



Being-with Grimes: The Problem of Others in Britten's First Opera

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Kinds of Others

BRITTEN is probably the most celebrated composer of oppressed 'others', and the sometimes aggressive failures of respect and understanding that are played out in his operas have latterly received a subtle but obvious reflection among the community of Britten scholars. Since Philip Brett offered his famous reading of *Peter Grimes* in relation to the social construction of homosexuality at the American Musicological Society convention in 1976,¹ Britten studies have divided into two groups. On one side of the debate are Brett and those who can be regarded as his followers, among whom the most gifted currently writing – and their work demonstrates that post-Britten Britten scholarship does not toe any particular party line – are Ruth Longobardi and Lloyd Whitesell. This side presents 'sexualized' or gender-theorized readings of Britten's works, and particularly his operas. Accepting the validity of Brett's insight that scholars should acknowledge the creative value of Britten's sexuality as an effective means of discussing oppression of different kinds, this generation-old hermeneutic tradition also offers writers the opportunity to bring to bear on their scholarship their personal experience as part of this same oppressed sexual minority, where they deem it appropriate.²

On the other side are those who either write biographically in a way that altogether denies the significance of Britten's sexuality, or else do not consider it as fruitful a ground for exploration of Britten's musical discourse as exegeses that are more closely focused on analysis (although analysis is not altogether absent from other studies). To stress the sexual angle is, they maintain with

¹ Soon after published as Philip Brett, 'Britten and Grimes', *Musical Times* 118 (1977), 995–1000, and most recently reprinted in Philip Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays*, ed. George E. Haggerty (Berkeley and London, 2006), 11–33. Here, all references to this essay are to the reprinted version.

² Brett's major Britten essays are now collected in Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*. Among the most significant of recent studies in his tradition are Ruth Sara Longobardi, 'Reading between the Lines: An Approach to the Musical and Sexual Ambiguities of *Death in Venice*', *Journal of Musicology* 22 (2005), 327–64; Longobardi, 'Multivalence and Collaboration in Benjamin Britten's *Death in Venice*', *Twentieth-Century Music* 2 (2005), 53–78; and Lloyd Whitesell, 'Britten's Dubious Trysts', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 56 (2003), 637–94.

persuasive force, to essentialize the composer as 'an oppressed other', and to hide the great quality and range of his achievement. This tradition predates the first, and ranges from the work of Mervyn Cooke, Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, through the studiously objective analyses of Peter Evans and Arnold Whittall, to the more freely interpretative but still rigorously analytical work of Philip Rupprecht.³

Occasionally members of opposing camps are involved in each other's projects, as when Clifford Hindley, a follower of Brett, was asked to contribute a chapter on *Billy Budd* and *Death in Venice* to the *Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, edited by Mervyn Cooke.⁴ In Britten's legacy we seem to see focused in a single compositional personality all the critical opposition of the old Wagner–Brahms schism, albeit generally expressed in terms of polite disagreement and eloquent failure to attempt intellectual cross-fertilization, with the writers of 'sexualized' readings generally not foregrounding analysis, and the analysts often stopping short of exploring the broader hermeneutic significance of their observations. Insofar as there are any, squabbles among those who study Britten's music should be cherished as a sign of his intellectual position in twentieth-century music.

Britten's first opera, *Peter Grimes*,⁵ was the site of the parting of the ways. It is his archetypal opera of Others, and both of the post-1976 schools have paid special attention to the way that the Borough, the East Anglian fishing community of George Crabbe's original poem, persecutes Grimes as an outsider. Perhaps the most striking reading is Brett's original. In essence, his argument is that the protagonist offers Britten a focus for an exploration of the oppression, by a prejudiced wider society, of people who are 'different'. 'There is every reason to suppose', he suggests, 'that the unspoken matter is what in 1945 [the year of the work's première] was still the crime that hardly dare speak its name, and that it is to the homosexual condition that *Peter Grimes* is addressed'⁶ – although, of course, whatever the motivation or character of Grimes, the strength of Britten's conception means that his analysis of oppression speaks to the very widest range of human experience. In a different spirit, Evans

³ Some of the principal contributions to the 'non-sexual' literature are Mervyn Cooke, *Britten: War Requiem*, Cambridge Music Handbooks (Cambridge, 1996), Mervyn Cooke and Philip Reed, *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge, 1993), Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London, 1979), Donald Mitchell, *Benjamin Britten: Death in Venice*, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge, 1987), Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller, *Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on his Works from a Group of Specialists* (London, 1952), Philip Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language* (Cambridge, 2001), Arnold Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett: Studies in Themes and Techniques* (Cambridge, 1982).

