

PART TWO

The operas

4 'He descended into Hell': Peter Grimes, Ellen Orford and salvation denied

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In his introduction to the original production of *Peter Grimes* in 1945, Britten stated: 'I wanted to express my awareness of the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depends on the sea – difficult though it is to treat such a universal subject in theatrical form.'¹ Pears stated that 'Ben and I had imagined the sea as being in the orchestra so it was not necessary to see it on stage.'² If the 'sea' can be understood almost as another operatic character, it becomes so primarily through its symbolic representation of human emotions; it may be seen to have the potential for providing a commentary on the dramatic action, mediating between it and the audience. This function is clearly to be seen in the six orchestral interludes that punctuate the opera, two located in each of the three acts. It is essential to distinguish between Britten's specifically programmatic designation of four of these as 'Sea Interludes' ('Dawn', 'Sunday Morning', 'Moonlight' and 'Storm') for the purposes of creating a concert-hall orchestral suite, and their greater psychological and narrative import – undesignated beyond the generic title 'Interlude' – in the operatic context.³

Britten's 'sea' may, in fact, be read as a metaphor of Peter Grimes himself. A great deal of ink has been spilt in the fifty years since the opera's première by critics and scholars wrestling to understand the 'divided' character of Britten's Grimes.⁴ The unresolved ambiguities of his character only begin to become explicable when he is understood as an incarnation of the dualism at the core of Britten's musical personality. As Hans Keller memorably put it: 'Peter Grimes is the living conflict. His pride, ambition, and urge for independence fight with his need for love; his self-love battles against his self-hate.'⁵ This dualism is revealed on the one hand by the Peter Grimes (himself not without conflict) who is first encountered in the lyrical phrases and luminous string accompaniment as he mounts the dock to account for the mysterious death of his latest boy apprentice (William Spode) during the inquest – or covert trial – of the 84 Prologue. It is this Grimes who is the visionary singing of stars and galaxies in the somewhat incongruous setting of an English pub in Act I scene 2. It is he who sings of peace prior to the raging storm: of his tender – and genuine – love for the widowed schoolmistress Ellen Orford, whom Philip

Hope-Wallace contrasted with the incompleteness of Grimes's character as 'a wonderfully realised secondary figure in the opera'.⁶ This is Britten's 'Apollonian' or 'Good' Grimes. Fighting with and ultimately overwhelming him is the aggressive Peter Grimes inherited from Crabbe's poem: it is he who churns up the orchestral music of Interlude II and strikes Ellen to the ground in Act II scene 1. It is he who cruelly manhandles his apprentice in the service of his selfish ambition during Act II scene 2 and collapses quite mad at the end of the opera. Whether his guilt is real or imagined, its power is ultimately strong enough to cause him to succumb to the Borough's judgement and commit suicide at sea. He is rooted in Crabbe's 'Dionysian' or 'Evil' Grimes. Such a struggle is universal to fallen man, accounting in part for the opera's continuing wide appeal in spite of the central characters' dramatic incongruities. What makes Grimes a genuine anti-hero is the ultimate failure of the potential 'Good' of his character to win out against the 'Evil'. This turns the opera into a kind of modern Faustian parable and directs the exclusive attention on Grimes towards other possibilities that could have led to Grimes's salvation should he have chosen to pursue them.

Through the character of Ellen Orford we discover a new perspective in the opera. Pears wrote in a letter to Britten dated 1 March 1944:

The more I hear of [*Peter Grimes*], the more I feel that the queerness is unimportant & doesn't really exist in the music (or at any rate obtrude) so it mustn't do so in the words. P[eter]. G[rimes]. is an introspective, an artist, a neurotic, his real problem is expression, self-expression.⁷

The removal of any overtly homosexual theme from the work places a greater significance on the outcome of Grimes's relationship with Ellen Orford. Philip Brett's research on the opera's source material and sketches confirms this view of the finished libretto. Most interestingly, Brett has also been able to demonstrate that Britten's and Pears's concern to remove any suggestion of a motivation for Grimes rooted in sadism and homoeroticism (elements that the opera's librettist, Montagu Slater, wanted to retain) led to a shift of emotional focus from Grimes and the boy to the relationship between Grimes and Ellen, bolstering her significance considerably in the process.⁸ It was not until these changes were effected that Britten began composition of the music.

