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The Specter of *Peter Grimes*: Aesthetics and Reception in the Renascence of English Opera, 1945–53

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ABSTRACT

In 1945 Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* contributed to a renascence of English opera. Critics praised *Grimes* for its realization of many aesthetic ideals of the traditional canon of opera, including musical depiction of character, innovation, and unification of music and drama. Subsequent English operas, however, failed to achieve the same success. Ralph Vaughan Williams's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Britten's *Gloriana*, especially, became subjects of critical disapproval. Scholars have examined the reception histories of these operas, but none has attempted to show a connection between them. This thesis explores the ways in which the success of *Peter Grimes* affected the reception of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana*. Reviews in English newspapers, magazines, and journals serve as the primary sources for this investigation. Expressly, critics found fault with the characterization, originality, and integration of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana*, i.e., the very same areas in which *Grimes* had excelled.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

THE POSTWAR RENASCENCE OF ENGLISH OPERA

In 1942 the composer Benjamin Britten returned to England after a brief visit to the United States. Three years later, a commission for a full-length operatic work from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation, the Sadler's Wells Company's aspiration to "tackle a new English opera,"[1] and the derequisitioning of the Sadler's Wells Theatre provided the necessary conditions for a resurrection of native opera in postwar England. In his survey *The Rise of English Opera* (1951), Eric Walter White recounted a familiar version of the outcome:

> [Britten] threw himself with enormous enthusiasm into the composition of *Peter Grimes*; and, as he himself later admitted, the qualities of the Sadler's Wells Company "considerably influenced both the shape and the characterization." Eric Crozier was chosen as producer. The first performance on June 7, 1945, which marked the company's return to its home after an absence of nearly five years, was an historic occasion. Not only was *Peter Grimes* an immediate success with its English audiences, but it excited considerable interest abroad…. In fact, no first opera written in the twentieth century by any other composer, British or foreign, has enjoyed such an instantaneous triumph…. Britten at one stroke became an international figure, and his future output a matter of concern to the whole operatic world. *Peter Grimes* was universally recognised as a symbol of the renascence of English opera; and its success went far to break down the inferiority complex under which English opera had laboured for so many years.[2]

Subsequent English operas, however, suffered from an inability to match the scope and intensity of *Peter Grimes*. Failure arose in individual cases for a variety of reasons, but two later operas, namely, Ralph Vaughan William's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1951) and Britten's own *Gloriana* (1953), did not achieve the success of *Grimes* in part because they failed to realize international ideals of operatic beauty. This thesis will explicate the ways in which the rise of Britten and the

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[1]Eric Walter White, *The Rise of English Opera* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), 167.

[2]Ibid., 167–8.

triumph of *Peter Grimes* shaped the critical rejoinder to *The Pilgrim's Progress* as well as *Gloriana*.

English music by 1945, having steadily recovered from two centuries of decline (i.e., from "a sort of musical Dark Ages"[3]), had begun to thrive in many genres, both instrumental and vocal. Opera, however, had failed to gain sure footing, even with English audiences and critics. In *Opera in English* (1945), Tyrone Guthrie commented: "Opera has never been a part of our native cultural tradition. It has, since its first importation from Italy, remained an expensive admired exotic; flowering, often magnificently, in conservatories, but putting no roots into our soil, making no adaptation to our climate."[4] Guthrie also drew attention to the paucity of native operas and the reliance upon foreign works: "There has virtually been no British opera. There have been British opera companies, but their repertoire has always depended upon foreign classics; and their status has always been that of poor relations to the German and Italian seasons, with glittering assemblages of 'stars,' performing in tongues other than our own."[5] For these reasons Guthrie found it "hardly surprising" that there was "very little written" in English "about either opera as an art-form, or about particular operatic works; incomparably less than…about other forms of theatrical art."[6]

The situation has changed significantly since Guthrie wrote these words in 1945. An English operatic tradition has blossomed and matured, and writing about opera has increased dramatically. Nevertheless, gaps in the literature persist. The reception history of twentieth-century English opera has yet to receive thorough treatment, although some scholars have begun

[3]Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 128.

[4]Tyrone Guthrie, introduction to *Opera in English* (London: John Lane, 1945), 7.

[5]Ibid., 7–8. Although factually inaccurate (i.e., English opera had been cultivated with varying degrees of success prior to Guthrie's writing), this statement reflected a common sentiment among intellectuals at the time.

[6]Ibid., 7.

to carry out preliminary study of the reception of the works of Benjamin Britten and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Alain Frogley, for example, in his article "Constructing Englishness in Music: National Character and the Reception of Ralph Vaughan Williams," made a provocative statement: "The reaction against Vaughan Williams is in many ways inextricably intertwined with the rise of Britten."[7] Indeed, this examination of the critical reception of the postwar operas of Vaughan Williams and Britten will support Frogley's claim. While individual articles have detailed the reception history of *Peter Grimes*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and *Gloriana*, no scholarly investigation has compared these histories; that is, no previous work has explored the relationship between the rise of Britten, the apparent turn against Vaughan Williams, and the subsequent backlash against Britten himself.

One example of recent scholarship in the field of twentieth-century English opera, Nathaniel G. Lew's dissertation "A New and Glorious Age: Constructions of National Opera in Britain 1945–51," affords an excellent starting point for the present examination.[8] In the introduction, Lew summarizes and evaluates many scholarly interpretations of postwar England's social and political situation, and, in the first chapter, he places English opera within this context. Furthermore, individual chapters on Britten's *Peter Grimes* and Vaughan Williams's *The Pilgrim's Progress* focus on the roles of these works within a newly emerging national tradition of opera and their relationship to state patronage of the arts. Whereas aesthetic ideology is an essential component of Lew's study, reception and the construction of musical values are illuminated predominantly through their connection with the contemporaneous

[7]Alain Frogley, "Constructing Englishness in Music: National Character and the Reception of Ralph Vaughan Williams," in *Vaughan Williams Studies*, ed. Alain Frogley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 21.

[8]Nathaniel G. Lew, "A New and Glorious Age: Constructions of National Opera in Britain 1945–51" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2001).

political culture. This method of inquiry, however, does not always sit well with the attitudes of English music criticism of the 1940s and 50s. Social, political, and economic considerations always play an important role in the patronage, composition, performance, and reception of works of art; nonetheless, examining these aspects of music history is a historiographical project of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. That is, writers of music criticism in the middle of the twentieth century in England showed greater concern for purely artistic characteristics in their aesthetic evaluation.

A more restricted focus on reception and aesthetics coupled with a wider historical scope will permit the present exploration to build upon and complement Lew's "A New and Glorious Age." The current study will concentrate almost exclusively on the interests of musical criticism during the mid-century renewal of English opera. In addition to analyzing the reception of individual operas, I will compare critical appraisals, and, based on these judgments, connect the reception histories of each work. A comparative analysis of reception history based upon contemporary aesthetic writings will lead to fresh insights, including especially the fact that aesthetic ideology reflected in and often derived from the reception of Britten's *Peter Grimes* weighed heavily upon the reception of subsequent English operas. For instance, whereas Lew's explanation of the lukewarm reception of Vaughan Williams's *The Pilgrim's Progress* rests on various problematic aspects of its performance at the premiere and on its antiquated nostalgia for pre-war England, nowhere does the author link criticism of this opera with the specific aesthetic standards of *Peter Grimes* and its perceived lineage. Also, Lew's dissertation only spans the period 1945–51. In addition to defining a relationship between the evaluation of *Peter Grimes* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, this thesis will cover a larger expanse of time, for the specter of *Grimes* lingered at least to the premiere of *Gloriana*. In other words, through expanding the

stretch of time to the years 1945–53, I will be able to further delineate the effect of *Grimes*'s reception upon the most excoriated of Britten's operatic works.

As an antecedent to this analysis, an overview of aesthetic theory of the period will reveal an ideal model for opera composition. Every judgment of a musical work betrays a conception of what that work should have been; that is, music critics carry a vision of the ideal opera with which they compare manifestations. Of course, there is no consensus model for the perfect opera, but there is a common language for the construction of this exemplar. The different operatic paradigms of various critics also often overlap, which results in numerous convergences of opinion. Besides, a common aesthetic lexicon and the project of envisioning operatic archetypes did not begin in England on 7 June 1945 with the premiere of Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes*—rather, they have existed from criticism's inception. That is to say, the past affects the reception of works in the present, and, in this case, the aesthetic ideas of critical forbears appear frequently in the writings of those who constructed the English opera renascence.

Criticism of *Peter Grimes* reflected the opera's realization of many of the artistic standards of the traditional canon of opera. Consequently, as the first English opera to accomplish this task, *Grimes* established some of the most significant aesthetic principles of the postwar rebirth of English opera. Included among these was the consummate combination of music and drama; for instance, Ernest Newman, in a review of the opera, averred, "Mr. Britten conceives the drama so entirely in terms of music, and the music so entirely in terms of the drama, that there is no drawing a dividing line between the two."[9] In this way, then, *Grimes* was aptly suited to theatrical production. Additionally, a majority of critics viewed the work as strikingly original yet couched in an easily discernable musical language. In *The Observer*, for

[9]*Sunday Times* (London), 24 March 1946.

example, William Glock wrote of Britten's talent "for making statements of undoubted originality in terms which everyone could understand."[10] For many reviewers, *Peter Grimes* also exuded a strong sense of competency and efficiency in its construction. Desmond Shawe-Taylor remarked in *The New Statesman*: "The moment the curtain rises…the spectator is seized by a powerful impression of competence. Everything happens rapidly, clearly, and inevitably."[11] Edmund Wilson also experienced the immediacy of *Grimes*'s musical and dramatic impact: "Almost from the moment when the curtain went up…I felt the power of a musical gift and a dramatic imagination that woke my interest and commanded my attention."[12]

These judgments then became some of the ideals for English operatic criticism in its consideration of subsequent endeavors. Failure to realize these touchstones of English opera accounted in part for the negative reception of Vaughan Williams's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Britten's *Gloriana*. A perceived absence of musico-dramatic efficacy was the impetus for much of the criticism directed towards these later operas. Many reviewers felt *The Pilgrim's Progress* more fit for a choral festival than for the operatic stage. Martin Cooper, for example, in the *Spectator*, observed, "In a theatre it [*The Pilgrim's Progress*] fails for want of variety (both musical and dramatic) and of interest, either in the action or in the psychological development of Pilgrim's character."[13] Britten's *Gloriana*, likewise, was criticized for a lack of correspondence between the music and the drama. Again, writing in *Spectator*, Martin Cooper exemplified this negative assessment with an objection to the music that accompanies the love scene between

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[10]*Observer* (London), 24 June 1945.

[11]Desmond Shawe-Taylor, "*Peter Grimes*—I," *New Statesman and Nation*, 10 June 1945, 371.

[12]Edmund Wilson, *Europe without Baedeker: Sketches Among the Ruins of Italy, Greece, and England, Together with Notes from a European Diary, 1963–4*, 2d ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1966), 186.

[13]Martin Cooper, review of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, by Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Spectator* (London), 4May 1951, 585.

Mountjoy and Lady Rich: it is "thin-blooded, nervous, ungenerous music that teases and irritates, instead of satisfying ear and heart."[14] Similar examples abound in the case of both operas. Thus, one of *Peter Grimes*'s greatest strengths became the foundation for disparagement of later works. In addition, further aesthetic standards latent in the reception of *Peter Grimes* molded the initial critique of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana*.

The principal sources for this study comprise the abundance of critical reviews found in various contemporary English newspapers and journals. Other writings of prominent music critics, especially books and articles on opera history and criticism, prove useful for uncovering the ideology of the canonical opera. Aesthetic standards extrapolated from opera scholarship and from *Grimes*'s reception will be compared with reviews of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana*. The goal will be to demonstrate that one of the many reasons for the disappointment with these later operas was simply that they failed to rise to the level of *Grimes*'s towering benchmark.

Ineluctably, issues of aesthetics and reception arise and develop within a definite political and social context. It is thus necessary to depict the historical society in which these activities took place. Rather than thoroughly reconsider Lew's analysis from "A New and Glorious Age," however, I will briefly summarize his assessment of the years 1945–51 and extend this historical inquiry through the premiere and reception of Britten's *Gloriana* in 1953.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, England underwent a number of social and political changes that served to frame the reception of postwar English opera. The Labour Party came into power in July 1945, defeating the Conservative Party in the general elections. According to Paul Addison, one of the primary goals of this new government was to expand "the

[14]Martin Cooper, "Britten at Bay," *Spectator* (London), 19 June 1953, 791.

social and economic role of the state." [15] Thus, to create a welfare state in the austerity of postwar conditions, the Labour government instituted a number of reforms. According to its own election manifesto, the party had several economic responsibilities, including "the promise to maintain full employment, the promise to expand the welfare state [i.e., to ensure a minimum standard of living above the poverty level for all citizens], and the promise to nationalise certain key industries."[16] Previously private-sector industries, such as health care, electricity, and coal, came under the control of the national government. Additionally, the new administration implemented the Arts Council of Great Britain, which controlled the allocation of state funds to various artistic endeavors. On 5 December 1947, the government proclaimed its "decision to celebrate the centenary of the Great Exhibition of 1851 with a nation-wide Festival of Britain 1951, which would be concerned with industrial design, science and technology, and the arts."[17] This event, the most elaborate and expensive of the Art Council's undertakings, saw the first performances of new operas by Benjamin Britten and Ralph Vaughan Williams, two premier British composers of the time.

