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Cover: Stuart Skelton as Peter Grimes. Above: Susan Gritton (centre) as Ellen Orford. Both from Peter Grimes (Opera Australia, 2009). Photos: Branco Gaica

### Welcome

Peter Grimes is an opera of great feeling, which depicts the life of an alienated fisherman and the seaside village he struggles to inhabit. Unveiled right after the moral catastrophe of World War II, this opera earned Britten his reputation. Though the opera does not deal directly with the effects of war, it's clear that the composer was reacting in a complex way to what a seismic event like WWII revealed about the state of humanity. Peter Grimes is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest operas of the 20th century.

With *Peter Grimes*, Britten held up a mirror to English life as no other composer has before or since. Its evocative music personifies the power and loneliness of the ocean,

and presents a gripping psychological drama about an individual ostracized by his community and in conflict with the collective.

The work abounds with thought-provoking themes and topics, including social ostracism; the nature of innocence and guilt; the possibilities of justice; the harsh realities of life as a fisherman; living within an ever-changing society; and, challenges in family and group dynamics.

Dealing with themes ranging from the intimate ties between us, to our unnerving capacity for cruelty, *Peter Grimes* is an evening of mature drama appropriate for older students in either high school or post-secondary studies.



# STUDENT DRESS REHEARSALS 2013/2014

\$15 INDIVIDUAL STUDENT RUSH TICKETS\*

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Thursday, April 3, 2014

Roberto Devereux Donizetti Monday, April 21, 2014

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\*In-person sales only. Age and purchasing restrictions apply. All dress rehearsals take place at 7:30 p.m. and are approximately three hours with one or two intermissions.

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### TEACHER DISCOUNTS: 50% OFF ADULT TICKETS!

Teachers can purchase a limit of two (2) adult tickets per opera season in select seating sections for half price. An OCT membership card must be shown when purchasing/picking up the tickets.

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# Opera 101

#### **WHAT IS OPERA?**

The term "opera" comes from the Italian word for "work" or "piece," and is usually applied to the European tradition of grand opera. Opera is a form of storytelling which incorporates music, drama and design.

Though its origins date back to ancient Greece, the form of opera we are familiar with today started in the late 16th century in Florence, Italy. Count Giovanni de' Bardi was a patron and host to a group of intellectuals, poets, artists, scientists and humanists including Giulio Caccini (composer) and Vincenzo Galilei (father to the astronomer and scientist, Galileo Galilei, who was most famous for his improvements to the telescope). These individuals explored trends in the arts, focusing on music and drama in particular. They were unified in their belief that the arts had become over-embellished and that returning to the transparency of the music of the ancient Greeks, which incorporated both speech and song, and a chorus to further the plot and provide commentary on the action, would present a more pure, natural and powerful way to tell stories and express emotions.

The first opera, *Dafne*, about a nymph who fled from Apollo and was subsequently transformed by the gods into a laurel tree, was composed by Jacopo Peri in 1597. From then on, the early operas recreated Greek tragedies with mythological themes. During the 17th and 18th centuries, topics expanded to include stories about royalty, and everyday or common people. Some operas were of a serious nature (called opera seria) and some light-hearted (called opera buffa). Since then, operas have been written on a wide variety of topics such as cultural clashes (Madama Butterfly), comedic farce (The Barber of Seville), politicians on foreign visits (Nixon in China), the celebration of Canadian heroes (Louis Riel), and children's stories (The Little Prince), to name a few.

The COC presents works in the western European tradition but musical equivalents to European opera can be found in Japan, at the Peking Opera in China, and in Africa where it is called Epic Storytelling.

### What are the differences between operas, musicals and plays?

Traditionally operas are through-sung, meaning they are sung from beginning to end with no dialogue in between. Singers must have powerful voices in order to be heard over the orchestra (the ensemble of instrumental musicians that accompanies the dramatic action on stage during an opera). Remember: opera singers don't use microphones!

Musicals are a combination of dialogue and sung pieces and often include choreographed numbers. The singers often use microphones and are accompanied by a pit band which includes more modern instruments like a drum kit, guitar and electronic instruments.

Plays are primarily spoken works of theatre with minimal singing or music.

There are always exceptions to the rule: though *Les Misérables* is through-sung it is still classified as a piece of musical theatre because of its style of music. By the same token, some operas, like Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, have spoken dialogue in addition to singing.

#### What does opera feel like?

Take five minutes out of the school day and instead of using regular voices to converse, ask the class to commit to singing everything. Make an agreement with the students that it's not about judging people's voices but about freeing our natural sounds. Make up the melodies on the spot and don't worry about singing "correctly." Did the musical lines help express or emphasize certain emotions?

If so, how?

# Attending the Opera: Make the most of your opera experience

#### WELCOME TO THE FOUR SEASONS CENTRE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS



So you're headed to the opera, and there are a few questions on your mind. Here are some tips on how to get the most out of your opera experience.

