

A FISHERMAN'S TALE

THE ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY TELLS THE STORY OF PETER GRIMES.

BY EDDIE SILVA

“A once-in-a-lifetime event.”

This is how St. Louis Symphony Music Director David Robertson describes the November performances of Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*, at Powell Hall and at New York's Carnegie Hall. The production coincides with the centennial of Britten's birth, a milestone being celebrated in concert halls around the world this year. The Symphony's performance at Carnegie takes place on the composer's birthdate, November 22.

Rarely do stars converge in the manner in which they have for the Symphony's *Peter Grimes*. Already the Symphony was blessed with the St. Louis Symphony Chorus, a stand-out chorus being an essential component for this opera. “The chorus is a main force,” says Robertson. The chorus members serve as the town gossips; they not only comment on the story as it moves along, but help to propel it in destructive ways.

The title role is sung by Anthony Dean Griffey, who has taken ownership of Grimes since he first sang the part at Tanglewood, under the baton of Seiji Ozawa, in 1996. His 2008 Metropolitan Opera performance was part of the Met's *Live in HD* series and was shown on PBS's *Great Performances*. Because of advances in technology alone, Griffey would be the most recognized Peter Grimes of our time, but it is what he has brought to the role that makes him stand out—he has enthralled, mesmerized, and haunted audiences and critics alike. His Grimes has been described as “overwhelming and enigmatic,” “completely heartbreaking,” “the finest interpretation of the role to date,” “the ideal.” When Natalie Dessay, during an intermission in the Met broadcast, asked Griffey how he prepared for playing Peter Grimes, he answered, “I was born for this role.”



ALEX IRVIN

Anthony Dean Griffey and Susanna Phillips at the Aspen Music Festival and School, July 27, 2013, semi-staged performance of Peter Grimes in the Benedict Music Tent.

Opposite Griffey is Susanna Phillips as Ellen Orford. In St. Louis Phillips most recently performed as Marie in Act III of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* and then, following intermission, sang Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in the Symphony's 2012-13 season finale. A winner of the prestigious Beverly Sills Award, Phillips has been described as "a splendid soprano" by the *New York Times*' Anthony Tommassini. She and Griffey have already performed as Grimes and Orford, last summer at the Aspen Music Festival and School, in a concert production described as "searing... glorious" in the *Aspen Times*.

The supporting cast for this concert production of *Peter Grimes* includes some of the finest names of the opera stage, vocalists such as Alan Held, Thomas Cooley, and Nancy Maultsby, to name just a few. The artistic virtuosity is there, and has already attracted the attention of the New York press—the Carnegie Hall performance has appeared on numerous fall highlight lists.

But *Peter Grimes* is an event not just because of the music, which is extraordinary, but also for the power of its story. The themes in Britten's opera, first performed in 1945, resonate profoundly in our time. Themes of the individual and society, and how society may prey upon the individual, especially if that individual stands outside the norms of that society. It is an opera that makes us question our basic ideas of goodness and of evil. Does Peter Grimes kill? Who is responsible for whom?

Grimes is an outsider, socially awkward, and brutally lonely. "Peter Grimes is a fisherman," says Robertson, getting to the basics of the plot. "He wants fame and fortune. He wants to marry a certain woman but won't because of his current

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KEITH SAUNDERS



David Robertson

economic state.”

Grimes takes on boys as apprentices and mistreats them—to what extent is left uncertain. The village gossips have their point of view. One boy has died under Grimes’ stewardship. So will another.

Britten sets his opera in a small fishing village on the rough Scottish coastline, not unlike the village that became his home, Aldeburgh, and where he is buried. But Britten resisted the insinuation that the tragedy of Grimes related to the harsh natural environment—the unfor-

giving sea and treacherous coastline serving as metaphors for the cruel nature of human existence. Although the sea is certainly a character in the opera—embodied by the orchestra—Britten asserted, “It’s got nothing to do with the seas; it has to do with the people in the village.... No, these people would be the same wherever they were.”

The music Britten wrote for his first opera is astonishing. Alex Ross devotes an entire chapter to Britten in his history of 20th-century music, *The Rest Is Noise*. “Rich, expansive music,” Ross describes it.

Ross observes that for *Peter Grimes* Britten includes 19th-century opera traditions such as “arias, duets, choruses, and other set forms”; but the composer also “presses constantly at the borders of the genre” and “bursts with folk song, operetta and vaudeville tunes.” It is not surprising that Robertson mentions *Carousel*, the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, and *Peter Grimes* in the same breath, both centered on “a character who wasn’t good and nice.”

Robertson mentions that while the opera presents a dark view of community, the St. Louis production reflects on the best of community—musicians, staff, board members, donors—coming together to make a profound, landmark artistic experience.

St. Louis Symphony Principal Viola Beth Guterman Chu, who just joined the orchestra in January 2013, finds herself happily within this starry alignment that is making *Peter Grimes* a reality. “I love Britten,” says Chu. She relishes the opportunity to play his challenging music—“We’re constantly being pushed to the edge”—and to be involved in a work with such relevant themes.

“You don’t know in the end if Grimes is a terrible person,” she says. “It’s not just black and white. Look at *Breaking Bad*—you don’t know if Walter White [the central character in the HBO series] is bad or good. One hundred years from Britten’s birth and we’re asking the same questions.”

However, Britten did answer a question for Chu many years ago. “I was in my youth orchestra, and playing the big viola solo in the passacaglia—which signifies the beginning of the end for Peter. That was the moment I woke up and said, ‘I have to play this instrument.’”

The St. Louis Symphony and Chorus perform Britten’s Peter Grimes at Powell Hall, November 16, 2013.

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