⁴ Mervyn Cooke, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁵ It was not, of course, his first stage work; the operetta *Paul Bunyan* preceded it by four years.

⁶ Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, 20.

and Whittall explore the tonal shapes of the work, and the tensions between the Borough's insistence on an axis moving A–Eb (with crucial moments, for instance in the trial of the Prologue, and the man-hunt of Act 3 Scene 2, on Bb) and Grimes's more exclusively personal (and, of course, outlandish) reflections in the Boar.⁷ In a subtle reading that draws on the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin and John Searle, Philip Rupprecht argues that 'the tragedy of *Peter Grimes* turns on acts of naming,'⁸ which is to say that the opera's dramatic power is focused in the utterances of groups and individuals. The way that the Borough and Grimes respectively configure their musical presentations of his name outlines the main thrust of the tragedy, from his calling to the dock to the chilling wails of his name during the man-hunt. In other contexts, statements take on illocutionary force – saying becomes doing – such as, in the decisive turning-point of the opera, when Grimes makes a life-changing decision to the words 'So be it, and God have mercy upon me!'

All of these readings are enlightening on the subject of the opera's most obvious plot dialectic, that between self and other, but there is another way, no less interestingly explored by Britten, in which Grimes's status as an 'other' is used as a quite different example of the way that human beings interact. This, the first of two matters addressed in this chapter, is his status as 'other half' to Ellen – the state he wishes to achieve above all else, in the hope that she will help him to gain acceptance by the Borough while maintaining his own distinctive qualities. Grimes's problem in his relationship with her is, in a sense, the traditional philosophical problem of other minds.

This chapter's second concern emerges from the first, but is broader than it. In his review of the première of *Peter Grimes*, Desmond Shawe-Taylor expressed moral concern over the portrayal of the protagonist. 'I know that operas are not ethical treatises [...]. But is there not something shocking in the attempt to win our sympathies for a character *simply because* he is an outlaw and an enemy of society – and no more questions asked?'⁹ While it might seem inappropriate to experience moral outrage at a work of art that is offered for contemplation, as opposed to (a much rarer case) a physical or directly political act that is couched or spun in terms of art, Shawe-Taylor is right to focus moral attention on the character of Grimes, whose legal and ethical status in the Borough is established as a central theme immediately with the court scene that constitutes the work's Prologue.

Discussion of oppression is a moral enterprise; to undertake it, we must have a working model of what the source and ground of judgment is to be, and how reliable that model is. Although its specific urgencies are a matter of

⁷ See Evans, *Britten*, 104–23, and Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett*, 95–103.

⁸ Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 32.

⁹ Desmond Shawe-Taylor, "Peter Grimes": A Review of the First Performance, in *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*, ed. Philip Brett, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge, 1983), 153–8 (p. 155). Emphasis original.

debate, there is certainly a considerable ethical intensity to *Peter Grimes* that commands attention. In a work that presents characters and their society in highly stylized, even abstract ways, it is useful to adopt an abstract theoretical framework for and interpretation that can range across all its levels, from the smallest – that of relations between two individuals – to the largest – that of relations between individuals and society at its widest extent. I shall now turn to Heidegger, without, however, leaving Britten far behind.

Caring for Others

In *Being and Time* Heidegger calls the mode of relation of *Dasein* (or 'Being-there' – his term for the human mode of being) with others *Mitsein* (or 'Being-with').¹⁰ In effect, he is theorizing relations between Self and Other; though his language is arcane, his insights are illuminating in the context of *Peter Grimes*. 'Being-with' is a very different mode of being from the one that *Dasein* has towards entities in the world that are not *Dasein*, like cars, books or hammers. To those *Dasein* relates in terms of *Sorge*, or 'care': they are entities *Dasein* uses for things; *Dasein*'s relationship to them is one that recognizes their nature as 'equipment', as things 'ready-to-hand', or available for use in connection with certain projects. 'But those entities', Heidegger says, 'towards which *Dasein* as Being-with comports itself do not have the kind of Being which belongs to equipment ready-to-hand; they are themselves *Dasein*. These entities are not objects of concern, but rather of *solicitude* [*Fürsorge*]'¹¹ (This distinction, as we shall see, is a helpful one for understanding the relationship of Peter and Ellen in the opera.)

