

# Meridian Music of the Week!

## Issue No. 205 (based on previous Newsletter No.167 – September 2024)

Each week ALL our children will be listening to a piece of music as part of our music lessons. We'll be talking about it in class and discussing what we like, what we don't like and what it makes us think about. Parents/carers/family - why not join in and listen for yourself at home! All music is available **free** on YouTube as well as paid services such as iTunes and Spotify.

This week's music...



### Four Sea Interludes from the opera 'Peter Grimes' by Benjamin Britten (1945)

You can listen to all four interludes – played by the BBC Symphony Orchestra [HERE](#) (total 16 mins)

Interlude 1 - 'Dawn' – (beginning)

Interlude 2 - 'Sunday Morning' – (3:36)

Interlude 3 - 'Moonlight' – (7:19)

Interlude 4 - 'Storm' (11:42)

Or listen to them one by one...

['Dawn'](#) ['Sunday Morning'](#) ['Moonlight'](#) ['Storm'](#)

### Back to the beginning...

Believe it or not, this week's music was featured in the **first ever** 'Meridian Music of the Week' newsletter – back in 2019! Many of our Meridian children will have heard it many times before, but that's OK because it's a great piece of music! Written by British composer Benjamin Britten, these short pieces describe the sea in four different ways. Appropriate for a school near the coast such as Meridian...

### Benjamin Britten

Britten was born in 1913, just before the First World War – and died in 1976 (of heart failure) at the age of only 63. He is considered by most music experts to be our country's greatest composer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote many different styles of music but was famous for writing operas – including '**Peter Grimes**' which is the opera our music comes from this week.

Britten was often ill during his relatively short life – he caught pneumonia and nearly died when he was only three months old. He started having music lessons around the age of 5 and even started writing his first music at that young age.



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He started to learn the piano at age 7 and then the **viola** (a slightly larger violin) when he was 10. Amazingly, because his father wasn't interested in music at all, the Britten family weren't allowed a record player or even a radio in the house! So, Britten became a successful young musician without ever hearing any music that wasn't played 'live'.

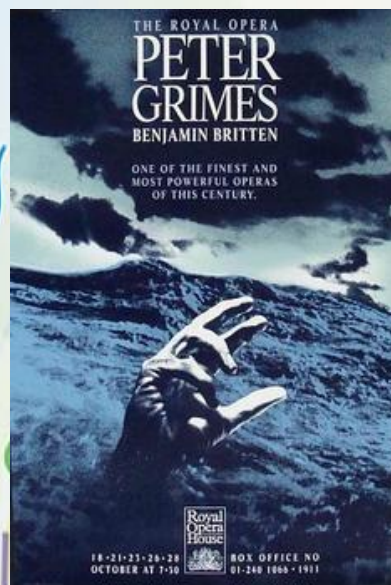
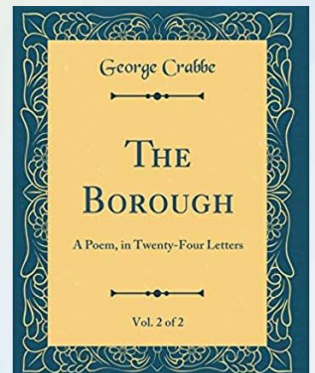


One of Britten's first musical successes wasn't an opera at all – but, in fact, the music for a BBC film documentary about the Post Office night train! It was called 'Night Mail' and was an information film all about how letters and other mail were transported around the country by trains during the night. There was a well-known section where a poem by the famous poet W H Auden was read out over some music (by Britten) describing the trains travelling at night. It became very well-known and is sometimes still shown on TV today. You can hear Britten

making the orchestra sound like the rhythmic noises of a train – have a listen [HERE](#)!

Britten was a life-long **pacifist** – someone who disagreed with war under any circumstances. And he caused some controversy when he and his partner (classical singer Peter Pears) decided to leave England to live in America in April 1939, just before the beginning of the Second World War. Many people thought he was a coward for doing this, but many other pacifists did the same at the time – including the poet W H Auden and Britten's friend the author Christopher Isherwood. (Isherwood wrote the book that the film musical 'Cabaret' was based on.) Britten and Pears stayed in America for three years but they became homesick and returned in 1942, while the war was still going on.

Interestingly, one of the things that had made Britten homesick was reading the poems of a writer called George Crabbe which were set on the Suffolk coast near to where Britten had lived. And one of those poems ('The Borough') is about a character called Peter Grimes! Britten was known to have said, **"In a flash I realised two things: that I must write an opera, and where I belonged"**. Britten knew he wanted to write an opera about this character's story – and three years later, back in England, he did...



## 'Peter Grimes' – the opera

The story of the opera is set in a small fishing village in Suffolk in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It starts dramatically with a scene in a court room. The main character, Peter Grimes (a fisherman) is being questioned about the death at sea of his young fishing apprentice (assistant).

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They never find the boy's body and the people of the village are convinced that Grimes killed the boy himself. Grimes protests that it was an accident and the boy fell overboard and drowned. The judge finally clears Grimes of the death – but warns him not to get another apprentice to take to sea fishing. In the story, we never get to really know whether Peter Grimes was guilty or not. It's left to the audience to make up their own mind!