First, there's the question of **what to wear**. People wear all sorts of things to the opera – jeans, dress pants, cocktail dresses, suits, etc. The important thing is to be comfortable. Wear something that makes you feel good, whether it be jeans or your nicest tie. But skip that spritz of perfume or cologne before you go out; the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts is scent-free. Many fellow patrons and performers are allergic to strong scents.

Once you're dressed, it's important to arrive on time for the show. Late patrons cannot be admitted to the theatre, and you may have to watch the first act on a television screen in the lobby rather than from your seat. If you don't have your ticket yet, arrive as early as possible – the line-up for the box office can often be quite long prior to a performance! The main doors open one hour before the performance. Line up there and have your ticket ready to present to the usher. If you have any questions about

tonight's performance, drop by the welcome desk (just inside the main doors) to ask a member of the COC staff, who are full of useful information not only about tonight's opera, but also about COC programs in general. A preperformance chat takes place in the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre (Ring 3) about 45 minutes before the show. These chats, given by members of our COC Volunteer Speakers Bureau, offer valuable insight into the opera and the specific production that you'll be seeing.

Before the opera starts, take the opportunity to **explore** the lobby, known as the Isadore and Rosalie Sharp City Room. Stop by concessions and order a beverage for intermission or purchase a snack. Browse the Opera Shop and pick up a memento of your experience at the opera. (Note: the Opera Shop is not open at dress rehearsals.) Walk up the stairs, passing a sculpture as you go, and note the floating glass staircase – the longest free-span glass staircase in the world! On the third floor, you'll see the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre, home to our Free Concert Series. You'll also see a mobile by artist Alexander Calder, adding some colour and whimsy to the space.

Chimes will ring throughout the lobby ten minutes before the performance, reminding everyone to find their seats. Head towards the door noted on your ticket, get a program from the usher, and find your designated seat in R. Fraser Elliott Hall. It's best to use this time to open any candies you might have and turn off your cell phone - the hall is built to carry sound, so small sounds travel further than you may think! Photography is not permitted once the show starts. The design and direction of the show is under intellectual property and only the official COC photographer and/or members of the media can take pictures and even then, only under special circumstances that require prior arrangements.

As the lights go down and the audience quiets, listen carefully. Remember all of that traffic you heard in the lobby? And now... not a peep! The auditorium is physically separated from the outside and the ground below, making for the best acoustic experience possible.

Now it's time to sit back and enjoy the opera! **SURTITLES**<sup>™</sup> will be projected on a horizontal screen above the stage. SURTITLES™ originate from the idea of "subtitles", which are most commonly used in foreign films to make them more accessible outside of their country of origin. The COC was the first opera company to adapt this concept for the operatic stage. Slides containing the English translation of the *libretto* (text for the opera) are projected in a more visible place for the audience: above the stage. SURTITLES™ were first used by the COC at the premiere of the opera *Elektra* in 1983. Only the name could be trademarked, as the technology for the projections was already in existence. Opera companies from around the world have adopted this audience initiative under different names, and it has revolutionized opera stages everywhere.

Feel free to show your appreciation to the performers by laughing at humorous bits or applauding after a well-performed aria. If a performer has pulled off some particularly impressive vocal fireworks, it's absolutely acceptable to yell out your appreciation in addition to applause. You may hear your fellow audience members shouting "bravo!" for a man, "brava!" for a woman, or "bravi!" for a group of performers. Feel free to join in!

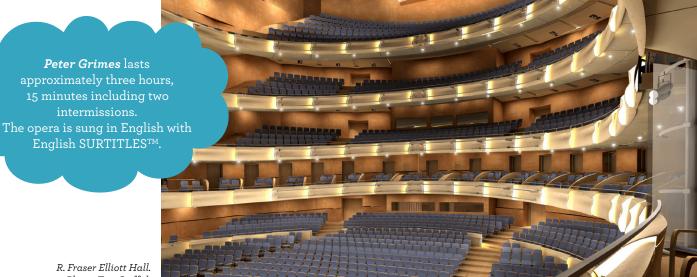


Photo: Tim Griffith

# **Characters and Synopsis**

#### **MAIN CHARACTERS (in order of vocal appearance)**

Name	Description	Voice Type
Hobson	Carter (one who transports things in a cart)	Bass
Swallow	Lawyer	Bass
Peter Grimes	Fisherman	Tenor
Mrs. Sedley	Widow	Mezzo-soprano
Ellen Orford	Widow, schoolmistress	Soprano
Auntie	Landlady of The Boar tavern	Contralto
Bob Boles	Fisherman	Tenor
Captain Balstrode	Retired merchant skipper	Baritone
Rev. Horace Adams	Rector	Tenor
Auntie's 1st "niece"	Main attraction at The Boar	Soprano
Auntie's 2nd "niece"	Main attraction at The Boar	Mezzo-soprano
Ned Keene	Apothecary*	Baritone
John	Grimes' apprentice	Silent
Dr. Crabbe**		

\*Apothecary:
an archaic term
for a person who prepares
and sells medicines. Roughly
correlates with the modern word
"pharmacist."

