

Class 12: Peter Grimes

A. Home Town

1. Title Slide 1 (website title)
2. Section title A (Polish trailer)
3. Section title A (Home Town)

That was a trailer for a production of *Peter Grimes* (1945), the first major opera by **Benjamin Britten** (1913–76). This production was in Poland, and fairly radical in approach. I'll put clips from some even more radical productions on the website, but the actual production I am going to show is as traditional as you can get: staged in Britten's home town, with the composer conducting, and the original Grimes, his life-partner **Peter Pears**, in the title role. I reckon those factors make up for the slightly blurry quality of the 1969 video. But first let's see how the opera came about.

4. New York to Aldeburgh
5. Influence of *Porgy and Bess*

Here is an interesting point. While they were in New York, Britten and Pears saw a revival of last week's opera, *Porgy and Bess*. The style of the two operas is completely different, and yet the influence is unmistakable: both are depictions of fishing communities; both use a storm scene as a dramatic pivot, with a dramatic entrance for the leading figure; both treat the chorus as a major character in its own right; and both begin with an extended opening scene consisting of short vignettes. In *Peter Grimes*, these introduce the main figures of the town. If this were a British film of the 1960's, we would be all set for a comedy. But in Britten's opera, they mostly turn out to be mean-spirited, hounding the lonely fisherman—the one man in the community who swims against the tide—to his death.

6. The people in the Borough

Here is a breakdown of the main characters in the opera. Those in the upper group all turn against Grimes by the end; the two below are his few friends. We will meet them all in Act One, which I am going to play complete, though omitting the short prologue. But first let me give you a short slide-show of what you are going to see, with a few clips in which you can meet the characters.

7. Synopsis 1
8. Clip 1
9. Synopsis 2
10. Clip 2

The Prologue opens during the inquest into the death at sea of Peter Grimes' apprentice. The lawyer **Swallow**, serving as coroner (and also mayor of the Borough), declares an open verdict, but the

townsfolk clearly believe that the loner **Grimes** has maltreated the boy. **Ellen Orford**, the village schoolteacher, who cares about Grimes, approaches him after the inquest to console him. But he does not want to be beholden to her or anybody else; they sing together, but in quite different keys. There now follows the first of the Sea Interludes that have become famous orchestral works in their own right. This one represents **Dawn**, and I shall start my featured scene just at the end of it.

11. Synopsis 3

12. Clip 3

13. Synopsis 4

14. Clip 4

Dawn breaks slowly over the beach, and the shore fills with people working on nets and boats. Grimes calls from offstage asking for help, but the only people who will man the capstan are retired **Captain Balstrode** and the apothecary **Ned Keene**, assisted in this production by his friend **Aunties**, who runs the local pub (and manages its other services). Ned Keene tells Grimes that he has found a boy at the workhouse to replace the dead apprentice. The Methodist preacher **Bob Boles** uses the occasion for a protest against child labor. Keene tells the carter **Hobson** to fetch the child, but he refuses. Later Ellen will brave the Borough's disapproval to go with Hobson to look after the child.

15. Synopsis 5

16. Clip 5

The storm gets nearer. Everyone leaves the beach except Grimes and Balstrode, who advises him to either leave town or settle down with Ellen. But Grimes says he first needs to make enough money to stop people's mouths.

17. Synopsis 6

18. Synopsis 7

That is all I am going to play right now, but let me give you the rest of the synopsis. Left alone, Grimes sings his first great aria, "What harbour shelters peace?"; note the extraordinary vocal leap with which it begins, reaching beyond the octave, then sinking down. The second orchestral interlude depicts the fury of the storm. The people of the Borough take shelter in the Boar, where Auntie and her two so-called **Nieces** provide female attention. Grimes makes a sudden appearance; his spooky aria, "Now the Great Bear and Pleiades"—which begins on a single precarious high note before again sinking—unsettles the crowd until Ned Keene starts a round ("Old Joe has gone fishing," in 7/8 time) to break the tension. Ellen arrives with the new apprentice, but Grimes will not let the boy stay to warm up.

B. Toxic Town

19. Section title B (Toxic Town)

That is a scene from a modern updated production in London. But the phalanx of Bible-brandishing citizens makes my point exactly that this cosy environment, when united against an outsider who scorns their conventions, can become toxic indeed.

20. List of sections in Act One

Here is a list of the separate sections you will see in Act One. Note two things: the importance of the Chorus, and the fact that all the arias, including the two for Grimes, are actually quite short. Now let's watch the full act.

21. Britten: *Peter Grimes*, Act One complete

22. List of sections in Act One (repeat)

What did you think? If there is time, I'll end with the trailer of a production in Paris, staged by the great contemporary British Director, **Deborah Warner**. Just to show that the original literal scenography and production approach is no longer what you will expect to find with this opera nowadays. I'll post some more examples on the web.

23. Britten: *Peter Grimes*, trailer of Deborah Warner production in Paris