In order to appreciate the importance of Ellen's perspective in the opera we will need, briefly, to look at the poem by George Crabbe on which the opera was based.⁹ In the section 'Ellen Orford' from Crabbe's *The Borough*, Ellen is described as having lived a savage life in which an indestructible Christian faith shines through to the end. Britten marked out several lines from 'Ellen Orford' in his copy of the poem: 152–4,

198–9, 218–19 and 336–7.¹⁰ In the course of Crabbe's text, Ellen encourages her husband's conversion to Christianity. However, he – like Grimes – rebels and commits suicide.¹¹ Notably, the closing words of the poem, and of her life, exemplify her spiritual essence: 'And as my Mind looks cheerful to my end, I love Mankind and call my God my Friend.'

In Crabbe, Grimes and Ellen never appear together. Slater admitted that he borrowed aspects from other poetic characters to inform the secondary and minor ones in the Borough of the opera.¹² But the operatic Ellen, while living in the Borough, is not of it: as a symbol of a real and living Christianity she stands apart, both from the Borough's values and from the impotent legalism of its religious adherents – typified by the Anglo-Catholic Rector (Horace Adams) and the Methodist lay-preaching fisherman (Robert Boles).¹³ For the audience, then, Ellen provides a highly desirable third alternative to siding with either Grimes or the Borough, without having to abandon an appropriate pity for all three. Read in these terms, Ellen becomes the opera's fallible spiritual heroine. The implicit narrative she embodies, partially prefigured in the 'Elegy', 'Dirge' and, particularly, the 'Sonnet' settings in the *Serenade* (1943), is left open-ended in *Peter Grimes*. Immediately following the opera, the themes of sin, repentance and forgiveness were to re-emerge in Britten's song-cycle *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne* and the roles of the Christian chorus in *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946), written for the joint creators of the original *Peter Grimes* and *Ellen Orford* – Peter Pears and Joan Cross.

It may be too fanciful to speak of an opera called *Ellen Orford* within *Peter Grimes*, but who else seated on stage during the opening inquest hears Grimes's music as we do – the music Michael Kennedy associates with the 'haloes of sound' of the Evangelist in Bach's *St Matthew Passion*?¹⁴ Surely not the Borough, which is characterized through music of bumbling neo-baroque badinage. Both Grimes and Ellen are almost 'drowned' by the buzz of Borough gossip in one of several short choruses that, interestingly, Stephen Walsh also associates with the Bach Passions.¹⁵ These are accompanied by 'chattering' semiquaver figures in the woodwinds while the horn quartet fills out the voices, as 'Ellen Orford' is called out by the lawyer (and self-appointed judge) Swallow. The women of the Borough immediately react with gossip: 'O when you pray you shut your eyes And then can't tell the truth from lies', identifying – if resisting – Ellen's spiritual essence, which they cannot comprehend. She is an outsider, too.

Yet, as Pears commented, 'Ellen Orford loves [Grimes]. She would do anything for him and tries to keep him on the rails.'¹⁶ As Ellen and Grimes are left on stage after the clearing of the court, her significance becomes evident in what Britten himself termed the 'love duet'.¹⁷ The bitonality of

Example 4.1

9 Recitativo (*senza misura*)
Molto più lento

Ellen comes up to Peter.
ELLEN *pp dolce* Pe-ter, Pe-ter, come a-way! *pp*

PETER *minor 2nds* The truth... the pi-ty... and the truth... *f agitato* Where the walls themselves gossip of

E. *tranquillo* But we'll gossip too, and talk and rest...
P. in-quest! While Peeping Toms nod as you go... You'll share the name of outlaw too!...