Soon after the Festival of Britain in October 1951, the Labour administration faded and the Tories returned to power. "The rationing and the developing bureaucracy required to run a more socialist state, had," according to Bryan Appleyard, "inspired a degree of popular impatience and disillusion."[18] By 1951 the English populace had discovered the welfare state

[15]Paul Addison, "The Impact of the Second World War," in *A Companion to Contemporary Britain, 1939–2000,* ed. Paul Addison and Harriet Jones (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 12.

[16]George L. Bernstein, *The Myth of Decline: The Rise of Britain Since 1945* (London: Pimlico, 2004), 37.

[17]Eric Walter White, *The Arts Council of Great Britain* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1975), 217.

[18]Bryan Appleyard, *The Pleasures of Peace: Art and Imagination in Postwar Britain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 95.

was "not quite the panacea that had been advertised."[19] With the return of a Conservative majority in the early 1950s, the harsh economic conditions of the immediate postwar years began to give way to an increasing affluence. Near the beginning of its tenure, the Conservative government continued to promote public patronage of the arts. One of the first major musical events of the state, for instance, involved the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II on 2 June 1953. A television audience of twenty-five million watched the "magnificent, feudal ceremony" that marked the birth of what the English media called the "New Elizabethan Age."[20] Many activities surrounded the celebration, "but the most significant event—both in terms of its context and the issues of patronage and identity that it raised—was Britten's opera *Gloriana*."[21] Similar to the Festival of Britain, the coronation festivities emphasized a burgeoning interest in the composition of English opera.

During the period 1945 to 1953, English opera experienced a renascence. The widespread acclamation for *Peter Grimes*, the inauguration of Britten's national and international success, facilitated the postwar recovery of English culture. According to Andrew Blake, "As the Labour government, elected at the end of the Second World War in a climate of optimistic hope in renewal, was trying with little success to reconstruct a shattered economy, there was a flourishing of national culture, with enormous pride in sporting and artistic events."[22] In this atmosphere, the resurgence of the arts, the revivification of English opera, and Britten's monumental achievement coincided in an "uncompromising portrait of a man suffering the

[19]Ibid.

[20]David Childs, *Britain Since 1945: A Political History*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), 55.

[21]Robert Hewison, "'Happy Were He': Benjamin Britten and the *Gloriana* Story," in *Britten's Gloriana: Essays and Sources*, ed. Paul Banks (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1993), 10.

[22]Andrew Blake, *The Land Without Music: Music, Culture, and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 48.

consequences of his own passion."[23] Furthermore, the aesthetic standards resulting from this portrayal served as the foundation of operatic criticism in England for the ensuing decade.

Benjamin Britten's ascendancy in the postwar years depended upon his accomplishments in opera, a genre in which Ralph Vaughan Williams, the preeminent English composer of the time, had yet to achieve success. As the younger composer used opera to ensure contention for the title of most important living English composer, the success of *Peter Grimes* challenged the aging Vaughan Williams to rekindle his own interest in composing opera. In this regard, he resumed working on an operatic adaptation of John Bunyan's Puritan allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the score of which he completed in 1947–8.[24] The first performance of Vaughan Williams's *The Pilgrim's Progress* on Thursday, 26 April 1951 "constituted a major national event," and its propinquity to the opening of the Festival of Britain "lent it even greater importance."[25] Nevertheless, while audience reaction to the premiere was enthusiastic, the critical reception was, at best, mixed.

The response to Britten's operas in the early 1950s was tepid as well. In the years following the success of *Peter Grimes*, Britten composed a number of chamber operas, including *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946) and *Albert Herring* (1947). In addition to these works, Britten also wrote two grand operas in the vein of *Peter Grimes*: *Billy Budd* (1951) and *Gloriana* (1953). Audiences and critics highly anticipated the premieres of these works, each of which was the centerpiece of a major national and musical event. In the case of *Billy Budd*, this event was the Festival of Great Britain, and, for *Gloriana*, the Queen's coronation. The initial critical reaction

[23]Ibid.

[24]Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 353.

[25]Nathaniel G. Lew, "*The Pilgrim's Progress* and the Pitfalls of Nostalgia," in *Vaughan Williams Essays*, ed. Byron Adams and Robin Wells (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2003), 190.

to *Billy Budd* was, on the whole, negative: the first performance disappointed the critics. Mervyn Cooke summarized the critical disapprobation:

> The warmly complimentary tone generally adopted by Britten's reviewers began to change around 1951…when the composer's former champion, the influential Ernest Newman, dismissed *Billy Budd* in print as a "painful disappointment." The tone of other reviews of this Festival of Britain opera was unusually carping. One writer shed intriguing light on the widespread shift in critical stance by commenting that "one always resents having it dinned into one's ears that a new work is a masterpiece before it has been performed; and Benjamin Britten's 'Billy Budd' was trumpeted into the arena by such a deafening roar of advance publicity that many of us entered Covent Garden…with a mean, sneaking hope that we might be able to flesh our fangs in it."[26]

Despite the anticlimax of *Billy Budd*, however, history has reserved the distinction of the least successful opera in Britten's *oeuvre* for *Gloriana*.

Gloriana fared unfavorably with Britten's previous operas, especially *Peter Grimes*. Beverley Baxter, writing in the *Evening Standard*, proclaimed:

> For minutes at a time—minutes piled upon minutes—it was as clamorous and ugly as hammers striking steel rails. No melody emerged, no tune, no beauty in the sustained passages which, in the last act, took complete command. At least in *Peter Grimes* we had those deep haunting chords of the cruel sea, and in *Billy Budd* there was the soft singing of the sailors at dusk. But in the finale of *Gloriana*, Britten seems to be shouting: 'Ugliness is truth, and truth is ugliness!'[27]

Additionally, in his review of *Gloriana*'s premiere Mosco Carner recalled the expertise of Britten's musical characterization in *Peter Grimes*. Britten once competently managed "so crucial a problem as musical characterization from within"; however, Carner wrote, Britten's "gradual decline as a musical dramatist has been to me a matter of the deepest disappointment."[28] Ernest Bradbury, in *The Musical Times*, detected the presence of *Grimes*'s shadow as well: "We seek always for a second *Peter Grimes*, not quite accepting that, in *rerum natura***,** a second *Peter*

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[26]Mervyn Cooke, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3–4. The unnamed critic was Stephen Williams, the quotation from his review in the *Evening News* (London), 3 December 1951.

[27] *Evening Standard* (London), 9 June 1953.

[28]Mosco Carner, "*Gloriana*," *Time and Tide*, 20 June 1953, 818.

Grimes is an impossibility." [29] Stephen Williams, too, compared *Gloriana* with Britten's previous operas. For Williams, *Gloriana* lacked the substance of *Peter Grimes* or *Billy Budd*.[30] Also, according to the reviewer for the *Daily Mail*, "It must be frankly said that Britten has still to surpass what he achieved in *Peter Grimes*."[31] Hence, critics at the time made overt reference to *Grimes* in their disparagement of *Gloriana*.

While the critical establishment had declared *Peter Grimes* a historical milestone, both *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana*, though highly anticipated, suffered greatly from negative reviews. Why did *The Pilgrim's Progress* disappoint critics? What accounted for the backlash of unenthusiastic criticism directed towards Britten's coronation opera? Admittedly, many of the perceived problems surrounding the premieres of these two later operas involved inadequacies in the performances as well as structural flaws in the compositions themselves. In addition to these individual shortfalls, however, the aesthetic standards of *Peter Grimes* greatly influenced the lackluster reception of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Billy Budd*, and *Gloriana*. The turn towards Britten as the founder of a modern institution of English opera composition accompanied a decline in the popularity of the pastoral school of English music, of which Vaughan Williams was the leading exponent. Also, the specter of Britten's early success with *Peter Grimes* lurked behind much of the anticipation and disappointment surrounding the premiere of *Gloriana*.

[29]Ernest Bradbury, "Opera in London," *Musical Times* 94 (1953): 372.

[30]*Evening News* (London), 9 June 1953.

[31]Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO

SOURCES OF MUSIC CRITICISM IN POSTWAR ENGLAND

Thorough analysis of the effect of *Peter Grimes* on the reception of subsequent English operas requires the consideration of some preliminary questions. What were the major sources of music criticism in postwar England? Who were the individual critics writing for these institutions? What kinds of aesthetic ideologies did these writers espouse? Following the Second World War, academic journals and newspapers remained the primary literary venue for the criticism of opera. The countries of publication and the quality of individual periodicals varied widely. To demarcate a finite group of responses for the current investigation, the newspaper and journal articles chosen for inclusion will be limited to English publications. Within this subset, special emphasis will be placed on periodicals with the widest readership and on those with critics of eminent reputation. Because of their dissemination and authority, these sources will be the most valuable to this reception history, as they were the ones most likely to have influenced the responses and perceptions of English audiences. Additionally, since the scope of this project encompasses the reception of three operas premiered and performed over a nine-year period, the music itself will only be considered to the extent that it is discussed in the reviews and articles.

At mid-century, a plethora of publications, both national and local, circulated in England. Most germane to the present task will be the criticism of writers who evaluated each of the three operas and publications that contained reviews of each opera's opening performance; these writings will provide the most convincing demonstration of the specter of *Peter Grimes*. Institutional sources of particular interest include the *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*, the

Musical Times, the *New Statesman*, the *Observer*, the *Times*, and the *Sunday Times*. These newspapers employed numerous music journalists. In the postwar era, some of these critics reviewed performances on a regular basis with the same newspaper or journal; others penned reviews for various publications, and, in the case of *Gloriana*, a few wrote multiple critiques of the same performance. Some of the more important opera critics in England were Eric Blom, Ferruccio Bonavia, Richard Capell, Mosco Carner, William Glock, Frank Howes, Dyneley Hussey, Ernest Newman, and Desmond Shawe-Taylor. The following table coordinates all relevant institutional sources, critics, and reviews of the three operas.[32]

[32]Anonymous reviewers will also be considered (specifically in the case of the London *Times* and *Sunday Times*), though they are not included in Table 1.

Table 1. Institutional sources, critics, and reviews of specific operas.

Music Critics	***Peter Grimes***	***The Pilgrim's Progress***	***Gloriana***
W. R. Anderson			*Musical Times*
Beverly Baxter	*Evening Standard*		*Evening Standard*
Stanley Bayliss		*Daily Mail*	*Daily Mail*
Preston Benson			*Star*
Fred Billany			*Manchester Daily Dispatch*
Eric Blom	*Birmingham Post*	*Observer*	*Sunday Observer*
Ferruccio Bonavia	*Daily Telegraph*		
Rutland Boughton	*Musical Times*		
Ernest Bradbury			*Yorkshire Post, Musical Times*
Richard Capell		*Daily Telegraph*	*Monthly Musical Record, Daily Telegraph*
Clive Carey	*Musical Times*		
Mosco Carner		*Time and Tide*	*Daily Telegraph, Time and Tide*
Martin Cooper		*Spectator*	*Score, Spectator*
A. V. Cotton			*Music Review*
Hubert James Foss		*Musical Times*	
William Glock	*Observer*		
Scott Goddard	*News Chronicle*	*News Chronicle*	*News Chronicle, Chesterian*
Nöel Goodwin			*Truth*
John Graham	*Sound Wave Illustrated*		
Sydney Harrison	*John O' London's Weekly*	*John O' London's Weekly*	*John O' London's Weekly*
Ralph Hawkes	*Tempo*		
Ralph Hill	*Daily Mail*		
A. K. Holland		*Liverpool Daily Post*	
Philip Hope-Wallace	*Time and Tide*	*Public Opinion, Manchester Guardian*	*Manchester Guardian Weekly, Time and Tide*
Dyneley Hussey	*Spectator*	*Listener, Foyer*	*Listener*
Arthur Jacobs		*Daily Express*	
R. L. Jacobs	*Listener*		
Hans Keller	*Music Review*		*Music Review*
John W. Klein			*Tempo*
Greville Knyvett			*Royal College of Music Magazine*
Colin Mason	*Musical Times, Opera*		
Tony Mayer			*Opera*
William McNaught	*Musical Times, Manchester Guardian*		
Wilfred Mellers		*Musical Quarterly*	
Donald Mitchell			*Musical Opinion, Monthly Musical Record*
George Montagu			*London Musical Events*
C. B. Mortlock			*Church Times*
Michael Mulliner		*Royal College of Music Magazine*	
Herbert Murrill		*Music & Letters*	
Ernest Newman	*Sunday Times*	*Sunday Times*	*Sunday Times*
D. Hugh Ottaway		*Musical Opinion*	
Marius Pope		*Evening Standard*	
Andrew Porter			*London Musical Events, Opera, Music & Letters*
Kenneth Pearson		*Manchester Daily Dispatch*	
Geoffrey Sharp	*Music Review, Sunday Times*	*Music Review*	
Desmond Shawe-Taylor	*New Statesman*	*New Statesman*	*New Statesman*
Andrew Smith		*Daily Herald*	
Cecil Smith	*Musical Times*	*Daily Express, Opera*	*Opera*
Philip Squire		*Truth*	
Erwin Stein	*Tempo*		
Stephen Williams	*Evening News*	*Evening News, Stage*	*Evening News*

A fundamental problem in the nature of reception study is the difficulty of accurately gauging the reactions of historical audiences to musical performances. Consideration of the

published letters written to newspapers and journals will elucidate to some extent the responses of the general public. Still, in most cases professional music criticism and journalism serve as the only sources for scholarly research on the critical reception of musical works; in terms of historical research, the nature of a composition's aesthetic reception depends primarily upon how established critics received the work. This does not mean, however, that music criticism had no association with the attitudes of the English public, simply that the precise nature of this relationship defies facile definition. While there is always a gap between the recorded ripostes of the musical press and the fleeting reactions of audiences, the writings of music journalists were disseminated in the 1940s and 1950s to an ever-increasing readership. The media—newspapers especially—played a significant role in the construction of culture and value in the postwar English climate.

