

The Metropolitan Opera

HD LIVE

Educator's Guide



Photo: portrait photograph by Nick Heavican; the Hastings background shot by Aitken Jolly

Peter Grimes
March 15, 2008



A scene from the first act of the Metropolitan Opera production of *Peter Grimes*

What to Expect from *Peter Grimes*

The Metropolitan Opera’s new staging of *Peter Grimes* by Tony Award-winning director, John Doyle, explores the isolated world of a 19th-century fishing village, its judgmental townspeople, and a man they have cast out of their community.

A grim, impoverished seaside village might sound like the last place to set an opera. But in *Peter Grimes*, Benjamin Britten found the perfect setting for a contemporary tragedy. *Peter Grimes* brings the expressive power of opera to bear on the repressed, all but inexpressible, emotions that drive so much modern art. Far from the sweeping romantic pronouncements of a Puccini lover, Britten’s protagonist can barely recount the simple facts of his own life story.

Britten’s music is modern, sometimes elusive, often dissonant, but frequently lyrical and always powerfully evocative. Only occasionally will students recognize melodies in the traditional sense. Nevertheless, they’re sure to recognize the confusion and frustration Peter Grimes feels as he struggles both with a society that won’t understand him—and a self he himself barely understands.

The story of *Peter Grimes* contains adult subjects, such as the suspicion of various forms of child abuse, as well as prostitution and drug addiction. It is recommended that educators read the entire guide before presenting the opera to students and determine the best way to present the material for classroom use.

This guide offers a variety of experiences designed not only to enrich enjoyment of the Metropolitan Opera’s *Live in HD* transmission of *Peter Grimes*, but also to help young people engage with the opera’s gripping social commentary and to appreciate the means by which the composer and the artists of the Met bring them to life.



THE WORK *PETER GRIMES*

Composed by Benjamin Britten

Text by Montagu Slater, after the poem by George Crabbe

First performed on June 7, 1945, in London

THE MET PRODUCTION

Donald Runnicles, Conductor

John Doyle, Production

Starring:

Anthony Dean Griffey (Peter Grimes)

Patricia Racette (Ellen Orford)

Anthony Michaels-Moore (Balstrode)



FUN FACT: Although *Peter Grimes* premiered in England and takes place in England, it was actually commissioned for an American music festival, thanks to its Russian-born director. Serge Koussevitsky, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, commissioned the opera.

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**THE GUIDE INCLUDES FOUR
TYPES OF ACTIVITIES:**

- Two full-length activities, designed to support your ongoing curriculum
- Five “Coming Attractions”—opportunities to focus briefly on bits of music from *Peter Grimes* to cultivate familiarity with the work
- Activities for students to enjoy during the Metropolitan Opera HD transmission, calling attention to special aspects of this production. Reproducible activity sheets can be found on the last two pages of this guide.
- A post-transmission activity, integrating the *Live in HD* experience into students’ wider views of the performing arts

A Guide to *Peter Grimes*

The activities in this guide address several aspects of *Peter Grimes*:

- the tools Britten uses to convey the emotional complexity of his tale
- the ethical issues provoked by the characters’ behavior
- Britten’s use of contrasting musical approaches to create character
- the opera as a work of art, involving a wide range of creative decisions by the composer, the librettist, and the artists who have created this new production for the Metropolitan Opera

The guide seeks not only to acquaint students with *Peter Grimes*, but also to encourage them to think more broadly about opera—and the performing arts in general—as a means of personal and philosophical expression. Little prior knowledge is required for the activities. If you’d like to present *Peter Grimes* in a more formal, traditional way, please take advantage of the introductory activity in the companion publication, *Opera: the Basics*.

The Story

PROLOGUE. An English fishing village. During a coroner's inquest at the town hall, the lawyer Swallow questions the fisherman Peter Grimes about the death of his apprentice during a storm at sea. Though the room is crowded with villagers hostile to Grimes, Swallow accepts the man's explanation of the event and rules that the boy died accidentally. He warns Grimes not to take on another apprentice unless he lives with a woman who can care for the boy. When the hall empties, Ellen Orford, the schoolmistress, asks Grimes to have courage and promises to help him find a better life.

ACT I. On a street by the sea, the women repair nets as a group of fishermen head for the Boar, a tavern kept by Auntie. Other villagers arrive: the Methodist fisherman Bob Boles, the widow Mrs. Sedley, and Balstrode, a retired sea-captain who warns

The seaside fishing village of Hastings, England, seen here, is director John Doyle's hometown and was an inspiration for the production's set design.



that a storm is approaching. Grimes calls for help from the harbor to land his boat, but only Balstrode and the apothecary Ned Keene lend him a hand. Keene tells Grimes that he has found him a new apprentice at a workhouse. When the carrier Hobson refuses to fetch the boy, Ellen offers to go with him. The villagers make hostile comments, and she accuses them of hypocrisy (“Let her among you without fault cast the first stone”). As the storm rises and the crowd disperses, Grimes is left alone with Balstrode, who tries to convince him to leave the village. The fisherman explains that first he has to make enough money to open a store and marry Ellen.