E. *sempre tranquillo* Pe-ter... we shall re-store your name... warned by the new es-teem that you will find...
P. *f energico* Un-til the Bo-rough hate...

E. *cresc. ed accel.* There'll be new shoals to catch, life will be kind. Un-cloud-ed...
P. poi-sons your mind. Ay!... on-ly of drowning ghosts! Time will

their initial keys – Grimes in F minor and Ellen in E major (united enharmonically by the equivalence of A \flat and G \sharp but otherwise remote) – is noticeably calmed when Grimes adopts Ellen’s key for the final octave phrases (Ex. 4.1).¹⁸ These phrases contain minor ninths, an interval that Peter recalls both prior to and (in orchestral terms) during Interludes II and VI. Throughout the opera, ‘flat’ music (i.e. music with flat key signatures or accidentals) tends to be associated with the Borough and its values.

Interlude I, which opens Act I, flows directly from this ‘love duet’: the orchestral music suggests that some kind of emotional dialogue between Ellen and Grimes is being introduced. The tonality (based on A, Britten’s habitual symbol of purity) and sonority of the harp suggest that it could

Example 4.1 (cont.)

The musical score consists of three systems, each with a vocal line (E) and a piano line (P). The key signature is three flats (B-flat major/D minor). The tempo and mood are marked 'Più lento e tranquillo'. The first system includes performance directions 'dim. e rall.' and 'minor 9th'. The piano part features triplet markings (3) and a dynamic marking of 'pp'. The lyrics are as follows:

System 1:
 E: the hot sun will spread... his rays a - round. My
 P: not for-get the dead are wit - ness, and fate is blind. Your

System 2:
 E: voice out of the pain is like a hand that you can feel, that you can
 P: voice out of the pain is like a hand that I can feel, that I can

System 3:
 E: feel and know: Here is a friend, here is a friend!
 P: feel and know: Here is a friend, here is a friend!

be a beautiful though sometimes strained (i.e. a 'normal') relationship. The initiative and outcome depend on Grimes and indeed the low brass chords already contain a harmonic form of what Peter Evans has labelled motif *x* – the motif that, in melodic form, will mark the doom of their relationship in Act II scene 1 (see Ex. 4.2). The brass also introduce what will here be termed an 'Ellen motif' (motif *e*; see Ex. 4.3 below) which evolves through Interludes II and III. Interlude I is the first of two (possibly three) 'Ellen Interludes' which open each act, the second being Interlude III which opens Act II (and the third Interlude V opening Act III). These are complemented by three mid-act 'Peter Interludes': Interlude II in Act I, Interlude IV (the passacaglia) in Act II, and Interlude VI in Act III.¹⁹ The evidence for the status of Interlude V as an 'Ellen Interlude' is more tenuous: it is the interlude that seems to stand most independently of the opera, as if outside it. Edward Sackville-West noted that it had greater depth of feeling than the other five Interludes, and it may be felt that the preponderance of 'feminine' thirds in a stable rhythmic structure is of the same equilibrium as much of Ellen's music elsewhere in the opera. On a subjective level the music seems to have a feminine quality, and seems to evoke metaphysical sighing and crying. It

Example 4.2

Interlude I

motif x

gives the impression of being a narrative requiem. Such associations are, however, admittedly more oblique. Significantly, it is the music of Interlude I that concludes the opera: thus implicitly it is Ellen that bridges and 'narrates' the action of *Peter Grimes*. This technique was to be employed explicitly through the narrative frame provided by Captain Vere in Britten's second venture into grand opera, *Billy Budd* (1951).

The music of Interlude I continues as the curtain rises, accompanying the set-pieces of the first scene as we are introduced to members of the Borough and their foibles. These individual sketches are drawn against a broad hymn-like melody with a text taken virtually intact from Crabbe's poem. It is a hymn, not to God, but to the Borough characters themselves in relation to both Nature and, by implication, Grimes's nature. Sung by the fishermen and women, it bespeaks a far greater depth than the liturgical worship of Act II scene 1, and betrays the Borough's true spiritual centre of gravity.²⁰ This impression is reinforced by the powerful framing effect created by the recapitulation of the tune at the opera's conclusion as Grimes drowns out at sea.

