
January 31, 2019 Program Notes:

Benjamin Britten

Born November 22, 1913, in Lowestoft, England; died December 4, 1975, in Aldeburgh, England

Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes, Op. 33a

Composed: Britten composed the opera, *Peter Grimes*, from which Four Sea Interludes are drawn between 1944 and 1945.

First performance: November 1948, with Eugene Ormandy conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra

Duration: c. 16 minutes

Scored for 2 flutes (doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets (2nd doubling E-flat clarinet), 2 bassoons and contrabassoon, 4 horns, piccolo trumpet and 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, and strings.

In sum:

- Benjamin Britten's sensitivity to literature helped him become one of the leading composers of opera in the 20th century's second half.
- *Four Sea Interludes* is extracted from his breakthrough 1945 opera *Peter Grimes*, which depicts "the individual against the crowd." Britten's position as a gay pacifist

intensified feelings of alienation in his own life.

- Through Britten's brilliantly imaginative orchestration, *Four Sea Interludes* not only serve to anchor the opera's coastal setting but serve as multilayered commentaries on the issues it explores.

Sensitivity to literature and theater was an indispensable factor in the formation of Benjamin Britten—a factor that made opera his natural element. The premiere in 1945 of his first large-scale opera *Peter Grimes* (the source of *Four Sea Interludes*) in fact marked a watershed not just in the young composer's career but for postwar opera overall. Britten went on to establish himself as one of the most significant opera composers of the 20th century, including operatic treatments of the work of such literary giants as Shakespeare, Henry James, Herman Melville, and Thomas Mann. He also experimented with the format, producing chamber operas for small, flexible groups as well as for the new medium of television.

As a young prodigy composer, Britten became part of the circle around fellow Englishman W.H. Auden—who features in the final work on our program—and

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collaborated with the poet on his first opera, *Paul Bunyan*, and other works. Auden was a literary mentor who molded the younger composer's sensibility and also became a kind of guru, helping him to come to terms with his sexuality. It was Auden's example that inspired Britten, together with his life partner, the tenor Peter Pears, to emigrate on the eve of the war in 1939 to the United States. In Britain, being gay and a pacifist intensified the composer's sense of being marginalized.

But Britten's homesickness was awakened when an article by E.M. Forster prompted his discovery of George Crabbe's *The Borough*. The events of this long narrative poem from 1810, written in the form of letters, take place along the East Anglian seacoast where the composer had grown up. One of the characters depicted in the poem is the fisherman Peter Grimes, who is accused by the townsfolk of murdering his young apprentices. Crabbe portrayed Grimes as a sadistic misanthrope, "untouched by pity." Britten's opera, in contrast, reimagines the ruthless bully as a movingly ambiguous figure—a "tortured idealist," in the composer's phrase, and, by extension, an outsider set

apart from the close-knit collective of the townspeople. Grimes' outsize ambitions fatefully combine with the hostility he arouses from that community to bring about his self-destruction.

Britten sensed tremendous operatic potential in this literary source. A story of "the individual against the crowd" is how he described the scenario (the librettist was the leftist poet Montagu Slater), which entailed "ironic overtones for our own situation." That pertained both to the taboo subject of his relationship with Pears (who created the role of the protagonist) and to his identity as a conscientious objector.

The composer was additionally moved by the richly detailed local color of *The Borough*. Britten was determined to reconnect with his roots, and he and Pears ended their self-imposed exile, returning to what was now an England ravaged by war. The opera includes six orchestral interludes that gave Britten space to evoke the ever-present power of nature and the sea as a character in its own right in *Peter Grimes*. He extracted four of these to be performed as a stand-alone concert piece. In the opera, these interludes foreground the element of the sea setting and

function as wordless commentaries that might be compared to the tragic Greek chorus.