Indeed, English newspapers became increasingly important as a means of articulating the national consciousness. According to Michael Bromley, "Between 1937 and 1947 the sales of national daily newspapers had risen from 9.9 million copies to 15.45 million copies, and of national Sunday newspapers from 15.7 million copies to 29.3 million copies."[33] Then, in the 1950s, newspaper reading reached its zenith.[34] In 1957 Francis Williams wrote in *Dangerous Estate: The Anatomy of Newspapers*:

> No other people on earth are such avid readers of newspapers as the British. For good or ill, close on thirty million newspapers national, provincial, morning and evening go into British homes on every working day; on Sundays even more. Most of them are read by more than one person, some by three or more. Many of those who read newspapers, although by no means all, read at least two a day—one in the morning, one in the evening—some read more. All in all nearly 90% of the adult population of this island reads regularly at least one national morning paper every day, which means, if statistics

[33]Michael Bromley, "The Media," in *Britain Since 1945*, ed. Jonathan Holowell (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 214.

[34]Ibid., 216.

> of national intelligence are correct, practically all those who can read. No other product of modern civilisation has achieved so complete a saturation of its potential market.[35]

Audiences had access to the judgments of music critics; however, in most cases historians cannot know how audiences viewed these judgments, because general audience members did not document their opinions.[36] Critics, who comprised only a small segment of the opera-going public, provide an incomplete picture of an artwork's reception. Their writings, nonetheless, provide the best evidence for historical interpretation.[37]

What of the condition of musical writing in the English press? In 1947 Eric Blom, critic of the London *Observer*, commented on the state of music criticism in England:

> Criticism has…been well cultivated by A. H. Fox Strangways, the founder of the quarterly *Music & Letters*, in *The Observer*, where he was succeeded by William Glock [and later by Eric Blom himself], Ernest Newman in *The Sunday Times*, Richard Capell in *The Daily Telegraph*, to which F. [Ferruccio] Bonavia has also long been attached, and several others. Percy Scholes, formerly among London's critics, has for some years devoted himself to the production of books that have profitably spread musical knowledge among the general public. Excellent critics not attached to daily papers are William McNaught, Gerald Abraham (now professor at Liverpool), Constant Lambert, Cecil Gray, Scott Goddard and Edward Lockspeiser, to mention only a few. *The Musical Times* and several other specialist journals keep up a high standard.[38]

Blom also described the staff of the London *Times* as "admirable."[39] At that point in time, the paper's highly regarded commentators included Dyneley Hussey, who had written books on W. A. Mozart and Verdi, and Frank Howes, who "succeeded [H. C.] Colles as chief critic on the

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[35]Francis Williams, *Dangerous Estate: The Anatomy of Newspapers* (London: Longmans, 1957), 1.

[36]For *Peter Grimes* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, there is no substantial record of general audience reception. *Gloriana*, however, inspired many to write letters to journals and newspapers. The published letters contain a mixed response; some defend the opera while others lambaste it.

[37]Ticket sales also indicate the tastes of the public, but attendance data do not disclose the reasons for approval or disapproval.

[38]Eric Blom, *Music in England*, rev. ed. (London: Pelican Books, 1947), 258.

[39]Ibid.

latter's death in 1943" and had previously written on the subjects of "Byrd, the musician's psychology, and opera."[40] Blom continued to depict music criticism as it appeared in the English press:

> The Sunday papers still have their weekly articles on music, and after the war they were resumed by *The Daily Telegraph*, where Capell's essays are always worth attention for their exceptional literary distinction. A few of the provincial dailies have kept weekly musical essays going, including *The Birmingham Post*, *The Glasgow Herald* and *The Liverpool Post*. *The Manchester Guardian* has long been famous for musical criticism of the finest literary quality: Samuel Langford was worthily succeeded there by Neville Cardus. Liverpool has a discerning critic in A. K. Holland. *The Yorkshire Post* formerly did good work, its critic for many years being Herbert Thompson and later A. H. Ashworth.[41]

In the 1940s and 1950s music criticism was plenteous in England.

More recently, some scholars have dismissed the significance of critical reviews of music during this era. Philip Brett, for instance, quickly denigrated contemporary criticism of *Peter Grimes*'s premiere: "Among the reviews of the first performance, that of Desmond Shawe-Taylor stands out (almost alone) as being of more than ephemeral interest."[42] Upon reviewing the accounts of *Grimes*'s opening night, Brett concluded they reveal the "insufficiency of most of the daily and weekly critics of the time."[43] Also, he decided: "Their reviews served a useful purpose in publicising the event, but not even a practised hand like Newman [i.e., Ernest Newman, music critic for *The Sunday Times*] can be said to have shown any real penetration into the music. Even those who had time to absorb the work rarely did it justice."[44] True, the postwar writings of English columnists are certainly insufficient judged according to the

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[40]Ibid.

[41]Ibid., 259.

[42]Brett, preface to *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*, xi.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Brett, "Breaking the Ice For British Opera: *Peter Grimes* on Stage," in *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*, Cambridge Opera Handbook, 94.

standards of *modern musicological* scholarship; per contra, contemporaneous writers never intended these reviews, inscribed hurriedly in the days and weeks following the performance of a new work, as scholarly articles. By the standards of *journalistic* criticism *of that period* they are more than sufficient. Furthermore, in addition to their utility as publicity, contemporary reviews serve as a suitable guide to how people living in a specific historical context evaluate works of art, how preconceived aesthetic values affect their critical perspectives, and how the excitement generated by an immensely successful artistic project realizes preconceptions, raises expectations, and in turn impinges upon the reception of subsequent artworks. In this respect, then, music criticism from postwar England is not only adequate, but also felicitous and even noteworthy.

An investigation of English news organizations and their respective press officers takes its cue from Meirion Hughes's *The English Musical Renaissance and the Press, 1850–1914: Watchmen of Music*. Like Hughes's research, the current inquiry will explore the relationship between the English press and the growth of the arts. Whereas Hughes concentrated on the rebirth of interest in English music originating in the second half of the nineteenth century (i.e., the so-called English Musical Renaissance), this inspection will focus on the associations between criticism and the arts in the second half of the twentieth century, during the postwar renascence of English opera. Within each epoch there was a substantial recovery and proliferation of national music as well as an "unprecedented expansion"[45] of the musical press. Following Hughes's method, this analysis will, in a circumscribed fashion, "attempt to bring some of the most influential critics out of the shadows and place them and their writings in the context of the publications for which they wrote," "re-assess and re-evaluate the importance of

[45]Meirion Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance and the Press, 1850–1914: Watchmen of Music* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2002), 1.

music criticism in British cultural history," "explore aspects of the symbiotic relationship between the watchmen [i.e., the music critics] and the English composers which they promoted (and rebuffed) in their columns," and show how music critics "sought to give leadership both in terms of formation of composers' reputations and in moulding the taste of the musical public."[46] In the context of national opera, the goals of postwar English criticism remained remarkably similar to those of the nineteenth century. For the purposes of the current project, it proves most convenient to organize the sources of criticism into three broad categories: newspapers, literary-cultural journals, and music periodicals. The ensuing table places pertinent publications into their appropriate organizational classes.

[46]Ibid., 7.

Table 2. Primary sources of music criticism in post-war England.

Newspapers	**Literary-Cultural Journals**	**Music Periodicals**
Birmingham Mail	*Foyer*	*Listener*
Birmingham Post	*John O' London's Weekly*	*London Musical Events*
Church Times	*National and English Review*	*Monthly Musical Record*
Daily Express (London)	*New Statesman and Nation*	*Music & Letters*
Daily Herald (London)	*Public Opinion*	*Music and Musicians*
Daily Mail (London)	*Spectator*	*Music Review*
Daily Mirror (London)	*Time and Tide*	*Musical Opinion*
Daily Telegraph and Morning Post (London)	*Truth*	*Musical Quarterly*
Daily Worker (London)		*Musical Times*
Evening News (London)		*Opera*
Evening Standard (London)		*Radio Times*
Liverpool Daily Post		*Royal College of Music Magazine*
Manchester Daily Dispatch		*Score*
Manchester Guardian		*Sound Wave Illustrated*
Manchester Guardian (Weekly Edition)		*Stage* (London)
News Chronicle (London)		*Tempo*
Observer (London)		*Theatre World*
Picture Post (London)		
Star (London)		
Sunday Express (London)		
Sunday Observer (London)		
Sunday Times (London)		
Times (London)		
Times Weekly Review (London)		
Yorkshire Evening Post		
Yorkshire Observer		

For the present investigation, representative sources from each genre will be examined; that is, the most significant publishers and authors within each grouping will garner greater attention than others. In postwar England, London remained the primary site for the publication of the most authoritative newspapers, which can be subdivided into two classes based on the frequency of issuance—into daily and Sunday publications. The most respected national daily

was the *Times*, while the *Sunday Times* was the most reputable and influential Sunday newspaper of the postwar era. In addition, the *Observer* provided excellent musical coverage. The bestselling daily papers were the *Express* and the *Mirror*[47]; however, of papers with soaring circulations, the *Daily Telegraph* contained the most salient musical journalism. The *New Statesman and Nation* was a prominent literary-cultural journal, and the *Musical Times* endured as one of England's foremost music periodicals.

The most powerful English broadsheet of the nineteenth century, the London *Times* remained a prestigious publication in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the postwar years, the resurgence of the newspaper's arts section mirrored the general revival of the arts in England. According to Iverach McDonald, "The unprecedented popularity of music in post-war Britain kept Frank Howes, chief music critic since 1943, William Mann and their colleagues busy with new work of unusual interest."[48] English audiences avidly anticipated "whatever new British composers did,"[49] especially Benjamin Britten, Michael Tippett, and Malcolm Arnold. In general, the *Times*'s coverage of musical events was consistent and thorough. Although the paper maintained the pretense of anonymity for its music critics, and often it may have been difficult to discern the author of a particular commentary, the identities of the *Times*'s reviewers were public knowledge. Two of the most important critics in the context of opera were Frank Howes and Dyneley Hussey.

In 1945, the year of *Peter Grimes*'s premiere, the chief music critic of the *Times* was Frank Howes (1891–1974), who also served as President of the Royal Music Association and as

[47]Bromley, 214.

[48]Iverach McDonald, *The History of the* Times: *Struggles in War and Peace*, (London: Times Books, 1984), 226.

[49]Ibid.

lecturer in music history at the Royal College of Music. A graduate of St. John's College, Howes had worked for the *Times* since 1925. In addition, he wrote several books, including *The Borderland of Music and Psychology* (1926), *Man, Mind and Music* (1948), and *The English Musical Renaissance* (1966). "A staunch champion of anonymous criticism (as in *The Times*)," observed Martin Cooper, "Howes possessed a personal style, in which the didactic was often concealed beneath an easy persuasiveness of manner, and strong individual opinions; and the combination served as effectively as any signature to identify his writing."[50] In *The English Musical Renaissance*, Howes defined the importance of critical reception to national music:

> Our renaissance advanced with the revival of our learning. A renaissance of composition presupposes logically, if not chronologically, some sort of renaissance of response. A quickening of musical life in a society is only possible if listeners are in a state to respond to it.[51]

For Howes, listening with judgment (i.e., reflecting conscientiously on received works and publishing lucid evaluations) was crucial to the project of revitalizing the musical life of a country. What might the critical listener expect to hear in the finest examples of postwar English music? According to Howes, the fusion of superlative components from the Italian, French, and German traditions stimulated the reinvigoration of opera composition in England after the Second World War. The finest examples presented a "true drama in and through music,"[52] a genuine synthesis of singing and theater. "The cult of Wagner," according to Howes, "recalled the dramatic ideals and potentialities of opera, so that Mozart and later Verdi began to be treated as something more than singers' stalking grounds."[53] After the upheaval of the war, the operas

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[50]Martin Cooper, "Howes, Frank (Stewart)," *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (accessed 7 June 2007), <http://www.grovemusic.com.proxy.libraries.uc.edu>.

[51]Frank Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance* (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), 343.

[52]Ibid., 313.

[53]Ibid., 313–4.

of Mozart and Verdi became some of the principal mines for English music critics' excavation of aesthetic ideals.