The orchestral fabric is finally broken, significantly, by Grimes's rough first entry into the action at Fig. 20 – an off-stage cry for help in landing his boat, in E \flat . Balstrode helps him as the storm approaches. The return of the Interlude music at Fig. 23 as Ned Keene, the Borough's apothecary and quack, announces that another boy apprentice has been secured for Grimes, suggests appropriately that Ellen has a hand in it. This impression is confirmed by her support for Keene against the carter Jim Hobson at Fig. 26 to a statement of the Interlude music on a chord based on D \flat , adding a notable air of luminous suspense.²¹ Though unusual, this is not sinister, as Swallow's verdict at the inquest was that Grimes should only get another boy apprentice on the condition that he also get 'A woman to help you look after him.' Pears commented: 'Ellen keeps a kindly eye on him, hoping secretly that her care for the boy will bring her nearer to Peter and that perhaps one day they will all three share a home.'²² However, the Borough's indignant incredulity at her overt support for Grimes leads directly into Ellen's first major aria at Fig. 28:

Let her among you without fault
 Cast the first stone
 And let the Pharisees and Sadducees
 Give way to none.
 But whosoever feels his pride
 Humbled so deep,
 There is no corner he can hide
 Even in sleep.
 Will have no trouble to find out
 How a poor teacher,
 Widowed and lonely, finds delight
 In shouldering care.

Britten sets the lines of this aria to music that evokes the world of oratorio – strong ‘masculine’ descending scales in F major for Ellen, emphasized by the lower register of the voice, and strong ascending D major scales in the orchestra. Almost all Ellen’s music in the opera employs regular rhythms in a manner of word-setting encountered in Britten’s earlier songs. Peter Evans cites Sonnet XXX from the *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* as an example of this style, in which the ‘deliberately unnaturalistic delivery directs our attention beyond [the regular rhythm] to the expressive significance of each melodic interval. What in one sense can appear an understatement can therefore in another represent an emotional essence.’²³ Ellen’s relatively stable ‘emotional essence’ is thus contrasted with the unstable rhythmic character of much of Grimes’s and the Borough’s music. This ‘unnaturalistic delivery’ may also direct our attention to her reflective, narrating position beyond the immediate world of the opera.²⁴

Sackville-West noted that Ellen’s aria has the effect of ‘trouncing the villagers and taking responsibility on herself’, subjecting her to complete vulnerability on Grimes’s behalf as she ‘lays down her life’ for him.²⁵ Musically, the aria also completes our introduction to a sequence of tonal regions – E, A and D – that Brett associates with Grimes’s ‘fantasy world’ and I associate with Ellen’s narrative voice; these interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as long as it is qualified that Ellen’s love for Peter is both real and genuine (i.e. they are ‘fantasy’ keys for Peter but ‘real’ keys for Ellen). Against the opera’s primary A is pitted the Borough’s primary E \flat , establishing a tritonal (*diabolus in musica*) relationship indicative of Peter’s Faustian progress.²⁶


At Fig. 31 the storm music begins, and a fugal chorus is initiated by Balstrode at Fig. 32. Here the semitonal tension implicit in Grimes’s ‘The truth, the pity and the truth’ (Ex. 4.1) begins to become more explicit, indicating the slowly gathering tragedy. This interval is retained

by Britten for its traditional signification of 'sin' and heightened stress. It is thoroughly exploited during the storm music both of the next Interlude and the ensuing pub scene (Act I scene 2). Boles's shouts of 'God has his ways which are not ours, His high tide swallows up the shores. Repent! Repent! Repent!' during the storm chorus (Figs. 31–7) are, like many of his other statements, spiritual truths put into the mouth of a hypocrite.