#### \*\***Dr. Crabbe** is an

important silent role. Britten included
this character, named after the poet who wrote
the source material of the opera, in his cast list.
Director Neil Armfield magnifies the role by keeping Dr.
Crabbe on stage as a near-constant observer of the action.
This is a way of suggesting the cross-generational process
of artistic creation, as Dr. Crabbe often sits at his writing
desk, with angled lamp, imagining the inhabitants of the
town and their fates. Canadian actor Thomas Hauff
portrays Dr. Crabbe.



(l-r) Taryn Fiebig and Lorina Gore as Auntie's Nieces and Stuart Skelton as Peter Grimes in Peter Grimes (Opera Australia, 2009). Photo: Branco Gaica

#### **SYNOPSIS**

#### **PROLOGUE**

An English fishing village

During a coroner's inquest at the town hall, the lawyer Swallow questions the fisherman, Peter Grimes, about the death of his apprentice during a storm at sea. Though the room is crowded with villagers hostile to Grimes, Swallow accepts the man's explanation of the event and rules that the boy died accidentally. He warns Grimes not to take on another apprentice unless he lives with a woman who can care for the boy. When the hall empties, Ellen Orford, the schoolmistress, asks Grimes to have courage and promises to help him find a better life.

#### ACT I

As the villagers go about their daily routine the apothecary Ned Keene tells Grimes that he has found him a new apprentice at a workhouse and Ellen Orford offers to go and fetch him, in spite of the villagers' hostile comments. Grimes is left alone with Captain Balstrode, one of his few friends, who tries to convince him to leave the village. The fisherman explains that first he has to make enough money to open a store and marry Ellen.

That night, as a storm rages, the villagers gather at Auntie's tavern. When Grimes enters, there is an uncomfortable silence. Ellen arrives with the new apprentice, John, and Grimes immediately takes the boy back into the storm and to his hut.

#### INTERMISSION

#### ACT II

On Sunday morning, as Ellen and John are watching the villagers go to church, she discovers a bruise on the young boy's neck. Grimes comes to take John fishing. Ignoring Ellen's concerns, he hits her and drags the child off. The villagers, who have witnessed this brutality, decide to confront the fisherman, and an angry mob heads off to Grimes's hut.

At his hut, Grimes hears the mob approaching and rushes John out of the back door. The boy slips and falls down the cliff and Grimes escapes. The villagers find the hut empty and orderly and decide that they have misjudged Grimes. Captain Balstrode looks over the cliff and knows better.

#### INTERMISSION

#### **ACT III**

A dance is underway in the town hall. Captain Balstrode and Ellen have been searching for Grimes, Ellen has found the boy's jersey but there is no sign of Grimes or John. Once the villagers realize Grimes' boat has returned they mount another manhunt, convinced that Grimes is guilty of the death of his new apprentice.

Grimes, deranged and raving, hears the villagers shouting his name in the distance. Ellen asks Grimes to come home, but Balstrode tells him to sail out and take his own life. He helps Grimes launch the boat, and then leads Ellen away. As the dawn breaks, the villagers return to their daily chores. Swallow tells them that the coast guard has reported a sinking boat, but no one listens to him.

Synopsis courtesy of Houston Grand Opera and Opera Australia

#### After

its world premiere in
1945 in London, England, Peter
Grimes received its first American
performance in 1946 at the Tanglewood
Music Festival, where it was conducted
by the young Leonard Bernstein. Bernstein
is the composer of tremendously popular
and successful musicals including On
the Town, West Side Story and the
operetta Candide.

## **Genesis of the Opera**



Photo by Roland Haupt. Image courtesy of www.britten100.org

### EARLY LIFE OF THE COMPOSER

Born in Suffolk, on the seaswept east coast of England in 1913, Benjamin Britten (left) is acknowledged as the foremost English composer of the 20th century. The child of a dentist father and a musician mother, Britten was a child prodigy, composing prolifically from the age of four. He began formal music studies in 1924, and by the age of 12 he had composed a dozen large-scale works. When he was 14 he began taking lessons with English composer Frank Bridge who recognized Britten's talent.

Later he met and studied with composers John Ireland and Ralph Vaughan Williams. In 1930 he entered the Royal College of Music and by 21, was earning his keep as a composer, mainly for film, radio and theatre. In his early twenties he was a member of a group of left-wing intellectuals centred around the poet W. H. Auden. In 1936 Britten met tenor Peter Pears who was to become his lifelong partner and muse, and, in 1939, together they fled Britain, horrified by the rise of Nazism in Europe.

