

Music and Sexuality in Britten

Selected Essays

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY SUSAN McCLARY

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CHAPTER ONE

Britten and Grimes

“I am firmly rooted in this glorious county. And I proved this to myself when I once tried to live somewhere else.”¹ In this tribute to his native Suffolk, Benjamin Britten refers to his attempted emigration to America during the years 1939–42. He and his friend Peter Pears left England shortly before war was declared and hard on the heels of two friends and collaborators, W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, whose departure stimulated a minor exodus of British writers and a considerable outcry in the national press. Britten, then a discouraged young composer, has described himself on arrival in the U.S.A. as “muddled, fed-up and looking for work, longing to be used.”² Commissions quickly came his way, and in the next three years he wrote a number of considerable works, including the Violin Concerto in D minor, the String Quartet in D, the Michelangelo Sonnets, the operetta *Paul Bunyan* on a libretto by Auden, and the *Sinfonia da Requiem*. And it was a performance of this last piece in Boston that prompted Koussevitzky to offer him the grant that enabled him to write his first major opera. But the muddle did not clear up.

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If as Auden is reported as having said, “an artist must live where he has live roots or no roots at all,”³ then it became clear that the anonymity and isolation beneficial to the poet did not suit the musician, and Britten gradually realized he must return to his native land, whatever the consequences to him as a pacifist.

The opera *Peter Grimes* has an intimate connection with the composer’s decision to go back. It was in Southern California in summer 1941 that he picked up an issue of *The Listener* to which E. M. Forster had contributed an article on the Suffolk poet, George Crabbe. This seems to have been the turning point in Britten’s decision not only about nationality but also locality. It was Crabbe’s own Borough to which the composer repaired, no doubt with a sentence of Forster’s ringing in his ears: “Yet he never escaped from Aldeburgh in the spirit, and it was the making of him as a poet.” More important still, the article sent Britten to Crabbe’s poems, which he had not previously read, and in *The Borough* he discovered not only a place to put down roots but also a series of characters and a plot for an opera.

Crabbe’s Peter Grimes is one of the poor of the Borough, and though the poet grew up among the poor he did not like them. His portrait of the man whose cruelty leads to the death of three boy apprentices from the workhouse and whose guilty conscience drives him to madness and death is alleviated by few redeeming features: a bold and unusual choice for the central figure of a musical drama in the tradition of grand opera. True, there are other anti-heroes in twentieth-century opera, of whom the most famous is Wozzeck. But there is no assumption of basic decency in the Grimes of the poem, and he is not so obviously the downtrodden common man pushed into crime and insanity by the savage acts of those around him. It is true, of course, that Britten and his librettist, Montagu Slater, transformed him from Crabbe’s ruffian into a far more complicated figure, one who can be recognized in certain lights, perhaps, as a distant foreign cousin of Wozzeck’s. At the beginning of the opera Grimes has lost only one apprentice, clearly by accident, and the death of his replacement in Act II is also patently a mishap. The new, almost

Byronic, Grimes is rough, to be sure, but he is also a dreamer; and his music constantly invites compassion and concern. Yet there are still great difficulties with Grimes as the central figure, and the reaction of the critics ranges from Patricia Howard's prim little sentence, "His is not a character with whom we can admit to identifying ourselves" (*Operas*, 23), to Eric Walter White's more sophisticated but equally unhelpful remark that he is "what might be called a maladjusted aggressive psychopath" (115). In a comparatively recent review, Desmond Shawe-Taylor has gone so far along these lines as to find "a flaw in the conception of the central character." In his opinion, "the new Grimes is inconsistently presented. For all his visionary airs, the death of his second apprentice is directly caused by his roughness and callousness, so that the sympathetic Ellen Orford was in effect culpably wrong, and the 'Borough gossips' and the much-maligned Mrs. Sedley dead right."⁴

This statement raises a number of issues. It is of course usual and right for a society to protect the innocent and helpless from harm, but it is also generally recognized that it must observe due process of the law. The accident that befalls the second apprentice occurs when Peter, who is responsibly watching the boy, has his attention diverted and his paranoia understandably aroused by the arrival of the Borough procession, which observes neither due process nor common decency. That knock at the door just before the boy's scream reminds us in a very direct way that society precipitates what it should be guarding against, and therefore shares the responsibility with the individual. To put it in Forster's more trenchant words, there is "no crime on Peter's part except what is caused by the far greater crimes committed against him by society" ("Two Essays," 20). More important than what is indicated by the libretto, however, is what goes on in the score, because questions of right and wrong in opera are ultimately determined not by moral law but by music. We come away from the final duet of *Poppea* or the Liebestod of *Tristan und Isolde* believing if anything in the power of love, not the culpability of fornication, faithlessness, peremptory execution and banishment. Grimes is as undeniably sympathetic from the music he

sings as Mrs. Sedley, on the other hand, is sinister. But what is finally disturbing here is not only that an experienced and respected member of the profession should wield a stick he would never use to beat earlier classics of the repertory, such as *Poppea* or *Tristan*, but also that he studiously avoids any truth that lies below the most obvious surface of the action. To discover why that should be is to take a further journey into the opera.