That night, as the storm rages, the villagers gather at Auntie’s tavern. Auntie’s “nieces” are frightened by the wind and Bob Boles gets into a fight with Balstrode over one of them. When Grimes enters, there is a sudden silence, and he begins talking to himself, mystifying everyone (“Now the Great Bear and Pleiades”). The drunken Boles tries to attack Grimes. In an attempt to restore quiet, Ned Keene starts singing a sea shanty (“Old Joe has gone fishing”). When Hobson and Ellen arrive with the new apprentice, John, Grimes immediately takes the boy back into the storm and to his hut.



ACT II. On Sunday morning, as Ellen and John are watching the villagers go to church (“Glitter of waves”) she discovers a bruise on the young boy’s neck. Grimes comes to take John fishing. Ignoring Ellen’s concerns, he hits her and drags the child off. Auntie, Ned Keene, and Bob Boles have observed the incident and tell the congregation about it as they come out of church. The men decide to confront the fisherman, and despite Ellen’s protests, Boles leads the angry mob off to Grimes’s hut. Ellen, Auntie, and the nieces remain behind, reflecting on the childishness of men.

At his hut, Grimes orders John to dress for work. He dreams of the life he had planned with Ellen, but his thoughts return to his dead apprentice. As he hears the mob approaching, he rushes John out the back door. The boy slips and falls down the cliff; Grimes escapes. Bob Boles and the Rector find the hut empty and orderly and decide that they have misjudged Grimes. The villagers disperse, except for Balstrode, who looks over the cliff and knows better.

ACT III. A dance is under way in the town hall. Outside, Mrs. Sedley tries to convince Ned Keene that Grimes has murdered his apprentice. Balstrode enters with Ellen and tells her that Grimes’s boat has returned but that there is no sign of him or the boy. He has also found John’s wet jersey, and Ellen remembers embroidering the anchor on it (“Embroidery in childhood was a luxury”). Mrs. Sedley has overheard the conversation and informs Swallow that Grimes’s boat is back. Once again, the crowd sets off on a manhunt.

Grimes, deranged and raving, listens to the villagers shouting his name in the distance. He hardly notices Ellen and Balstrode, who try to comfort him. Ellen asks Grimes to come home, but Balstrode tells him to sail out and take his own life. He helps Grimes launch the boat, and then leads Ellen away. As dawn breaks, the villagers return to their daily chores. Swallow tells them that the coast guard has reported a sinking boat, but no one listens to him.

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“For me, *Peter Grimes* is about judgment. It’s a highly theatrical piece, but equally, it is a piece that could happen and *does* happen every day. We meet, we judge. We even try people on television nowadays.” —John Doyle

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IN PREPARATION

For this activity, each student will need a photocopy of the printed resources for the activity, found on pages 26 through 28 of this guide.

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CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Language Arts and Social Sciences (Psychology)

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To recognize the moral dilemmas often encountered in modern literature and performing arts
- To practice critical thinking skills, including marshalling evidence and developing an argument
- To consider the choices creators make in presenting characters and details of plot
- To exercise ethical judgment
- To prompt curiosity about the Met’s new approach to this opera

Peter Grimes on Trial

A CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

The protagonist of *Peter Grimes* is an antihero—a deeply flawed figure with whom we can nonetheless empathize. Despised by most of his townspeople, he’s a character even audiences may struggle to accept. Yet even though he is implicated in the deaths of two boys, the opera never reveals whether he’s a murderer, an abusive guardian, or simply an unfortunate bystander. This activity offers students an opportunity to prepare for the *Live in HD* transmission of *Peter Grimes* by applying their own ethical judgment to Grimes and his behavior. They will:

- become acquainted with the opera’s plot and characters
- consider the specific information the opera provides about Grimes—and what information is left out
- recognize the intentional ambiguity of Britten’s ending
- use their own judgment in trying to resolve that ambiguity

STEPS: In this activity, students will review the known facts of “the case of Peter Grimes.” The class will then try Peter Grimes in absentia. Students will take roles as members of the prosecution and defense teams and as specific characters from the opera. After the prosecution and defense question their witnesses, the entire class will serve as jury, voting whether they believe Peter Grimes guilty or not guilty in the death of his boy apprentice, John.