#### **EXILE IN AMERICA AND INSPIRATION**

Britten and Pears were still travelling in the U.S. and Canada when the war was declared, and were unable to return to England. It was in America that Britten composed his first operetta *Paul Bunyan* (with libretto by Auden) in 1941, specifically written for children.

Also in 1941, while visiting California, Britten was given a copy of George Crabbe's collection of poems entitled *The Borough*, published in 1810. In 24 poems, *The Borough* describes the lives of the people of a small fishing village in Suffolk, one of whom is a fisherman named Peter Grimes.

Crabbe, a poet and clergyman, had grown up in Aldeburgh and depicted the village and its inhabitants with a great deal of precision, though he kept his account thinly veiled as The Borough. Britten, as it happened, grew up very near Aldeburgh and knew the area and the people well. A potent combination of homesickness and his identification with

the depiction of the loner misfit (one either misunderstood or deliberately shunned) spoke to him on a personal level. Britten immediately seized on the poem as the subject for his first opera. Homesick for England, he and Pears finally returned in 1942, and settled in Aldeburgh. As committed pacifists, Britten and Pears both registered as conscientious objectors\*. In a time of national patriotic fervour, this was a radically unpopular stance to adopt.

\*Conscientious
objector: Individual who
refuses to perform military service,
usually a claim recognized on
religious grounds or objections of a
moral conscience.

You can
read George Crabbe's
long narrative poem The Borough at
this online link. The section that inspired
Britten's opera is called "The Poor of the
Borough." One of the characters from
that section is Abel Keene, shown
below.

Illustration of Abel Keen by C. R. Leslie from an 1847 verson of The Borough

#### **PETER GRIMES PREMIERE AND SUCCESS**

Peter Grimes received its world premiere in June 1945, only weeks after WWII ended, at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London, England with Peter Pears in the title role. Complaints from company members about supposed favouritism and general unease about a score many considered "unsingable," had made for a rehearsal period fraught with tension. Fortunately, critics and audiences recognized the musical value of the opera – it was an instant success. Within three years of its premiere, it was performed around the world in major opera houses to great acclaim.

Embraced by the public and critics, *Peter Grimes* was generally acknowledged as a watershed moment in operatic history, giving a fresh new feel to the art form. Despite his renown as a symphonic composer and conductor, over the next fifteen years Britten devoted himself almost exclusively to writing operas and established himself as the leading opera composer of the 20th century: *Albert Herring* (1947), *Billy Budd* (1951), *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), *Owen Wingrave* (1971), and *Death in Venice* (1973), are the most famous of Britten's operas. Not coincidentally all of these works share a common theme – an outsider character excluded or misunderstood by society.

### RECURRING THEMES: THE OUTSIDER IN SOCIETY

Nearly all of Britten's operas touch in some way on the themes of the individual in society and the violation of innocence. Britten never lost the belief that art could convey fundamental truths by confronting social majorities with evidence of their own intolerance and insensitivity. His outsider-protagonists are distinguished by their great sensitivity, while their opponents are portrayed through parody or even caricature.

Britten was a lifelong outsider; a pacifist even through the height of WWII and the bombing of Britain; a homosexual at a time when such a life was considered a criminal offence; and a musician whose work was more deliberately situated against the prevailing trends of mainstream British composers, and yet conservative compared to many European and American contemporaries. Still, he elevated the use of English as a language to be sung, and clarified the chosen text (often poetry) through music. His work is very accessible and was highly respected during his own lifetime. He is one of the few 20th-century composers whose operas are regularly performed throughout the western world.

After many years of illness Benjamin Britten died of heart failure in 1976, one year after accepting the title of Baron of Aldeburgh in the county of Suffolk. He is buried in Aldeburgh next to his partner Peter Pears, who died in 1986. Their home, The Red House, is now the **Britten-Pears Foundation**, dedicated to promoting their musical legacy.



#### **A GREAT LEGACY**

In 1948, Britten, Peter Pears and *Peter Grimes* producer Eric Crozier established the Aldeburgh Festival. Originally intended to house their own opera company, the English Opera Group, it expanded to include readings of poetry, literature, drama, lectures and art exhibitions. Over the years, the Festival has provided a venue for new music, new interpretations and the rediscovery of forgotten works, as well as the premieres of two Britten operas, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Death in Venice*. Visit the Aldeburgh Festival's website at www.aldeburgh.co.uk for more information.

In 2003, English painter
and sculptor Maggi Hambling was
commissioned to produce a sculpture to
commemorate Benjamin Britten. The result was Scallop,
a pair of oversized steel scallop shells, situated on the shores
of Aldeburgh beach. The edge of the main shell is pierced with
the words, "I hear those voices that will not be drowned," taken
from Britten's Peter Grimes. The sculpture (shown below) is
a source of controversy among locals, where some say it
obstructs views or is an eyesore, while others say that it
is a fitting commemoration of Britten that helps
attract tourists.