The *Times* also counted Dyneley Hussey (1893–1972) among its critics of opera performances during the postwar period. Hussey, who graduated from Corpus Christi College, Oxford, lectured at the National Gallery in addition to his duties as an art and music critic. He was, according to his obituary in the periodical *The Musical Times*, "a connoisseur of painting, architecture, and *objets d'art*."[54] From 1923–46, over and above his work at the *Times*, Hussey critiqued concerts for the *Saturday Review* and the *Spectator*. At the time of the premieres of Vaughan Williams's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Britten's *Gloriana*, he worked for the music journal *The Listener*. Over the course of his career, Hussey also wrote numerous reviews and articles for *The Musical Times*. He published several works on the history of music, including *Eurydice, or the Nature of Opera, Some Composers of Opera*, and volumes on Mozart and Verdi for the Masters of Music and Master Musicians series, respectively. In an article for the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Martin Cooper summarized Hussey's contribution to criticism:

> Expert knowledge of the visual arts and of European culture in general lent a valuable perspective to [Hussey's] music criticism.… His criticism in the *Listener*, after he had left *The Times*, showed a special interest in Italian opera. Well-informed and balanced judgment and an urbane style mark his books on Mozart and Verdi.[55]

Hussey sketched an aesthetic theory of opera in his treatise *Eurydice, or The Nature of Opera* (1929) and in his collection *Some Composers of Opera* (1952). Hussey asserted the sovereignty of opera as an art form: although it combines elements of both music and poetry, "opera is a definite and independent form governed by laws which do not necessarily apply to

[54]"Obituary: Dyneley Hussey," *Musical Times* 113 (1972): 1116.

[55]Martin Cooper, "Hussey, Dyneley," *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (accessed 7 June 2007), <http://www.grovemusic.com.proxy.libraries.uc.edu>.

either music or drama."[56] He had previously discussed this notion in an article from 1928 entitled "The Future of Opera in England": "Unless an opera is a satisfactory blend of the two elements of drama and music, it must fail in the theatre since opera is something essentially different both from a play and from a piece of music, and something more than a combination of the two."[57] Hussey also emphasized the necessity of an "intimate knowledge of the theatre" and of a permanent opera company for the success of opera in England.[58]

The London *Sunday Times* contained Ernest Newman's music reviews. According to his obituary in *The Musical Times*, Newman "was born in Liverpool" and "began his career in business" as a clerk at the Bank of Liverpool after attending Liverpool College and Liverpool University.[59] Born E. N. Roberts, Newman (1868–1959), upon undertaking the task of criticism at the *fin de siècle*, changed his name because he viewed himself from that moment forward as "a man in earnest."[60] Until 1919, Newman wrote criticism for the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Birmingham Daily Post*; from 1919–59, he worked for the *Sunday Times* and the *Sunday Observer*. *A Musical Critic's Holiday* (1925) encompasses an introduction to his critical methodology, and *From the World of Music* (1956) collects many of Newman's critical essays from the *Sunday Times*. According to William S. Mann, "As a critic, Newman aimed for scientific precision in evaluation; his writing is closely argued yet marked by its lively

[56]Dyneley Hussey, *Eurydice, or The Nature of Opera*, To-day and To-morrow Series (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1929), 71.

[57]Dyneley Hussey, "The Future of Opera in England," *Musical Times* 69 (1928): 314.

[58]Ibid.

[59]H. R., "Obituary: Ernest Newman," *Musical Times* 100 (1959): 481.

[60]Ibid.

humanity."[61] On the nature of his profession, Newman once remarked, "I want a form of criticism that will tell me more about the object criticised and less about the critic."[62]

In addition to journalistic writings, Newman authored a number of books about music, including his first work *Gluck and the Opera* (1895) and *Life of Richard Wagner* (4 vols., 1933–46, reprinted 1976). These studies presented some of Newman's thoughts on the aesthetics of opera. From Wagner and Hegel, Newman learned how not to approach "the criticism and aesthetic of music": "metaphysical bias" and an "*a priori* manner of treating history" lend themselves to "bastard analysis and spurious generalisation."[63] Newman thought it "perfectly futile to go on discussing the aesthetic of music *in abstracto*, without reference to the historical conditions under which the art has lived and by which it has been moulded from century to century."[64] Consequently, the proper role of the responsible historian was to carefully consider the theoretical presuppositions underlying the ideas and works of composers of a particular era of history. According to Newman, the task of the historian was not to impose a contemporary point of view upon the narrative of the past; for example, to treat Gluck and Rossini as "stages in the evolution of a dialectical idea" was simply "to ignore the actual social and aesthetic conditions that went to shape their music and their relations to poetry."[65] Rather, an understanding of the "general culture-conditions" of an epoch was necessary to accurately evaluate the works of its composers. For instance, according to Newman, the principle of the "imitation of nature" played

[61]William S. Mann, "Newman, Ernest [Roberts, William]," *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (accessed 7 June 2007), <http://www.grovemusic.com.proxy.libraries.uc.edu>.

[62]Ernest Newman, *From the World of Music* (London: John Calder, 1956), 13.

[63]Ernest Newman, *Gluck and the Opera: A Study in Musical History* (London: Bertram Dobell, 1895; reissue, London: Victor Gollancz, 1967), 6–7.

[64]Ibid., 6.

[65]Ibid., 10.

a "large part in the aesthetics, politics, morals, and sociology of the eighteenth century" and accounted for "many of Gluck's ideas and…much of his method of working."[66] For Newman, elision of this principle can lead to misinterpretation of the composer's intent and music's worth.

Though Newman did not explicitly endorse any comprehensive theory of musical aesthetics, his work as a music critic employed aesthetic principles. Newman's articulation of the lasting value of Gluck's operas suggests the perspective from which he criticized the works of English composers in the middle of the twentieth century. Newman praised Gluck for his consolidation and revitalization of "the whole structure of opera."[67] Despite Newman's insistence in his scholarship on the indispensability of historical context, in his work as music critic Newman implied that certain aesthetic principles do survive the closing of an historical age and achieve a sort of limited universal status. These musical values, always subject to revision, are neither absolute nor eternal, but they are often appropriate tools for the criticism of musical works from disparate historical periods.

Newman also worked for another Sunday publication—the London *Observer*, "Britain's oldest Sunday newspaper," first published in 1791. While the *Sunday Times* was a "reassuring, establishment paper," the *Observer* was "a question-asking paper" [68]; in other words, the moderate liberalism and internationalism of the *Observer* served to countervail the conservatism of the *Sunday Times*. In the decade following the Second World War, the *Observer* experienced a golden age under the editorship of David Astor. From 1948–56, according to Richard Cockett, the *Observer* was "exactly in tune with the spirit of the age; it was the product of a thoughtful, serious generation which had fought through the Second World War, and had also seen—and in

[66]Ibid., 13.

[67]Ibid., 293–4.

[68]Richard Cockett, *David Astor and The* Observer (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), 140.

some cases experienced—the miseries of Depression and the failure to combat Fascism in the 1930s."[69] During this period, first Jim Rose and then Terry Kilmartin directed the *Observer*'s arts coverage. According to Cockett, Kilmartin constructed "the best culture pages in Fleet Street": "The critics he employed were a mixture of the tried and tested and the new and conventional."[70] The *Observer*'s music critics were especially competent.

The London *Observer* employed two music columnists during the postwar era. The first of these, William Glock (1908–2000), after a brief stint at the *Daily Telegraph*, became a reviewer for the *Observer* in 1934, and in 1939 replaced A. H. Fox Strangways as the chief music critic. In 1945 Glock assessed the premiere of Britten's *Peter Grimes* in the pages of the *Observer*. Shortly afterward, however, Glock left to found the Summer School of Music at Bryanston, Dorset, and to establish and edit the music periodical *Score*, which was dedicated primarily to the promotion and criticism of contemporary music. In 1959 he attained his most fêted office, Controller of Music at the BBC (the British Broadcasting Company).[71] According to his obituary, Glock "had three powerful strings to his bow: he was a gifted, 'classical' pianist; he wrote with expert acuity about a wide range of music; and, as a lecturer, he was an able communicator."[72]

Glock's autobiography, *Notes in Advance*, captured many of his thoughts on music criticism and the aesthetics of opera. Glock compared his early pieces for the *Daily Telegraph* with his later criticism for the *Sunday Observer*. The constraints of time and space, he observed, made writing the concert notices for the *Daily Telegraph* a "difficult task." That is, Glock had to

[69]Ibid., 133.

[70]Ibid., 169.

[71]"In Memoriam: Sir William Glock," *Musical Times* 141 (2000): 4.

[72]*Independent* (London), 1 July 2000.

write each notice "within a half an hour or so" and crowd it into "100 or 120 words."[73] The length of his reviews for the *Observer* remained condensed, yet Glock discovered that "writing for a Sunday paper held the great advantage that, instead of dividing one's attention between listening to a concert and wondering what to say about it, it was possible to experience the music and to ponder about it afterwards."[74]

Glock's operatic criticism reflected a musical value system that both venerated the works of the masters of Western art music and promoted contemporary music, especially that of British composers. Nevertheless, for Glock, inclusion of performances of new works, especially on a BBC music programme, required deliberation. When considering modern music, it was essential to uphold the standards that authorities had used to permit the entrance of previous works into the musical canon. One of Glock's self-proclaimed goals as Controller of Music for the BBC was to "choose a high percentage of important works, and to limit the number of those secondary and incidental pieces which belong rather to the Spa repertory, and which are apt to make faint reading in the *Radio Times* [the official organ of the BBC] and dull or inanimate listening."[75]

What did Glock regard as important works? In 1963, during Glock's tenure as Controller of Music, the BBC broadcast 530 performances of the works of Mozart, which constituted the highest percentage of performances of works of a single composer in that year. Why did Glock so highly value Mozart's compositions? In a 1955 broadcast on the BBC's Third Programme, Glock defended Mozart from detractors. "In Mozart," Glock wrote, "there is a wonderful and intense levity altogether beyond the reach of any late-nineteenth-century composer."[76] The

[73]William Glock, *Notes in Advance: An Autobiography in Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 29.

[74]Ibid., 31.

[75]Ibid., 201.

specific qualities responsible for this "intense levity," i.e., this overwhelming lightness, include "clarity, precision, and the most delicate balance of texture."[77] Glock further emphasized the operatic nature of Mozart's entire opus: "Indeed we tend to look upon the whole of Mozart's music as essentially operatic."[78]

Once Glock had moved on from his post at the *Observer*, the paper hired Eric Blom as a music reporter. Blom (1888–1959)—English music critic, writer, and editor—covered musical performances for the *Observer* beginning in 1949. He had been employed previously as music journalist for the *Manchester Guardian* and *Birmingham Post*. Blom also enjoyed the position of director and editor of the quarterly publication *Music & Letters*. In an obituary notice, Frank Howes noted these achievements as well as Blom's "admirable critical biography of Mozart in the *Master Musicians* series, of which [Blom] was the editor" and his "extensive revision and modernization of 'Grove' [i.e., the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*]."[79] On Blom's criticism of music, Westrup and Williamson wrote:

> Though he was thoroughly familiar with contemporary music—although critical of, for example, Rachmaninoff and Weill—and not hostile to it, the classics were the core of his musical experience, particularly Mozart, on whom he wrote perceptively and with affection. As an analyst he had no use for what he called "philosophical criticism" and "psychological probing" but aimed at conveying to others the pleasure he got from the music he was discussing.[80]

Blom's operatic criticism in particular rested on his high regard for the masterpieces of the genre, especially on the operas of Mozart. In *Così fan tutte*, for instance, Mozart's use of the orchestra

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[76]Ibid., 86.

[77]Ibid., 84.

[78]Ibid., 85.

[79]Frank Howes, "Eric Blom (1888–1959)," *Music & Letters* 40 (1959): 205.

[80]Jack Westrup and Rosemary Williamson, "Blom, Eric (Walter)," *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (accessed 7 June 2007), <http://www.grovemusic.com.proxy.libraries.uc.edu>.

demanded adulation. Specifically, the eminence of the "orchestration in *Così*" was "the wonderful economy" with which Mozart obtained "the most limpid and exquisite effects and the utmost imaginable eloquence and justness of expression without going out of his way to draw any attention to the scoring at all."[81]

The *Daily Telegraph*, established 29 June 1855, was one of London's bestselling and most well-regarded daily papers. From its inception, the publication "set out to identify a new newspaper audience, a mass readership for a popular and readable daily."[82] According to George Evans, the paper

> established its position as unchallenged leader in the quality field under Viscount Camrose with, at its peak, a circulation approaching a million and a half. It continued to prosper under his son, Lord Hartwell, a life peer, founder of the *Sunday Telegraph* [in 1961] and its last editor-in-chief.[83]

In 1937 the *Telegraph* absorbed the *Morning Post*, a conservative paper read primarily by the retired officer class. The newspaper was published with the title *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* throughout the postwar period. During this time, Ferruccio Bonavia, Mosco Carner, and Richard Capell served as the primary music critics.

