

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

"Four Sea Interludes" from *Peter Grimes*, Op. 33a

Born: November 22, 1913, in Lowestoft, England

Died: December 4, 1976, in Aldeburgh, England

Work composed: Britten composed the opera *Peter Grimes* in 1944 and 1945.

World premiere: Reginald Goodall conducted the premiere of *Peter Grimes* at the Sadler's Wells Theatre in London on June 7, 1945. Less than a week later, Britten premiered the "Four Sea Interludes" with the London Philharmonic in Cheltenham, on June 13, 1945.

While staying with friends near Los Angeles during the summer of 1941, **Benjamin Britten** and Peter Pears came across an article by E. M. Forster on the Suffolk poet George Crabbe (1754– 1832) in a back issue of *The Listener*. Britten (himself born in Suffolk) was later to comment: "I suddenly realised where I belonged and what I lacked," and even more revealingly, "that I must write an opera." Pears discovered a copy of Crabbe's poems, including *The Borough*, which tells the tragedy of the fisherman Peter Grimes, in a "Rare Book Shop." His and Britten's enthusiasm after making this discovery is obvious in a letter sent to their New York friend Elizabeth Mayer on July 29: "We've just discovered the poetry of George Crabbe (all about Suffolk) and are very excited — maybe an opera one day!!" The remainder of 1941 and the early part of 1942 were spent working on a draft synopsis and libretto for an opera based on Peter Grimes, but it was not until reaching the UK that a librettist was found — the left-wing writer Montagu Slater, with whom Britten had frequently collaborated in the 1930s — and serious progress made.

From the outset, chief among the opera's distinctive features was the sequence of orchestral interludes (six in all) that introduce or separate scenes, a device in which the influence of Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* and Berg's *Wozzeck* can be felt. On early typed libretto drafts Britten made important marginal notes throughout, in which he succinctly describes the kinds of music he intended to write. Those concerning the interludes are of particular interest and suggest that they were intended to have a programmatic function within the structure, a point made even clearer by the arrangement of four of them into a concert suite in which each was given a descriptive title by the composer: *Dawn* (Interlude I in the opera), *Sunday morning* (Interlude III), *Moonlight* (Interlude V) and *Storm* (Interlude II).

Dawn, described by Britten in his libretto marginalia as an "Everyday, grey seascape," comprises three ideas operating on three levels: the high-lying unison melody for flutes and violins; the bubbling rising and falling arpeggios on clarinets, harp and violas; and the ominous chorale-like motif from bassoons, brass and low strings. *Sunday morning* ("Sunny, Sparkling music") is taken from the beginning of Act II of the opera, where the schoolmistress Ellen Orford sings "Glitter of waves / And glitter of sunlight / Bid us rejoice / And lift our hearts on high." Britten superimposes overlapping chords on the horns with (at first) a spiky idea on the woodwind, the quality enhanced by the bright D major tonality, brightened further by the use of a sharpened fourth note (G-sharp) of the scale. Ellen's words coincide with the second idea, an expressive melody on violas and

cellos. *Moonlight* (“Summer night, seascape, quiet” in the composer’s description) introduces Act III of the opera. Quiet, slow throbbing syncopations are broken by chinks of moonlight (flutes and harp), before reaching a tumultuous climax.

The final interlude of the concert suite, *Storm*, speaks for itself. In the opera, it prefaces Act I Scene 2, set in The Boar, and re-emerges throughout the scene as characters arrive at the pub. A rondo structure in E-flat minor, the interlude not only provides a graphic portrayal of the physical storm but also the psychological storm in Grimes’ mind.

© 2015 Philip Reed