Photo: Ella Mullins



# **Listening Guide**

#### INTRODUCTION

The premiere of Britten's *Peter Grimes*, which re-opened London's Sadler's Wells Theatre after World War II, was a defining moment in the history of British opera. In fact, since Henry Purcell's Dido and Aeneas (1688), no British opera had managed to remain in the active repertoire in the intervening three centuries. Britain produced many great composers of symphony and song such as Edward Elgar, Gustav Holst, Ralph Vaughan Williams and William Walton but, despite their notable efforts, none was successful in composing the great British opera. In many ways Britten "invented" the modern British opera, though he was undoubtedly influenced by a myriad of sources, both homegrown and international. Peter Grimes sources the English folk song tradition and looks back to Purcell himself; it refers to German Baroque oratorio, as well as the latest compositional trends (especially early 20thcentury American composers, such as Aaron Copland), and to continental opera (namely, Richard Strauss). Also, Britten was careful to build his work around forms that opera audiences knew well: arias, duets, quartets, choruses and interludes. He brilliantly synthesized these influences into an original style which was neither conservative nor aggressively avant-garde, but still completely and undeniably "modern."

Peter Grimes revolves around four characters, not all of them individual soloists as one would expect. Two are just that: the tenor who takes on the title role and the soprano who sings Ellen Orford, one of the few people in the village who sympathizes with the disturbed outsider. Of the two other main personages, one is the "Borough" - the tightly knit, close-minded townspeople played by the chorus, along with a number of comprimario singers (performers who sing smaller roles). The final "character" is the sea itself, personified by the orchestra in the form of three introductory, curtain-raising interludes which set the scene and mood, along with three mid-act interludes, each of which conveys a specific psychological tone, as well as Peter Grimes's state of mind. Britten himself stated, "I wanted to express my awareness of the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depend on the seas." The sea preludes and interludes are thus an integral part of the drama.

The tracks listed below are excerpted from *Peter Grimes*, Decca 478 2669. Orchestra and Chorus of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Sir Colin Davis, conductor. Jon Vickers, Heather Harper, Jonathan Summers, Elizabeth Bainbridge. At coc.ca/COCRadio you can experience the listening guide online.



#### MUSICAL EXCERPT

Act I, scene i, Arioso/Duet/Arioso/Interlude: "That evil day..."

#### **CONNECTION TO THE STORY**

In an attempt to bridge the gulf between Peter and the Borough, Captain Balstrode asks the fisherman to recount the truth of what happened with his first apprentice, William Sprode, and encourages him to marry Ellen Orford. Peter rejects Balstrode's attempt at conciliation in an agitated duet before regaining his calm to consider a different kind of life with Ellen and wonder: "What harbour shelters peace? Away from tidal waves, away from storm? What harbour can embrace terrors and tragedies?" The orchestra provides us with the answer to his musings as it launches into an agitated sea interlude.

#### MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The musical structure of this excerpt demonstrates Britten's virtuosity in assimilating historical musical influences. In this instance, he looks back to the Baroque period's "ABA" aria form, in which a slower, more lyrical opening "A" section is contrasted by a quicker "B" section followed by a repeat of the "A" section. Here, the "A" is Grimes's *arioso* (singing more tied to the rhythm of speech than an aria, but more melodic than recitatives) in which he recounts in long, sustained lyrical lines "that evil day" which ended with the death of his apprentice at sea (at 0:00). The "B" of the Baroque formula is the more agitated, *vivace* (quick) duet with Balstrode (at 1:20) in which the divided, choppy singing line suits their heated exchange, as Grimes rejects his friend's attempt to draw him into the Borough's fold. Just before the reprise of the

"A" section, we hear a brief portent of the approaching storm (at 3:01) followed by Grimes's haunting arioso, "What harbour shelters peace?" in which, for one last time, he contemplates a more conventional, domestic life before being interrupted by a violent orchestral sea interlude (at 3:13).

Like the famous German composer Richard Wagner before him, Britten used *leitmotifs* (recurring musical themes) to represent particular persons, places, or ideas. In this case, the *leitmotif* of a rising 9th represents the title character's longing for love, peace and normality. This interval (the number of tones between two given notes in any given musical key) can be heard between the words "What" and the first syllable of "harbour" (at 3:15). The very sound of these two tones being sung in succession intrinsically contains a hopeful, yet haunted quality which communicates Grimes's conflicted emotions in the moment. The rising 9th *leitmotif* recurs throughout the opera, returning most significantly at the conclusion, when Grimes has lost his mind and tries in vain to recall earlier "happier" times.

#### **FURTHER REFLECTION**

Why do you think a 20th-century composer like Britten looked for inspiration in music that was composed 300 years earlier?