Solicitude comes in three kinds, a 'deficient' type, and two more 'satisfactory' types, which are referred to as 'positive solicitude' and 'authentic solicitude', to point to their essential differences. Deficient solicitude is the way *Dasein* is, usually, with other *Daseins*, in its 'average everyday' mode. Its characteristic is indifference: other *Daseins* are 'inconspicuous' in the sense that when passing them in a street or in a shop, there is no reason to engage with them in a conscious way, just as there is no reason for me to engage consciously with my phone as I write this, even though it is quite close by. When I wish to make a call, the 'inconspicuous' phone that is beside me will suddenly become 'ready-to-hand', an object of concern (*Besorge*) that I can use to communicate. When other *Daseins* become conspicuous in the same way, for instance because they are speaking to me, they do so not merely as equipment about which I am concerned, but as other *Daseins* about which I am solicited.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford, 1962; orig. edn 1927), 16.

¹¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 157. The translators note here that the etymological connection between care for objects (*Sorge*) and what they call 'solicitude' (although 'caring-for' is a more literal translation of *Fürsorge*) is lost in translation. Emphasis original.

The first of these 'positive' kinds of solicitude is called 'leaping in'. In positive solicitude I am no longer indifferent to the other person, yet he or she is still not a matter of concern as a person, but only as part of a project. It could be that my project is to complete a transaction in the shop, and then go about my business; or it could instead be that my project is to instil a moral sense in my godson, in which case I present my views as facts, with the intention of shaping his mental life to some degree. 'In such solicitude the Other can become one who is dominated and dependent, even if this domination is a tacit one and remains hidden from him.'¹² *Fürsorge* is the normal German for 'welfare', and it could be that the Welfare State is a form of this approach to others; possessive parents and spoon-feeding teachers are the other obvious examples. Like deficient solicitude, positive solicitude is not a form of Being-with that we can entirely hope to escape; Heidegger is not imposing a saintly discipline on us.

The third kind, authentic solicitude, 'does not so much leap in for the Other as to *leap ahead* of him [...] not in order to take away his "care" but rather to give it back to him authentically as such for the first time.'¹³ This is the mode of responding to the other on his or her own terms, not prejudging or deciding on the best outcome, but encouraging autonomous thought, perhaps in the manner of a counsellor or an enlightened teacher. The image of leaping ahead suggests that this authentic form of solicitude requires of *Dasein* a willingness to try and see clearly what fear, obsession, guilt, pride or any other powerful limitation might prevent the other from seeing as a restrictive difficulty in a particular situation, and clearing the way for the individual to take his or her own stand on the issues of its own concern. Authentic solicitude is, above all, a recognition that the other is a *Dasein* that must take choices for the sake of its own being, and as such is the foundation of 'authentic community'.

Relating to others in terms of authentic solicitude is an important step towards *Dasein* choosing its own authentic Being, partly since, as Hegel might put it, the consciousness of the individual becomes self-conscious when it is acknowledged by another self-consciousness, that is another person who is recognized as possessing the quality of self-consciousness. But Heidegger's argument is subtler than this, and tends in an overtly moral direction. In order to be authentically solicitous for the other, *Dasein* must rise out of the 'idle talk' of everyday understanding; it must not offer the obvious advice or do the automatic thing, because doing so would be a failure to recognize the uniqueness of the other that *Dasein* is Being-with. As with other terms of Heidegger's that seem to have negative connotations, "idle talk" ["*Gerede*"] is not to be used here in a "disparaging" signification.¹⁴ It is simply everyday language

¹² *Ibid.*, 158.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 158–9. Emphasis original.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 211.

and everyday understandings of things. It is easy, though, to see how 'idle talk' can get out of hand and, through habit of thought and action, put barriers in the way of truth. And Heidegger says that idle talk indeed has the habit of taking *Dasein* 'out of the truth'. We see this in the case of the Borough, which has already decided, before *Peter Grimes* begins, on Grimes's guilt, and so becomes hostile to reason and in fact utterly closed off from it. Grimes's tragedy is therefore sealed from the outset, and his worry about 'Borough gossip' is its perfect focus. Words, as Rupprecht points out, carry illocutionary force in this opera,¹⁵ and when they congeal as ideology there is no escape from them.