In the most sensitive account of *Peter Grimes* to date, Hans Keller, who draws usefully on psychoanalytic theory as well as a secure musical and dramatic instinct, points out that Peter “cannot show, let alone prove his tenderness as easily as his wrath—except through the music, which, alas, the people on stage don’t hear. Thus he is destined to seem worse than he is, and not to be as good as he feels. *Peter Grimes* is the story of the man who couldn’t fit in” (*Peter Grimes*, 105). It is this theme that Peter Pears explored in an article directed to the opera’s first radio audience:

Grimes is not a hero nor is he an operatic villain. He is not a sadist nor a demonic character, and the music quite clearly shows that. He is very much of an ordinary weak person who, being at odds with the society in which he finds himself, tries to overcome it and, in doing so, offends against the conventional code, is classed by society as a criminal, and destroyed as such. (“Neither a Hero nor a Villain,” 152)

This is a clear explanation, so far as it goes, and rather more helpful than Britten’s own statement that “in writing *Peter Grimes*, I wanted to express my awareness of the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depends on the sea” (introduction, 149). One of the greatest strengths of the opera is of course its vivid portrayal of the moods of the ocean—owing much, I suspect, to Britten’s re-encounter with the Suffolk coastline. But, as in Crabbe, the natural detail is secondary to the human drama played out against it and which it sometimes reflects (e.g., in the Storm Interlude). In approaching this human drama, however, we need

to go further than Keller's psychoanalytical abstractions, further too than Pears perhaps felt able, into the idea of the outsider, Grimes the unclubbable. His tragedy is of course relevant on a universal scale in our age of alienation, but I am interested in a particular interpretation that I believe solves some of the problems that have been raised.

It is clear from the music of the opening scene that Peter is not only telling the truth about the death of his first apprentice but also that he really is at odds with the Borough, and seeks in his own inner life a means of averting the harshness of his condition. All this can be heard in the orchestral motive played as he steps into the witness box, in his first words—sung on the same note as those of the bullying coroner but harmonized differently, and also in the way he cadences so frequently, not on the tonic, like Swallow, but on the seventh of the supporting chord (example 1.1). Peter cannot reply in the worldly manner of the coroner, then, just as later he cannot respond immediately to the approach of his schoolmistress supporter, Ellen Orford. She sets him off on a paranoid outburst that is literally out of tune with her E-major blandishments, and when she does bring him round to her key, what they sing together centers upon the minor ninth, the interval most associated with Peter's loneliness and his private fantasies, of which she is the unrealistic focus (example 1.2).

"I have my visions, fiery visions, they call me dreamer," sings Peter (in Act I, scene 1). And the tonal planning of the opera reflects the conflict between this fantasy life (generally expressed in D, E or A major) and the outside reality represented by, say, the E-flat of the storm and pub scene, or the B-flat of the courtroom and the final manhunt. It is easy enough to point to the self-destructive force of Peter's pride and of his fantasies, and to show how even his relationship with Ellen is doomed by his seeing marriage to her as the last step on the ladder of gaining respectability and "showing the Borough." But this still leaves him, in a sense, as an unexplained boy-beater, and it is only by looking more closely at his re-

Example 1.1. *Peter Grimes*, Prologue

SWALLOW PETER *p*

Why did you do this? We'd caught a huge catch. Too big to sell here.

Str *pp*

Example 1.2. *Peter Grimes*, end of Prologue

ELLEN *Piu lento e tranquillo*

My voice out of the pain is like a hand that you can feel,
Your I can feel,

PETER

lation with the chorus, representing the Borough, that a closer understanding of his nature can be reached. Eric Walter White has pointed out important distinctions between the handling of the chorus in *Grimes* and in Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, with which it has often been compared (116). Britten was evidently concerned to characterize the minor figures who emerge now and then in order to emphasize that the crowd is after all a collection of individuals, each of whom, like Grimes in Crabbe's memorable phrase, "is at his exercise." Yet the most powerful moments are undeniably those—like the storm fugue, the round in the pub scene, the posse in Act II, the manhunt in Act III—when everyone on stage joins the chorus, only Peter himself standing out in contradistinction to the general will, which at one point, in the round, "Old Joe has gone fishing," he almost overcomes musically singlehanded. There is no other relationship so important in the opera: the boy doesn't utter a word; and Ellen—well, as we have seen, marriage with her is out of the question,

Example 1.3. *Peter Grimes*, climax of Act II, scene 1

CHORUS (off) A - men! PETER

So be it, And God have mer - cy up - on me!

Ww Str

ff

largamente

Tpts.

and her parental response when she discovers a bruise on the boy's neck prompts her to a judgment which Peter can only interpret as desertion. The failure of their relationship leads to another and crucial step in Peter's decline. It is expressed musically in the second most important motive in the opera, a downward thrusting figure in which Peter, so to speak, accepts his fate (example 1.3).