#### MUSICAL EXCERPT

Act II, scene i, Interlude/Arioso and Chorus: "Glitter of waves..."

#### **CONNECTION TO THE STORY**

Ellen Orford and Grimes's new apprentice sit in the sun on the beach, while morning service is going on in the neighbouring parish church.

#### MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The interlude which opens Act II contains contrasting sections played by strings and brass. At the beginning of this excerpt, listen as the cellos and violas play a melody which will be sung by Ellen when the curtain rises, beginning with her words: "Glitter of waves" (0:02 and 1:34). Later, the same melody returns as Ellen endeavours to engage the boy in conversation with the words "I'll do the work, you talk" (at 2:27). The apprentice is a silent role, yet he is given eloquent "voice" by this same haunting tune (at 2:36) which signifies his playfulness and innocence. The yearning melody we hear at the beginning of the excerpt is possessed of a definite shape and direction, but is juxtaposed by more raucous, disjointed, staccato (short, detached) sounds produced by four French horns paired in twos suggesting the clangor of church bells (at 2:05). This allusion to church is entirely appropriate and utilizes a device long used in opera, the offstage "church scene."

Britten's juxtaposition of church text and the onstage drama between Ellen and the boy is particularly telling. Each of Ellen's scattered thoughts in this section is "commented" upon by the church choir. For example, when she discovers a suspicious tear in John's coat, the congregation sings the biblical text, "We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep" (listen at 6:05).

#### **FURTHER REFLECTION**

What is Britten trying to say about the townspeople of the Borough by having them sing together as a group at church?

What do you suppose are Ellen's motives in trying to engage Peter's apprentice in conversation?



#### MUSICAL EXCERPT

Act II, scene i, Quartet: "From the gutter..."

#### CONNECTION TO THE STORY

Public anger mounts against Grimes for his suspected abuse of his apprentice, and the men go off to track him down in his hut. Ellen, Auntie and the Nieces remain to ponder the position of women, who are slighted by the men's decision-making, yet still needed to comfort them when things go wrong.

#### MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE

According to Britten's life partner, tenor Peter Pears (for whom the role of Peter Grimes was written), this quartet was included at the composer's insistence to provide "some softening, some change, some relaxation after the intensity of the march to the hut." As the excerpt begins, listen for the downward cascades of flutes and horns which help to establish a gentle moment of musical calm, a sea of peace before the final tragic storm. The very specific sound world created by these descending musical gestures in the flutes, together with the three-part writing for high, female voices (Ellen, Auntie, and the two Nieces) seems to have been directly inspired by the famous, final trio from Richard Strauss's Der Rosenkavalier, also composed for three soprano voices and utilizing a very similar orchestration. English soprano Joan Cross, the first Ellen Orford, recounted how Britten requested a copy of Strauss's score to study while in hospital with measles during the writing of Peter Grimes and the link between the quartet and trio has been accepted ever since. The significance of Britten's quartet is not only contained in its homage to an earlier 20th-century piece, but also in its future influence. Leonard Bernstein, the American conductor and composer who led the first performance of Peter Grimes in the United States, was inspired by Britten's falling flutes for his song "Somewhere" from West Side Story.

#### **FURTHER REFLECTION**

What career options do you feel were open to women in a 19th-century English fishing village? Auntie is a pub owner, and the "Nieces" are prostitutes. What is Britten saying about Ellen by having her sing with them?



#### MUSICAL EXCERPT

Act II, scene i, Interlude: Passacaglia

#### **CONNECTION TO THE STORY**

This orchestral interlude occurs directly after the quartet in excerpt #3 and leads seamlessly into the second scene of Act II in which Grimes's apprentice dies tragically.

#### MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Besides acting as a bridge between two musically contrasting scenes (the serene female quartet and Grimes's towering rage directed at his apprentice), this interlude shows how closely connected Britten was to his musical heritage. This piece is written in passacaglia form in which a small musical fragment is repeated over and over, and around which other material is developed. Its name derives from the Spanish words pasar (to walk) and calle (street). Originally the passacaglia was a dance form used in Baroque opera with the repeated theme being played by the bass (the lowest pitched string instrument in the orchestra). It signified to the audience that the opera was coming to an end, and also came to represent the fate of the main character. One of the most famous examples is found at the end of Henry Purcell's opera Dido and Aeneas (1688): Dido's "Lament" in which she asks that her tragic fate be remembered after she commits suicide on a funeral pyre. Britten closely connected himself to his illustrious British Baroque

predecessor with his own arrangements of Purcell's songs and an edition of *Dido and Aeneas* itself. The repeated musical fragment (sometimes called an *ostinato*) in *Peter Grimes' passacaglia* is heard at the beginning of this excerpt, a six-note phrase played *pizzicato* (plucked rather than bowed) by cellos and basses, and later on the harp, forty times. Overlying this theme is a sinewy, sad viola solo (0:20) that, ever since the opera's premiere, has been understood to voice the apprentice boy's unspoken sadness. After the viola solo, the variations of the theme move on to more agitated patterns in the woodwinds (1:20), then to the woodwinds with high strings punctuated by sharp brass chords (2:00). The gradual increase in the number of instruments and volume telegraphs the quickening dramatic tension as the village mob approaches Grimes's hut.