What, though, is the source of idle talk? In *Peter Grimes* it is the Borough; for ordinary *Dasein* it is *das Man*, 'the They' or 'the One' – the kind of super-ego that we find embedded in such thoughts as 'One shouldn't have a gay wedding; they wouldn't like it.'¹⁶ *Das Man* is a particular community – a village, a nation, a hemisphere – that functions as a bearer of truth, albeit truth that operates more at the level of the community than the individual. Every *Dasein* is part of *das Man*, just as Grimes is part of the Borough. One can no more escape from *das Man* than one can escape from defective solicitude, and neither should one wish to do so altogether. If we write in English, it is because one does so in an English-speaking country; we respect the speed limit because they have imposed the rules. Morality and social cohesion can be upheld by *das Man*, and this is indeed part of Heidegger's argument for 'authentic community', but if unquestioned it can also lead to ethically dubious dealings with the other, which is the other ingredient in his reading of Being-with.

Dasein cannot be authentically solicitous if it simply applies the received wisdom of *das Man* to the situation of the other. To do so is to privilege the automatic and assured over the situation of the individual; to deny the other its inalienable choice (as *Dasein*); to 'leap in' and fix a situation according to predefined operating instructions, instead of 'leaping ahead' to clear the way for the individual other to make self-defining decisions. The ethical problems associated with one *Dasein*'s domination of another in this sense are clear, but are only half of the picture. Taken to extremes, the domination of *das Man* in the business of Being-with-others leads to large communities, or even states, having a totalitarian control over every individual within them – people become numbers, raw material, functioning cogs in a larger machine which is itself the main reality, and from which the only possible further stage is submission to the still more impersonal Schopenhauerian Will. Community of that sort could not be more inauthentic.

Authentic Being-with-others, then, has the twin effects of making *Dasein*

¹⁵ See Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, esp. chap. 1.

¹⁶ *Das Man* is introduced in Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 17.

better aware of itself as an individual, and building up authentic community, a community that is sensitive to and respects individuals (a perfect form of which remains a dream forever). *Dasein* cannot avoid taking its 'thrownness' (*Geworfenheit*) into a particular historical moment of its own community into account. For instance, a modern Westerner cannot choose to be a Lollard or an emperor of the Qin dynasty, but *can* choose to be a diplomat or a computer engineer. Thrownness provides a range of possibilities from which *Dasein* can – indeed must, since it is essential to the nature of *Dasein* to be responsible for its own existential development – choose its own authentic combination. To fail to take a proper regard of the Being of others when making those decisions is not to experience a limit on individual freedom in the sense of being *refused* choice by the existentialist police, but a restriction of one's own possibilities for self-definition in the sense of having *removed* choice by one's actions. This is because *Dasein* is fundamentally a social being experiencing complex interrelationships with every other *Dasein* in its community, and without that community, the choices would not exist. Therefore, for Heidegger, to miss an opportunity to 'leap ahead' is both to fail to build up a morally sound authentic community, and also to foreclose on the possibility of defining oneself as an authentic being at all. Inauthentic care for the other has consequences for both self and the moral function of society. That is why Heidegger sometimes says that ontology is ethics.¹⁷

Read in this light, Grimes's role in his opera cannot so straightforwardly be read as that of an 'oppressed' member of society; but neither is Shawe-Taylor right in directing the moral questions solely at the protagonist. As so often with Britten, the matter is much more complicated.

Existential Oppression in *Peter Grimes*

Many commentators have noted Britten's association of specific tonalities with specific persons and groups in *Peter Grimes* – a technique he probably learnt from Wagner. Anthony Payne was the first to suggest that the essential tonal tension in the opera is between E \flat and A, and Peter Evans expands this observation by claiming that the 'association of Lydian scales and tritonally opposed key areas is one of the strongest unifying elements in the opera'.¹⁸ He notes that Act 1, for instance, makes strong use of the tritone polarity, by opening with the A major of the Dawn, which is regained for Grimes's 'What harbour shelters peace?' (fig. 48 in the vocal score), before plunging into Eb

¹⁷ This is one of the arguments of the 'Letter on Humanism', in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. David Farrell Krell (London, 1993), 213–65.

