

a storm approaches, 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. Left alone, Grimes sings his first great aria, "What harbour shelters peace?" beginning with an extraordinary vocal leap, the epitome of yearning. A second interlude depicts the fury of the storm.

Scene Two: 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," unsettles the crowd until Ned Keene starts a round to break the tension. Ellen arrives with the new apprentice, but Grimes will not let the boy stay to warm up.

Act Two (not played) begins outside the Church during Sunday matins. Ellen notices a bruise on the neck of the new Apprentice, and questions Grimes, but he brushes her off. Their quarrel is overheard by people coming out of church, prompting Swallow to form a posse of menfolk to confront Grimes in his hut. In his eagerness to get out to sea, Grimes rushes the boy, who falls down the cliff to his death.

Act Three (not played) takes place a couple of days later, during a dance at the village hall. Mrs Sedley realizes that Grimes is around and gets Swallow to reconstitute the manhunt, which bays ferally for his blood. They go off into the gathering fog and Grimes himself appears, now half mad. Balstrode tells him to take the boat out to sea and sink it, and even Ellen accepts that this is the only possible outcome. The Dawn music is heard once more as the people come back onto the beach. There is a rumor of a boat sinking out at sea, but it has gone.

Britten: *Peter Grimes*, Act One, scenes 1 and 2 (BBCtv from Snape Maltings, 1969; Benjamin Britten, *cond*; Joan Cross, *dir*; Peter Pears, *Grimes*; Heather Harper, *Ellen*; Bryan Drake, *Balstrode*)

Britten: *Peter Grimes*, trailer for 2023 production by Deborah Warner in Paris

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Great Scenes in Opera

ROYAL OPERA HOUSE
LONDON

PETER
GRIMES

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

OCTOBER AT 7.00
17, 20, 23, 26, 29, 31

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12. Peter Grimes
April 30, 2026

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BENJAMIN BRITTEN AND HIS PARTNER PETER PEARS, both conscientious objectors, were in New York during much of WW2. The combined experience of seeing Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and reading **George Crabbe's** narrative poem *The Borough* (1810), set in Britten's native East Anglia, convinced the composer that he had to return home to write an opera based on the protagonist of one of its sections, the outcast fisherman Peter Grimes. Grimes in the original is a sadist and murderer, but Britten saw a more complex character, a visionary outsider who refuses to conform to the conventions of small-town society; it was something with which he could strongly identify.

Peter Grimes premiered at Sadlers Well Theatre in London on 7 June, 1945, one month after the cessation of hostilities in Europe. It was hailed as the great new hope of British opera, and is still regarded as a masterpiece today. The portrait gallery of small-town types painted by Britten and his librettist **Montagu Slater** was very much in the English tradition running from Dickens to Ealing Comedy films. But the authors make it a powerful indictment of social intolerance and mob violence, and Britten flooded it with a musical evocation of the raw power of the sea that he knew, and feared, so well. *rb.*

A. Home Town

The central cast of characters in the opera is shown below. First, Grimes himself and two supporters who remain on his side even if they are powerless to avert the tragedy.

Peter Grimes (t). *Fisherman, living on his own outside the town*

Ellen Orford (s). *Village schoolteacher, in love with Peter*

Balstrode (br). *Retired sea captain, voice of reason*

The first act also introduces the following characters, who are more or less neutral at first, but eventually become Grimes' persecutors:

Swallow (bs). *Lawyer, magistrate, mayor*

Auntie (c). *Proprietress of "The Boar"*

Nieces (s, s). *Auntie's euphemism for The Boar's main attraction*

Ned Keene (br). *Apothecary, cynic, and purveyor of opium to...*

Mrs. Sedley (ms). *Widow, busybody, and laudanum addict*

Hobson (bs). *Carter and village constable*

Bob Boles (t). *Fisherman and Methodist lay preacher*

In the first half-hour of class, we shall look at the origin and nature of the opera and play short clips to give a preview of the plot and thumbnails of most of the characters listed above.

Britten: *Peter Grimes*, trailer for 2023 production by Mariusz Trelinski in Warsaw

Video: *NYC to Aldeburgh* (video by rb.)

Britten: *Peter Grimes*, clips from 1969 production listed below

B. Toxic Town

The scene to be played in class is **Act One**, omitting the Prologue and first Sea Interlude, but otherwise complete. However, I am supplying a complete synopsis of the opera to give it context.

The **Prologue** (not played) opens during the inquest into the death at sea of Peter Grimes' apprentice. The lawyer **Swallow**, serving as coroner, declares an open verdict, but the townsfolk clearly believe that Grimes has maltreated the boy. **Ellen Orford**, the village schoolteacher, approaches Grimes to console him. But he does not want to be beholden to her or anybody else; they sing together, but in quite different keys. An orchestral interlude follows, depicting Dawn.

Scene One: 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 **Balstrode** and **Keene**. Keene tells Grimes that he has found a boy at the workhouse to replace the dead apprentice; he tells the carter **Hobson** to fetch the child, but he refuses. Ellen braves the Borough's disapproval to go with Hobson to look after the child. As