#### **FURTHER REFLECTION**

The amount of orchestral music Britten uses in *Peter Grimes* is unusual for an opera – why do you think he used this option?

What does casting the apprentice as a mute role make us feel about this character?

The sea is everpresent in Peter Grimes.
Other operas in which the sea is almost a character unto itself are Mozart's Idomeneo, Verdi's Otello, Wagner's The Flying Dutchman and Tristan und Isolde, and Britten's own Death in Venice. By coincidence, all of these operas have been featured in recent COC seasons.

Britten
used a variety
of native, British
musical sources in *Peter Grimes* including the sea
shanty "Old Joe has gone
fishing" sung by Ned
Keene in Act I,
scene ii.

Many
of Britten's
works, including
most of his operas,
contain parts specifically
written for the tenor Peter
Pears, who was also
the composer's life
partner.

### What to Look for

#### **ENTERING THE BOROUGH**

This production of *Peter Grimes* is staged by Australian theatre director Neil Armfield, who has worked with the COC previously on a number of different operas, including works by Benjamin Britten (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Billy Budd*).

Britten's score is exceptionally good at creating a sense of place. You'll notice the music suggests an extraordinary number of things in the world of *Peter Grimes*, from the physical properties of the landscape – weather, light and atmosphere – to the mental states and relationships among characters. Experiences like fear and mistrust, and emotions like hope and love can be heard and, in an important sense, *felt* in the music.

And it is precisely because the music communicates with us so powerfully on a level of shared imaginative capacity (we feel the brewing anger, we smell the sea tide) that Armfield has decided not to interfere in that mental process. For example, instead of designing and creating scenery that looks like the seashore and the sea, he allows us to create the sea mentally through the images that Britten's evocative music paints.

In other words, Armfield's scaled-back staging deliberately opens up the conditions for an imaginative engagement with the opera's music. He opts not to fix our experience with literalist projections of what the music is expressing, but offers a theatrical space where the revelations of the music, and of the people in the Borough, can take place within an imaginative world we help create.



A scene from Peter Grimes (Opera Australia, 2009). Photo: Branco Gaica

#### **SET AND COSTUMES**

Armfield sets *Peter Grimes* in a community hall theatre, one that's probably not so different from the place where Benjamin Britten would have rehearsed *Peter Grimes* in England during the mid-1940s.

Inside the hall, there is an ordinary stage with a proscenium arch. Two rows of fluorescent lights hang from the ceiling. A round-faced clock keeps time from above the stage.

The **scenery** is sparse. In front of the stage, where the "audience" would normally take their seats for a performance, several pieces of furniture that you would expect to find in a community hall are scattered: large tables with legs that can fold away for easier storage; metal chairs that can be stacked alongside the walls.

The **costumes** are typical of British post-war dress, with lots of wools and tweeds in subdued colours.

For the working-class men of the Borough, overcoats and pea-coats predominate, as well as cable-knit sweaters and cardigans. As a fisherman, Peter Grimes wears hip waders and rubber boots. Individuals from higher socio-economic strata wear suits.

Women are mostly attired in long dresses of grey wool or other neutral tones. One of the few splashes of colour is assigned to the "Nieces," who wear bright, yellow dresses.

### CONCEPT: LET THE MIND PLAY INSIDE A THEATRE

This is a space where members of the community meet, but it's also a venue for performance.

Yet the way in which furniture is set up – as well as the conspicuous absence of anything that registers overtly like "set-design" – indicates that this is a space in the midst of rehearsal, undergoing a process of creation as opposed to functioning like a finished product.

Staging the opera like this is motivated by Neil Armfield's personal experience of the "final run-through... where, without the benefit of scenery, the story is told by the performers with the conspiracy of all minds in that room deciding to believe. [...] it is the pleasurable act of shared participation in the story, of choosing to allow the imagination to play and to be led, for a couple of hours, into the world of the characters."



A scene from Peter Grimes (Houston Grand Opera, 2010). Photo: Felix Sanchez

# **COC Spotlight: Alan Moffat**

Not everyone at the COC is an opera singer... take a peek behind the scenes and learn about the many diverse careers available in the arts! In this edition, we interview Alan Moffat – Patron Relationship Manager. Alan runs the COC's box office, making sure that audience members get the tickets they want and keeps that area of the website running smoothly. Alan also does a huge amount of work behind the scenes keeping our databases with customer and donor information up to date. We asked Alan a few questions to see what led him down this career path.



