'PETER GRIMES'

English coast fog covers tragedy to come
By JOHN PATRICK FORD

Peter Grimes is a recluse fisherman at odds with society. Like the composer of the opera, Benjamin Britten, he was born to the sea. The music interprets his conflicts with hostile villagers by using rhythms of the sea throughout the opera from foggy calm to wild storms. "Peter Grimes" is the fourth production of the 2009 San Diego Opera season opening April 18 at the Civic Theatre.

San Diego is lucky to have Anthony Dean Griffey to sing the title role following his great success as Peter at the Metropolitan Opera last season. His intense portrayal of the misunderstood loner is chilling and at the same time compassionate. His only friend among the gossipy villagers is Ellen the schoolmarm who hopelessly tries to calm Peter's tensions and hostility.

Modern day therapy could have saved this demented fisherman who is finally driven away to be swallowed by the sea. The dramatic scenes of encounters with the village folk provide superb choral ensembles, the trademark of Britten's music repertory.

The opera blends voice with orchestra into a rich score to support the drama on the stage.

I spent a weekend with Benjamin Britten. While researching the source material for this preview I found some interesting parallels between his compositions and his personal life. Having checked out several biographical books about Britten from the UCSD library, I devoted my Labor Day weekend to reading and absorbing the enigmatic character who was arguably the most celebrated English composer of the 20th century.

To know the full scope of Britten's life depends on which type of biography is read. Most are devoted to his early family life and his development as a composer and performer from strictly an historic chronology. A few others delve deeper into the shadows of his personal life as a guide for the style of music he composed. I found the latter records fashioned from private correspondence and interviews with Britten's most intimate colleagues and friends to be more revealing.

There was a legend that Britten lived briefly in Escondido in 1941 and found a book that inspired him to compose his first major opera. This is essentially true, but the details were fuzzy, especially learning why he was in Escondido in the first place, a long way from his war-ravaged home in Suffolk, England. Here are the actual facts. As the war clouds gathered over Europe in 1939, Britten sought refuge to ease his pacifist beliefs. He and tenor Peter Pears, his life partner, came to America and settled in New York City. In 1940 they visited Chicago and Grand Rapids seeking commissions for symphonic works.
Hollywood was a siren song for Britten who hoped to get work there. He had gained some reputation as a young composer writing incidental music for BBC documentary films in England in the 1930s. He was invited to stay with pianist friends Ethel Bartlett and Rae Robinson in Escondido during the summer of 1941.

A letter written to Elizabeth Mayer on July 5, 1941 refers to his discovery of the poems of George Crabbe, a 19th century resident of Aldeburgh, near Britten's birthplace in Suffolk, England. "The Borough" told of the lives of simple villagers, including fisherman Peter Grimes, in a typical Suffolk sea coast town. The tales filled Britten with nostalgia for his homeland.


Anthony Dean Griffey was last seen at SDO in "Streetcar Named Desire" (2000) and a recital following his 1999 debut here as the dim witted Lennie in "Of Mice and Men." Both British conductor Steuart Bedford and director John Copley worked with Benjamin Britten and are recognized as leading interpreters of his music.

"Peter Grimes" is sung in English with text above the stage. Performances at the Civic Theatre are: 7 p.m. April 18, April 21; 8 p.m. April 24; and 2 p.m. April 26. For ticket information, call 619-533 7000 or visit sdopera.com.

Ford is a past president of San Diego Opera and supports the opera archive at San Diego State University.