What to listen for

The First Interlude (“**Dawn**”) serves as the transition between the trial scene of the Prologue (where Grimes is exonerated) and the first act. Against the thin glint of sunlight breaking through on high, menacing brass harmonies swell from below. This music returns to end the opera, suggesting that nature’s eternal patterns are indifferent to the human suffering that has been witnessed. The Second Interlude (“**Sunday Morning**”) prefaces the second act with extroverted, brightly rhythmic tolling as the community gathers for worship.

“**Moonlight,**” the Third Interlude

(prelude to the final act), provides a counterpart to “**Dawn.**” A silvery rain of woodwind and percussion intermittently splashes, as yearning harmonies slowly throb with increasingly troubled intensity. Britten’s achievement offers much more than picturesque “nature painting.” The seascapes here function as a screen onto which human emotions are projected. Thus the Fourth Interlude (“**Storm**”) doubles as scene-change music for the opera’s first act and as a metaphoric commentary on Grimes’ inner psychic turmoil. As a temporary refuge from the storm—captured by the music’s thrashing violence—a sweeping melodic arc interpolates a passing vision of peace. But its hope is battered by the tempest’s savage final surge.

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January 31, 2019 Program Notes:

Hannah Kendall

Born 1984 in London; currently resides in New York City

Disillusioned Dreamer

Composed: 2018

First performance: This is the world premiere

Duration: c. 12 minutes

Scored for 2 flutes (both doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons (2nd doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, 2 percussionists, harp, and strings.

In sum:

- The young London-born Hannah Kendall, who has emerged as an eloquent new voice both in the concert hall and in the opera house, is frequently inspired by literary sources.
- *Disillusioned Dreamer*, a Berkeley Symphony commission, is Kendall's musical response to a passage about awakening to the reality of racism from Ralph Ellison's landmark novel *Invisible Man*.
- Kendall writes fluently for large orchestra in this work, using striking contrasts in timbre and gesture to pit the sense of an illusory dreamworld against the

newly awakened state the unnamed Invisible Man experiences.

When Berkeley Symphony decided to include a brand-new work for this program built around composers' responses to the written word, Hannah Kendall emerged as a natural choice to receive the commission. The young artist, who was born in London to first-generation immigrants from Guyana, has earned acclaim for a growing body of compositions that are characteristically inspired by poetic or other literary sources. Indeed, her chamber opera *The Knife of Dawn*, which premiered in October 2016 in London, pays homage to the real-life story of Martin Carter (1927-1997), a Guyanese poet and political activist who made resistance to colonialism a central theme. The libretto—by the Guyanese-born Canadian novelist Tessa McWatt—“touches on the vulnerable aspects of a black Caribbean man who is finding his identity through his poetry and his politics,” according to Kendall.

Even when her work does not directly set a text, the composer frequently finds stimuli for her musical imagination in the power of words. She wrote the orchestral piece *The Spark Catchers* in response

Hannah Kendall

to the poem of the same title by the British writer Lemn Sissay (whose theme involves the 1888 strike by London matchgirls protesting inhumane working conditions). Premiered at the BBC Proms in 2017 by the renowned Chineke! Orchestra (an ensemble whose mission is “to provide career opportunities to young Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) classical musicians in the UK and Europe”), *The Spark Catchers* will receive its U.S. debut in June by the Seattle Symphony, with Jonathon Heyward conducting.

Disillusioned Dreamer is another example of Kendall's musical treatment of a source she encountered in literature: here, a passage from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (first published in its entirety in 1952). Narrated by an unnamed protagonist, Ellison's landmark novel grapples with issues of racism in American society and black identity. The passage in question (from chapter 12) describes the narrator being overcome “by a sense of alienation and hostility” as he awakens to an awareness that those around him in the lobby of a Harlem meeting house are “still caught up in the illusions that had just been boomeranged out of my head.” They include “the younger crowd for

whom I now felt a contempt such as only a disillusioned dreamer feels for those still unaware that they dream . . .”

Kendall notes that the vulnerability expressed here shares a similarity with *The Knife of Dawn*. “Black male vulnerability—here, his realization that his race renders him invisible in society—is something that isn't explored to a great extent in art or in music. That's why I was drawn to this source. This book changed my life and view on how things work and on the reality of being black in society.”