But the break with Ellen is only symbolic of his final capitulation to the values and judgment of society at large, a point ironically underscored by the final "Amen" of the Borough at prayer. The congregation emerges, and starts a different chant: "Grimes is at his exercise"—set to the very notes of Peter's self-surrender. Is it quite clear at this point why the Borough people are so incensed? Clearly no one but Ellen combines moral fervor with sufficient human warmth to be unduly concerned about the misfortunes of a workhouse brat. It is Peter himself who rivets their hypocritical attention. He is an outsider not merely because of the unpleasant sides of his personality either, but because he is "different"—a difference accounted for on the surface level of the plot by his visionary side. His difference of nature—proud, aloof, rough and visionary—poses some sort of threat to the narrow ordered life of society struggling

for existence against the sea, and therefore he is subjected to persecution, which is part of the ritual societies devise, whether subtly or in this case brutally, to maintain the bounds of what is socially acceptable.

The action of such a society upon an individual or minority in such a manner is simply stated as oppression. The word is overworked, but there is nothing better to describe the essence of a tragedy conceived long before the writings of the 1960s taught us the mechanics of the phenomenon outside purely political spheres. The dramatic treatment of this subject in earlier ages tended—as in, say, Milton or Handel’s *Samson*—to dwell on the heroic aspects of the destructive but ennobling anger it can generate. But the anger of the nonheroic Peter is directed not toward some cataclysmic showdown with the crowd, but more dangerously against the defenseless boy, and still more dangerously, against himself. The moment when oppression becomes crippling and leads to tragedy is when it is accepted and internalized. And once we hear Peter falling under the spell of the Borough’s values, we know that he embraces his own oppression and sets his soul on that slippery path toward self-hatred that causes the destruction of the individual.

First, it cuts off his means of escape: he is rooted, not only “by familiar fields, marsh and sand,” as he admits to Balstrode in Act I, but also “by the shut faces of the Borough clans.” Second, it leads him to think he can vindicate himself by making money, setting up as a respectable merchant, and even more unrealistically by marrying Ellen. Balstrode perceives clearly enough that a new start with a new apprentice will lead only to the old tragedy again, and Peter’s acceptance of this unpalatable truth an act later is the pivotal moment of the drama (see example 1.3). And yet the most terrifying dramatic realization of his self-hatred is reserved for the last scene when, after recalling fragments from the opera in his delirium, he catches the sound of his persecutors calling his name through the fog. The Borough by this time has become a surrealistic caricature of itself as an oppressive society engaged in that ultimate fantasy of the oppressed—the manhunt. And Peter’s response is to shout back at them, not abuse, but his own name—first in anger, but then as his energy subsides, in the self-loathing that longs for dissolution and death. On the appearance of

Ellen and Balstrode he curls up, as it were, into the womb-like state he associates with Ellen in his fantasy, and sings the melody first heard just before the Storm Interlude in Act I. This time the optimistic orchestral accompaniment is replaced by the fog-wreathed voices of his distant hunters, and he completes the descent from the rising ninth previously left unresolved.

Easily unnoticed, but highly significant, is the staccato figure (example 1.4) separating the lyrical arcs—modified in this last statement to emphasize the pathetic minor seconds more strongly. It is audibly an inversion of the angry crowd's motive in the courtroom Prologue. Bearing in mind that Britten combines an unconscious melodic gift with a highly conscious and responsible working-out of thematic connections, this can be taken not merely as a sign of Grimes's alienation but as a musical clue to his perverse relationship with the Borough through the inverting and turning inward of the outward forces of oppression. The true tragedy of Grimes, then, can be heard in his most eloquent moment of fantasy.

With this in mind, we can return to the question of why critics like Shawe-Taylor tend to be so uncomfortable about Grimes. Hans Keller provides one answer by observing that there is something of a Grimes in each one of us, though most have outgrown or outwitted him to the extent that they cannot or will not recognize him (105). Perhaps there is a more specific reason. The situation that gives rise to the oppression of Grimes—poverty and the nineteenth-century British apprentice system—is hardly relevant to opera-going audiences today, and it is consequently underplayed in the libretto. Instead, Peter's dreaming, visionary side is played up. We can safely take him as a symbol and the story as an allegory.