¹⁸ Anthony Payne, 'Dramatic Use of Tonality in *Peter Grimes*', *Tempo* 66 (1963), 22–6, and Evans, *Britten*, 109. For Evans's criticisms of Payne's thesis see *Britten*, 121–2.

minor for the storm interlude (fig. 51). Whittall agrees: 'Grimes's irreconcilable conflicts – primarily between his desire to find security and respectability and his instinct to preserve his isolation by acts of cruelty and irrationality – find reflection in the exploitation of tritone and semitone opposition'.¹⁹ Brett also calls on tonal schemes to explain the means by which Britten conveys the oppression in the opera: 'the tonal planning of the opera reflects the conflict between [Grimes's] fantasy life (generally expressed in D, E or A major) and the outside reality represented by, say, the E-flat of the storm and pub scene, or the B-flat of the courtroom and the final manhunt'.²⁰

As we shall see, the semitone motive (which does not actually suggest a Lydian modal context – more generally it is simply neighbour-note figuration) is introduced in the opera on a slightly higher structural level than those already mentioned, that is in the E/F bitonality of the love duet before Act 1. Grimes's enormously significant Act 2 theme (Ex. 17.1), the B \flat –G–E \natural –F–B \flat cadential line, contains both a tritone (B–F) and the E–F semitone elements that Rupprecht calls both 'Peter's prayer' and his 'self-sentencing'²¹ (the words 'So be it, and God have mercy upon me!'). This concentrated focus on the opera's semitone–tritone structural fingerprint has the potential to highlight not only Grimes's isolation and oppression, but also his own responsibility, as a result of (in Heidegger's terms) inauthentic action, either to act solicitously, or to make the right decisions for his own self-definition. Grimes, it turns out, is as responsible for his own destruction as the Borough is, and the moral conclusion that follows from the opera is unclear.

Between the B \flat of the Prologue and the A major of Act I comes one of the most remarkable love duets in opera, an unaccompanied non-meeting of minds between Ellen and Peter.²² Ellen sings reassuringly of rebirth and new hope after the shame of the apprentice deaths that haunt Peter (see Ex. 17.2). She sings in a comfortable E major, her line composed almost entirely of arpeggiations of the tonic triad. Peter, by contrast, sings in an insistent F minor that heavily emphasizes $\flat 8$ and $\flat 7$, the F and E that are at issue between these characters musically. Twice he immediately lifts her e² to f² ('walls' and 'Peeping'), and when she changes to resting on g $\sharp 1$ ('find' and 'kind'), he picks it up as his own key's Ab, casting it furiously up the octave. Their tentative resolution onto E (on 'around' and 'blind') is accomplished only by Peter's vigorous and ambivalent toying for one bar with the semitonal F–E alternation. The melody they go on to sing together at an octave's distance continues the

¹⁹ Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett*, 102.

²⁰ Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, 15.

²¹ Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 48.

²² Britten almost certainly had in mind the unaccompanied duet between Cavaradossi and Tosca in Act 3 of *Tosca*, whose musical effect and implications of tragic misunderstanding he refracts in *Peter Grimes*.

Ex. 17.1 Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Act 2, fig. 17 (Grimes's 'self-sentencing')

17

Peter

Choir

Organ

Pesante a staccato

Pno.

ff

largamente

Peter drives the boy fiercely out in front of him,
Ellen goes out the other way, weeping.

T.

So be it... And God have mer cy u pon me!

Choir

A - men!

Ex. 17.2 Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Act 1, end of Prologue

Ellen

P dolce

FP

Pe-ter, Pe-ter, come a-way!

Peter

FP

The truth the pi-ty and the truth... Where the walls them-selves-gos-sip of

E.

tranquillo

But we'll-gos-sip too, and talk and rest.

P.

in-quest While Peep-ing Toms nod as you go You'll share the name of out-law too!

E.

sempre tranquillo

Pe-ter... we shall re-store your name... warmed by the new es-teem that you will find.

P.

f *urgente*

Un-til the Bo-rough hate.

E.

There'll be new shoals to catch, life will be kind.

P.

pol-sons your mind. Ay!... on-ly of

E.

cresc. ed accel. *dim. e rall.*

Un-cloud-ed... the hot sun will spread his rays a-round.

P.

drown-ing ghosts! Time will not fir-get... the dead... are wit-ness, and... fate is blind.

E-F pairing but resolves onto a final E, which then acts as the dominant to the A major that begins the first act proper.²³

That final E thereafter stands in this opera for the identity Grimes hopes to attain through Ellen's agency – for renewed life, and comforting acceptance by the Borough. In painting for Peter a vision of the future beyond the immediate

²³ In Britten's last opera, *Death in Venice*, the protagonist, Aschenbach, is also defined in the opening scenes by a pairing of E and F. The purging of the latter element is explicitly associated with the effect the beautiful boy Tadzio has on him on the Lido, and is a principal musical focus of Britten's treatment of sexual themes in that work.