The composer typically devotes a lot of time and care to choosing the right title for a new project. In fact, the title serves as the starting point, along with a graphic score, “because whenever I am writing or sketching, it has to go back to the title. It's almost as if the DNA structure of the piece is embedded in it.”

While Kendall could have chosen “any combination of words” from this passage about an awakening experience, the phrase “disillusioned dreamer” stood out as especially potent, since it marks “the moment that the Invisible Man realizes that he has himself been dreaming up to that point and has been awakened to the realities

of being a minority.” Kendall also incorporates phrases from the text as performance instructions.

Kendall has already acquired impressive experience writing for large orchestral ensembles. “The sound of a full orchestra is so incredible,” she says. “I decided to use large forces for the instrumentation to bring across this idea of dreaming and being disillusioned by interweaving lines of intricate material. The only way to make that work logically is to have as many instruments as you can to make it fluid and transparent.”

What to listen for

Cast as a single movement, *Disillusioned Dreamer* opens with gestures from the percussion that alternate with unsettling pauses, which together establish an atmosphere “of being in suspense and slightly restless. You don’t know what is coming next,” according to the composer. “I usually have a very climactic point relatively early on. Here, it conveys the idea of being awakened— the Invisible Man’s

journey of coming out of that dream.”

A gesture of pulsation recurs with varying timbral colorations (harp, pizzicato strings doubled by the woodwinds). “So much spins around this pulsing, which keeps the material rooted, like an idea that is quite fixed—almost as though the Invisible Man is mulling over this new revelation he has had.”

Intricate woodwind figures evoke the dreamworld in contrast, while the use of high registers elicits what Ellison describes as the “bright, buzzing” environment around the narrator. “It’s a bit like when you dream about people you know and don’t know and can’t grasp what you’ve just dreamt about.”

Kendall emphasizes that her pieces are not tone poems or “specific replications of a text.” *Disillusioned Dreamer* is not intended as a musical representation of what is being said. Instead, the composer has taken “a few aspects from the text and tried to express something new based on what I was responding to at the time.”

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January 31, 2019 Program Notes:

Leonard Bernstein

Leonard Bernstein: born August 25, 1918, in Lawrence, Massachusetts; died October 14, 1990, in New York City

Symphony No. 2 for Piano and Orchestra, *The Age of Anxiety*

Composed: 1947-48; revised in 1965

First performance: April 8, 1949, with Serge Koussevitzky conducting the Boston Symphony and the composer as pianist

Duration: c. 35 minutes

In addition to solo piano, scored for 2 flutes and piccolo, 2 oboes and English horn, 2 clarinets and bass clarinet, 2 bassoons and contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, celesta, 2 harps (second optional), “pianino” (upright piano), and strings.

In sum:

- Leonard Bernstein, himself a talented writer, was drawn to W.H. Auden’s innovative long-form poem *The Age of Anxiety* as a powerful expression of contemporary alienation and spiritual crisis.
- The poem served as the basis

for a wordless but highly eventful symphony—the second of Bernstein’s three works in this genre (each of which was inspired by textual sources).

- Bernstein also assigns a prominent role to solo piano, but he did not consider *The Age of Anxiety* to be a piano concerto per se.
- *The Age of Anxiety* synthesizes an eclectic spectrum of musical styles, ranging from lively jazz idioms to twelve-tone austerity.

It was Leonard Bernstein who conducted the American premiere of *Peter Grimes*—at Tanglewood, in 1946. The year after that, W.H. Auden—who had since become estranged from his former close friend Britten—published a remarkable book-length poem titled *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue*. An unsentimental, hard-edged exploration of the modern spiritual predicament (but paradoxically using an archaic Anglo-Saxon meter), this poem immediately attracted Bernstein’s attention. Still working out how to balance his allegiances to “serious” music and the call of the Broadway stage, young Bernstein intended to follow Auden’s lead in composing “the record of our difficult and problematic search for faith.”