Step 1: Introduce the opera to your students: a story that takes place in a British fishing village around 1830, involving the mysterious death of a young apprentice fisherman. You may have to explain the apprentice system to your class: apprentices were boys who were assigned to live and work with a skilled professional (in this case, a fisherman) until they reached adulthood. In exchange for room and board, the apprentices were to learn their masters’ trades.



Sketches by costume designer Ann Hould-Ward

Step 2: Assign roles.

- The witnesses who will be called up during the trial
- The prosecution legal team (half of the remainder of the class)
- The defense legal team (the other half)

Each legal team should appoint one or two “stenographers” to keep track of the questions they want to ask and to take notes on testimony during the trial. You may want to serve as the court officer and judge yourself, so all your students can participate as townspeople of the Borough.

The seven witnesses include:

Mrs. Sedley: Perhaps the richest lady in the Borough, she is a busybody. She is addicted to laudanum, a form of opium that was legal and commonly used in 19th century England.

Auntie: Auntie owns the Boar, a tavern and brothel in the Borough.

Bob Boles: Boles, a very religious man, denounces the apprentice system. He also denounces Auntie, her business, and the

Patricia Racette as Ellen and Logan
William Erickson as the boy



men who patronize it—until the night of a big storm, when he gets drunk and winds up in the Boar, asking for one of Auntie’s prostitutes.

Captain Balstrode: Balstrode has retired as captain of a fishing boat. He is a fair-minded man who tries to give Peter Grimes helpful advice.

Swallow: The Borough’s lawyer, Swallow led the inquest against Peter Grimes after his first apprentice died. He has been keeping a close eye on Grimes ever since.

Ned Keene: The Borough’s pharmacist, he makes use of the services of Auntie’s brothel. He supplies laudanum to Mrs. Hedley. He also helped arrange for Peter Grimes to hire his new apprentice, John. Some in town call him a quack.

Ellen Orford: The town’s schoolteacher, Ellen is Peter Grimes’s best friend. Peter hopes to marry her someday. She does every-

thing she can to help him. She is also very concerned about the welfare of the apprentices who work for Grimes.

Step 3: Since students will not yet have seen *Peter Grimes*, they should familiarize themselves with the “case” by studying the two resource documents on pages 26 and 27:

- The transcript of Peter Grimes’s first inquest
- The “bare facts” of the case

Allow the defense and prosecution teams approximately 10 minutes to come up with questions to ask the witnesses. Meanwhile, each witness can quietly flesh out her or his character. Witnesses should make up life stories and opinions that will help them answer the lawyers’ questions. Since the witnesses will have very little information about the characters or events of

Anthony Dean Griffey as Peter Grimes with Logan William Erickson as his apprentice. Kneeling at left is Patricia Racette as Ellen Orford.



the case, this will be an exercise in going creatively beyond the known facts. Characters may contradict each other when they take the witness stand. In this sense, every group of students will invent its own *Peter Grimes* story.

Step 4: One by one, call each witness to the stand. Allow each of the legal teams a few minutes to question the witness (based on the amount of class time available).

Step 5: When all the witnesses have testified, allow each of the legal teams two minutes to summarize its case.

Step 6: Some teachers may want to conduct an open discussion of the case at this point. Others may want to move directly to the next step.

Step 7: Have each student write “guilty” or “not guilty” on a piece of paper. Collect these jury ballots, count them and announce the result. Some teachers may want to open the floor up to discussion once the result has been announced.

FOLLOW-UP: For homework, have students write a short essay in the voice of the character they played. They should discuss their experience during the trial. Was it challenging to make a verdict? Explain why they think the verdict was—or was not—just.

The Sound of Loneliness

A CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

One notable aspect of *Peter Grimes* is the way Britten uses music to establish both Peter Grimes’s psychological states and his relationship to the other citizens of the Borough. In this activity, students will listen closely to one key scene from the opera, then create storyboards blocking out the events of the scene. Students will:

- analyze Britten’s use of musical composition to communicate both the inner lives and the interrelationships of his characters
- explore the tools an opera composer has at his disposal
- consider the relationship between Slater’s text and Britten’s music
- acquaint themselves with some of the character relationships and music of *Peter Grimes* in advance of the Met’s HD transmission.

STEPS

While opera is a multisensory experience, much can be learned from simply listening to a recording and following along with the libretto. The more familiar an operagoer is with the composer’s approach and with his music, the easier it can be to enjoy other aspects of an opera production. In the case of *Peter Grimes*, one key scene provides a frame for appreciating not only plot and character relationships, but also the composer’s deployment of musical styles and elements to present this particular story. Here, music is not only Britten’s means. It is also his subject matter. The scene, a section of Act I, Scene 2, begins with a poem and ends with variations on a song.

IN PREPARATION

For this activity, each student will need a photocopy of the selections from the *Peter Grimes* libretto found on page 29 of this guide.