Born in Triesta, Italy, Ferruccio Bonavia (1877–1950) spent the majority of his working life as composer and critic in England. In an obituary, his colleague Richard Capell wrote that Bonavia "had his own way of making the best of a bad job" (i.e., the best of "a career in the rough and tumble of music journalism"), "the way of integrity, reticence and courtesy."[84] During his career, Bonavia wrote an influential biography of Giuseppe Verdi, supported the

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[81]Eric Blom, *Classics, Major and Minor* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1958; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 33.

[82]Hughes, 41–2.

[83]George Evans, "*The Daily Telegraph* as Seen by Max Hastings," *Contemporary Review* 282 (2003): 243.
[84]R.C., "Ferruccio Bonavia: 1877–1950," *Music & Letters* 31 (1950): 115.

cause of opera in England, and handled the task of music journalism with aplomb. As a critic, according to Capell, Bonavia could, "amid the hard-boiled performances of the greatly famous which at one time it was his lot to hear in an unending succession, pick out the instances of imaginative feeling surviving professional petrifaction."[85] In addition, Capell noted, it was Bonavia's "delight to observe promise and sometimes achievement at Sadler's Wells,"[86] the English opera company that premiered Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*.

Bonavia's reverence for Verdi's operas indicates some of the critic's views on the aesthetics of opera. The seamless incorporation of the popular into a form of high art, for instance, marked the best of Verdi's later operas, particularly *Otello* (1887). In his biography of the Italian composer, Bonavia drew a parallel between Verdi's *Otello* and Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*: "*Poppea*…implied a recognition that certain popular elements discreetly and skilfully used might be employed without imperilling the drama"; similarly, "in *Otello* lyrical expression, as distinguished from dramatic, is allowed a certain freedom, but only when its employment is perfectly legitimate."[87] As a consequence, the tasteful use of a popular element like "lyrical expression" became an aesthetic ideal appropriate for the discrimination of operas from different eras of music history.

Mosco Carner (1904–85) also worked for the *Daily Telegraph*. In 1928 he earned a doctoral degree in musicology from Vienna University with a dissertation on the nature of sonata form in the works of Robert Schumann. According to Sadie, Carner was "one of the last pupils

[85]Ibid.

[86]Ibid.

[87]Ferruccio Bonavia, *Verdi* (London: D. Dobson, 1947; reprint, Westport, Conn.: Hyperion Press, 1979), 100.

of Guido Adler, who strongly influenced his approach to stylistic criticism."[88] Carner immigrated to London in 1933, and although he worked as a conductor, he "devoted himself increasingly to writing, as a critic and as author of articles and books on a wide range of topics."[89] In addition to his employment with the *Daily Telegraph*, he wrote about music for the *Evening News*, *Music and Letters*, *Musical Quarterly*, *Music Review*, *Monthly Musical Record*, *Musical Opinion*, *Listener*, *Time and Tide*, and the London *Times*. The focus of Carner's research (i.e., Continental opera) reflected the musical wellspring from which English critics drew many of their aesthetic values. Carner's defence of Puccini in particular illustrates the critic's attitudes toward operatic value. Puccini's operas were "theatre *par excellence*" for Carner. Many of the qualities of Puccini's operas, including a profound understanding of the nature of the theatre, an ability to compose music suitable for the stage, and a proclivity for melodic writing also served as important aesthetic principles for Carner's evaluation of other operatic works.[90]

The *Daily Telegraph* also employed Richard Capell (1885–1954) as a music critic. A strong literary talent led Capell to music journalism, "at first in Northampton and then in London, where he became the critic of the *Daily Mail*."[91] In addition to writing reviews for the *Daily Telegraph*, Capell edited the *Monthly Musical Record* (1928–33) and *Music and Letters* (1950–54). In terms of journalistic style, Eric Blom wrote that Capell

[88]Stanley Sadie, "Carner [Cohen], Mosco," *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (accessed 7 June 2007), <http://www.grovemusic.com.proxy.libraries.uc.edu>.

[89]"Mosco Carner," *Musical Times* 126 (1985): 620.

[90]Mosco Carner, "In Defence of Puccini," in *Of Men and Music: Collected Essays and Articles*, 2d ed. (London: Joseph Williams, 1944), 28.

[91]Maurice J. E. Brown, "Capell, Richard," *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (accessed 7 June 2007), <http://www.grovemusic.com.proxy.libraries.uc.edu>.

> was conscientiously mindful of what should be perhaps the first principle in criticism: one may praise and leave it at that, but one should never find fault without substantiating one's findings in detail and in such a way that strictures may offer useful suggestion for improvement.[92]

Capell's monograph *Opera* (1948) amplified the critical stances expressed in his many operatic reviews. The first chapter, "The Nature of Opera," outlined several conceptual categories for the evaluation of opera, including the relationship between the music and the words (i.e., the "power of music to magnify the verbal expression of emotion"[93]), the *sine qua non* of the dramatic element, and the import of innovation, of the continual reinvigoration of operatic form. Capell did not subscribe overtly to any specific theory of operatic beauty, instead seeking opera's justification in the "sometimes incomparable fruit of its luxuriance,"[94] in the refulgence of select operatic masterworks. Nonetheless, his criticism implies a system of aesthetic values, and it requires little effort for the inquisitive reader to discern the underlying principles of Capell's critical intuitions.

In addition to daily and weekly broadsheets, several literary and musical periodicals published criticism of operatic performances. In this respect, one of the most important was the *New Statesman and Nation*. "The essence of the *Statesman*'s appeal," according to Kenneth O. Morgan, was "the latter half of that famous publication, with its reviews of books, music, and opera designed for the middle-class intellectuals."[95] Kingsley Martin, a correspondent at the *Manchester Guardian*, took over the editorship of *New Statesman and Nation* from Clifford Sharp in 1931; Martin's tenure as editor (1931–60) saw the periodical's "first golden age, with

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[92]Eric Blom, "Richard Capell," *Musical Times* 95 (1954): 418.

[93]Richard Capell, *Opera*, 2d ed. (London: E. Benn, 1948), 8.

[94]Ibid.

[95]Kenneth O. Morgan, *Britain Since 1945: The People's Peace*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 68.

its circulation peaking at almost 100,000 in 1959."[96] During the 1930s, the *New Statesman* also integrated two of its greatest journalistic competitors—the *Nation and Athenaeum* and the *Weekend Review*. Cuthbert Worsley replaced Raymond Mortimer as Literary Editor for the journal in 1946, after Mortimer left for a position at the *Sunday Times*. One of Mortimer's many achievements at the *New Statesman* was the recruitment of talented critics: "Desmond Shawe-Taylor, admirable whether as 'Peter Galway,' reviewer of books, or as music critic, was Mortimer's 'find.'"[97]

Desmond Shawe-Taylor (1907–95) was "one of a galaxy of robust writers [including Desmond MacCarthy, Raymond Mortimer, V.S. Pritchett, and Edward Sackville-West] who between them turned the *New Statesman* into compulsory reading for people of all political persuasions."[98] Shawe-Taylor, educated at Shrewsbury and Oriel College, Oxford (1926–30), predominantly engaged in literary criticism prior to World War II, but "occasionally wrote about music in *The Times*, *The Spectator*, the *London Mercury*, and the *New Statesman*."[99] In 1945 he became music critic for the *New Statesman*, for which he reviewed the premieres of Britten's *Peter Grimes* and *Gloriana* as well as Vaughan Williams's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. He also acted as gramophone critic for the *Observer* from 1950–58, and, following the retirement of Ernest Newman, Shawe-Taylor served for a quarter century as chief music critic of the *Sunday Times*. Eric Blom described his merits as a music critic:

> Shawe-Taylor's particular interests were opera, song, vocal technique and interpretation, and recordings. His judgments were based on a deep and wide knowledge and a keen

[96]Ibid.

[97]Edward Hyams, *The New Statesman: The History of the First Fifty Years, 1913–1963* (London: Longmans, 1963), 168.

[98]*Independent* (London), 4 November 1995.

[99]Eric Blom, "Shawe-Taylor, Desmond (Christopher)," *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (accessed 7 June 2007), <http://www.grovemusic.com.proxy.libraries.uc.edu>.

> discernment, particularly as regards the human voice. Although receptive to new music, he was quick to distinguish pretension or absurdity and sharp in pointing them out. His writing was trenchant and informative, marked by grace, wit, and a strong vein of common sense.[100]

In 1948 Shawe-Taylor authored a volume on the history of Covent Garden, London's Royal Opera House, and created *The Record Guide* with Edward Sackville-West in 1951.

Shawe-Taylor did not produce any extensive studies on opera; as a result, his thoughts on criticism and aesthetics must be gleaned from his voluminous reviews and articles. Two of Shawe-Taylor's life-long interests included nineteenth-century Italian opera and twentieth-century Czech opera. In particular, Shawe-Taylor's admiration for Leos Janácek, expressed clearly and volubly at the 85th session of the Proceedings of the Royal Music Association, displays some of his general positions on the beautiful in opera. For example, especially commendable in Janácek's mature operatic works was the Czech composer's talent for effective characterization through musical writing. That is, Janácek's "close attentiveness to living speech-curves enabled him to give to the utterances of each character in turn something that is more than surface realism: a deep truthfulness and a strong individuality of tone."[101] Another element of masterful composition, particularly evident in Janácek's opera *Katya Kabanova*, was the simultaneous perpetuation of passion and restraint.[102] Paradoxically, at its most effective, operatic music intimated sumptuousness while maintaining a slender elegance. Ideally, then, the composer of opera should realize both an intensity and subtlety of musical expression.

Many English journals devoted themselves entirely to the musical arts. *The Musical Times*, the oldest English-language music periodical, contained reviews of *Peter Grimes*, *The*

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[100]Ibid.

[101]Desmond Shawe-Taylor, "The Operas of Leos Janácek," *Proceedings of the Royal Music Association* 85 (1958/1959): 55.

[102]Ibid., 60.

Pilgrim's Progress, and *Gloriana* from 1945–53. During this period, various authors, including W. R. Anderson, Rutland Boughton, Ernest Bradbury, Clive Carey, Hubert James Foss, and William McNaught, evaluated performances of opera. Additionally, many of the other music critics previously described in this chapter often wrote articles and reviews for the *Musical Times*. At this time, typical issues, published on the fifteenth of each month, consisted of thirty- to thirty-five pages of advertisements, announcements, and copious reviews of books, printed music, recorded music, radio broadcasts, and live musical performances. Each issue also featured articles from respected English scholars on diverse aspects of music history, theory, and performance practice.

This rich array of English newspapers and journals houses the historical record of postwar opera criticism in England. Publishers employed scores of music critics who, despite divergences in opinion, shared a common critical method. In their reviews and articles, a conception of musical beauty underlay every judgment. Certainly, different critics had distinct visions of sublimity, but none operated without such a definite impression. Coherent criticism requires a general theory of musical value, which itself is composed of a consistent set of aesthetic principles. Critics' responses to their sundry musical experiences—composing, conversing, conducting, listening, performing, reading, and writing—shape their musical opinions. Throughout the course of this chapter, I have analyzed specific principles from the writings of each critic: Blom's interpretation of an appropriate use of the orchestra in opera; Bonavia's view on the integration of popular elements into opera composition; Capell's estimation of the rapport between opera's music and its text; Carner's judgment of the essential nature of opera's dramatic element; Glock's depiction of intense levity and a flexible setting of the libretto; Howes's conception of beauty in opera as the perfect synthesis of music and drama;

Hussey's accentuation of the significance of opera's theatrical dimension; Newman's insistence on the importance of unity in opera; and Shawe-Taylor's consideration of passion and restraint in operatic music. In each case, the works of specific composers apotheosize general principles. For each critic, his accumulated opinions formed the basis of his critical reception and evaluation of newly composed native works in the mid-twentieth-century renascence of English opera.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DESIRE FOR A UNIVERSAL ENGLISH OPERA

Understanding the critics and their writings first requires a close examination of the intellectual baggage they brought with them to the assessment of a musical composition and its performance. Appreciation of the critical reception of new works of art in the postwar era necessitates recognition of some of the predetermined ideas about what made art beautiful for the English music critic. These preconceptions, which affected the documented reception of musical works, fell in this case into two related categories: the national and the international, the English and the Continental. For centuries, what the institution of English musical criticism had wanted above all else was a full-scale opera, set by a British composer to an English text of a native librettist, which would be truly English as well as universal in its appeal. Such a work would achieve the highest success on both the national and international stage.

Benjamin's Britten's *Peter Grimes* presented English music critics with an opportunity to realize their aspirations for English grand opera. In his compositional style, according to Wilfrid Mellers, "Benjamin Britten has been interested in the problem of effecting a rapprochement between…the more provincial elements of English musical styles and the cosmopolitan techniques of Europe."[103] Previously, solutions to this problem had been scarce in the context of English opera. In the history of dramatic vocal music in England, there are numerous examples of "stage action with vocal and instrumental music written by a British composer to a libretto in English," including "interludes, masques, farce jigs, burlettas, as well as dramatic operas, ballad

[103]Wilfrid Mellers, review of *The Beggar's Opera*, by Benjamin Britten, *Music Survey* 2 (1949): 47.

operas, comic operas, pasticcio operas, [and] operettas."[104] Before 1945, however, no truly full-scale English operas had entered the international canon of masterworks. English critics of opera thus inevitably looked to non-English (i.e., French, German, and Italian) compositions for operatic ideals. To sell Britten to themselves, to the English public, and to the rest of the musical world, English music critics positioned the composer and his works within a distinct historical framework: a grand narrative of great, albeit largely foreign, opera composers and their compositional principles.

