, it is clear that he had no compunction about ending such friendships when the boy's voice broke.

Having failed to persuade Christopher Isherwood, then living in California, to provide a libretto, Britten chose Montague Slater, a left-wing poet he had worked with in the 1930s. Slater's text was complete by the end of 1942, but it was early 1944 before Britten began on the music, and there were many arguments and adjustments to the text before the composition itself was completed in February 1945: even then, there were further revisions when a definitive vocal score was published later that year.

The opera's American origins are evident in the fact that it was Serge Koussevitsky, the Russian-born conductor resident in Boston, who actually commissioned it, mainly on the strength of his admiration for the *Sinfonia da Requiem* (1940). Britten's experience of recent American music theatre, notably Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, with its vivid storm scene, also helped to shape the work. Britten was also a wholehearted admirer of such radical earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century operas as Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* and Berg's *Wozzeck*. Nevertheless, it is his powerfully original rethinking of more traditional operatic conventions associated particularly with Verdi that does most to account for the early impact of *Peter Grimes*.

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The huge success of the première itself was particularly gratifying for Britten, since there were many tensions with members of the Sadler's Wells Company and the production team during an unusually fraught rehearsal period. Yet within two years of the première, the opera had been staged in Belgium, Switzerland, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Sweden, Austria and Germany, as well as at Tanglewood in the USA, conducted by the young Leonard Bernstein. In addition, it was performed no fewer than 23 times at Covent Garden between November 1947 and December 1949. By the time of the 1958 *Grimes* performances, Britten was by far the most regularly performed living composer at the Royal Opera.

### The opera in outline

#### **Prologue: interior of the Borough's Moot Hall**

The coroner Swallow conducts an inquest into the death at sea of a boy apprenticed to fisherman Peter Grimes. As the music makes crystal clear, there is an unbridgeable gulf between the jaunty, self-important and intolerant demeanour of the assembled Borough citizens, led by Swallow, and the gauche yet distinctly volatile Grimes. The Prologue briefly introduces the opera's other main characters – apothecary Ned Keene, genteel widow Mrs Sedley and schoolmistress Ellen Orford, also a widow, and the only one to sympathise with Peter after the coroner's verdict of death in 'accidental circumstances'. Their brief, eloquent duet, introducing one of the work's most memorable themes, leads into Act 1.

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### **Act 1 Scene 1: a Borough street by the sea**

A magical orchestral introduction depicts the wheeling, screeching seagulls and rolling breakers on a bright morning. The verses of a hymn-like chorus describing the rewards and perils of the fishing community, interspersed with brief comments from various locals, lead to an extended scene in three main parts.

First, after Grimes has been helped to haul his boat onto dry land, Ned Keene puts forward a plan to obtain a new apprentice from the workhouse for Grimes: the plan becomes viable when Ellen agrees to travel with Hobson the carter to collect the boy. Second, the sighting of an impending storm provokes a massive ensemble and chorus anticipating the worst. Third, a dialogue between Grimes and retired sea-captain Balstrode, who is relatively well-disposed to him, shows vividly how the fisherman's visionary streak (as he recalls the voyage in which his previous apprentice died) can quickly turn into a paranoia made all the more dangerous by his unrealistic desires to conform – on his own terms – to Borough standards. As Grimes's fantasies of domestic bliss and social acceptance reach their climax ('with her there'll be no quarrel') an orchestral depiction of the storm erupts and leads directly into

### **Act 1 Scene 2: the interior of the Boar Inn**

Again, there are two main parts. First, short, song-like arias from Auntie and Balstrode, as well as contributions from Bob Boles, the Nieces, and Ned Keene, say much about the narrow views of Borough society as it assembles in the local pub. Then, at the height of the storm, Grimes bursts in, to await the arrival of his new apprentice. In a brief but mesmerisingly lyrical aria, 'Now the Great Bear and Pleiades', the manic quality of his poetic streak is given full rein, and provokes violent hostility, especially from a tipsy Bob Boles.

After Auntie's plea for calm, Ned Keene launches an ebullient Round, 'Old Joe has gone fishing', to which Grimes makes an eerily disruptive contribution. Then, at last, Hobson, Ellen and the boy arrive, only for Peter to drag him away unceremoniously as the Borough howls its outrage.

### **Act 2 Scene 1, as Act 1 Scene 1, several weeks later**

The orchestral introduction evokes a sunlit Sunday, as Ellen and the apprentice John settle on a seaside bench, and the bells of the Parish Church summon the faithful to morning service. The first part of the scene is dominated by Ellen's questioning of John, and then by her fraught dialogue with Peter as his rough treatment of the boy and lack of concern for Ellen's feelings are exposed: meanwhile, a more fundamental dialogue is taking place between the conflict-ridden music of the principals on stage and the off-stage church service, which fades in and out. The second part of the scene begins after Peter's wild cry – 'So be it! – and God have mercy upon me!'