Each student should also have a sheet of 11x17 paper divided into 12 frames, as well as scratch paper on which to sketch thoughts before committing them to the storyboard. (You’ll probably want to have extra copies of the storyboard form on hand for students who need to “start over.”)

You will also need the accompanying recording of selections from *Peter Grimes*.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Language Arts, Music, and Social Studies (Sociology)

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To practice careful, critical listening
- To consider the effects of changes in rhythm, instrumentation, and lyrics on the messages conveyed by a song
- To practice the interpretation of poetry
- To prompt curiosity about the Met’s new production of *Peter Grimes*

Step 1: Setting the scene

Students won't need to know a lot about the story of *Peter Grimes* to participate in this activity. In fact, all they need to know is that

- This scene takes place in a tavern.
- It begins as one character enters the tavern.
- Many people have been there, drinking, for some time.

(If you prefer, you can acquaint students with the full story of *Peter Grimes* by distributing photocopies of the synopsis on pages 5–7 of this guide.)

Step 2: Listening to the scene

Peter's entrance

Track 1, the words of which are on the resource page 29, is one of this opera's signature arias, "The Great Bear and the Pleiades." (resource #1)

Have students listen to the selection without the words, then invite them to discuss their feelings about what they've heard. How would they describe the music? How does it change, and change again? What emotions do they hear in the character's voice?

Distribute the words and play the selection again. What do they make of this poem? What do they think Peter Grimes is singing about? What do they think of him, based solely on this song?

Now analyze the song more technically. Is it divided into sections? How do the sections differ from one another? What instruments do they hear? Is there a relationship between the music and the lyrics? If so, how would your students describe it? Does it change?

The town reacts

Track 2 comes immediately after Peter's aria. Here we hear the response of the townspeople. Distribute the text (resource #2) for students to follow, then play the selection. What do the townspeople make of his song? What do they think of Peter? Do all agree? How are their feelings expressed by Britten's music? What effect has Peter's entrance had on the atmosphere in the tavern?

Old Joe

Play **Track 3**, including the sea chantey “Old Joe,” without distributing the words.

As the selection begins, Captain Balstrode tries to restore order. How does he do that? What do your students think of his method? Did it work? How can they tell? What characteristics of Britten’s music provided clues? Is everyone singing the same melody, in unison? How might a round stand for the workings of a town or community? What do students make of the percussion played throughout the piece? How does it make them feel? What does it say about the town?

Distribute the words to “Old Joe.” What kind of song is this? Sea chanteys were sung by sailors not only to pass the time, but to establish rhythms that coordinated their efforts when doing tasks that required many men. What makes Britten’s chantey appropriate to this scene in *Peter Grimes*?

Anthony Dean Griffey as Peter Grimes and
Anthony Michaels-Moore as Captain Balstrode



Peter's response

With **Track 4**, Peter Grimes joins the song—but as your students will hear, he hardly joins the chorus. After playing the selection, distribute the words. What do your students make of Peter's interruption? How did the townspeople respond? What's on his mind? What's on theirs? Again, how are these opposing viewpoints expressed in Britten's musical choices? Having only heard the scene, without seeing it, how do your students think it ended?

Step 3: In a whole-class discussion, review the events of this scene. Have students keep track on paper as you list the events on the chalkboard. Include one or more adjectives, suggested by students, to describe each event. (Certain adjectives may contradict one another, since students may understand events differently. If so, simply include all the choices on the list).

Step 4: Distribute the storyboard forms. Explain that each student is going to make a storyboard of this scene. A storyboard is kind of like a comic strip without speech balloons. It tells the story of a scene in pictures. Filmmakers use storyboards to plan scenes in advance, so they can figure out exactly what they want to film.

In films, storyboards are based on screenplays, but they can depict action that can't be expressed in words. They can include new actions. They can convey new information by deciding where characters stand with respect to one another and to the environment.

In this activity, the words of a libretto will provide the backbone for storyboards, but each student can imagine the scene himself or herself. How do they imagine the tavern? Where does Peter enter? Where is Auntie? Balstrode? Boles? How does the action proceed? What happens in the last panel?

FOLLOW-UP: If there's time in class, students can begin to design their storyboard versions of this scene. In most classes, the storyboard will be a follow-up homework activity.

The Wildness of Nature and People

COMING ATTRACTION

An eternal conflict drives the story of *Peter Grimes*: the conflict among human beings in any society. There is also the conflict between all humans and unpredictable, uncontrollable nature. Each is expressed, and the two are contrasted, in Act I, Scene 2, shortly before Peter Grimes enters the tavern (the scene discussed in the activity *The Sound of Loneliness*, on pages 13–15).