Leonard Bernstein

Bernstein decided to respond to the poem in the form of an unconventional symphony for orchestra and solo piano. Commissioned by the Boston Symphony, his Second Symphony was written while the composer traveled widely during 1948 and 1949 (including a tour under wartime conditions in the newly created state of Israel). Bernstein drew on some earlier material but also returned to the score years later to revise it. He dedicated *The Age of Anxiety* to Serge Koussevitzky, one of his most important mentors and a deeply influential father figure. Despite the prominent role of the solo pianist, Bernstein insisted that his Second Symphony is “no concerto, in the virtuosic sense.” Instead, the piano soloist functions as an alter ego who combines aspects of the four individual characters delineated by Auden.

Some remarks by Bernstein and Auden suggest a fascinating parallel with the issues of identity and self-deception that Hannah Kendall takes up in her new *Disillusioned Dreamer*. Bernstein wrote: “The piano provides an almost autobiographical protagonist, set against an orchestral mirror in which he sees himself, analytical, in the modern ambience.” In notes

for an essay he was planning in the 1940s, Auden for his part mused on the image of the mirror, which plays an important role throughout *The Age of Anxiety*: “Every child, as he wakes into life, finds a mirror underneath his pillow. Look in it he will and must, else he cannot know who he is, a creature fallen from grace, and this knowledge is a necessary preliminary to salvation. Yet at the moment he looks into his mirror, he falls into mortal danger, tempted by guilt into a despair which tells him that his isolation and abandonment is [sic] irrevocable. It is impossible to face such abandonment and live, but as long as he gazes into the mirror he need not face it; he has at least his mirror as an illusory companion.”

Auden’s poem, heavily allegorical and Jungian, introduces three men and a woman who meet in a bar in New York during wartime. (Hints of *On the Town*: indeed, Bernstein’s longtime collaborator Jerome Robbins choreographed a ballet version of the score in 1950.) They try to come to terms with feelings of loss deep in their innermost selves as they face a fragmented, meaningless world. As in an Edward Hopper painting, their respective insecurities reinforce the loneliness each feels, even when together.

Attempts to escape through alcohol fuel the narrative with a sense of underlying despair. They are having, as Bernstein puts it, “the kind of good time which one hour later is horrible.”

What to listen for

Each of the six movements has its own subtitle; the movements are also grouped into two larger parts, each of roughly equal length. “**The Prologue**”’s duet of clarinets introduces an atmosphere of somber reflection. At its close, the flute’s descending figure—a key motif throughout the work—leads us, in Bernstein’s words, “into the realm of the unconscious” (made more permeable by the copious drinking of the protagonists).

Two sets of seven variations each follow. The first set (“**The Seven Ages**”) involves not a theme per se but various fragments of the material from **The Prologue** presented in shifting configurations: piano solo, piano with the ensemble, and orchestra alone. The unstable rhythmic energy of the fourth variation introduces a strain of nervous humor that is part of *The Age of Anxiety*’s soundscape. A haunting reprise of **The Prologue**, expanded beyond the clarinets, occurs in the seventh variation, before the piano

leads the descent further into the unconscious.

The second set of variations (“**The Seven Stages**”) traces the collective dream of the characters as they search for meaning. **Part One** ends with emphatic but hollowly assertive music.

Part Two has three sections marked by striking contrasts. The first, “**The Dirge**,” derives its main theme from a 12-tone row, which represents a vain search for authority. Its piano-dominated middle section echoes Stravinsky in neoclassical guise. This eventually dissolves into “**The Masque**” (scored for just piano, harp, celesta, and percussion), a full-blown jazz scherzo, where the quartet of characters try to party before they fizzle out. It all ends in a ghostly disintegration. A four-note figure from the trumpet signals a return to sober reality for “**The Epilogue**.” This motif of lingering hope (first sounded by the trumpet) blends with a reprise of the somber strains from “**The Prologue**.” Bernstein later added a solo piano cadenza at this point, following which the orchestra joins in, transforming the hope motif into a passionate affirmation of life—with all its anxieties.

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