

## MINDREADING

# 'What harbour shelters peace?'

## On the opera *Peter Grimes*, exclusion and stigma

Lisa Conlan

**Lisa Conlan** is a Visiting Scholar at New York University.  
**Correspondence** Dr Lisa Conlan, Room 906, 285 Mercer Street, New York University, NY 10012, USA.  
Email: lc2920@nyu.edu

### SUMMARY

Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* premiered in 1945 and has since enjoyed lasting popular and critical acclaim. Its central character is a fisherman driven to suicide by circumstances beyond his control. It has a wide political and social resonance and is a testament to the damaging psychological effects of exclusion and stigma.

### DECLARATION OF INTEREST

None.

In 2013 we marked the centenary of the composer Benjamin Britten's birth. Suffolk-born to a modest background, Britten rose to become one of Britain's most celebrated composers and 'a key figure in British culture whose impact on everything from opera to the revitalization of music education is hard to overestimate' (Brett 2003). In celebration, his work has been staged across the globe, including numerous productions of his most popular opera, *Peter Grimes*. Deservedly so, for it is an extraordinary work: the tale of a lonely fisherman driven to suicide by persecution and exclusion. The compelling score evokes both a powerful naturalism (of the English coastline) and inner states of psychological turmoil. The opera remains almost as popular today as when it premiered in 1945. Indeed, such was its popularity then that (according to Britten's lifelong partner, Peter Pears) London bus conductors would call out at Sadler's Wells Theatre, 'Any more for Peter Grimes, the sadistic fisherman?' (Ross 2008).

### Synopsis of *Peter Grimes*<sup>a</sup>

The Prologue opens with a coroner's inquest. Peter Grimes is cross-examined on the death of his young apprentice, whom he says died of dehydration at sea. Accidental death is ruled but the townsfolk regard Grimes as guilty.

Act 1: Peter finds a new apprentice from the workhouse. Balstrode, retired sea captain, urges Peter to leave the borough and start afresh. Peter

refuses, pledging to win the town over, become its most successful fisherman and, once he does, marry Ellen. Balstrode laments, 'then the tragedy is in the store. New start for the prentice just as before'. In the local inn, Peter is accused of killing young boys and a fisherman goes to attack him. Balstrode intervenes and to divert attention, starts up sea-shanty. The townsfolk all sing along. When Peter joins in, everyone else stops, leaving Peter singing alone.

Act 2: Ellen and John, the new apprentice, sit together while the townsfolk are at church. Their Sunday worship is heard in the background. Ellen notices a bruise on John's neck and remarks grimly 'It's begun'. Peter arrives to take the boy fishing immediately. Ellen protests and confronts Peter about the bruise. He dismisses it. Ellen despairs that their plan to rehabilitate him in the eyes of the borough has failed. They argue, Peter strikes her and leaves with the boy. This scene is witnessed by the townsfolk, who swell to an angry mob and go after Peter.

In his hut, Peter initially comforts the frightened boy, but when he hears the mob he shouts cruelly at him. He rushes the boy down to the boat and the boy slips, falling to his death. The mob arrives, but the hut is empty.

Act 3: Balstrode and Ellen have not seen Peter for several days and Ellen found John's jumper washed up on the beach. They vow to do whatever they can to help Peter. Unknown to them, the local gossip has been eavesdropping on their conversation. Emboldened, the woman approaches the Mayor and accuses Peter of murdering his apprentice. The townsfolk collect, shouting loudly 'Peter Grimes, Peter Grimes'.

Peter emerges alone, 'weary and demented'. He is talking aloud, speaking in isolated fragments. Ellen and Balstrode try to comfort him. He sings 'in a tone almost like prolonged sobbing'. Balstrode tells Peter to take his boat out to sea and sink it.

Suddenly it is dawn. The coastguard reports a ship sinking. 'Just one of those rumours', say the townsfolk and cheerfully they go about their work.

a. This synopsis is based on Slater M (1944) The plot of 'Peter Grimes'. *Tempo*, (9): 10–11. Excerpts from the libretto are taken from Slater M (1945) *Peter Grimes, The Libretto*. Boosey and Hawkes.

## The Borough

In 1939, with Europe on the verge of the Second World War, Britten, like his contemporaries W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, emigrated to the USA. Lonely in Los Angeles, he came across a copy of *The Borough* by a fellow Suffolk man George Crabbe (1810). This collection of poems included the story of Peter Grimes. Britten later said he felt at that moment everything had changed, he knew he wanted to write an opera about Grimes and he knew he had to return to his Suffolk roots and settle in Aldeburgh (Brett 1977).

George Crabbe's Peter Grimes was an altogether darker character; a cruel alcoholic who kills his father in a fit of rage and is responsible for the deaths of three apprentices through brutality and neglect:

'Strange that a frame so weak could bear so long  
The grossest insult and the foulest wrong'  
(Crabbe 1810).

Shunned by 'the Borough' – the people among whom he lives – and haunted by the ghosts of his victims, Grimes is driven to madness by his guilty conscience. As in the opera, the townsfolk are implicated for turning a blind eye to what was happening to the boys.

Britten was drawn to the story, identifying strongly with Grimes not as a monster but as a product of his environment. At its centre was an ambiguous moral dilemma on how we treat outsiders. For Britten did feel very much an outsider.

## Benjamin Britten

As a homosexual and lifelong pacifist in post-war Britain, Britten struggled with his outsider status. Philip Brett, in his 1977 essay on the subject, cited Britten's difficult relationship with his sexuality as the inspiration for *Peter Grimes*: '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' (Brett 1977; 2006 reprint: p. 20). Leonard Bernstein described Britten as 'a man at odds with the world' and said of his music 'if you hear it, not just listen to it superficially, you become aware of something very dark' (Carpenter 1992: p. 588).