Act I, Scene 2 begins with **Track 5**. Set the scene before listening: It's late in the evening. Auntie wants to close her tavern. Mrs. Sedley, who's never set foot there before, is waiting for Ned Keene to arrive with her laudanum; though prim and proper, she's an addict. Auntie wants her out of the way; this old woman may deter customers from taking advantage of her offerings ("That is the sort of weak politeness/Makes a publican lose her clients"; it may help to inform your students that 'publican' is a British term for tavern-keeper.) Then the door bursts open and Captain Balstrode comes in, announcing "Phew, that's a bitch of a gale all right."



COMING ATTRACTIONS

Coming Attractions are brief opportunities to:

- help students make sense of opera
- whet their interest in upcoming Metropolitan Opera HD transmissions.

Each focuses on music from the accompanying CD recording. They direct students' attention toward highlights and details that can organize and illuminate their viewing of the transmission. The descriptions below offer listening pointers.

These "mini-lessons" will in practice take up no more than a few minutes of class time. They're designed to help you bring opera into your classroom while minimizing interruption of your ongoing curricular sequence. Feel free to use as many as you like.

Play Track 5. How would your students describe the conversation between Auntie and Mrs. Sedley? Could they tell when the tavern door opened? How?

Track 6 begins a minute or two later. Balstrode asks for a pint of beer. Auntie resists. (Ask students why they think she does.) The door opens again, and Bob Boles enters, with news about the storm. Balstrode responds by asking Auntie to close the tavern's shutters. What's his tone? How is it expressed by the music?

A few more minutes pass in the bar, then **Track 7** is heard. This selection begins in the middle of a song, with Balstrode describing life in the bar: "We sit and drink the evening through/Not deigning to devote a/thought to the daily cud we chew/But buying drinks by rota." ("By rota" is a British expression meaning "in rotation." In other words, they buy rounds of drinks.) The chorus of townfolk responds, "We live and let live, and look/We keep our hands to ourselves." Is there a difference between their sentiments and Balstrode's? What words express it? How is it expressed in music?

Again students will hear the scene interrupted by the door opening. How do they feel about the way Britten establishes indoors and outdoors in this scene? How would they describe the difference between the environments? Do they get the sense that the storm is raging outside even while we're listening to the dialogue indoors? How is that conveyed in music?

The door opens one more time in **Track 8**. How would your students describe the music this time? How has the storm music changed? What do they think these strange sounds might mean? In fact, this is the moment where Peter Grimes enters the tavern. How might this explain the musical change? Does this fact add new meaning to the chorus's cry at the beginning of the track, "Mind that door"?

Mercy, Gossip, and Disdain COMING ATTRACTION

The simplest change in lyrics, rhythm, dynamics or counterpoint can transform the meaning of a melody. Tracks 9, 10, and 11 provide an excellent example.

The three tracks appear consecutively in *Peter Grimes*. Late on a Sunday morning, Ellen is on the beach with John, Peter's boy apprentice, and Grimes himself. Most of the Borough is in church. Ellen has noticed a bruise on his neck, and she fears Peter beats the boy. "Peter," she sings as **Track 9** begins, "we've failed." At this, Grimes loses control. As the chorus of townspeople sing "Amen" in the distance, Peter explodes, "And God have mercy upon me."

Those furious, poignant eight notes take on different character in **Track 10**. Off to the side, Auntie and Ned Keene have been watching. The events on the beach have confirmed



Costume sketches for *Peter Grimes*.

their suspicions: Grimes is incorrigible—and characteristically violent. Have your students listen carefully as Keene and then the chorus of townspeople heading home from church sing “Grimes is at his exercise.” The rhythm has changed, but this is the same melody Peter Grimes sang in his plea for divine mercy. Subgroups of townspeople take up the song in a round. Now, through counterpoint and dynamics, the melody conveys the spread of a rumor about Grimes throughout the community.

With **Track 11**, a change in lyric brings yet a third meaning to the melody. Keene and Auntie, now joined by Bob Boles, are commenting sarcastically here on the very same wildfire they’ve

A scene from the first act of *Peter Grimes*



just ignited: “Now the church parade begins/Fresh beginning for fresh sins/Ogling with a pious gaze...” How does their song conclude? “Each one’s at his exercise.” What does this latest change mean? Can the hypocrisy described in the first three lines be equivalent to the evil they’ve ascribed to Peter Grimes? Your students may enjoy discussing the many levels of meaning Britten has proposed through variations on one simple line of song.

What’s in a Name? COMING ATTRACTION

The very first words we hear in *Peter Grimes* are... “Peter Grimes.” The name is repeated three times in **Track 12**, as steady and solemn as the tolling of a bell. This repetition opens the legal proceedings which begin the opera, establishing Grimes’s character and his relationship to his neighbors in the Borough.