If Britten had been black, or had been a woman composer, he might well have addressed himself to the oppression of these groups. As a pacifist, he must have been engaged in the questions dealt with in *Owen Wingrave*, though 1945 would scarcely have been a good time to raise them, even in heavy camouflage. No, *Peter Grimes* is about a man who is persecuted because he is different. We may recall Peter Pears's explana-

Example 1.4. *Peter Grimes*, comparison of figures

a. Prologue



b. Act I, scene 1



c. Act III, scene 2



tion that Grimes “is very much of an ordinary weak person who . . . offends against the conventional code, is classed by society as a criminal and destroyed as such.” To which he adds as a final line, “There are plenty of Grimeses around still, I think!” There is every reason to suppose that the unspoken matter is what in 1945 was still the crime that hardly dare speak its name, and that it is to the homosexual condition that *Peter Grimes* is addressed. At any rate, if we look at the opera in this allegorical way, the problems (both moral and dramatic) about Grimes’s character fall away, the viciousness of the Borough’s persecution becomes more explicable, and Peter’s own tragedy, that of guilt and self-hatred, all the more poignant and relevant to people today.⁵

A number of Britten’s other operas deal with male relationships, some

of them—*The Turn of the Screw*, *Billy Budd* and *Death in Venice*—in a more specifically homosexual context than *Grimes*. Yet none of them is so vivid or urgent in quality. This can be understood in a variety of ways, not least in terms of the composer's youthfulness, but I should like to explore its connection with the circumstances of his removal to America in the wake of Auden and Isherwood. The reasons for their emigration have been explained in a number of ways, usually in broad terms embracing the decline of European civilization, the threat of Nazism, the stifling, censorious moral and artistic atmosphere of Britain in the 1930s, and so on.⁶ All these reasons are plausible, but another fundamental impulse must also have been at work: namely that desire, so common in young gay men, to seek anonymity and freedom by going to the big city, the far-off country—any place, that is, away from the home where they feel at best half-accepted. But mere removal generally solves nothing. Every homosexual man, and in particular the artist, needs to come to terms with himself as well as society, and settle the linked questions of "roots" and sexuality in order to live, to grow, and to work fruitfully.

Let us consider the cases of two analogous British artists, both friends and collaborators of Britten's, who represent alternative possibilities at each extreme of the scale. Christopher Isherwood, who settled in the Los Angeles area, did not become any the less a British novelist for the remove. His perception of America was brilliant, but it was the view of an outsider, like the hero of his novel, *A Single Man*, who is a British homosexual man teaching at a Southern Californian State College. Yet as an exile Isherwood was able to write freely on sexual matters. He was the only writer of his time to explore the English phenomenon of male homosexuality, as a recent critic has pointed out (Heilbrun, 11), and it was not until Michael Holroyd's biography of Lytton Strachey that the subject so central to English intellectual life was treated in a manner, like Isherwood's, neither maudlin nor flamboyant. In his later years, moreover, Isherwood wrote and talked openly of his own experience of homosexuality, most notably in the two autobiographical books *Kathleen and Frank* (1971) and *Christopher and His Kind* (1976). Maintaining a reputation as

one of the most distinguished writers of English prose of the twentieth century, he took a prominent part in the activities of the gay movement in the U.S.A.

The case of E. M. Forster is very different, though the two writers have many values in common, particularly those of honesty, gentleness and decency. Forster's most important experience abroad comprised the two visits to India (chronicled in *The Hill of Devi*) that provided the material for his masterpiece, *A Passage to India*, published in 1924. Ten years earlier, after a lean period following the success of *Howards End* in 1910, he had written *Maurice*, a homosexual love story. His reasons for not publishing it are often misunderstood: to quote the author's Terminal Note: "Happiness is its keynote. . . . If it ended unhappily, with a lad dangling from a noose or with a suicide pact, all would be well, for there is no pornography or seduction of minors. But the lovers get away unpunished and consequently recommend crime" (236). Forster did not want to face the possibility of being prosecuted; but the book, and some of what he called his "sexy stories," circulated among friends. The tension between society's conventions and demands on the one hand and his own wishes as a creative artist on the other finally led to the painful and difficult decision to abandon the writing of fiction for publication, as several entries in his personal diary indicate.⁷ And if there should be any doubt about the price this sensitive and private man would have had to pay for what is now called "coming out," even in his later years, then one has only to contemplate the treatment of the posthumously published *Maurice* by the British critics, whose condescension on every other aspect of the novel barely concealed either a embarrassment at, or hostility to, the subject itself.⁸

Given Forster's love of England, then, his acceptance of himself as a homosexual had an effect amounting almost to suicide as a novelist. Britten, no less rooted in his native country, arrived at a less drastic accommodation allowing him to act upon his belief in music as a social activity. He wrote for particular people and places—a principle that began at home, so to speak, in the huge amount of music composed for his friend,

the tenor Peter Pears, whose artistry and discrimination contributed enormously to Britten's own development. In addition to their work as singer and accompanist, these two men literally re-created English opera. They founded a national opera company, they initiated and successfully maintained a provincial music festival of international standing at Aldeburgh, and in their work with children and amateurs they played a large part in the dramatic transformation of English musical education since World War II. This great achievement above and beyond Britten's music would scarcely have been possible, in a country where homosexuality is tolerated as an eccentricity but not accepted as a way of life, if Britten had been as overt as, say, Angus Wilson or David Hockney.