A scene from the opera where the villagers march on Peter Grimes' fishing hut to question him about his apprentice.

But later, one of Grimes' few friends tells him he has found another boy apprentice for him and they send a woman – Ellen – to fetch the boy from the workhouse (it reminds me a bit of Nancy and Oliver Twist!) But later in the story, Ellen finds a bruise on the new boy's neck and accuses Grimes of hurting him. Grimes denies it but runs off with the boy to his fishing hut. The people of the village get to hear about this and start to march in procession towards Grimes' fishing hut to investigate. When Grimes hears them coming, he

decides to sail out to sea to escape. He tells the boy apprentice to change out of his Sunday best clothes into some fishing gear and tells him to be careful climbing down the cliff to his boat. But tragedy! The boy falls from the cliff and dies on the rocks.

When the villagers arrive at Grimes' fishing hut – he is gone. But they are still convinced he is a murderer. Later, the new apprentice's jumper is washed ashore and the people become more convinced that Grimes is guilty. So, the villagers send another angry mob to Grimes' hut to confront him. By this time, Peter Grimes has gone mad with guilt over the boys' deaths. Another old sea captain finds Grimes before the villagers do and persuades him to sail out to sea and sink his own boat. We see Grimes leaving...



Another scene where Grimes' second apprentice dies from falling from the cliff.

At the end of the story, the villagers are seen to be going about their business as if nothing had happened. They hear a report from the coastguard that a ship has been found sunk. But the landlady of the local pub simply says it's just "one of those rumours"... THE END!

## The Sea Interludes

'Peter Grimes' is a very dramatic opera story but strangely, this week's music from the opera doesn't have any actual singing! During the story there are several 'pauses' in the action – where the orchestra play on their own without the singers/actors. These are known as **interludes** (a short musical composition played in between the main action). In this opera, they are used to set the scene for what is coming next.

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They give an 'atmosphere' for the audience before the story continues. Most of the interludes in 'Peter Grimes' are to do with the sea and the weather. Very often, the weather and the sea reflect what is actually happening in the story. For example...



### 'Dawn'

This is the first interlude, quite near the beginning of the story. It happens just after the opening scene of the opera where Peter Grimes is in court. It sets the scene for the beginning of the next day in the village. The idea of this short piece is to give the impression of a sea bird swooping over the ocean – as well as the bubbling and shifting of the waves beneath. The violins play the sea bird swooping – and the **woodwind** (clarinets, flutes, oboes and bassoons) play the sounds of the ocean bubbling up. The low **brass** instruments (trombones, horns and tubas) represent the depths of the ocean – slowly shifting.

### 'Storm'

This interlude is noisy! Just before we meet the new apprentice boy in the story, there is a storm in the village. Britten uses the orchestra to give the impression of violent winds and waves. It uses a lot of lower **strings** (cellos and double basses) to give the impression of deep stormy waves – and uses a lot of **tympani** (kettle drums) for the sound of thunder. Then, at about two minutes into the music, things change. The storm seems to calm down – and we can hear short, sharp splatterings of rain. We then hear a calm melody from the strings and it seems the storm is over. But it isn't! After a while the orchestra builds up to a noisy climax, the storm is back, but then it disappears again almost as soon as it had returned. Dramatic stuff!



### 'Sunday Morning'

This one happens later in the story – a few weeks after the storm and before Ellen finds the bruise on the new apprentice's neck. It's Sunday morning and the church bells are ringing. This is represented in the orchestra by the French horns playing simple chords (although Britten does use actual orchestral bells later in the music). People in the village are busily beginning to make their way to church. Some move quickly, some move slowly and you can hear this by the different **tempos** used in the music.

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## 'Moonlight'

This one is slow and quite sad sounding. It's not really supposed to sound 'like' anything. To be honest, Britten wrote it because, at this point in the stage show, they had to move a lot of actors and singers off the stage and change the scenery – which took a little time! Because of this, it's perhaps the least interesting – but it's still a nice tune!

## Britten and music for children...

Just to finish off, another thing that Benjamin Britten was famous for was writing music not just **about** children – but **for** children. One of his most famous pieces is called '**A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra**' which is based on a simple tune (which he didn't actually write!) but has different sections of the music played by different sections of the orchestra. The idea is to show how each section (strings, woodwind, brass, percussion etc.) sound differently (they have a different **timbre**) and to tell children about the different musical instruments. Sometimes when it is performed, a narrator explains the different instruments for the audience. There's a good example of it [HERE](#).



A scene from the online 'Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra' game.

But, **MUCH** more fun, is an online interactive 'game' you can play – all about the 'Young Person's Guide' which you can find [HERE](#). It's quite fun to play through and it introduces you to all the different instruments of the orchestra. You can even play samples of each of the individual instruments. Why not give it a go!

He also wrote a series of songs called '**Friday Afternoons**' for children to sing. He wrote them for his brother who was a school headmaster in Wales. One of these songs, 'A New Year Carol' has been sung in music lessons by Meridian's own Year 6 children for the past few years. I think we'll probably do it again later this year around Christmas time. So, get ready our new Year 6 – it's your turn next!



Listen & enjoy...

Mr. Mole

Music Teacher