Britten has been the subject of a number of biographies and a further two were published in his centenary year (Carpenter 1992; Kildea 2013; Powell 2013). He emerges as a complex man struggling with self-doubt and the darker aspects of his character, notably his sexual attraction to young boys (memorably described by W. H. Auden in a letter that would spell the end of their

friendship as 'those thin-as-a-board juveniles') (Carpenter 1992: p. 164). There is no evidence to suggest that Britten ever acted on these desires, but they remained a source of guilt and persecutory anxiety throughout his life (Matthias 1999). These themes are writ large in his later operas, *Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw* and *Death in Venice*, but none deal with the outsider status with quite the emotional intensity seen in *Peter Grimes*.

## Peter Grimes as psychiatric case?

Durà-Vilà & Bentley (2009) consider *Peter Grimes* an exemplary case study of psychiatric illness in opera: 'Despite Britten's conception of the character of Grimes as being a victim of his society, throughout the opera we hear and see accumulating evidence of his psychopathology [...] Grimes appears to have, at the very least, personality traits, if not personality disorder, although one might question whether the composer fully intended this particular interpretation'.

This was not Britten's intention. In an interview for *Time* magazine, he described the 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' (Time 1948). Pears described Peter Grimes as 'very much of an ordinary weak person who offends against the conventional code, is classed by society as a criminal and destroyed as such' (Brett 1977; 2006 reprint: p. 20). Hans Keller, an influential cultural commentator of the time, writing on the opera's popularity, reflected 'There is a little bit of Grimes in all of us' (Keller c. 1945). Peter Grimes is a flawed man, but one that we can all connect with.

When Peter sings 'I hear those voices that will not be drowned', he is speaking not of auditory hallucinations or of abnormal psychopathology, but of his dreams of a better life. He is also obliquely referring to the townsfolk, who soon appear baying for his blood, singing 'What's done now is done for life'. The townsfolk cannot entertain redemption. To them, Peter is spoiled, 'Who can turn skies back and begin again?'.

*Peter Grimes* is ultimately an opera about the damaging psychological effects of exclusion and stigma. These are the direct cause of Peter's final disturbed mental state and suicide.

## Stigma

Erving Goffman, in his influential sociological work on stigma, defined it as 'the situation of the individual who is disqualified from social acceptance' (Goffman 1963: Preface). The stigmatised is the bearer of a 'spoiled identity' and 'by definition, of course, we believe the person

with a stigma is not quite human' (Goffman 1963: p. 5). Shame is central to this and it has been reported that psychiatric patients rate shame and stigma as worse than their psychiatric symptoms (Byrne 2000).

The philosopher Ian Hacking (who cites Foucault as a key influence) has written extensively on the powerful effect that a classification (i.e. diagnosis or label) can have on a person, affecting behaviour, symptom construction and self-identity through what he terms a 'looping effect' (Hacking 1995: p. 351). These labels exert a similarly powerful effect on those who interact with the 'sufferer'. A crucial moment in the opera is when the audience realise that Peter has internalised the Borough's view of him and he cannot escape his tragic end.

In an article for this journal, Graham Thornicroft asked 'How can we understand the powerful blemish of being a psychiatric patient on a person's identity?' (Thornicroft 2010). A work like *Peter Grimes* addresses this directly. It reflects on the relationship between society and those it terms 'outsiders'. It is not a straightforward tale of mental illness, but a meditation on the psychological effects of alienation and oppression and, as such, speaks to any stigmatised outsider.

### Conclusions

Peter Grimes is a modern anti-hero; a complex, difficult man grappling discontentedly with his outsider status, with tragic results. As an allegory of exclusion and stigma resulting in breakdown,

the opera is exemplary. With this work, Britten posed real-world moral questions about the structure of our society and the way we treat those we deem outsiders.

### References

- Brett P (1977) Britten and Grimes. *The Musical Times*, **118**: 995–1000. Reprinted (2006) in *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays* (ed GE Haggerty). University of California Press.
- Brett P (2003) Benjamin Britten. *Grove Music Online* (ed L Macy). Oxford University Press.
- Byrne P (2000) Stigma of mental illness and ways of diminishing it. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, **6**: 65–72.
- Carpenter H (1992) *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*. Faber and Faber.
- Crabbe G (1810) *The Borough*. Reprinted (2007) by Dodo Press.
- Durà-Vilà G, Bentley D (2009) Opera and madness: Britten's *Peter Grimes* – a case study. *Medical Humanities*, **35**: 106–9.
- Goffman E (1963) Stigma and social identity. In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Prentice Hall.
- Hacking I (1995) The looping effects of human kinds. In *Causal Cognition* (eds D Sperber, AJ Premack): 351–83. Oxford University Press.
- Keller H (c 1945) Three psychoanalytic notes on Peter Grimes. Reprinted (2003) in *Music and Psychology: From Vienna to London, 1939–52* (ed C Wintle). Plumbago Books.
- Kildea P (2013) *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the 20th Century*. Allen Lane.
- Matthias J (1999) The Haunting of Benjamin Britten. *Electronic Book Review*, 1 Jan ([www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/prodigal](http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/prodigal)).
- Powell N (2013) *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music*. Henry Holt.
- Ross A (2008) *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Thornicroft G, Rose D, Mehta N (2010) Discrimination against people with mental illness: what can psychiatrists do? *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, **16**: 53–9.
- Time (1948) Opera's new face. *Time*, 16 February.