A less morally ambiguous presentation of an operatic other that owes much to Britten's choice of tone and symbolism in this aria, and which illuminates the present case, is that of Thomas Adès's Ariel in his opera *The Tempest* (2003–4). That sexless creature of the spirit realm is kept distinct from the human characters in the opera through the use of a consistently and exceptionally high tessitura that begins with a leap e^2 – e^3 (Act 1, 44:1) and becomes immediately associated with that stratospheric note throughout the opera, surmounting it only by rising to a *ppp* f^3 in the closing bars (Act 3, 333:11).²⁷ Ariel's desire throughout the opera, as in Shakespeare's play, is for release from bondage, and nowhere is Ariel's separation from Prospero's world of indiscriminate retribution felt more poignantly than in the Act 1 aria, 'Five fathoms deep' (see Ex. 17.4). Here, as in the 'Great Bear' soliloquy of *Peter Grimes*, the operatic action ceases; the storm of Prospero's wrath (the tempest of the play) opens up into this glimmeringly beautiful moment of stasis, and because it is Ariel singing, we are suspended in the higher, unearthly spheres that are the object of Grimes's gaze. Adès's tonal palette is richer here than Britten's, and the coincidence that both Peter and Ariel hover around an E (Peter infinitely more obsessively – it is his very identity that is at stake, in a way that it is not for Ariel) cannot be meaningful. But in both cases, we are starkly confronted with alienation, and a presentation of the alienated individual so sympathetic that we cannot fail to take sides.

Picking up a theme from his *America: A Prophecy* (1999), in which a Mayan voice (singing Mayan poetry in translation) reflects mournfully on the torments and sense of loss attendant on invasion by the Spanish (who likewise sing contemporary texts to fragments of contemporary music), Adès's opera offers a complex colonial reading of Shakespeare's play. In Adès's hands the otherness of Ariel and Caliban is enhanced, for instance by the appearance of Caliban among the entire court of Naples in Act 2, which allows the composer to depict the island native as an American Indian, welcoming godlike visitors from abroad, with their gifts of jewellery and promises of hope. We are never in doubt as to the tragedy of the alienation of Caliban and Ariel, and – since this opera is richly populated with characters who are alienated from one another – virtually every other major character, including Prospero; but the scenes of reconciliation at the end of the opera, which lead to marriages, reunions and the release of Caliban and Ariel, leave a disturbingly empty feeling. Caliban remains finally on stage, alone in his earnestly sought-after crown, sovereign at last, over – what? The music, which refuses to cadence, and leaves its last chord tied over into the nothingness of the *Generalpause* of the final bar, offers no answers.

²⁷ There is one notable descent from the heights, as Ariel grieves over the harm Prospero's magic is doing to the human souls on the island: 'if you saw them / Your heart would soften. / Mine would, were I human' – at which point Ariel's line sinks to a very human ab , two and a half octaves below the high point of main focus (303:8–304:5).

The absurdity of this 'happy' and 'just' ending is a similarly important element in *Peter Grimes*, though here the question is as much about existential authenticity as political justice. The opera's essential questions are whether Grimes can make peace, and continue to live in peace, with the Borough, and whether it will be existentially authentic for him to do so, or would require the destruction of his personality in order to save his physical body from the extinction that the lynch-mob of Act 3 threatens. Although the plot's fulfilment does not come until the closing scenes, Grimes's fate is decided much sooner, in the *Augenblick* – the 'moment of vision' in Heidegger's philosophy, which clarifies *Dasein*'s choices for its future to be authentic – of Act 2 (see Ex. 17.1). It is a favourite moment of exegetes who regard it as the crux of the opera.

The thought uniting all their responses, which I shall discuss at the end of this essay, is the insight that this moment is Grimes's judgment on himself, however positive or negative that judgment is seen to be. Its after-effects are clear in the 'mad scene' of Act 3 Scene 3, where, aside from a foghorn, the only accompaniment to the protagonist's mental breakdown is the distant (but always approaching) chorus. Grimes's music here is dominated by the falling semitone of the foghorn, Eb – D , but very quickly the motif rises to focus on the two notes that are essential to answering questions about Grimes's personal authenticity, as well as of his Being-with-others, $E\sharp$ – $Eb/D\sharp$.

