

# MUSIC FROM "PETER GRIMES"

*Selections Will Be Heard Next Week From 2YA*

THE broadcast by 2YA at 8.12 p.m. on Tuesday, December 17, of new BBC recordings of music from Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* will be for most listeners the first acquaintance with the sound of this much-talked-about opera. In New Zealand, we have read about its production by the Sadler's Wells Opera Company in June, 1945, seen photographs of the settings (published in England even months before the production); the pages of the newspapers have even carried short cables about its exciting reception in London. And E. M. Forster has been heard from the BBC describing his excitement after hearing the opera. Some excerpts from it were performed at the Summer School for Music at Cambridge last January, but the new BBC recording, although it presents only five purely orchestral excerpts, will now bring more of the music to more listeners.

*Peter Grimes* owes its origin in the very first place to the fact that Britten read an article in the *BBC Listener* by E. M. Forster on George Crabbe. He then read Crabbe's long poem "The Borough," which is about the daily life of a Suffolk fishing and shipbuilding town around the end of the 18th Century. Britten had always lived in Suffolk himself.

The tale of "Peter Grimes" comes into the section of the poem called "The Poor," and Britten saw in it the background for an opera. In 1941, while he was in America, Britten was commissioned by Serge Koussevitzky to write the opera he had in mind, and in 1942 he set to work with Montagu Slater, who wrote the libretto. "Discussions, revisions, and corrections took nearly 18 months," Britten has said. "In January, 1944, I began composing the music and the score was completed in February, 1945." (In that month *Picture Post* printed photographs of the model stage settings.)

The story, as it stood when Britten and Slater had finished their "discussions, revisions, and corrections," told of Grimes, the Suffolk fisherman, misunderstood by his fellows and eventually driven to death by their persecution. Britten has said:

"My parents' house in Lowestoft directly faced the sea, and my life as a child was coloured by the fierce storms that sometimes drove ships on to our coast and ate away whole stretches of the neighbouring cliffs. In writing *Peter Grimes*, I wanted to express my awareness of the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depends on the sea—difficult though it is to treat such a universal subject in theatrical form."

Grimes is a lonely soul, too poor and too proud to offer marriage to the woman he loves (Ellen Orford, the widowed schoolmistress). All day and every day he puts out in his fishing-boat, with "grey unresting energy." He is accused of killing his apprentice and the opera begins with the inquest; his guilt is by no means established, but the tongues of the gossips wag. He is shunned, taunted, driven in upon himself. "The case goes on in the people's

minds," he cries out. "O, let me thrust into their mouths the pity and the truth." But his broken pleas in the courtroom are overwhelmed by the relentless chorus of villagers, in whom honest indignation stifles compassion and reasonable judgment.

Later, his new apprentice is accidentally killed in falling down the cliff by Grimes's hut, in circumstances that will put Grimes under more suspicion.

Finally, driven to madness by grief, Grimes goes out to sea with his boat. We know that he is going to sink it, and go down with it. And then, in the last scene, the village resumes its everyday life, its never-ceasing struggle for existence.



THE Borough High Street—a design for "Peter Grimes," by Kenneth Green

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ready to give me their diagnosis. Three of them stood at the foot of the bed and told me gravely that I was past their help; that my right lung had collapsed, that the tissue was disintegrating, that there was no treatment and, of course, no cure for the malady. "You are too late by a year in coming to us," they said.

They told me I could stay there as long as I liked, which they thought would not be long, and so I settled down to enjoy what was left of life. In time they began to say they would send me to Shanghai if I wanted to stalk and look at China, and on March 18th they gave me one of the admiral's four-engine planes, the head doctor from the hospital, a nurse, and Hollington Tong, and away I went, thinking that in about two weeks' time I would wiggle my toes and say farewell.

But what is the situation? To my disgust and my surprise, I began to sit up and take notice of things and now I find myself getting ready to stalk about the landscape. I used to be aspirated once every two weeks. It is now six weeks since I was done and the doctors scratch their heads in puzzlement and I am feeling like getting up and walking around. However, I've got to take it easy. And that is my story.

I would like to hear more about your troubles. China is in a helluva mess and I wonder if it is worth while getting better to poke my nose into things again. I find myself thinking of distant landscapes. I shall shut up for the time being, with my best wishes to you. I hope you are well and comfortable. Good luck, God bless.