The protagonist’s name recurs dozens of time over the course of the opera, but none as significantly as in his last moments on stage. Grimes’s world is falling apart. A lynch mob is chasing him, calling his name. **Track 13** presents the striking distinction between that call, off in the distance, and Peter Grimes’s own repetition of his name—14 consecutive times, in whole or part, sometimes steadily, sometimes wildly. It’s as if he were trying to buttress his very being. Students may enjoy discussing the contrasts among the recitation “Peter Grimes” as the opera begins and the mob’s call and Peter’s desperate cry at its climax. What does Britten’s music tell us about Grimes, his destiny, and his sense of identity?

Supporting students during the *Live in HD* Transmission

Thanks to print and audio recording, much about opera can be enjoyed long before a performance. But performance itself remains an incomparable embarrassment of riches—sound and color, pageantry and technology, drama, skill, and craft. “At the Met” activities are designed to help students tease apart different aspects of the experience, consider creative choices that have been made, and sharpen their own critical faculties.

Each activity incorporates a reproducible activity sheet. Students bring the activity sheet to the transmission for filling out during intermission and/or after the final curtain. The activities direct attention to characteristics of the production that might otherwise go unnoticed. Ratings matrices invite students to express their critique, a time-tested prompt for careful thinking.

The basic activity sheet is called *My Highs and Lows*. Meant to be collected, opera by opera, over the course of the season, this sheet points students toward a consistent set of objects of observation. Its purposes are not only to help students articulate and express their opinions, but to support comparison and contrast, enriching understanding of the art form as a whole.

For *Peter Grimes*, the “At the Met” activity asks students to examine the set design and staging.

Activity reproducibles can be found on the last two pages of this guide. Either activity can provide the basis for class discussion after the transmission. On the next page, you’ll find an additional activity created specifically for after-transmission follow-up.

How Did It End? Home from the Opera

Students will enjoy starting the class with an open discussion of the Met performance. What did they like? What didn't they? Did anything surprise them? What would they like to see or hear again? What would they have done differently? The discussion offers an opportunity to apply the notes on students' *My Highs & Lows* sheet, as well as their thoughts about the visual design of the Met production—in short, to see themselves as *Peter Grimes* experts.

Summaries of *Peter Grimes* frequently say he dies at the end of the opera. But Britten's librettist, Montagu Slater, in fact never makes that ending crystal clear. We know that a sinking boat has been spotted at sea—even if, as the last moments of the opera indicate, the people of the Borough don't know or care:

AUNTIE: What is it?

BOLES: Nothing I can see.

AUNTIE: One of these rumours.

We also know that Grimes set sail at Captain Balstrode's urging. But what exactly did Balstrode advise? Attentive operagoers will have noticed his careful words, "Sail out till you lose sight of land, then sink the boat. D'you hear? Sink her. Goodbye Peter."

Could Balstrode have been advising Grimes to kill himself? Would such advice be within his character as it has unfolded in the opera? Would he offer such advice in front of the compassionate Ellen? Having seen the opera, your students may enjoy discussing these questions—and two more:

- Did Peter Grimes actually die?
- If not, what might have become of him?

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IN PREPARATION

This activity requires no preparation other than attendance at the Met *Live in HD* transmission of *Peter Grimes*.

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CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Social Studies and Language Arts

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To review and consolidate students' experiences with *Peter Grimes*
- To explore the social and cultural assumptions implicit in the opera
- To cultivate an imaginative perspective on works of fiction

Students can explore these questions in a creative essay. Beginning with the facts of the opera, their knowledge of its characters, and in particular, their understanding of Peter Grimes himself, they can write a sequel to Britten's opera. Does Grimes return to the Borough? If not, where does he go? Or does his body wash up? What do the townsfolk do? In short, what happened to Peter Grimes?

As appropriate for your teaching situation, students can work either singly or in teams to write their *Peter Grimes* sequels, either in class or for homework. If it's practical in your classroom, students will probably enjoy sharing and comparing the endings they devise.

Hastings, England



Student Resources

On the next six pages, you'll find reproducibles of the texts and worksheets for each *Peter Grimes* activity. Feel free to photocopy these and distribute them in your classroom.

Pages 30 and 31 are activity sheets to be used at the *Live in HD* transmission. Page 30 is designed to focus student attention during the transmission and to support your post-transmission classroom work. Page 31, *My Highs & Lows*, is a collectible prompting closer attention to specific aspects of the opera. You may want to provide copies of *My Highs & Lows* not only to students, but to friends, family and other members of the community attending the transmission.

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THE METROPOLITAN OPERA: LIVE IN HD
PETER GRIMES

Resource Page for Classroom Activity
Peter Grimes on Trial

HOBSON: Peter Grimes!

