

Peter Grimes, The Princeton Festival, June 26, 2016

Reviewed by Toby Grace

“Peter Grimes” by Benjamin Britten, has been a highly successful opera since it opened in London in 1945. It has been presented in famous performances at Tanglewood (directed by Leonard Bernstein), the Metropolitan Opera, the Aldeburgh Festival and others. The Princeton Festival’s entry into this distinguished field fully merits comparison with the best of them. A dark and tragic story Britten based on a poem by the 18<sup>th</sup> Century poet George Crabbe, which itself may perhaps have been based on a true incident, it tells of the downfall of a village fisherman. Whether this fall was the result of his own inner demons, driving him to strive for worldly success or of the backbiting and gossip of a small, tightly connected community where there are no secrets and little privacy, we are left to judge for ourselves.

Some critics have called “Peter Grimes” a powerful indictment of repressed homosexuality but the opera gives no overt references lending credence to such a theory. It does however show Grimes as being different from the other villagers in ways the community could not approve of.

Peter Grimes is himself not a nice person. There are no heroes in this story but there are a number of victims: the apprentice boys Grimes over-works and abuses and for whose deaths he is responsible, and the school teacher who, for unfathomable reasons, loves this unpleasant and doomed man.

Britten chose to set the opera in his own contemporary time period and the costumes by Marie Miller reproduced this era with the Festival’s usual meticulous attention to detail. The women’s costumes in particular hit just the right note of the style and quality that working and lower-middle class women would have worn in the late 1930s and ‘40s.

In keeping with the grim nature of the story the sets, designed by Jonathan Robertson and enhanced by the superbly atmospheric lighting design by Norman Coates, were dark and weathered, with hanging netting testifying to the trade of this coastal fishing village. “Peter Grimes” is not an opera to see for visual spectacle but rather for Benjamin Britten’s magnificent music, to which the excellent orchestra, conducted by Richard Tang Yuk (also the overall Artistic and General Director of the festival) did full justice.

With a primary cast of 15, backed up by a chorus of 35, this production could produce choral music of real power, my personal favorite coming near the beginning of Act 2. Particular mention must be made of the wonderful performance given to us by Caroline Worra as Ellen Orford. Ms. Worra’s clear and brilliant voice was given further life by her excellent acting in this role of sadness and defeated love. Alex Richardson in the title role not only sang magnificently but gave us a character who was obsessed – perhaps a bit insane but very believable. Peter Grimes is a role that could so easily be over-acted but Mr. Richardson hit just the right note to make his portrayal seem chilling but very real.

As is often the case with the lavish productions of the Princeton Festival, the cast is too large to give each individual the credit due in the space we have available. However we do want to mention Stephen

Gaertner as Balstrode, Joseph Barron as Swallow the lawyer, Kathryn Krasovec as Mrs. Sedley and Casey Finnigan as Bob Boles, all of whom gave exceptional performances.

This brings to a close the 2016 Princeton Festival and it does so fully maintaining its tradition of getting better every year and bringing genuinely world class productions to our region. Every year the festival is fresh, creative and offers unexpected marvels. Keep up with it and plan ahead at [www.princetonfestival.org](http://www.princetonfestival.org). When it comes to the performing arts it is by far and away the best thing going in our part of this planet.