Auntie, Ned Keene and Bob Boles, who have overheard the later stages of the argument between Ellen and Peter, immediately accuse Ellen of failing to stand up to Grimes's bullying, and as the churchgoers come out into the street a big ensemble builds up whose refrain – 'Grimes is at his exercise!', uses the same melodic shape as Grimes's earlier cry, 'and God have mercy upon me!'

The ensemble turns into a march on Grimes's hut, bent on retribution. Then, in one of the opera's most poignant contrasts, the fading music of the march yields to a tender, regretful ensemble for Ellen, Auntie and the nieces, musing on the bitter compromises necessary in the lives of women. The orchestral interlude which

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follows begins as a hushed reflection (with solo viola) on the need for compassion, and John the apprentice's vulnerability: but as it evolves, and grows ever more agitated, that vulnerability is seen as inseparable from Peter's capacity for violence.

### **Act 2 Scene 2: inside Grimes's hut**

In an extended scena, Grimes forces the boy to get ready to go fishing. In a state of delusional excitement at the prospect of stealing a march on all the other fishermen, he fantasises about the riches that will come his way, and then – more tenderly – about the life he might lead as Ellen's husband. But the approaching, marching mob can now be heard, and Grimes's mood quickly changes. He tells John that he has had visions of the dead apprentice, and accuses the boy of conspiring with Ellen and the rest to destroy him. In haste, Grimes forces John out of the hut, telling him to climb down the cliff to the boat, but the boy stumbles and falls to his death.

As Peter himself climbs down the cliff, the Borough posse, led by Swallow, Keene and the Rector, arrive. Finding nothing but 'a neat and empty hut', they leave with complacent self-satisfaction, while the orchestral postlude, recalling the interlude's depiction of John's vulnerability, speaks the tragic truth.

### **Act 3, Scene 1: the Borough street, at night**

Paralleling Act 2's counterpointing of on-stage and off-stage musics, the initial exchanges involving Swallow, the Nieces, Ned Keene and Mrs Sedley, take place against the background of dance music from inside the Moot Hall. The parodic nature of this episode, in which Britten's own contempt for the failings of the Borough worthies is at its most explicit, culminates in a saccharine ditty for the Rector as he bids the company 'Good Night'.

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Only the malicious Mrs Sedley remains behind, to eavesdrop on Ellen and Balstrode, who have seen that Grimes's boat has reappeared. Ellen has found the boy's embroidered jersey, and the regretful tenderness of her meditation on her own handiwork, ending with her agreement with Balstrode that they will do what they can to help Peter, is potently offset by Mrs Sedley's gleeful informing of Swallow about Grimes's return. Swallow quickly orders Hobson, as Borough constable, to effect Grimes's arrest. The most intense and vehement of the work's choral assaults on Grimes ensues, culminating in visceral bellowings of his name.

### Act 3, Scene 2

The setting remains the same, but a few hours have passed. A distant fog horn sounds, and the orchestra focuses in on Grimes disorientation and despair. Grimes himself is now to be pitied, and the music, in a remarkable transformation of the conventionally operatic Mad Scene, reaches new levels of intensity as he recalls earlier material – even the Act 1 Round – and, finally, his always-doomed hopes of love and stability with Ellen. As it is, not even Ellen, for all her anguish, can persuade Balstrode not to urge Peter to sail out to sea and sink his boat: and the fact that this instruction is spoken, not sung – Peter himself now silent – adds to the sense of utter helplessness at the turn events have taken.

Dawn breaks, and the Act 1 depiction of a serene seascape, its crying gulls and gently surging waves, returns. The Borough gets ready for another working day, while a few individuals – Swallow, Boles, Auntie – note that a boat 'sinking out at sea' can no longer be seen. But the opera ends with a shuddering cadence, suggesting that the tragic events we have witnessed will not be so easily forgotten.

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The original sources are stored in the Borthwick Library at the University of York, where they are curated by Dr. Christopher Webb. Many of them are unique, irreplaceable and fragile: acetates in particular have an unpredictable shelf-life and require extremely careful handling. They are being remastered by Roger Beardsley, who has a worldwide reputation in the field, to the highest possible standard, with the emphasis kept on the feel of the live performance.

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**Roger Beardsley**

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Recorded: 6 February 1958, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

*From the Harewood Collection*

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