(Peter Grimes steps forward from among the crowd.)

SWALLOW: Peter Grimes, we are here to investigate the cause of death of your apprentice William Spode, whose body you brought ashore from your boat, “The Boy Billy”, on the 26th ultimo. ... Tell the court the story in your own words.

Grimes is silent.

SWALLOW: You sailed your boat round the coast with the intention of putting in at London. Why did you do this?

GRIMES: We’d caught a huge catch, too big to sell here.

SWALLOW: And the boy died on the way?

GRIMES: The wind turned against us, blew us off our course. We ran out of drinking water.

SWALLOW: How long were you at sea?

GRIMES: Three days.

SWALLOW: What happened next?

GRIMES: He died lying there among the fish.

SWALLOW: What did you do?

GRIMES: Threw them all overboard, set sail for home.

SWALLOW: You mean you threw the fish overboard?...When you landed did you call for help?

GRIMES: I called Ned Keene.

SWALLOW: The apothecary here? Was there anybody else called?

GRIMES: Somebody brought the parson.

SWALLOW: ...Was there a certain amount of excitement?

GRIMES: Bob Boles started shouting.

SWALLOW: There was a scene in the village street from which you were rescued by our landlady?

GRIMES: Yes. By Auntie.

SWALLOW: ...You shouted abuse at ...Mrs. Sedley

GRIMES: I don’t like interferers.

SWALLOW: ...Who helped you carry the boy home? The schoolmistress, the widow, Mrs. Ellen Orford?

SWALLOW: *(to Ellen)* ...Mrs. Orford, as the schoolmistress, the widow, how did you come into this?

ELLEN: I did what I could to help.

SWALLOW: Why should you help this kind of fellow – callous, brutal, and coarse?

SWALLOW: *(to Grimes)* There’s something here perhaps in your favour. I’m told you rescued the boy from drowning in the March storms.

Grimes is silent.

SWALLOW: Have you something else to say? No?—Then I have. Peter Grimes, I here advise you—do not get another boy apprentice. Get a fisherman to help you—big enough to stand up for himself. Our verdict is—that William Spode, your apprentice, died in accidental circumstances. But that’s the kind of thing people are apt to remember.

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THE METROPOLITAN OPERA: LIVE IN HD
PETER GRIMES

Resource Page for Classroom Activity

Peter Grimes on Trial

ACT I. Balstrode, a retired sea-captain, tries to convince Grimes to leave the village. The fisherman explains that first he has to make enough money to open a store and marry Ellen.

With Ellen's help, Grimes arranges to get a new apprentice—an orphan boy named John who will work for Grimes in exchange for room and board until he grows up.

ACT II. Sunday morning, Ellen discovers a bruise on John's neck.

Grimes comes to take John fishing. Ellen asks where John's bruise came from. Grimes replies, "Out of the hurly burly." When Ellen tries to stop him from taking John to work on his one day off, Grimes hits her and drags the child off.

Three townspeople observe this scene: Auntie, the tavern-keeper, Ned Keene, the town pharmacist, and Bob Boles, another fisherman.

Boles leads an angry mob off to Grimes's hut. As Grimes hears the mob approaching, he rushes John out the back door. The boy slips and falls down the cliff; Grimes escapes.

The mob finds the hut empty and orderly. All agree that they have misjudged Grimes—all but Captain Balstrode.

ACT III. Balstrode says Grimes's boat has returned but that there is no sign of him or the boy. He has also found John's wet jersey.

Mrs. Sedley has overheard the conversation. She tells others. The crowd sets off on a manhunt.

Grimes, deranged and raving, listens to the villagers shouting his name in the distance. Ellen asks Grimes to come home.

Balstrode tells Grimes to sail out and sink the boat.

Swallow tells the townspeople that the coast guard has reported a sinking boat, but no one believes him.

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THE METROPOLITAN OPERA: LIVE IN HD
PETER GRIMES

Resource Page for Classroom Activity

Peter Grimes on Trial

Mrs. Sedley: Perhaps the richest lady in the Borough, she is a busybody. She is addicted to laudanum, a form of opium that was legal and commonly used in 19th century England.

Auntie: Auntie owns the Boar, a tavern and brothel in the Borough.

Bob Boles: Boles, a very religious man, denounces the apprentice system. He also denounces Auntie, her business, and the men who patronize it—until the night of a big storm, when he gets drunk and winds up in the Boar, asking for one of Auntie’s prostitutes.

Captain Balstrode: Balstrode has retired as captain of a fishing boat. He is a fair-minded man who tries to give Peter Grimes helpful advice.