Peter Grimes was conceived at the very moment when Britten decided to exchange uncongenial freedom abroad for unknown peril at home, when he forswore the advantage of Isherwood for a life that might entail the Forsterian sacrifice. The work therefore occupies a special place in his accommodation to society. After his return Britten always showed an affable face to his countrymen, and the artistic aristocracy lent him support and showered him with honors. I believe the other side of the coin, the dark side of his feelings as a potential victim of persecution and as an outsider in an established society, come out with tremendous force in *Grimes*. They were once again to emerge in 1953, the coronation year, when he scandalized conventional opinion by his treatment of the first Queen Elizabeth in *Gloriana*; but by the time of the *War Requiem* nine years later the voice of protest had become institutionalized in the oratorio form, and consequently muted.

In 1945, however, Britten had just returned to face unknown penalties from a repressive and embattled society on account of both his lifestyle and his pacifism. And I believe it was *Peter Grimes*, representing the ultimate fantasy of persecution and suicide, that played a crucial role in his coming to terms with himself and the society which he both distrusted and yet wished to serve as a musician. Unlike Isherwood, Britten needed to live and work where he had roots; unlike Forster he was not prepared

to damp down the creative fires. Having made his choice, *Grimes* served as a catharsis, purging its agony and terror.

POSTSCRIPT

Two statements about the opera by its composer escaped my attention when I wrote “Britten and Grimes”; they provide different but connected ways of re-examining the concerns of the composer and his work. One of them, now frequently quoted, comes from an interview in which Britten recounts how he and Peter Pears came across Crabbe’s poem and started working together on the outline of the plot:

A central feeling for us was that of the individual against the crowd, with ironic overtones for our own situation. As conscientious objectors we were out of it. We couldn’t say we suffered physically, but naturally 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, rather than the villain he was in Crabbe. (Schafer, 116–17)

It was reassuring to find the composer confirming a symbolic view of the opera, stressing Peter Pears’s involvement in its conception, and relating it to their personal situation. On the face of it, Britten’s words contradict my view that “1945 would scarcely have been a good time to raise . . . the questions dealt with in *Owen Wingrave*” (see p. 19, above); but, to quote Michael Kennedy, “is it to be seriously doubted that ‘and homosexuals’ were unspoken but implied words in that statement? [after ‘conscientious objectors’]” (123–24). Though the opera owes a good deal to the composer’s experience not only as a pacifist in wartime but also as an artist in a society he considered “basically philistine” (an expression he used twice in that same interview), its intensity must ultimately derive from the much earlier and more fundamental experience of the stigma of his sexuality, a stigma so strong that it could not be mentioned.

Peter Pears has said, “Ben had a marvellous childhood,” and all one

can discover of family life at 21 Kirkley Cliff Road in Lowestoft confirms this. A strict but gentle father who read Dickens to his children and took them on walks, a mother who pampered the boy and encouraged his musical talents, sisters who jumped up indulgently from the piano bench whenever he had a musical idea he wanted to try out—these were some of its happy ingredients. There was also a certain puritanism, which Britten regarded as an advantage to him as a composer because it inculcated disciplined working habits. Indeed, he remained nostalgic all his life for this ordered boyhood idyll (though when reconstructed it could prove a little stifling, as Auden pointed out to him in 1941 in a remarkable letter about “the demands of disorder”).⁹

“His personality was outgoing, as a young child,” writes Christopher Headington. “A later shyness came with adolescence” (17). Such a manifestation of the awkward age is familiar to many of us who had to confront our homosexuality while growing up in comparable circumstances. The dawning realization of sexual feeling can rarely be a simple matter; when it is homosexual feeling and when the family tie is strong, the resulting conflict can be devastating—for it is the special characteristic of the homosexual stigma (unlike that attached to being black or Jewish) that it is almost always reinforced at home and is thus the more readily “internalized,” that is, accepted as valid and to a greater or lesser extent incorporated into the values and sense of identity of the person in question.¹⁰ Attempting to imagine the special degree of guilt and shame he accumulated during this outwardly happy and unremarkable youth is, I think, the key to understanding Britten’s sense of being an outsider, his insecurity and the resulting contradictions in his character. If imagination fails, some estimation of the damage his self-image sustained can be gained from his later attitude to his sexuality and from his hostility to the gay movement and to homosexual life-styles other than his own. According to Duncan “he remained a reluctant homosexual” (28), and Pears has said, “the word ‘gay’ was not in his vocabulary . . . ‘the gay life,’ he resented that.”¹¹

More important, the effect on Britten’s work can be seen in the

themes which crop up in it with some frequency: the difficulties surrounding male relationships; the loss of innocence; and the plight of the outsider. Perhaps even the more profound issues, the doubts about life and art that surfaced with such intensity in *Death in Venice*, derived at least in part from that early and crucial self-doubt. Not that Britten was totally obsessed by these things to the exclusion of all else in his dramatic music—far from it—but the importance in his creative output of an experience of human society resulting from his sexual preference can perhaps be gauged by comparing him with other leading composers of this century who happen to have shared the same orientation. In no other case does it seem so important an issue.

