Notes on the Program
By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

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

Benjamin Britten

Although Benjamin Britten was an instrumentalist, having been trained as a string player and excelling especially as a pianist, he is most acclaimed in posterity for his vocal compositions. Numerous vocal works issued from his pen during his youthful private studies with Frank Bridge and his composition classes under John Ireland at London’s Royal College of Music. Having completed his conservatory curriculum and garnered some notable honors to serve as imprimaturs, Britten set about earning a living through his music. To this end, he found a job as a composer in the General Post Office Film Unit, writing film scores for such documentaries as *The King’s Stamp* and *Night Mail*.

This proved to be not just gainful employment but also an aesthetic experience far more decisive than one might have predicted. The GPO Film Unit, it turned out, was a hotbed of personal escapade and professional creativity that also included the poet W.H. Auden (the unit’s kingpin) and such other writers as Christopher Isherwood and Montagu Slater. Many of the people involved were left-wing pacifists, and several were as close to being openly gay as was possible at the time. Britten promptly began developing in both directions. In March 1937 he met a young tenor named Peter Pears, and within a year they had moved in together, beginning a spousal relationship that lasted to the end of Britten’s life. In 1939 they left for America to wait out the war, but they returned to England in 1942 and were granted status as conscientious objectors, leaving them to pursue their musical projects.

While in the United States, Britten composed his first opera, *Paul Bunyan*, a collaboration with the similarly expatriate Auden; it was produced at Columbia University in 1941.

Though a far cry from Britten’s ensuing operas, it represented an important first step toward the lyric stage. Also during his American years, he became engrossed in the works of the British poet George Crabbe (1754–1832), motivated by a critical article E.M. Forster had recently published. Britten and Pears grew fixated on Crabbe’s lengthy poem *The Borough*, and together they extracted from it the tale of Peter Grimes, a rough and eccentric East Anglian fisherman who abused his apprentices, lost his sanity, and died.

They presented the scenario to Isherwood, who was certain it wouldn’t work as an opera and accordingly declined the offer to serve as librettist. They then approached Slater, another Film Unit colleague, and he accepted the challenge. At the end of three years’ work,

In Short

**Born:** November 22, 1913, in Lowestoft, Suffolk, England

**Died:** December 4, 1976, in Aldeburgh, Suffolk

**Work composed:** January 1944–February 1945

**World premiere:** The opera was premiered on June 7, 1945, at Sadler’s Wells Opera Theatre, London, with Reginald Goodall conducting. The *Four Sea Interludes* were presented six days later, on June 13, 1945, by the London Philharmonic Orchestra at the Cheltenham Festival, with the composer conducting.

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** March 1, 1973, Leonard Bernstein, conductor

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** April 5, 2014, Pablo Heras-Casado, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 16 minutes
Peter Grimes emerged as a compelling tale bursting with what would become Britten-esque fingerprints: a sympathetic portrayal of a social outcast, undertones of sexual ambiguity and abuse, the hypocrisy of an intolerant community easily given to scapegoating, and a leading tenor part crafted specifically for Pears.

The Sadler’s Wells Opera Company in London mounted the premiere under trying circumstances, with opening night following VE Day by less than a month. The chorus and orchestra approached open rebellion over what they considered the inordinate difficulties of the music, but the players were reportedly won over at their first rehearsal of the Sea Interludes. Six of these interludes occur in the opera, separating each of the scenes, and they serve as a recurrent reminder of the critical role that the sea plays in the lives of the characters who populate this wretched borough. The interludes depict the sea in various times or “moods”: sequentially, Dawn, Storm, Sunday Morning, Passacaglia, Moonlight, and untitled Interlude VI. Britten extracted four of them — now ordered Dawn, Sunday Morning, Moonlight, Storm — and published them separately as his Four Sea Interludes, a testimony to his penchant for expressive, often haunting orchestration.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (both doubling piccolos), two oboes, two clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet), two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, xylophone, bells, tambourine, harp, and strings.

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**The Poetry of Dawn and of the Storm**

Although not explicitly cited in the libretto or score of Peter Grimes, scholars have suggested that this passage from George Crabbe’s *The Borough* corresponds to the moment depicted by the Dawn interlude:

… Various and vast, sublime in all its forms,
When lull’d by zephyrs, or when roused by storms,
Its colours changing, when from clouds and sun
Shades after shades upon the surface run;
Embrown’d and horrid now, and now serene,
In limpid blue, and evanescent green;
And oft the foggy banks on ocean lie,
Lift the fair sail, and cheat th’experienced eye.

Crabbe goes on to a poetical description of the Storm at sea:

All where the eye delights, yet dreads to roam,
The breaking billows cast the flying foam
Upon the billows rising — all the deep
Is restless change; the waves so swell’d and steep,
Breaking and sinking, and the sunken swells,
Nor one, one moment, in its station dwells:
But nearer land you may the billows trace,
As if contending in their watery chase;
May watch the mightiest till the shoal they reach,
Then break and hurry to their utmost stretch;
Curl’d as they come, they strike with furious force,
And then re-flowing, take their grating course,
Raking the rounded flints, which ages past
Roll’d by their rage, and shall to ages last.