The second half of scene 1 is dominated by Grimes and his altercations with Balstrode. This retired sea captain – who is not unsympathetic to Grimes – recognizes the value of this private moment in allowing Peter an opportunity 'To free confession: set a conscience free!' It is another key spiritual opportunity that Grimes refuses to take. Balstrode also identifies Ellen's genuine and unconditional love for Grimes in his statement: 'Man – go and ask her, Without your booty, She'll have you now.' But Grimes's nature is too proud (and masquerades as pity): as Pears stated, he 'longs to accept Ellen's love but refuses'.²⁷ His divided attitude towards Ellen is revealed in two passages immediately prior to and during Interlude II. The transformation of the tension/sin indicated by the minor ninth at Fig. 41 (a semitone displaced by an octave, quoted from their love duet) as he ruminates on the death of his former apprentice into a major ninth as he yearns to find peace with Ellen registers powerfully as his main psychological dilemma (i.e. the need for the semitone to release into the whole tone). The harmonic return of the minor ninth at the words 'With her the mood will stay' expounds the conflict of his social pride with his love for Ellen, which erupts in Interlude II. Whereas the music of the first half of the scene issues from Interlude I and Ellen, the music of this second half seems to be swept up by this powerful 'Peter Interlude'. At Fig. 54 we hear a new form of motif *e* that, as David Matthews has demonstrated, is directly associated with Ellen's opening melody of Act II (see Ex. 4.3). Now, however, it is compressed into semitonal patterns. It is as if Grimes is battling to hold on to Ellen against his compulsion to destroy her. Peace and the harbour that Ellen offers are recalled at Fig. 60 but the storm music confirms what we already fear as it swamps her out. The baptism that Grimes has elected is not one of the redemption of love, but of sleep, death and oblivion in 'Davy Jones's Locker'. Ellen's presence in the music – albeit in Grimes's mind – is as potent as it was in Interlude I. The schizophrenia revealed in the pub during his 'Great Bear and Pleiades' aria (Fig. 76) and his sociopathic disruption of the round song 'Old Joe has Gone Fishing' (Fig. 79) – another moment where the Borough attempts to 'drown' him out – can only arouse our frustrated compassion as we witness the unfolding of the inevitable when Grimes tugs the newly delivered apprentice, John, from Ellen's arms and out into the storm at the end

Example 4.3 Motif *e*


Interlude I (Fig. 12⁺⁵)

a) Brass  etc.

Interlude II (Fig. 54)

b) Brass  etc.

Interlude III (Fig. 5)

c) ELLEN  etc.

Glitter of waves_ and glitter of sun light _ Bid us re-joice_ and lift_ our hearts on high. _

of the act. The storm music from Interlude II, that punctuates this scene in five broken outbursts as the pub door opens and closes, finally bursts forth unabated at the conclusion of the round, significantly with the entry of Ellen, the boy and the carrier.

The ascending motif introduced by the woodwind during Interlude III at the start of Act II is given pitch and textual closure by Ellen at Fig. 6⁺¹⁰. This may be seen to be a second 'Ellen motif' (motif *e*₂) which she sings again in the crucial (Phrygian) moment at the 'Adagio' before Fig. 26 (Act III scene 2) where it is heard simultaneously with Balstrode's singing of *x* (see Ex. 4.4). What is particularly fascinating about the relationship between these motifs is that Grimes's motif *x*, first announced fully by him later in Act II scene 1, is a free retrograde of motif *e*₂ (transposed in Ex. 4.4 to make the connection clearer), itself inverted in Ellen's 'We shall be there with him.' Flat notes are added to the opening woodwind figures of Interlude III to create a darker tension in an otherwise sunny scene, as do the B \flat and E \flat entries of the church bells – the English associations of which are offset by the same oriental resonances derived from McPhee's Balinese gong (see pp. 168–9) as the sonorous bass notes of Interlude I (see Ex. 4.2), which shares its key of A with Ellen's opening melody. The quasi-passacaglia nature of this Interlude (the 'ground' in the horns identified by Peter Evans) symmetrically balances the full-blown passacaglia (Interlude IV) at the conclusion of the scene. The thirds of this horn figure and the superimposed thirds of the string phrases at Fig. 3⁻¹⁰ emphasize the signification of this Interlude's femininity.²⁸