There is, however, no reason to see all his work as autobiographical. It is surely wrong, and perhaps crass, to identify Britten with any of his characters to the degree that both Davis and Vickers identify him with Peter Grimes in the literature accompanying the Philips recording. Equally suspect is the tendency to criticize the composer for failing to measure up to the implications of his plots and characters, as Peter Conrad does in his essay about *Grimes* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The furthest we might go is to see Grimes as symbolic of something the composer recognized in himself. For if, as I suggested at the end of “Britten and Grimes,” he came to terms with his worst fears about the darker side of society in this opera, he may also have explored there the darker and more violent sides of his own nature.

But at this point a distinction needs to be made. My ultimate concern is the social experience of oppression and its effects in the writing of *Peter Grimes*, not Britten's sexual preference. With appropriate changes to fit the conditions, I might write similarly about the social accommodation of another of England's greatest composers, William Byrd, who experienced another kind of oppression that affected his music. But the essence of Britten's sexuality or Byrd's religion is as inaccessible to criticism as the inner mystery of a work of art, “this stuff from the bucket, this subconscious stuff,” as Forster calls it (*Two Cheers*, 123). Moreover, once we realize that, as several recent studies have emphasized, the very concept of

“homosexuality” as a social and psychological category distinct from the “normal” or “heterosexual” is of comparatively recent origin (the word itself was not coined until 1869), the phenomenon of “homosexuality” becomes less relevant than the psychological effects of the labeling and its social consequences.¹² And Britten’s preoccupation with a predominantly negative “homosexual vision” shows how crucial for him was the effect of this labeling and the concomitant oppression. Viewed as representatives or adumbrations of the “homosexual condition,” Aschenbach, Oberon, Quint, Claggart, Vere and Grimes make a horrifying sextet; one almost forgets that the same composer wrote *Albert Herring*, that profound comedy of liberation. Furthermore, it is (to say the least) ironic that Britten, who enjoyed one of the most remarkable personal and professional partnerships in musical history, should choose for his final operatic “testament” the story of *Death in Venice*; for though one might join Tippet in saying “I think all the love which he had for his singer flowed into this work” (Blyth, 71), the fact that it centers on Thomas Mann’s sad and lonely character seems to suggest that the oppression Britten sensed and internalized was much more powerfully present in his imagination than the well-regulated, shared and accepted life he led throughout adulthood.

Ultimately it is not the causes that are of greatest concern when one tries to come to grips with works of art, but the effects. While those who earlier this century sought completely to dissociate the work of art from its creator’s life now appear mistaken, they did achieve what is surely the best focus for criticism. Our findings about the creator, the conception and the context of a work are put to best use only if they are projected in such a way as to sharpen our perception of its nature. The discoveries of Alfred Dürr and others redefining Bach’s attitude to his work at Leipzig and Joseph Kerman’s exploration of the significance of Byrd’s Roman Catholicism are two examples of how radically a new interpretation of a composer’s life can enhance our comprehension of his work. The taboo on all mention of composers’ sexuality was of course partly a manifestation of wider repressive forces from which all of us, straight or gay, need liberating. In the case of Britten it was also an affront to critical intelligence, for

it tended to force those who wrote about Britten's music into evasive tactics verging on intellectual dishonesty or, even worse, into euphemisms ("emotional immaturity" headed the list) that were themselves oppressive and insulting. On the other hand we should avoid making the simplistic claim that here lies the single key to Britten's creative personality: no inner mystery in the music is revealed by the simple acknowledgment of his homosexuality and its consequences, but the way is at least cleared for us to approach the works a little closer and with more understanding.

Britten's other statement may indeed help us in that quest. It comes from the article printed in *Time* magazine (16 February 1948) when *Peter Grimes* first opened at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York: "Britten regards this opera as 'a subject very close to my heart—the struggle of the individual against the masses. The more vicious the society, the more vicious the individual.'" This raises the moral question, familiar to social thinkers of liberal persuasion in this century, about the balance of responsibility between the criminal or delinquent and society, and relates it to the character of Grimes in a graphic way. When, at the climax of his quarrel with Ellen, Grimes accepts society's judgment, he also implicitly accepts the role forced on him by the prejudice and inhumanity of his fellow beings. He becomes the criminal he is thought to be. The question of whether or not he is technically guilty of the second boy's death—one I now see I was overanxious to answer—is (as Edmund Wilson saw clearly enough) beside the point. The intrusion of the posse in Act II, scene 2 was not merely a strategy to exculpate Peter, but more importantly a way of further dramatizing the moral question at the heart of the work.¹³

The connection between this question and the mechanics of oppression is a close one, for it is characteristic of stigmatized people to internalize society's judgment of them. This is the point Britten saw so clearly and (inasmuch as it did not gain general currency for another twenty years) so prophetically; it is also the one that critics of the opera like Shawe-Taylor, Garbutt and Conrad, who do not discern the source of Peter's apparent self-contradictions, have consistently failed to grasp. A common result of

this internalization is that in the attempt to conform the person represses anger and eventually comes to distrust all feeling to such an extent that on top of the burden of insecurity and self-hatred is heaped the paralysis of depression.¹⁴ Sometimes, however, the dam holding back the anger and guilt bursts with a resulting deluge of senseless violence. As I write, the newspapers carry two stories in which the “Grimes syndrome” reaches horrendous proportions. William Bonin, the so-called Freeway Killer of Southern California, and Wayne B. Williams of Atlanta have been convicted in murder cases concerning the deaths of large numbers of young men and boys. Both men are reportedly homosexual; Williams, whose victims were young blacks, is himself black. “Homophobia is the true murderer,” wrote a correspondent to the *Los Angeles Times* (6 February 1982) in the wake of Bonin’s trial, pointing the same moral: that society’s fear of homosexuality had sentenced Bonin to death just as it had destroyed his victims.