The choice of subjects for each volume in the series of *Sadler's Wells Opera Books* (1945) provides a window into operatic values in postwar England.[105] Placing a new English opera alongside two popular Italian examples of the genre, the series comprised four volumes: *Opera in English*, *Mozart's "Così fan tutti*," *Britten's "Peter Grimes*," and *Puccini's "Madame Butterfly."* Two of the contributors—Mosco Carner and R. L. Jacobs—also reviewed the operas under present consideration. In the case of the *Sadler's Wells Opera Books*, Carner and Jacobs authored the fourth book. According to a review in the journal *Music & Letters*, Carner "makes out as good a case as can be made in defence of *Madame Butterfly*."[106] Carner, in addition, later crafted an authoritative work on Puccini.[107] In his preface to the second edition of *Puccini: A Critical Biography*, Carner explained some of the aims of his study, which included the search for why Puccini had not joined the ranks of the canonic composers of opera (i.e., Mozart,

[104]Eric Walter White, *A History of English Opera* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 18.

[105]Eric Crozier, ed., *Sadler's Wells Opera Books* (London: John Lane, 1945).

[106]D. H., review of *Sadler's Wells Opera Books*, ed. Eric Crozier, *Music & Letters* 26 (1945): 240.

[107]Mosco Carner, *Puccini: A Critical Biography*, 2d ed. (London: Duckworth, 1958). According to *The New York Times* (7 August 1985), the London music critic Edward Greenfield considered Carner's book "indispensable." Furthermore, "the work was translated into Italian and for it Mr. Carner was awarded the Silver Medal of the Italian Government in 1964. He was working on a new edition at the time of his death [in August 1985]."

Wagner, Verdi, and Strauss).[108] This notion of a pantheon of opera's great composers performed a vital role in postwar opera criticism. Additionally, in the same vein as the *Sadler's Wells Opera Books*, Covent Garden produced a line of works intended for the serious operagoer.[109] Martin Cooper, another important reviewer during the renascence of English opera, wrote the third volume in the series on Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (a subject on which he had previously produced a study for Oxford University Press[110]). The choice of operas for this series, which reflected staple works in the repertories of each opera house, illumine aesthetics of the time as well as the standards to which English critics held *Peter Grimes*.

Many writers deemed *Grimes* the first English opera to rise to the level of the greatest Continental operas. Sidney Harrison, for example, in "A New Birth of Opera," proclaimed the "glad tidings" that England had found "an operatic composer."[111] The critic A. W., in a review in *Theatre World*, posited a similar significance for Britten's opera: "*Peter Grimes* is important not only in itself (and it is a fine work by any standards) but in pointing a revival of English musical creation and perhaps the beginning of a national school of opera this country has always lacked."[112] Philip Hope-Wallace affirmed *Grimes*'s historical importance in the pages of *Time and Tide*, placing *Grimes* alongside Hindemith's *Mathis der Mahler*, Shostakovich's *Katerina Ismailova*, and Puccini's *Il trittico*.[113] For these critics, *Grimes* became the first English opera destined to join the repertoire of the world's opera companies.

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[108]Carner, *Puccini*, ix.

[109]Anthony Gishford, ed., *Covent Garden Operas* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1947).

[110]Martin Cooper, *Georges Bizet* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938).

[111]Sydney Harrison, "A New Birth of Opera," *John O' London's Weekly,* 29 June 1945, 125.

[112]A. W., "Peter Grimes," *Theatre World* 21 (July 1945): 6.

[113]Philip Hope-Wallace, "Peter Grimes," *Time and Tide*, 16 June 1945, 496.

What about *Peter Grimes* fulfilled critics' expectations? What were these expectations? That is, what were the ideals of beauty embodied in other internationally renowned operas that allowed them to achieve such lasting success? In "A New and Glorious Age," Lew mentions some of the general attributes for which *Grimes* was so highly acclaimed, including "operatic convention," "mastery of craft," "national topics," the opera's "powerful and timely theme," and an "effective musical depiction of character."[114] He does not, however, demonstrate the ways in which, for contemporary opera reviewers, many of these ideals stemmed from the great works of the past. English music critics derived many of their aesthetic principles, the building blocks of the ideal opera, from the masterworks of foreign composers, such as those of Bizet, Mozart, Puccini, Strauss, Verdi, and Wagner. The musical press perhaps most consciously associated Britten with Mozart and Verdi.

Comparisons of Britten and Mozart abounded. In 1956 Joseph Kerman, with an intimation of regret, noted this phenomenon in his monograph *Opera as Drama*: "I always feel rather sorry for Benjamin Britten, whose admirers proclaimed him years ago as the authentic Mozart of our age."[115] Newspaper critics commonly emphasized the most glaring example—to wit, that both composers exhibited a "youthful maturity," a high degree of musical precocity. The music critic Hans Keller claimed in his 1948 article "Britten and Mozart: A Challenge in the Form of Variations on an Unfamiliar Theme" that the similarities extend far beyond such superficial resemblances. Both Britten and Mozart were, according to Keller, possessed of "an impeccable sense of form" and "masters in the solution of a paradox inherent in all classical art: the paradox of restrained, yet explicit emotion."[116] Their compositions were, however, prone to

[114]Lew, "A New and Glorious Age," 156.

[115]Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 269.

misunderstanding: "Mozart and Britten are the only two composers I know who strongly and widely attract people who do not understand them."[117] Similar strengths in each composer were often confused with weaknesses. "Both composers are clever, supreme craftsmen," Keller maintained, "Hence both are accused of trying to be clever and of lacking in the deeper emotions."[118] Thus, even in the postwar period itself, members of the English musical intelligentsia descried the remarkable similarity between the ways in which critics spoke of Britten and of past masters.

For Keller points of commonality also arose specifically in the matter of operatic composition. Both composers, for example, wrote operas for particular occasions and singers. Too, "their common love for virtuosity," "together with their common love of the dramatic," was "also a part of their intense common love for opera."[119] With Britten and with Mozart, the "psychological and sociological theme of rebellion" was nearly always an integral component of dramatic works: "Even *The Magic Flute*, it must be remembered, 'was a work of rebellion'; *Grimes* and *Lucretia*, as well as *Herring*, centre on the motive of opposition to (society's) tyranny."[120] Again, even in censure, convergences prevailed. For instance, "when they are not accused of striving after originality, Mozart and Britten are accused of lacking originality, of eclecticism."[121] From this very same eclecticism, however, sprang forth each composer's "super-nationality," i.e., the tendency for each artist's music to transcend parochial

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[116]Hans Keller, "Britten and Mozart: A Challenge in the Form of Variations on an Unfamiliar Theme," *Music & Letters* 29 (1948): 19.

[117]Ibid., 20.

[118]Ibid.

[119]Ibid., 24.

[120]Ibid.

[121]Ibid.

boundaries.[122] Thus, rather than a fault of unoriginality, Keller considered the ability to make quick and effective use of a wide variety of idioms, as well as the ability to employ these diverse styles wisely in appropriate musical contexts, a virtue of the highest order.

Even though no studies written at the time directly compared the operas of Mozart with those of Britten, the aesthetic accomplishments of Mozart's operas set many of the critical measures for *Peter Grimes*. In their writings, English music critics articulated some of the musical principles of Mozart's dramatic vocal works. The composer's eclectic use of international elements, mentioned above, is a case in point. An orchestral score rich in nuance and sonority, "full of ingenious and expressive details,"[123] represented another strength of Mozart's operas, in particular the collaborations with da Ponte. In "Mozart and His Age," Martin Cooper identified two further assets of Mozart's operatic writing: a balance of complexity and intelligibility as well as a considerable dexterity with the evocation of emotional experience.[124] In a study on Mozart for the Masters of Music Series, Dyneley Hussey, one of the *Times*'s music critics, described the composer's eloquent use of musical ornamentation within a clear but flexible structure.[125] In addition, critics perceived the depth of thematic content, the relevance of social commentary, the psychological insight of character development, the clarity of text setting, and the consistency of music and drama as qualities inherent in Mozart's operas.

An association with Verdi also pervaded discussions of Britten's music. An opposition to Wagner's music drama typically accompanied the equation of Britten and Verdi's compositional

[122]Ibid., 26.

[123]Edward J. Dent, *Opera*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1949), 54.

[124]Martin Cooper, "Mozart and His Age," in *Ideas and Music* (New York: Chilton Books, 1967), 39–40.

[125]Dyneley Hussey, *Mozart* (London: Harper & Brothers, 1928), 277.

approaches. In 1945, before the premiere of *Grimes*, Britten alluded to his own preference for the operatic style of Verdi:

> I am especially interested in the general architectural and formal problems of opera, and decided to reject the Wagnerian theory of 'permanent melody' for the classical practice of separate numbers that crystallize and hold the emotion of a dramatic situation at chosen moments.[126]

Critics also recognized parallels between Britten and his Italian predecessor, and *Peter Grimes* first stimulated the detection of many of these semblances. Writing about the musical structure of *Grimes*, several scholars cited Britten's partiality for Verdi.[127] Also, many reviews of *Grimes*'s premiere referred to Verdi. William Glock postulated, "Could Verdi have been there [i.e., at the premiere of *Grimes*] he would have sat back in admiration if not always in comfort."[128] Desmond Shawe-Taylor, in the second of two reviews of the first performance, compared the opening of *Grimes* with Verdi's *Falstaff*, "Different though the mood is…there is the same effect of speed and precision." Shawe-Taylor also identified *Grimes*'s "preludes and interludes, of which there are six in all," and which "form a major item in the musical design," as "the only respect in which [Britten] departs from the generally late Verdian lay-out of the score."[129] Edmund Wilson, the eminent American critic, equated the compositional talents of

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[31]Benjamin Britten, introduction to *Peter Grimes*, Sadler's Wells Opera Books, no. 3 (London: John Lane, 1945), 8.

[127]See Erwin Stein, "Opera and *Peter Grimes*," *Tempo*, no. 12 (Sept. 1945): 4; Colin Mason, "Benjamin Britten," *Musical Times* 89 (1948): 108; Arthur Oldham, "*Peter Grimes*: I. The Music; The Story Not Excluded," in *Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on His Works From a Group of Specialists*, ed. Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), 109.

[128]*Observer* (London), 10 June 1945.

[129]Desmond Shawe-Taylor, "*Peter Grimes*—II," *New Statesman and Nation*, 16 June 1945, 507. Immediately following this passage, Shawe-Taylor distinguished this statement further: "I am not referring to the musical idiom, but to the division of the score into set-pieces; arias, ensembles and choruses, linked by recitatives which slip insensibly into *arioso*. He shows great mastery too of a kind of operatic writing known as the *scena*."

Britten and Verdi (and Mozart as well) in "An Account of *Peter Grimes*." Recalling his excitement at the first production, Wilson claimed:

> There have been relatively few composers of the first rank who had a natural gift for the theater: Mozart, Musorgsky, Verdi, Wagner, the Bizet of *Carmen*. To be confronted, without preparation, with an unmistakable new talent of this kind is an astonishing, even an electrifying, experience.[130]

This assortment of references to Verdi suggests another set of artistic criteria used to evaluate Britten's operas.

Posteriorly, musicians and scholars also acknowledged the similarities. "Commentators on Britten have long seen the virtue of pointing out [Britten's] alignment with Verdi rather than Wagner in respect of form in opera,"[131] wrote Arnold Whittall. In October 1962, in homage to Britten, the French composer Francis Poulenc pronounced, "*À 50 ans vous voici glorieux comme un jeune Verdi*."[132] Nearly thirty years after the premiere, Arthur Hutchings noticed *Grimes*'s correspondence with Italian opera: "Comparable in resources and musical ingredients with Verdi's *Otello* rather than any German music-drama, [*Peter Grimes*] remains [Britten's] most popular work, having been translated into many languages and acclaimed in many countries."[133] In 1983 Peter Porter perceived a comparable approach to libretti. "As much as Verdi," Porter maintained, "Britten is the originator of his own operatic texts," and "Brevity was always

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[130]Wilson, 186.

[131]Arnold Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 95.

[132]Francis Poulenc, "*Hommage à Benjamin Britten*," in *Tribute to Benjamin Britten on His Fiftieth Birthday*, ed. Anthony Gishford (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 13.

[133]Arthur Hutchings, "Music in Britain, 1916–1960," in *The Modern Age, 1890–1960*, ed. Martin Cooper (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 554. Hutchings also connected *Grimes* with Verdi in a remark about Britten's *Billy Budd*: Since it marks "Britten's return to Verdian broadness," *Billy Budd* (1952) "may be considered the successor to *Grimes*."

Britten's motto, as well as Verdi's."[134] Additionally, for Michael Oliver, the structure of *Grimes* was "Verdian"; that is, *Grimes* was "essentially a 'number opera,' divided into arias, ensembles and choruses," and its divisions grew "naturally from dialogue." [135] Hence, comparisons to Verdi have not fallen into disuse in the interval since *Grimes*'s initial sensation; in contrast, critics have maintained this practice to the present day.