His memories of earlier moments in the opera begin with his trial ('Accidental circumstances', Act 3, 47:6) and take a significant turn with his memory of the 'Great Bear' (Act 3, 48:5), where his repetition of the concluding words, 'begin again!', demonstrates his tragic change of heart. The line descends a full octave from the notated e^2 to the e^1 on the first syllable of 'again', even creating a sense of E major through the introduction of a $g\sharp^1$ and $f\sharp^1$ on the two preceding steps – but on the word's second syllable the line falls to eb^1 , where it is joined by the foghorn.

Already, just before this 'mad scene', the 'Great Bear' octave descent had been recalled, on an oboe ranging high above the staff (see Ex. 17.5), starting down a semitone from its earlier form, on eb^3 , and with a division at the tritone on a^2 . By this stage in the opera, Eb (the key of the storm, the symbol of the crisis in the protagonist's mind, the same role it has in *The Tempest*) has become associated with the hunt through the fog for Grimes-as-outlaw. In acquiescing to the Borough's conception of him in this scene, Grimes makes the choice not to affirm his alienated and *unjustly* persecuted E, but instead to decide in favour of the *just* persecution signified by his 'outlaw' Eb . The remainder of his vocal part is an insistent flattening of his originally secure E. 'Old Joe' goes fishing down a semitone, starting on $D\sharp$ (Act 3, 49:2); the reminder of Ellen, his leaping-ahead giver of E major, is now on the Borough's $E\sharp$ (Act 3, 49:4–5); and at the climax of the scene, when the choir – now close enough at hand to sing *ffz* – restates its judicial Bb and Grimes recalls the

Ex. 17.4 Adès, *The Tempest*, Act 1, fig. 90 (Ariel's aria)

90 Più rit *Larghissimo* $\text{♩} = \text{c.}40-44$ ($\text{♩} = 88$)

f *ff* *mf*

Ariel Five là thoms deep Your fa - ther lies

Prospero Sing!

f *fff* *pppp* (*loca*)

p sempre *cresc.* 91

Ariel These are pearls That were his eyes Noth - ing of him

pp

Ariel That was mor - tal Is the same His bones are co - ral

ppsub. *ffsub.* *mf*

ppp *ffff* (*loca*)

Ariel He has suf - fered A sea change In - to some - thing

p *pp* *ppp*

Ariel Rich and strange

f sempre dim. *p* *mp* *mf dim*

pppp
* unaccented notes always *pppp*

92

Ariel Sea - nymphs hour - ly Ring

pp *pp* *pp* *pp*

ppp col 3 *col 8*

Ariel his knell

pp *pppp* *pppp*

col 8

93 (in 4)

Ariel I can hear them Ding dong bell

G.P. *mf* *mf*

G.P. *R.* *f* *ppp*

pp *pp* *pp* *pp*

col 8 *con Ped.*

Ex. 17.5 Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Act 2, fig. 45

rising third, A-C, that called him to judgment as a prelude to his final breakdown (see Ex. 17.6). Clutching in despair at the last remaining undisputed fact concerning him – his name – he twice sings ‘Grimes’ to an E \sharp before bending the pitch as if wringing his conscious self through a mangle, and dragging it through E \flat and back up again to restate the falling semitone. With a great effort of will he squeezes out his last line, a swelling phrase, rising but aiming at nothing, which terminates with his last statement of his name to the now unbearably poignant E–E \flat motif. He sings no more; Ellen and Balstrode collect him and he is advised to sink his boat and drown himself before the Borough catches him up to despatch him with less dignity.

Grimes’s end is not a negation. He does not choose to be ‘not-Grimes’, by denying the visionary-Grimes E \sharp . Rather, he chooses to be ‘mad-Grimes’, ‘outlaw-Grimes’ (E \flat), which is what the Borough understands him to be. Although tragic, the decision is still an *authentic* one. This is indeed the darker side of Heidegger’s reading of authenticity and human temporality: it is possible for an *Augenblick*, the present revelation of *Dasein*’s authentic direction for self-definition in the future, to point to a bleak destiny. Truth, in the form of personal authenticity, is not always happy; it can, as it does in *Peter Grimes*, lead to a bad end. In deciding to be a madman and an outcast, albeit under extraordinary pressure that effectively compels that decision, Grimes condemns *himself* (the pronoun is meant in a strong sense, that is, as the *self*

Ex. 17.6 Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Act 2, fig. 51 (Grimes’s mad scene)

that is authentically *his* own) to the only set of outcomes that can follow from such resolution, in the context of the historical and social situation into which he is thrown. Madmen who might be murderers cannot be accepted into the Borough society; they must die either by their own hand or the mob’s.