One reason why critics of the opera tend to evade this moral question is suggested by a passage in Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* where she discusses a case of infanticide by an apparently devoted mother with a history of “depression” (256–80). The experts of modern society, she points out, instead of examining the institution of motherhood to discover root causes for such appalling tragedies, prefer to label those women who erupt in violence as psychopathological. Indeed, when Eric Walter White labels Grimes a “maladjusted aggressive psychopath” (116) or Arnold Whittall finds him immature in the sense that he cannot “conform” (“Benjamin Britten,” 315), what we hear louder than their words are echoes of the conformist postwar era, when “unsocial attitudes,” whether criminal or not, were equated with mental sickness or “immaturity,” and when the tendency of psychiatrists was to put pressure on women and gays, for instance, to adjust to the expectations of society, thus increasing their guilt, suffering and sense of isolation. No wonder Grimes seemed as prime a candidate as Wozzeck for treatment,” because far from being the romantic, Byronic figure Slater wanted—a character with the self-possession and self-will that, as we have seen, Peter notably lacks—he is in fact, as Pears puts it, “very much of an ordinary weak per-

son." The successful realization of so modern a dramatic character is one of the main reasons for the opera's wide general popularity.

A common thread in all the murders mentioned above is that the violence was directed against those who were loved or who would have been the natural objects of affection but for the reversal of feeling caused by the long process of the internalization of society's values and the ensuing self-hatred and repression. "It has often been suggested (though seldom in print) that Grimes's inner struggle (like Claggart's, and perhaps Captain Vere's) is against a homosexuality that neither he nor, for that matter, his creator is consciously aware of," wrote Andrew Porter as long ago as 1971.¹⁵ Grimes's outright demand for love from the boy in Pears's Amityville draft shows on the contrary that Britten must have been very well aware of this element, which adds its own touch of psychological realism to the story. The question of why all homoerotic overtones, as well as other aspects of Peter's background, were slowly but surely expunged as the opera grew has already been explored [ed.: see chapter 2, "Grimes Is at His Exercise"]. But one of the reasons not mentioned there, and perhaps ultimately of greatest practical importance, was that whereas universal meaning could have been extrapolated from the predicament of many other kinds of "minority" hero or anti-hero, an obvious homosexual—even an obviously repressed homosexual—in the title role would have either spelt outright failure for the opera or caused it to be dismissed as a matter of "special interest." As recently as 1979 Jon Vickers could claim on the one hand that Grimes is "totally symbolic" and that he could "play him as a Jew" or "paint his face black and put him in a white society," and on the other hand declare that "I will not play Peter Grimes as a homosexual" because this "reduces him to a man in a situation with a problem and I'm not interested in that kind of operatic portrayal."¹⁶

The opera was a long time in gestation. When Britten and Pears conceived the idea in 1941 they were adrift; they had recently escaped from Auden's dominating presence, and were without immediate responsibilities to society. It took exactly four years for the finished work to reach

the stage, and those years were ones of tremendous development in their lives: first and foremost there was the return to England; then Pears, from having little or no operatic experience, quickly became a leading performer in the Sadler's Wells company; Britten meanwhile in 1943 worked out the theme of alienation in a different context in *Rejoice in the Lamb*; and both men gained a tremendous success with the *Serenade* in the same year. Moreover, with Eric Crozier excused his duties with the Sadler's Wells company in order to attend meetings with Britten and Slater in 1943, there must already have been some sense that the work might be chosen to celebrate the return to its true home of what was in effect, if not then in name, England's national opera. No wonder, then, that the homoerotic elements in the early drafts were censored.

More remarkable is the way in which Britten, in opposition to the ideas of his librettist, saw how to be true to his own feelings when turning the work into "a presentation of a general human plight—that of the outsider at odds (for whatever reason) with those around him" (Porter, "What Harbour"). For in order to make Peter so powerfully symbolic and to render the action of the opera so successfully allegorical, Britten could not allow the story to have homoerotic implications, much less an identifiably homosexual title figure. He had to desexualize Grimes, and furthermore rid him of his father-figure with all its attendant Freudian implications, in order that the work should not be misinterpreted as a "pathological" study. In doing this he made it abundantly clear that the opera's concern, implicit in its musical structure and thematic process, is the purely social issue of "the individual against the crowd": the one reflects the judgment and behavior of the many even while striving desperately to remain distinct. To watch Britten arriving at that conclusion and finding a solution, bit by bit, consciously or unconsciously, is to see how mature a dramatic composer he had by this stage already become; it is also to discover anew how from private pain the great artist can fashion something that transcends his own individual experience and touches all humanity.