As the Borough hypocrites worship, Ellen proceeds to sing of her compassion for children as she knits outside the church with John. The essential 'brightness' of her keys is contrasted with the 'flatness' of the liturgical commentaries Britten puts into the mouths of the off-stage congregation. This unseen service (consisting of hymn, responses, Gloria,

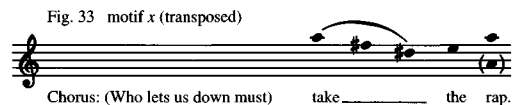
Example 4.4

Example 4.4 consists of two musical staves, labeled a) and b).
 Staff a) is labeled '(Act II) Motif e² (transposed)' and 'motif x'. The melody is written on a treble clef staff. The lyrics are: ELLEN: Shall we not go to (church?) GRIMES: God have mer- cy upon (me.)
 Staff b) is labeled 'Act III (transposed)' and '(transposed)'. The melody is written on a treble clef staff. The lyrics are: ELLEN: We shall be there with (him) BALSTRODE: We shall be there with (him.)

Benedicite and Creed) continues to interact with the drama of the foreground music as Ellen discovers John's bruise at Fig. 10, where she identifies what she at least feels to be Peter's betrayal ('the treason of the waves Glitters like love'). Britten here uses the key of B – the pitch that Mervyn Cooke has identified with the theme of mutiny (a form of treason) in *Billy Budd*.²⁹ There follows at Fig. 12 a strikingly unconventional setting of the Benedicite. David Matthews has suggested that it has something of a Balinese flavour about it.³⁰ The frenzied tempo and obsessive cultivation of the Phrygian (minor) second recall Interlude II and, surely enough, Grimes emerges in order to take the boy on his capitalistic enterprise. In his exchanges with Ellen, his Messianic delusions manifest themselves – it is *his* Sunday and Ellen is to believe in *him* – and as Ellen tries to show him that his desire for materialism and status are delusional she questions: 'What aim, what future, what peace will your hard profits buy?' It is Grimes, not Ellen, who is eaten by Borough values.

At the cathartic centre of the opera, after their altercations over a long dominant pedal F, Grimes strikes down the real Ellen (Fig. 17) while retaining a fantasy Ellen in his mind. Thus, as Pears put it, 'his pride, his ambition, his whole overwrought frustration, his inability to admit failure as possible, his feelings of betrayal, are all concentrated into a savage attack on his one true loving friend'.³¹ Grimes crucially reverses Ellen's motif *e*₂ to create the first undisguised statement of *x* as he concedes to the judgement and value system of the Borough in a Lydian B \flat with the defiant cry: 'And God have mercy upon me.' The Faustian resonances of this moment – hidden in the wordless liturgical creed played by the horns (i.e. 'And He [Christ] descended into Hell') – are veiled by Britten's deliberate manipulation of the text from Peter's original cry of 'To hell then ...' (in the composition sketch) to 'So be it ...'. This connection is, however, belatedly disclosed in Act III scene 2 at Peter's cry of 'To hell with all your mercy. To hell with all your revenge. And God have mercy upon you' (Fig. 50). This full revelation of motif *x*, latent from the music of Interlude I until this moment, is very significant. As Walsh puts

Example 4.5



it, 'from the moment that Grimes renounces salvation (in everything but his actual words) the theme [motif *x*] pursues him as relentlessly as ever the Furies pursued Orestes.'³²