Swallow: The Borough’s lawyer, Swallow led the inquest against Peter Grimes after his first apprentice died. He has been keeping a close eye on Grimes ever since.

Ned Keene: The Borough’s pharmacist, he makes use of the services of Auntie’s brothel. He supplies laudanum to Mrs. Hedley. He also helped arrange for Peter Grimes to hire his new apprentice, John. Some in town call him a quack.

Ellen Orford: The town’s schoolteacher, Ellen is Peter Grimes’s best friend. Peter hopes to marry her someday. She does everything she can to help him. She is also very concerned about the welfare of the apprentices who work for Grimes.

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THE METROPOLITAN OPERA: LIVE IN HD
PETER GRIMES

Resource Page for Classroom Activity

The Sound of Loneliness

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PETER'S ENTRANCE

GRIMES: Now the Great Bear and Pleiades
where earth moves
Are drawing up the clouds
of human grief
Breathing solemnity in the deep night.
Who can decipher
In storm or starlight
The written character
of a friendly fate—
As the sky turns, the world for us to change?

But if the horoscope's
bewildering
Like a flashing turmoil
of a shoal of herring,

Who can turn skies back and begin again?

.....

THE TOWN REACTS

CHORUS: He's mad or drunk.

Why's that man here?

NIECES: His song alone would sour the beer.

CHORUS: His temper's up.

O chuck him out.

NIECES: I wouldn't mind if he didn't howl.

CHORUS: He looks as though he's nearly drowned.

BOLES: You've sold your soul, Grimes.

BALSTRODE: Come away.

BOLES: Satan's got no hold on me.

BALSTRODE: Leave him alone, you drunkard.

BOLES: I'll hold the gospel light before

The cataract that blinds his eyes.

GRIMES: Get out.

BOLES: His exercise

Is not with men but killing boys.

.....

OLD JOE

Old Joe has gone fishing and
Young Joe has gone fishing and
You Know has gone fishing and
Found them a shoal.
Pull them in handfuls,
And in canfuls,
And in panfuls
Bring them in sweetly,
Gut them completely,
Pack them up neatly,
Sell them discretely,
Oh, haul a-way.

.....

PETER'S REACTION

When I had gone fishing
When he had gone fishing
When You Know'd gone fishing
We found us Davy Jones.
Bring him in with horror!
Bring him in with terror!
And bring him in with sorrow!
Oh, haul a-way.

At the Met: Staging and Metaphor

THE METROPOLITAN OPERA: LIVE IN HD

PETER GRIMES, MARCH 15, 2008

NAME _____

CLASS _____

TEACHER _____

Many opera productions feature detailed, realistic settings. Audiences have no doubt exactly where the story is unfolding. The designers of this Metropolitan Opera production of *Peter Grimes* chose a different approach. Set designer Scott Pask has turned the imagery of shingled net huts into a series of walls. The walls move closer over the course of the opera and provide a feeling of confinement, claustrophobia, and judgment.

If you pay close attention to the set design and staging, you'll make out Benjamin Britten's fishing village, the Borough. Consider the four design aspects listed here. Each provides clues to the designers' meaning and intentions. Then write your interpretation of this Metropolitan Opera production of *Peter Grimes*.

The materials used in the set

Visual patterns in the set

The arrangement of pieces of the set, including height, depth, placement, and movement around the stage.

The "blocking"—the ways performers are arranged on the stage

How would you describe the designer's central idea, the "big design concept" of this production?

Would you design a *Peter Grimes* set differently? How? Why? _____

Peter Grimes: My Highs & Lows

THE METROPOLITAN OPERA: LIVE IN HD

MARCH 15, 2008

CONDUCTED BY DONALD RUNNICLES

REVIEWED BY

	THE STARS
	STAR POWER MY COMMENTS
ANTHONY DEAN GRIFFEY AS PETER GRIMES	★★★★★
PATRICIA RACETTE AS ELLEN ORFORD	★★★★★
ANTHONY MICHAELS-MOORE AS BALSTRODE	★★★★★
TOWNSPEOPLE	★★★★★

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	SINGING	SET DESIGN/ STAGING
THE INQUEST	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
MY OPINION			
THE ARGUMENT OVER HELPING PETER FIND A NEW APPRENTICE	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
MY OPINION			
THE GATHERING AT THE BOAR	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
MY OPINION			
PETER'S ARRIVAL AT THE BOAR	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
MY OPINION			
SUNDAY MORNING BY THE SEA	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
MY OPINION			
PETER AND JOHN IN THE HUT	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
MY OPINION			
THE DANCE AT THE BOAR	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
MY OPINION			
PETER'S RESPONSE TO THE MOB	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
MY OPINION			
THE ORCHESTRAL "SEA INTERLUDES"	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
MY OPINION			

