



NINTH EDITION

A HISTORY
of
WESTERN MUSIC

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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 conscientious 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 contrast 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' choir and organ, and the Owen poems are scored for alternating tenor and baritone soloists with chamber orchestra. Ironies abound. As the chorus sings "Requiem aeternam" (Grant them eternal rest), they hammer 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 highlight 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 many 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 

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)