Verdi's operatic *oeuvre* also figured prominently in the evaluation of *Peter Grimes*. English critics in particular extolled Verdi's achievements in the genre. For example, Dyneley Hussey asserted in his tome on Verdi in the Master Musicians Series, "In *Otello* Verdi had found a solution of the fundamental problem of opera, namely the fusion of dramatic poetry and music, as complete and satisfying for the Italian language as was Wagner's for the German."[136] In addition to the seamless interweaving of melody and text, Richard Capell, music critic of *The Daily Telegraph*, saw in Verdi's *Otello* a greater refinement of ardor and an exceptional sense of continuity between formal sections.[137] Withal, according to Philip Hope-Wallace, drama critic for *Time and Tide* and opera reviewer for *The Guardian*, one of Verdi's most valuable gifts as a musical dramatist was the facility to make music theatrical.

Critics also regarded Verdi's masterful application of a vast range of musical and dramatic configurations within a single theatrical work. In an article on Puccini, for instance, Winton Dean used Verdi's mastery of compositional unity and diversity as a torch by which to

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[134]Peter Porter, "Benjamin Britten's Librettos," in *Peter Grimes / Gloriana*, ed. Nicholas Joan (London: John Calder, 1983), 12–3. Porter, like Hutchings, also linked *Peter Grimes* to Verdi's operas; expressly, *Grimes* "stands directly in the line of great folk operas, such as Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* (*The Force of Destiny*) and Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, and, like them, it makes a great play with the chorus as a centre of passion."

[135]Michael Oliver, *Benjamin Britten* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 109.

[136]Dyneley Hussey, *Verdi*, 5th ed. (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1974), 272.

[137]Richard Capell, *Opera* (London: E. Benn, 1948; reprint, Westport, Conn.: Hyperion Press, 1983), 110–1 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

shed light on deficiencies in Puccini's style. In spite of Puccini's "use of exotic colour devices and elaborate background-painting," Dean said, "there is less difference of musical and emotional texture between almost any half-dozen of his operas than between any two of Verdi's maturity."[138] For Dean, this dearth of variation resulted in the worst kind of unity, a certain bland similitude in all his music. On the other hand, Verdi unified his works without making them all sound the same. Postwar estimates of Britten's worth as a composer of opera in comparison to Verdi were never as direct as this. In most cases, critics did not judge *Peter Grimes* with overt reference to the highest principles of Verdi's masterpieces; still, many early impressions of *Grimes* relied implicitly on these aesthetic ideals.

Thus, Britten's music provoked comparisons with the works of canonical composers from the tradition of Western European art music. For English music critics, *Peter Grimes* induced the aesthetics of the operas of Mozart and Verdi. *Grimes* evoked many general qualities of Mozart's operas, including an eclectic use of international elements, depth of ideational content, vividness of orchestration, keenness of social themes, insightfulness of character development, clarity of text setting, consistency of music and drama, balance of musical complexity and intelligibility, skillful suggestion of emotional experience, eloquence of musical ornamentation, and lucidity and flexibility of structure. Much of *Grimes*'s praise also reflected the aesthetic values of Verdi's operas, namely, the masterful combination of dramatic poetry and music, highly developed sense of refinement, seamless continuity between formal sections, exceptional theatricality, and incorporation of diverse musical and dramatic elements within a tightly unified work.

[138]Winton Dean, "Giacomo Puccini, (1858–1924)," in *The Heritage of Music*, vol. 3, ed. Hubert Foss (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), 169.

In addition to preoccupations with international standards of operatic beauty, the English musical establishment had long pined for a uniquely English tradition of national opera as well as a new English masterwork to serve as a keystone for its foundation. Britten enunciated his own accord with this sentiment in the introduction to the volume on *Peter Grimes* for the series of Sadler's Wells Opera Books: "One of my chief aims is to try and restore to the musical setting of the English language a brilliance, freedom, and vitality that have been curiously rare since the death of Purcell."[139] Even well into the twentieth-century, despite many efforts to supercede it, Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* remained the sole English masterpiece in the operatic genre. After *Dido and Aeneas*, lengthy fallow periods followed brief flashes of brilliance, such as Rutland Boughton's enormously popular *The Immortal Hour* (1922), which, nonetheless, failed to "stand up very well to subsequent revival"[140] or to generate the requisite international appeal. Also, though he made several attempts (e.g., *Hugh the Drover* (1910–4), *Sir John in Love* (1924–8), and *Riders to the Sea* (1925–32)), Ralph Vaughan Williams, the most distinguished English composer during the first half of the twentieth century, was unable to successfully cultivate a school of English opera composition.

By nearly universal consensus, Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* became the panacea for England's operatic ailments. Most researchers have emphasized the unparalleled importance of *Peter Grimes* to the history of English opera. In a review of the first performance, for instance, the anonymous critic of the *Picture Post* prophesied that the opera's debut

> will be remembered as the reinstatement of opera in the musical life of this country. The absence of opera in British music was a void which could be filled only by a national

[139]Benjamin Britten, introduction to *Peter Grimes*, Sadler's Wells Opera Books, no. 3 (London: John Lane, 1945), 8.

[140]Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 314.

> work in the true sense. Without a truly British production opera remained an exotic bird which never nested here.[141]

Most writers have agreed that *Peter Grimes*'s unprecedented global success as an English opera justified the initial laudatory rhetoric and set *Grimes* apart from all the preceding efforts of English composers. Robert L. Jacobs, in an article on "The Significance of *Peter Grimes*," described the opera as a "decades-prayed-for-spectacle of a contemporary grand opera exerting a mass-appeal" and a "music-dramatic *tour de force*."[142] Eric Blom called *Grimes* "the first great English opera of the century."[143] Frank Howes, in *The English Musical Renaissance* (1966), marked *Peter Grimes* as "a turning point in English operatic history."[144] Even as late as 1986 Peter Evans remarked that the "emphatic success [of *Peter Grimes*] stamped Britten as the most gifted musical dramatist England had produced since Purcell, and its eager acceptance by foreign houses showed the judgment to be more than parochial."[145] In "A New and Glorious Age," Lew defended the importance of *Peter Grimes*: "The brouhaha in the press preceding the premiere served to whet the appetites of both the opera-fanciers and the scandal-mongers, and the opera's remarkable progress abroad validated the epochal critical pronouncements made on the work's behalf."[146] Critics and scholars to the present day have persisted in their adulation of Britten's first operatic venture.

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[141]*Picture Post*, 30 June 1945.

[142]Robert L. Jacobs, "The Significance of *Peter Grimes*," *Listener*, 7 March 1946, 317.

[143]Eric Blom, *Music in England*, rev. ed. (1947), 249.

[144]Ibid., 318–9.

[145]Peter Evans, "Benjamin Britten," in *The New Grove 20th-Century English Masters*, ed. Stanley Sadie (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), 241.

[146]Lew, "A New and Glorious Age," 175.

The successful reception of *Peter Grimes* stemmed in part from its fulfillment of critics' dreams for English grand opera. *Grimes* manifested aesthetic properties highly valued in the works of canonic composers of opera, which encouraged its international appeal and reception outside England. It did not merely ape the successful operas of the past, however. Rather, several qualities typified its unique Englishness. In the music and the story of the opera, critics noted, for instance, the significance of location, the prominence of the sea, the liberal and effective use of the chorus, and the resonance of the thematic content with postwar England. *Grimes*'s nonpareil ability to realize universal ideals in the form of a national opera presented an inspirational yet daunting figure for later attempts at the composition of English opera.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SPECTER OF *PETER GRIMES*

As discussed in the previous chapter, the acclaim for *Grimes* in the English musical press echoed the praise for the operas of previous masters, including those of Mozart and Verdi. The specter of *Grimes* subsequently materialized throughout the postwar reception of English opera. Three categories of aesthetic judgment—characterization, originality, and integration—underlay many of the opinions of *Grimes*'s reviewers. These same categories also permeated English critics' interpretations of musical works in general. The plaudits for *Grimes* centered upon Britten's convincing musical characterization, innovative and revitalizing compositional style, and incorporation of musical and dramatic variety within a cohesive, unified work. Failure to realize these goals, on the other hand, plagued the reception of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana*.

Characterization

The powerful expressivity of Britten's music in *Peter Grimes* awed most reviewers. According to Lew, *Grimes* disclosed "Britten's exceptional ability to draw effective characterizations through music."[147] At the time of the premiere, Britten's "mastery of character music" [148] impressed many critics, including Sydney Harrison, who celebrated the attention to character in Act I scene 2.[149] Shawe-Taylor admired the musical depiction of character in the opera's prologue as well as the contribution of Montagu Slater's libretto to the articulation of

[147]Lew, "A New and Glorious Age," 151.

[148]Harrison, "A New Birth of Opera," 125.

[149]Ibid.

musical character.[150] William Glock, writing for the London *Observer*, perceived the "care Britten took with the musical portrayal of the title character"[151] from the opera's opening moments. For the reviewer of the *Liverpool Daily Post,* Britten expressed "the varied dramatic situations and the characterisation…with remarkable power and ingenuity."[152] In the *Daily Telegraph,* Ferruccio Bonavia recognized the facility with which Britten handled the musical expression of the character's qualities.[153]

The language used to describe Britten's gift for characterization echoed the vocabulary with which English critics regularly discussed the operas of previous composers. In a discussion of Gluck's early compositional exercises in comic opera, for instance, Ernest Newman admired the demarcation of musical character. For Newman, *L'arbre enchanté* (1759) provided Gluck with the opportunity to "delineate character," and "Gluck's treatment of the old man Thomas" in this opera was "decidedly humorous."[154] W. A. Mozart's *Don Giovanni,* maintained Dyneley Hussey, was "unsurpassed as a music-drama" because of its display of "overwhelming mastery, both in the handling of the drama and in the drawing of the characters."[155] Critics also subjected modern opera, both native and foreign, to the test of musical characterization. Dame Ethyl Smith's *The Boatswain's Mate*, contended Robin Hull, exhibited "deft characterisation and attractive music."[156] Writing for *The Musical Times*, John Amis praised Gershwin's ability to

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[150]Shawe-Taylor, "*Peter Grimes*—I," 371.

[151]*Observer* (London), 10 June 1945.

[152]*Liverpool Daily Post,* 8 June 1945.

[153] *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* (London), 8 June 1945.

[154]Ernest Newman, *Gluck and the Opera: A Study in Musical History* (London: Bertram Dobell, 1895; reissue, London: Victor Gollancz, 1967), 42–3.

[155] Dyneley Hussey, *Mozart* (London: Harper & Brothers, 1928), 184.

[156]Robin Hull, "Dame Ethyl Smith," *Tempo*, no. 7 (June 1944): 12.

musically depict character in *Porgy and Bess*.[157] Thus, exquisite definition of musical character distinguished the finest operas for many English music critics.

Reviewers of *Peter Grimes* expressed similar sentiments, and, when they wished to exalt the opera, they often invoked the names and works of past masters. Ernest Newman, in a review of *Grimes*, compared Britten to Wagner.[158] Desmond Shawe-Taylor cited Gounod's *Faust* to accentuate Britten's ability to master and creatively reinterpret traditional devices.[159] Other journalists compared Britten's work with the recent successes of other composers, including those of Strauss and Mussorgsky.[160] Allusions to previous successes and their composers appeared frequently in the reception of *Peter Grimes*.

Even in the few instances of excoriation, critics held *Grimes* to the standards of operatic masterworks. Geoffrey Sharp, in a scathing article from *Music Review*, compared *Grimes* unfavorably with the works of previous composers: the music of *Grimes* was

> poverty-stricken in regard to that quality which forms the mainspring of every convincing opera—a genuine ingrained emotional drive. Britten's score is arid and "devilish smart." He seems afraid to develop a lyrical vein and reluctant to express in his music any emotional conflict, or other sign of a strong and vigorous personality. Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, Strauss—all knew that colourless opera warms no hearts, nor stirs any enthusiasm. [161]

In his "Second Thoughts" on *Peter Grimes*, Dyneley Hussey diagnosed a problem with the opera's protagonist—namely, that the fisherman Grimes was unsympathetic. Hussey noted, however, the precedent for repellent main characters in opera history, even among the most

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[157]John Amis, "Opera: Mozart to Gershwin," *Musical Times* 93 (1952): 513.

[158]*Sunday Times* (London), 17 June 1945.

[159]Shawe-Taylor, "Peter Grimes—II," 507.

[160]See Baxter, *Evening Standard* (London), 9 June 1945; Hill, *Daily Mail* (London), 8 June 1945.

[161]Geoffrey Sharp, review of *Peter Grimes*, *Music Review* 6 (1945): 187–8.

notable of composers, including Verdi: "In this error Britten is in distinguished company, for Verdi at an age when he was far more experienced, lavished some of his most beautiful music on the no less unsatisfactory (though very different) character of Simon Boccanegra."[162] For the most part, however, English reviewers compared *Grimes* favorably with the work of Britten's forebears.