NOTES

1. From a speech on being presented with the freedom of Lowestoft in 1951; quoted by White, 92.

2. *On Receiving the First Aspen Award*, 21.

3. Letter from Louis MacNeice in *Horizon* (July 1940), quoted in White, 30.

4. In the *Sunday Times*, 20 July 1975, echoing his views of thirty years earlier.

5. A reading of the first two chapters of Altman's work will show the connection clearly enough. I am happy to acknowledge that it was while reading this intelligent book and seeing Sir Geraint Evans's moving production of *Peter Grimes* at the San Francisco Opera in 1973 that this essay was first conceived. My use of the catchword "oppression," here and below, follows the sense developed by feminists and formulated by Altman (30–33): "Strictly speaking, oppression results from the fact that societies are divided along class, racial and caste lines and that some groups occupy positions from which they are able to dominate others. . . . But even when one concedes that, in these terms, oppression exists, it may seem difficult to conceive of groups being oppressed for their sexuality. This is, I think, largely because our concept of oppression has tended to be based upon a crude Marxist model that envisages oppression as a class or economic phenomenon, and there are those who still seek to incorporate all oppressed groups into such a uni-dimensional economic model. It is precisely the discovery that oppression is multi-dimensional, that one may be simultaneously both oppressed and oppressor that underlies the analysis of the sexual liberation movements. . . . The oppression faced by homosexuals takes on a number of forms, and at its most pernicious may be internalized to the point that an individual no longer recognizes it as oppression." Altman's book was enormously influential because it provided an intellectual basis for the gay movement, enabling it to reach many who had earlier remained aloof; his analysis of the various types of oppression is still retained implicitly in such important accounts as Weeks's *Coming Out* (1990), but his concept of "liberation," while still basically valid, benefits from comparison with more recent directions of thought as outlined in Weeks, "Discourse, Desire, and Sexual Deviance."

6. A good summary appears in Spender, 252–54.

7. See Stallybrass's introduction to Forster's short stories, xiv.

8. The reviews of the first volume of Furbank's biography of the novelist show that concealment diminishes in proportion to the increase of embarrassment and hostility. In *The New Statesman* (22 July 1976) Paul Johnson, for instance, fills almost all the considerable space at his disposal fitting the young Forster into what might be called the "withered-sissy" stereotype, a stupid exer-

cise that concludes with the cruel and facetious remark, "perhaps it would have been better for the novels if he had never found out about sex at all."

9. Published in Mitchell, *Britten and Auden*, 161–62.

10. At that stage homosexual feeling need not, of course, be consciously identified as such for social and family judgment to be sensed and for feelings of isolation, exclusion and unhappiness to result; see Altman, 25–26: "In my case I had the sense of not belonging, of being excluded through some perception by my peers that I was apart from them. Like many others I had no idea why exactly that was (if it was); I put it down, as do others in similar situations, to excessive intellectualism or timidity or artistic bent, anything other than the real cause." This common experience is still little affected by the liberalization of social attitudes to sexual preference.

11. "The Good Companions." The use of "gay" as a term of self-determination (replacing derogatory epithets such as "queer" and "faggot" in the same way that "black" replaced "nigger") began in the early 1970s toward the end of Britten's life, and was initially threatening to most homosexuals (including much younger people) who had already arranged their lives in one way or another. For Britten, "the gay life" probably signified something of the type of existence he and Pears had encountered while living under the same roof as Auden; the influence of his upbringing was, I think, decisive in his rejection of this and also, perhaps, as Auden thought, in his idealization of "thin-as-a-board juveniles, i.e. . . . the sexless and innocent" and in his "aloofness" (see Auden's letter referred to above, note 3).

12. The "anti-essentialist" view briefly outlined here is elaborated from various vantage points in Plummer. The view of sexuality in general as a social and historical construction, rather than an inherent "drive," has been reinforced by Foucault's thesis; for a good exposition in the context of modern British history see Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society*, esp. 1–16. It is a paradox of the gay movement that while offering a new sense of identity for homosexuals it also looks forward to the eventual disintegration of categories based arbitrarily on sexual behavior or preference (see Weeks, 286–88).

13. J. W. Garbutt, who seems obsessed with the question of Grimes's guilt, conspicuously ignores the significance of the Borough's intrusion into Grimes's hut.

14. A straightforward guide to such typical reactions to oppression is Clark; see 22–28, 52–60, 146–49.

15. In a note for the New York Opera production of *Albert Herring*, the substance of which is also found in "What Harbour."

16. In an interview included in the literature accompanying the Philips recording. Vickers makes a more considered statement, but with little change of basic attitude, in a later interview with Michael Oliver, 364–65.