**Alan Moffat** (Patron Relationship Manager)

Position: Patron Relationship Manager

**Department**: Communications and Development

Name: Alan Moffat

Role in the Company: I manage the box office, co-ordinating all aspects of ticket sales with our team of full- and part-time ticket services staff. I also do lots of the reporting and statistical analysis for our development and communications departments. I use all sorts of charts to illustrate statistics such as subscription renewal rates, average ticket prices, or average donations – anything that helps to market the company.

Hometown: Edinburgh, Scotland.

**Education**: I have a Bachelor's Degree in Physics from Edinburgh University. Although my degree is not affiliated with my career, I definitely apply the analytical skills learned from my degree in my current work.

First became interested in opera: When I started working at the COC in 2003. I have developed an appreciation for the art form in my nine years with the company with my favourite productions being Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk, Iphigenia in Tauris and Orfeo ed Euridice.

What was the first opera you ever attended? La Traviata in Edinburgh, Scotland. I really enjoyed it.

What made you decide to pursue this career path? I sort of fell into ticketing when I took a year off after completing my degree to come to Canada. I was working at Tower Records at the Ticketmaster outlet in the store. I met my wife while working with Ticketmaster and having only planned to spend the year in Canada I ended up staying and eventually moving on to my current career with the COC.

If someone was interested in becoming a Patron Relationship Manager, what would you recommend they have in terms of skills or experience? There are arts administration courses available at some universities and colleges, but I think the key in this job is work experience. Finding a part-time ticketing job is a great way to start and is something you can do whilst studying, as the hours are normally part-time and very flexible. With respect to a skill-set that is beneficial for the job, I would say it requires a technical mind-set (e.g. being comfortable with Excel spreadsheets, etc.), an analytical approach, and the ability to communicate clearly with customers/patrons. From the manager's perspective, it is important to be able to direct and manage others, as well as provide useful feedback.

What do you love most about this career? What inspires you to come to work each day? The people I work with. I find that people who work in the arts, even on the administrative side, are incredibly passionate, artistic people. In our box office we have singers, actors, writers, musicians and artists and it makes it a very fun and inspirational place to work. I'm lucky to have

worked with some of the full-time staff for over five years, and continue to be inspired by them daily.

What do you enjoy the least about this career? Some of the COC's patrons are elderly and we sometimes get letters telling us they are no longer able to come to the opera due to health reasons. They often say in the letters how much the company has meant to them over the years which is nice to hear, but it's always sad to lose patrons who have been coming for years.

What surprises you most about this career? The fact that I am entering my 10th season. Time flies by so fast; when I started, the company was just breaking ground on the new opera house and we're now entering our 8th season in the venue.

What are you looking forward to with respect to this production? I haven't seen *Peter Grimes* before, but I really enjoyed *Death in Venice*, also by Benjamin Britten, in our 2010/2011 season, so I'm looking forward to comparing it to that production. Britten has a unique style to his compositions, and I find his music to be very interesting.

What do you enjoy outside of opera? I am a huge music fan and go to lots of concerts. I also play guitar and write songs. I occasionally play open-mic nights around town and during the summer can be found most lunchtimes playing guitar in the COC courtyard. I'm also a big sports fan and I'm endlessly hopeful that one day we might get some success in Toronto.

What music frequently plays on your iPod? Joel Plaskett. I've been to numerous Joel Plaskett concerts, and really enjoy his style and energy on stage.



Alan making music in the city... and the country



## **Active Learning**

One of the best parts of taking your students to the opera is the discussion and further exploration that live theatre can inspire. Take a deeper look into the themes and story of *Peter Grimes* with these discussion questions and ideas for further exploration.

#### **DISCUSSION**

- What other famous stories, including movies, plays, and operas, focus on the idea of "the outsider?" What makes this theme so popular?
- Many say that Peter Grimes dies at the end of the opera, but the libretto is not clear on this point. Balstrode advises Grimes simply to "sink her." Could Balstrode have been advising Grimes to kill himself? Would this advice be in character for Balstrode? Did Peter Grimes actually die? What else might have become of him after the end of the opera? If you'd like to extend this line of inquiry further, write a story outlining the life of Grimes after the opera. Does he return to the Borough?

#### **EXTENSION THEMES**

- The opera does not definitively say whether or not Peter Grimes murdered his first apprentice. In your class, put Peter Grimes on trial, assigning the roles of the townspeople to various students, as well as the roles of the lawyers.
- Write your own story of what happened before the opera started.
- Read the original poem by George Crabbe (link on page 10). Compare and contrast the opera to the poem.

Did viewing the opera spark some scintillating debates or discussions? Would your students like to share examples of their work with the COC? E-mail us at education@coc.ca.

We'd love to hear from you!

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### **Study Guides**



The COC offers a wide variety of school programs for Kindergarten to Grade 12.

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Above: Summer Opera Camp. Photo: COC