This brings us back to Grimes’s *Augenblick*, his personal confirmation of the ‘Amen’ that the off-stage choir sings in the church on the fateful Sunday morning. ‘So be it, and God have mercy upon me!’ he sings (see again Ex. 17.1), cadencing into the Borough’s legalistic B \flat , with the strong spotlight on his own E (atop chord IV in the maximally firm root-position I–IV–V–I cadence

in Bb) confirming what the watching listener cannot doubt – that it is his own choice, his own *'self-sentencing*, a belated act of self-judgment that fulfils Peter's ill-advised desire in the Prologue – "Let me stand trial!" – and predicts the opera's ultimate progress toward his physical self-destruction.²⁸

Yet Rupprecht's claim that this is 'self-sentencing' is not quite strong enough. One can give in, politically, to the views of others without actually changing one's view of oneself. Defeated dictatorial rulers have a habit of doing this, subjecting themselves to the legal and military control of a conquering army but proclaiming their moral, cultural and even racial authority from the scaffold, tumbrel or block. Grimes, though, is more generous to the Borough. His desire to be judged is only 'ill-advised' from his own point of view: in submitting himself to the rule of law, insofar as the Borough's moral code constitutes a legal framework (certainly it is the judgment of *das Man*), Grimes acknowledges and affirms its validity despite the personal cost of his affirmation. What happens in this *Augenblick* is that Grimes finally sees that his hopes of redemption, founded on Ellen and her redemptive E major, are false, concerning both himself (for he accepts that he *is* the monstrous character that the Borough hates, and even if he does not murder boys, it is possible to argue that he does physically abuse them), and probabilities in the real world. He *cannot* be the perfect citizen, the good husband to Ellen, without ceasing to be Peter Grimes. He accepts that the Borough is right, but also that it would be wrong for him to be otherwise – not because his way is morally acceptable, but simply because it is *his* way, and for an individual human being, identity matters. Grimes's *Augenblick* is a confession that his Being-with-Ellen is inauthentic, because it 'leaps in' and sees a definite equipmental use for her. As Heidegger argues, this inauthentic Being-with has the capacity both to undermine his own sense of self and the authentic functioning of his community. His *Augenblick* is an ethical and existential statement that is at once positive and negative in its implications.

Both Brett, who calls this the turning point towards an oppression-induced 'self-hatred', and Clifford Hindley, who reads the moment as 'self-affirmation', with Grimes 'defiantly affirming his right to go his own way', are therefore right in their different ways, even if their insistence on a specifically sexualized reading is not totally compelling.²⁹ Grimes does acquiesce to the judgment of the Borough, but also proclaims that he will go his own way, because it is authentic to him. In damning himself, in the key (Bb) and sentiments of the Borough, he wills his own end. And this is not the good death of the Schopenhauerian who thumbs his nose at the Will whose eternal distaste for

²⁸ Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 51.

²⁹ Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, 18, and Clifford Hindley, 'Homosexual Self-Affirmation and Self-Oppression in Two Britten Operas', *Musical Quarterly* 76 (1992), 143–68 (p. 147).

the *principium individuationis* guarantees a perpetual misery for individual human beings; it is the hopeless oblivion of the denier of any metaphysics, a resolutely bleak proclamation of personal identity. It is, rather, a complex and paradoxical moral statement of the rightness of both oppressor and oppressed. It is this acceptance of moral paradox that elevates Grimes to the level of tragedy. Without it, his hounding to death would fail to rise above the tone of melodrama.

Britten refuses, in the end, to clarify the moral and existential ambiguity that his opera throws up. Later, in *The Rape of Lucretia*, *The Turn of the Screw* and (particularly) *Death in Venice*, Britten's exploration of (increasingly explicitly sexual) morals was to tend in a no less complicated direction;³⁰ but he is always intelligently reluctant to choose between the competing claims of society and the individual, in a shared existential experience in which, as Heidegger's analysis shows, both depend on each other if there is to be an authentic community of authentic individuals.

³⁰ For a study of *Death in Venice*, see J. P. E. Harper-Scott, 'Made You Look!: Children in Salome and Death in Venice', in *Benjamin Britten: New Perspectives on his Life and Music*, ed. Lucy Walker (Woodbridge, 2009), 116–37.