



# **Britten's Peter Grimes: A Short Guide to a Great Opera (Great Operas)**

*Michael Steen*

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Britten's opera Peter Grimes is based on George Crabbe's horrifying poem The Borough about early 19th century Aldeburgh, a North Sea fishing town in East Anglia. Its premiere at Sadlers Wells in 1945, shortly after VE Day, was a landmark moment in British operatic history. Britten's partner Peter Pears - like Britten a pacifist and conscientious objector - was in the title role. Britten and Pears, together with Montagu Slater, a communist journalist, created the libretto. Grimes, a fisherman and sadistic child abuser, is a loner longing for social acceptance, and the wealth to marry the retired schoolmistress Ellen Orford. Britten, a homosexual whose circle included E.M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood, wanted to win sympathy for outsiders. Yet after Grimes has destroyed yet another apprentice, and himself committed suicide, life just goes on as usual in the bustling, hypocritical town. 'The Borough' has a pompous mayor, a typical pub landlady, a drunken Methodist, an ineffectual parson, a drug-addicted rich widow. A pub brawl and barn dance conceal the dark side of this community: its hysteria, its busybodies, its lynch-mob justice. The opera and its story, as depicted in Britten's evocative music, haunts the audience long after the curtain comes down. Written by Michael Steen, author of the acclaimed The Lives and Times of the Great Composers, 'Short Guides to Great Operas' are concise, entertaining and easy to read. They are packed with useful information and informed opinion, helping to make you a truly knowledgeable opera-goer, and so maximising your enjoyment of a great musical experience. Other 'Short Guides to Great Operas' that you may enjoy include La Bohème, Don Giovanni and Eugene Onegin.

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