As Ever,  
DON.

To this Rewi Alley wrote back:

Baillie School,  
Sandan, Kansu,  
July, 1946.

Dear Don,—Thanks for yours of June 18th. You are certainly a man of surprises. Guess you will be able to do some good with your shrewd common sense for a while yet. Heaven only knows, there is a big enough need for it to-day. But I had not realised that you were so close to being promoted to the House of Lords. It's really much better that you stay around with the world of mundane men for

a while yet—you have so very much experience to help out with over these months that mean so very much to so many millions.

Thanks very much for your kind wishes for the Industrial Co-operatives. Keep on taking an interest. You have no idea how your letter encourages. . . .

Yours,  
REWI ALLEY.

But the end was nearer than they thought. On November 10 Donald, after the brief rally that had astounded the doctors, died of cancer of the lung and stomach. He was buried in the International Cemetery of Shanghai in what again, at last, is Chinese soil.

## The Manchurian Problem

He will not be forgotten. And there will be many besides Rewi Alley who will regret that Donald did not recover for long enough to poke that truculent, outsize Australian nose into things again.

What one man can do in any complicated political situation is always limited. But there is no doubt that Donald's practical common-sense and longstanding familiarity with key figures in the Chinese scene might have been of the greatest help in tackling one of the most complicated regional problems in China to-day—that of the North-east.

For Donald's part in helping to resolve the Sian crisis did not end with the return of the Young Marshal and his former captive to Nanking. It was Donald who first exposed—in a couple of articles in the *North China Daily News*—the plot by certain militarist elements in Nanking to bomb Sian during the Generalissimo's enforced stay there, with the intention of getting rid of their own chief. It was Donald who

fought indefatigably for the release of the Young Marshal, when he in his turn was made a prisoner by those same reactionary cliques (despite the pledges given in Sian). It was Donald who would frankly tell the Generalissimo what no one else dared tell him—the real motivation of some of his own political associates.

The Young Marshal—the one man who might command the loyalty and friendly co-operation of all the conflicting elements in Manchuria and China's North-east—is still a prisoner; North China is already a battleground. And there is one voice the less to be heard in private counsel in China's capital: the raucous, insistent, firmly antipodean English of one of the best foreign friends that China ever had, who never learnt a word of Chinese, could not stomach a Chinese dish, and wore the complete armour of an "Old China Hand" over a passionate loyalty to a people and a country not his own.

"The Superior Man," Confucius said, "takes as much trouble to discover what is right as lesser men take to discover what will pay." Donald's outstanding characteristics were loyalty without self-seeking, complete honesty, and fearlessness. He had not many of the stock Confucian virtues; and in tact—normally regarded as the first essential in a private advisor—he was conspicuously lacking. But so long as he was around the Chinese capital, there was always someone to remind China's leaders of another saying of the Master that is in danger of being forgotten in Nanking to-day: "To see what is right and not to do it is want of courage."

## The Music

The music to be heard from 2YA comprises four interludes and the longer Passacaglia. The first piece precedes Act I, and suggests the gloom of a grey morning before the inquest. The second (being the introduction to Act II) suggests the mood of a brilliant, sunny morning, with church bells ringing for the Sunday service. The third is the Prelude to Act III, setting the scene of the town and harbour lying tranquil under a moonlit sky. The fourth piece (in this recording) goes back to Act I. It is played between the first two scenes, and predicts the storm whose fury acts as a stimulant to the disordered mind of Peter.

Finally, there is the Passacaglia, which is a kind of centre-piece to the whole opera, reflecting the conflict in Grimes's mind—his desperate loneliness conflicting with his affectionate instincts; the pitiful workhouse apprentice sending his thought back to his own childhood and contrasting them with his present condition. Interwoven with the development of the Passacaglia is a desolate wandering motif, depicting the innocent workhouse boy Grimes himself once was. It is heard first as a viola solo accompanied by the Passacaglia theme, and later it develops to an orchestral climax, and is then reduced to a ground bass.

The Passacaglia comes before the second scene of Act II, and leads up to the rise of the curtain on Peter's dwelling, an upturned boat on the edge of a cliff, its dark and squalid interior crowded with nets, rope and tackle.

The music is played by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Sir Adrian Boult.