Grimes's reversal of Ellen's motif is gleefully and obsessively taken up by the Borough as they pour out of church to the memorably pithy fragment from Crabbe's poem – 'Grimes is at his exercise' – in a large ensemble that, incidentally, has a subtly American flavour to it (cf. 'The Christmas Party' in *Paul Bunyan*, Act III scene 2). Inevitably, a showdown between the Borough and Ellen now takes place. As she attempts an aria at Fig. 31 (in A minor), explaining to them her motives, they continually cut her off in a mounting ensemble of anger and evil suspicion until they slap her down too (metaphorically) to motif *x* at Fig. 33 (Ex. 4.5). Against their accusations she sings: 'O hard hearts, hard, hard hearts, pity those who try to bring a shadowed life into the sun.' The 'shadowed life' could apply both to Grimes and his boy apprentices, who (in Peter Porter's words) 'are attendant angels of his fallen state. His violence towards them might even be deemed no more than a Satanic desire to get them used to the notion of reigning in Hell rather than serving in Heaven.'³³

The self-righteous, hypocritical mob, sanctified in its own mind by the religious ritual, roars off to confront Grimes at his hut, accompanied by Hobson's drum. This, like every other supposed 'confrontation' between Grimes and the Borough-as-protagonist, *never actually takes place* – interesting non-occurrences, given the customary reading of the opera as an individual against society! Ellen, on the other hand, is confronted directly by the Borough twice and by Grimes once: if *Peter Grimes* is, as Edmund Wilson observed in 1945, an opera about war, then perhaps it is Ellen who embodies Britten's pacifist convictions.

At the conclusion of this scene, Ellen is left on stage alone with Auntie and her two 'Nieces'. Her identification with blatant 'sinners' adds to the poignancy of this moment, and their quartet is justly celebrated.³⁴ It inhabits the sound-world of the 'Requiem aeternam' from the *Sinfonia da Requiem* – especially in details such as the seconds in the flutes. Peter Evans has linked the flutes' falling thirds to the thirds of Interlude I. Such connections, also illustrated in the build-up of thirds at Fig. 3⁻¹⁰ in Interlude III (one thinks of the chains of thirds of the women's sewing aria in Act I scene 1 of *The Rape of Lucretia*) lend credibility to the suggestion

that Britten confers a signification of the feminine upon this interval. The false relations created by the 'sighing' bass-line at Fig. 41 also recall those of the orientalized bass/bells of Interlude III. Arnold Whittall has commented that 'Britten's personal voice is perhaps at its clearest in such contexts, where economy of means is the dominant factor rather than in moments of high drama and elaborate ensemble.'³⁵

Wilfrid Mellers claimed that in *Noye's Fludde* 'the passacaglia theme [of the storm episode] is also God's law which is beyond change'.³⁶ The passacaglia in Interlude IV is based on motif *x*, recalling Grimes's earlier plea 'And God have mercy upon me' but with an additional beat suggestive also of the motif's second text, 'Grimes is at his exercise.' We have heard this theme taken up obsessively in the second half of Act II scene 1 by the hypocritical Borough which identifies his rebellion with 'his exercise' and self-righteously rises up to execute judgement upon him on God's behalf – even though, in the very act of taking God's vengeance into their own hands, the Borough folk place themselves under that same judgement. Grimes is surely prophetic during his final moments in the opera when he cries out to them: 'And God have mercy upon you'. This same motif implies cries of 'God have mercy . . . God have mercy . . .' as it emerges out of the great climactic moment of Interlude VI at Fig. 47-6 in Act III. Evans links the significance of these statements with that of Berg's leitmotif 'Wir arme Leut' in the final interlude of *Wozzeck*.³⁷ If Grimes has unrepentantly rebelled against God's law – the law on which he swore in the inquest of the Prologue to the same dominant seventh, transposed, to which he dies in his final mad scena (Act III scene 2) – it is only logical that his guilty emotions expressed through his physical passions rage against it as they do in Interlude IV and the succeeding scene with the boy in his hut. Ironically, this tends to give a ring of truth to Boles's earlier prophecy: 'What [Grimes] fears is that the Lord follows with a flaming sword' (Act II, Fig. 19).

