

EXAMPLE 37.1: Barber, The Monk and His Cat, from Hermit Songs

□ = open 5ths

× = harmonic augmented unisons

/ = vertical lines indicate displaced parallel fourths



BENJAMIN BRITTEN

The most prominent composer in the tonal or neotonal tradition to win an international reputation in the postwar decades was English composer Benjamin Britten (1913–1976). After studying privately and at the Royal College of Music, Britten spent several years in the late 1930s writing music for films, an experience that shaped his style by teaching him to communicate through the simplest means. Like Copland, he tempered modernism with simplicity to achieve a clear and widely appealing idiom. As a young man in the 1930s, he was deeply influenced by humanitarian concerns and ideals of public service, manifest in his interest in writing music for children and amateurs, his allegorical pleas for tolerance, and his pacifism.

Teo.

Teo.

Music for amateurs

The English choral tradition was nurtured in church and cathedral choirs, schools, and amateur choruses. Most of Britten's choral music was conceived for such groups, and works such as *Hymn to St. Cécilia* (1941–42), *A Ceremony of Carols* (1942), and *Missa brevis* (1959) have become standards. His one-act opera *Noye's Fludde* (Noah's Flood, 1957–58), on the text of a medieval miracle play, is intended for a mixture of professional performers with children of various ages and includes hymns that the audience is invited to sing. These and his other works for nonprofessionals are melodious, challenging pieces that suit their performers' abilities yet are not limited by them.

Homosexuality

Britten was a homosexual and was the life partner of the tenor Peter Pears (1910–1986). Shown in Figure 37.1, the two met in 1936 and lived together until

^{*}Notes marked (--) in these two measures should be slightly longer, pochissimo rubato.

Britten's death four decades later. Britten wrote most of his tenor roles for Pears, and the two collaborated as performers and as producers of the annual music festival at Aldeburgh in England. Several of Britten's operas have themes that relate to homosexuality, including *Billy Budd* (1950–51) and *Death in Venice* (1971–74).

Peter Grimes (1944-45), which established Britten's reputation and became the first English opera since Purcell to enter the international repertory, centers on a fisherman who is disliked by the other residents of his village, pursued by mobs, and ultimately driven to suicide. The theme of the individual persecuted by the crowd can be read as an allegory for the condition of homosexuals in a hostile society. Tellingly, Grimes is not a sympathetic character; we are meant to see ourselves, not in him, but in the ugly crowd that unthinkingly persecutes outsiders on the basis of suspicions and misinformation, forcing a poignant catharsis in the final tragedy. In the last scene (NAWM 200), as a search party pursues him calling his name, Grimes raves and mocks them in an unmeasured recitative, until his friend Balstrode urges him to sail his boat out to sea and sink it. The opera ends with a stunning depiction of the uncaring sea and equally uncaring townsfolk in a most successful application of bitonality: strings, harp, and winds arpeggiate thirds that encompass all the notes of the C-major scale, depicting the shimmering sea, as the town's citizens go about their business, singing a slow hymn to the sea in A major, each key stubbornly ignoring the other. The entire scene displays the eloquent dramatic effects Britten creates out of simple means.

Britten's pacifism his parameters objection to war in any form is expressed in his choral masterpiece, the War Requiem (1961–62). Commissioned for the consecration of the new cathedral at Coventry a city destroyed in a German bombing raid during World War II, the work weaves together the Latin text of the Requiem Mass with verses by Wilfred Owen, English soldier and poet killed in France in 1918 just days before the end of World War I. The coltrast of texts is highlighted by contrasts of performing forces;

the Latin texts are set for soprano soloist, chorus, and full orchestra, with sections for boys' cherr and organ, and the Owen poems are scored for atternating tenor and baritone soloists with chamber orchestra. Ironies abound. As the chorus sings "Requiem aeternam" (Grant them eternal rest), they nammer home a tritone (F#-C), the least restful of intervals but the tonal axis of the entire work. Britten interleaves the English texts so that they comment on the Latin, and vice versa, as in the "Lacrimosa," where the melodic links between the soprano's tearful plea for mercy and the tenor's English verses highligh, the futility he feels at the death of a friend in battle.

Britten's commitment—to pacifism, to tolerance, to including all ages and talents in music-making—gives his music a quality of social engagement that has attracted marky performers and listeners and has inspired later composers. Its enduring success shows the continuing power of music with a tonal center to move audiences and earn a place in the permanent repertoire.

Peter Grimes

► BRITTEN: Peter Grimes, Act III, Scene 2: To hell with all your mercy!

Full 5

FIGURE 37.1: Benjamin Britten (right) and Peter Pears on the balcony of the Old Mill Snape in about 1944, when Britten was working on his opera Peter Grimes. (PHOTO: ENID SLATER. COURTESY OF THE BRITTEN-PEARS LIBRARY, ALDEBURGH)