The orchestral variations of the passacaglia are given textual significance during Act II scene 2 when Grimes is with the boy in his hut.³⁸ Aggression towards the boy is contrasted with the tenderness of his (now fantastic) dreams of life with Ellen. The death of the boy as he slips down the cliff as they attempt to escape from the approaching mob, if not directly caused by Grimes, is at least caused by the consequence of his choices. Swallow's mock-baroque music as the men inspect Grimes's empty hut forms a mini-frame (with the Prologue music, from which Swallow quotes) to the first two acts, save for the disturbing celesta music as Balstrode ignores the retreating mob and follows Grimes down the cliff-face while the curtain falls.

Interlude V leads to Act III scene 1. What at first appear to be harmless

Example 4.6



Borough dances at the Moot Hall (a barn dance, waltz *alla Ländler*, horn-pipe and galop), transmogrify via the clarinet theme during the waltz (Fig. 13) into the blood-lust cry of the final mob-hunt for Grimes (Fig. 41).³⁹ Evans has ingeniously shown how the great choral shouts after Fig. 43 are rooted in motif *x* – God’s immanent judgement suggested once again (Ex. 4.6).⁴⁰ It is during this scene that we discover the full consequences of the interference in events by that ‘respectable lady’, Mrs Sedley. It is also the scene in which we hear Ellen in an aria that is the most overtly detached from the dramatic action. It is virtually impossible to understand the full significance of this moment, as many commentators understandably fail to do, without setting it into the perspective of Ellen that has been the central thrust of this present chapter. Her ‘Embroidery Aria’ (Figs. 23–5) is a critical and extensive lament on the theme of betrayal, signified principally by being in the same B (now minor) of her discovery of John’s bruise in Act II scene 1. The music is ingeniously contrived by Britten to suggest the very act of embroidery with weaving and tugging of thread.⁴¹ It is tempting to suggest that the events in the opera are being recalled by an older Ellen (perhaps married to Balstrode?), again anticipating Vere’s framing of the events in *Billy Budd*. B major is asserted as Ellen sings her variant of motif *e2* and Balstrode simultaneously sings its inversion, motif *x* (see Ex. 4.4b).

Interlude VI is arguably the least known and most fascinating of the six. After a loud blast that disperses the mob, we hear three fatalistic Mahlerian strokes that anticipate in rhythm (if not in pitch) the three abrupt chords that conclude the opera. A nervous flute figure follows, obsessively quoting the ‘I’ll marry Ellen’ motif. Then comes a condensed version of Grimes’s vocal line ‘And she will forget her school-house ways’ (Act II, Fig. 61) in the lower register of the solo harp. Next we hear a condensed version of the minor ninth from the love duet and the motif that summarizes both Grimes’s recollection of the drowned apprentices and the salvation he forfeited with Ellen (Act I scene 1), heard on the three solo violins at Fig. 45. The repeated E \flat that follows on the oboe recalls ‘The Great Bear’ aria, while the repeated falling semiquavers at the end of a duet for clarinets (itself based on ‘Wrong to try!’ from Act II scene 2) again recall ‘what harbour shelters peace?’ After the huge Gershwin-esque climax at Fig. 46, the woodwind repeat descending cries of the motif to ‘God have

mercy . . .'. Again the recollection of these motifs, bound together by a dominant seventh on D played by the horns, ensures the consistent presence of Ellen's voice in the Interludes. As the chorus intone their ghostly cries of 'Grimes, Peter Grimes' they suddenly flower into a sweet E \flat triad at Fig. 49⁺⁵ which, according to Whittall, is 'out of character for the vengeful chorus, but . . . evokes the tenderness of Ellen, whom Grimes is remembering at this point'.⁴² Britten's use of unadorned speech for Balstrode's final instructions to Grimes to sink himself with his boat and Ellen's naked exclamation 'No!' can be easily rationalized when heard in a reading from Ellen's perspective. The decorated E \flat of Grimes's final remembrance of 'Her breast is harbour too, Where night is turned to day' can no longer act as a potential dominant onto the A \flat stressed in the earlier love-duet music ('The truth . . . the pity and the truth'; see Ex. 4.1 above).⁴³ Thus it is bypassed as the music of Interlude I returns, and the cycle begins again – an eternal requiem to Peter Grimes held in Ellen's memory.