By contrast with *Grimes* and other much-admired operas, *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana* did not fare well with critics in the aesthetic category of characterization. Many columnists, for instance, noted Vaughan Williams's failure to convincingly portray the emotional experiences of the characters. Most of the criticism focused on the opera's protagonist. In the journal *Public Opinion*, Philip Hope-Wallace lamented Vaughan Williams's inability to make the audience empathize with the characters of *The Pilgrim's Progress*:

> V. W. does not deal in those strokes of artifice which (rightly or wrongly) are the life of the thing theatrical. He feels that for his hero to declaim in the manner of a priest intoning "I sink, the waves go over me" (followed by choral comment) will make the point well enough. But on a stage this is totally inadequate. Never, indeed, do we "feel with" the hero as we so easily "feel with" other, and you may say, more meretricious heroes, *Parsifal*, Berlioz's *Faust* (semi-opera) or Elgar's *Gerontius* (oratorio).[163]

Martin Cooper likewise felt little compassion for the hero of Vaughan Williams's *Pilgrim*:

> Vaughan Williams's selection of scenes never once shows Pilgrim failing. He does not fall into the Slough of Despond, lose his roll or wander off to Doubting Castle. He has no companions, Faithful or Hopeful, but appears as the solitary saint in a world of sinners, a most unattractive predicament calculated to alienate the spectator's sympathy entirely. This circumstance, and the number of psalms he intones during the course of the evening, confirms the popular, though doubtless unjust, impression of the puritan as a psalm-singing prig.[164]

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[162]Dyneley Hussey, "*Peter Grimes*—Second Thoughts," *Spectator* (London), 22 June 1945, 571.

[163]Philip Hope-Wallace, "Opera: *The Pilgrim's Progress*," *Public Opinion* (London), 4 May 1951, 25.

[164]Cooper, review of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 585.

Cecil Smith, an American writer working in England, further depreciated Vaughan Williams's depiction of Pilgrim. "Vaughan Williams' Pilgrim (a coalition of Bunyan's Christian and Hopeful)," wrote Smith, "is a phlegmatic fellow, a stuffed-shirt with neither the vigour to deserve his victory over Apollyon and the Doleful Creatures, nor the hot blood to be seriously tempted by the provocations of Vanity Fair."[165] For Desmond Shawe-Taylor, the result of Vaughan Williams's musical treatment of John Bunyan's book was

> to diminish considerably the sympathy and interest we feel for Pilgrim. Arnold Matters [the baritone who played the role of Pilgrim at the opera's premiere], with grave voice and dignified mien, did what he could, and it was not his fault if we seemed to be watching, not so much the spiritual struggles of a sorely tried man, as the illustrious ascent of the best boy in the school from Lower Third to Upper Sixth.[166]

Reviewers also discerned Vaughan Williams's failure to properly delineate the opera's other characters. Sydney Harrison, in a review of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, complained of Vaughan Williams's feeble attempt to portray maleficence:

> Vaughan Williams is at his best in dealing with goodness and holiness. Though he can on occasion compose the music of apocalyptic violence, as in the Fourth Symphony, he is unconvincing in dealing with evil individuals. Maybe he knows about sin, but he seems insufficiently acquainted with sinners. His Beelzebub and Pontius Pilate are only picturesque. Perhaps it is a fault in production, but the eighteenth-century Vanity Fair has no Hogarthian ferocity or depravity.[167]

Several writers rebuked the opera's music for its feeble attempts to convey psychological insight or develop character. In *Time and Tide*, Mosco Carner compared *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Wagner's *Parsifal* as works for the musical stage. *Parsifal*, according to Carner,

> conveys its religious message in a psychological drama clearly showing the hero's inner spiritual transformation in the music. In *The Pilgrim's Progress* we have episodical

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[165]Cecil Smith, "*The Pilgrim's Progress*," *Opera* (London) 2 (1951): 373.

[166]Desmond Shawe-Taylor, "*The Pilgrim's Progress*," *New Statesman and Nation*, 5 May 1951, 502.

[167]Sydney Harrison, "Festival Opera: Musical *The Pilgrim's Progress*," *John O' London's Weekly*, 11 May 1951, 293.

> scenes which the music envelops, it is true, in a strong pervasive atmosphere but which it hardly attempts to characterize from *within*.[168]

For Cecil Smith, the "chief theatrical weakness" of the singing parts was that "they do not reveal character." Smith wrote, "I cannot think of another stage work in which the vocal writing is so abstract, so utterly without human passion, so removed from all interest in the delineation of the individual attributes and special emotional states of the people involved in the drama."[169] Critics found serious fault with Vaughan Williams's attempts to express character through music in *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Detractors of *Gloriana*'s premiere also focused on the dearth of musical distinction between characters. In the pages of the *Daily Telegraph*, Richard Capell wondered "whether any mortal men could have succeeded" in adapting Lytton Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex* for the musical stage. Certainly, however, William Plomer, the librettist, and Britten "failed," according to Capell. Their adaptation disappointed in part because it lacked sympathetic characters; that is, Plomer and Britten's "simplification" of Strachey's work showed "both Essex and the Queen in a more or less odious light."[170] Capell expounded this opinion in an article in the *Monthly Musical Record*:

> The action is based on Lytton Strachey's book about Elizabeth I and Essex, characters who have failed to enlist the composer's sympathies. True, the queen's dignity, which is in danger in some of the earlier scenes, is saved at last, when she represses her jealous, half-maternal affection for the irresponsible young man and sends him to the block, in the interests of her throne and of England's stability. But her motives have been all too much represented as petty and spiteful, and Essex's as merely vainglorious, for the peripeteia to make a moving effect.[171]

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[168]Mosco Carner, "*The Pilgrim's Progress*," *Time and Tide*, 5 May 1951, 396.

[169]Smith, "*The Pilgrim's Progress*," 374.

[170]*Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* (London), 13 June 1953.

[171]R. C. [Richard Capell], "Operas and Concerts," *Monthly Musical Record* 83 (1953): 157.

Some writers defended the vocalists. "The singing was generally good," the critic H. S. R. noted in a review in *Musical Opinion*; instead, "it was the drawing of the character, rather than the presentation of it, that was at fault, and it was the same in the case of most of the other parts."[172] In *Music Review*, A. V. Cotton wrote, "Innocently betrayed by librettist and composer, both Miss Cross and Mr. Pears [the respective singers performing the roles of Elizabeth and Essex] present to us an ambiguous and unsatisfactory pair of characters."[173] Moreover, for Cotton, Britten's "writing, both vocal and instrumental," lacked "vigour, a bold continuous clarity of statement and a psychological *rapport* with the characters supposedly portrayed."[174] Noël Goodwin likewise found the absence of character definition remarkable. Britten's "serious failure," according to Goodwin, lay "in his conspicuous inability to take advantage of the few but definite opportunities provided by his librettist for musical illustration of Elizabeth's character."[175] For Sydney Harrison, *Gloriana* did "everything but establish sympathy between us and its characters."[176] The poorly constructed characters also disappointed Cecil Smith:

> Characterisation, in the sense of full-rounded portraiture of people with some imaginable identity before and after they come into view on the stage, was an impossibility for most members of the cast. Mr. Plomer and Mr. Britten did not give them the wherewithal to construct real characters; they were content to label them by a few words and musical phrases, and, presumably, to let the costumes do the rest."[177]

[172]H. S. R., "Opera and Ballet in London: *Gloriana*," *Musical Opinion* 76 (1953): 585.

[173]A. V. C. [A. V. Cotton.], "Opera: *Gloriana*," *Music Review* 14 (1953): 228.

[174]Ibid.

[175]Noël Goodwin, Review of the Covent Garden *Gloriana*, *Truth*, 19 June 1953, 751.

[176]Sydney Harrison, "Homage to Queens," *John O'London's Weekly*, 26 June 1953, 573.

[177]Cecil Smith, "The Performance," *Opera* 4 (1953): 467.

The complaints about Britten's "undernourished"[178] musical characterization frequently recurred in the reviews of *Gloriana*'s first performance.

Innovation

In reviews of *Peter Grimes*, critics praised Britten for his ability to define character through music; they also celebrated his originality. For Scott Goddard, *Grimes* was "fierce and original"—"a work that must not be ignored by those who admire originality and take the art of opera seriously."[179] *Grimes*, according to Stephen Williams, was "a very imaginative and individual score."[180] In the *Birmingham Post*, Eric Blom deemed the opera "so impressive and original that only the most absurd prejudice will keep it out of the great foreign opera houses."[181] For the anonymous reviewer of the *Daily Express*, the score of *Grimes* deserved praise for its "exceptional technical brilliance" and employment of "many novel effects."[182] Philip Hope-Wallace declared that *Grimes* contained "perhaps the most interesting exercises in the operatic art of our time."[183] References to the innovation, intensity, and insight of Britten's music suffused the critical reception of *Grimes*'s premiere.[184]

Unsurprisingly, critics hailed comparable qualities in the works of canonical composers of opera. Richard Capell, in an introduction to Christopher Benn's *Mozart on the Stage*, described the attitude of Benn's generation toward the music of W. A. Mozart. According to

[178]*Daily Worker* (London), 10 June 1953.

[179]*News Chronicle* (London), 8 June 1945.

[180]*Evening News* (London), 8 June 1945.

[181]*Birmingham Post*, 8 June 1945.

[182] *Daily Express* (London), 8 June 1945.

[183]Hope-Wallace, "*Peter Grimes*," 496.

[184]See also Baxter, *Evening Standard* (London), 9 June 1945; Bonavia, *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* (London), 8 June 1945; *Yorkshire Observer*, 9 June 1945; *Liverpool Daily Post*, 8 June 1945; *Times* (London), 8 June 1945; Newman, *Sunday Times* (London), 10 June 1945.

Capell, before the First World War people recognized "eternal verities," such as the "supernatural creativeness" of Mozart, "rich as Nature's own, but supernatural in the effect of achieved purpose made by his infallible formal control."[185] Capell also embraced Stravinsky's opera *The Rake's Progress*, in which the composer had discovered "unexhausted resources in bygone operatic forms." For Capell, *The Rake's Progress* showcased Stravinsky's "originality of mind."[186] Percy Young admired Handel's "originality" in the nightingale chorus of *Solomon*.[187] Mosco Carner lauded Puccini's individualism. Puccini had, for Carner, "a rare gift for absorbing…heterogeneous elements and fusing them into a language entirely his own," which applied "particularly to his lyrical phrasing."[188] Additionally, English reviewers enjoyed originality in the works of native composers. Donald Mitchell, for example, ascertained "an inventive, original talent of a high order" in Dame Ethyl Smith's *The Boatswain's Mate*.[189] For critics, artistic innovation and uniqueness of compositional style defined the foremost composers of opera.

Scant reference to ingenuity appeared in the initial reviews of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana*. Reviewers did not appreciate these efforts to adapt unorthodox material for theatrical performance; conversely, most criticism of *Peter Grimes* deemed praiseworthy the treatment of the decidedly unconventional literary source for the opera's libretto (i.e., George Crabbe's poem, *The Borough*). Critics embraced Britten's striking originality in *Grimes*; in *The Pilgrim's*

[185]Richard Capell, introduction to Christopher Benn, *Mozart on the Stage* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1947), 9.

[186]Richard Capell, "Stravinsky's Opera," *Musical Times* 92 (1951): 499.

[187]Percy Young, "A Study in Handelian Thought," *Proceedings of the Royal Music Association*, 75th session (1948–9): 58.

[188]Carner, "In Defence of Puccini," 30–1.

[189]Donald Mitchell, "Opera in London," *Musical Times* 96 (1955): 91.

Progress and *Gloriana*, however, they saw ineffectual, uninspired attempts to create opera. The conflagration of Britten's musical imagination in *Grimes* burned so brightly, it blinded English critics to the merits of subsequent attempts to bring challenging material to the stage. *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana* suffered from a perceived deficiency of musical and dramatic inspiration.

Critics identified Vaughan Williams's failure to breathe life into the story and characters of John Bunyan's classic work. "I found it slow and halting," read the first sentence of Mosco Carner's review in *Time and Tide*. Martin Cooper's examination of the opera began with a profession of boredom: "In the theatre, where technical knowledge and skill look comic and the most revolting crimes are not without their power of attraction, the love of God is just dull."[190] Marius Pope, in the pages of the *Evening Standard*, encapsulated the perspectives of many viewers of the opera's first performance: *The Pilgrim's Progress* had "no dramatic tension, no real story, no character to come to life on the stage."[191] To point out the insufficiency of dramatic tension, Philip Hope-Wallace contrasted Bunyan's book with Vaughan Williams's adaptation: "Pilgrim's struggles in the book are simple, vivid, and tense. Somehow, here [in the opera] the progress has become unaccountably easy, progress through a golden sunset to a distant pentatonic trumpet-call and fading alleluias." Moreover, according to Hope-Wallace, *The Pilgrim's Progress* failed to "spring" the audience's sympathy and imagination:

> Vaughan Williams, though a fine maker of character in music (for instance, "The Tudor Portraits"), here does nothing to bind the Pilgrim to our imagination, as, in differing ways, Elgar's *Gerontius*, Berlioz's *Faust*, or Wagner's *Parsifal* catch at our sympathy. The stalwart figure seems in some way outside the music; even when fighting Apollyon he never stirs us as Job does in the "Masque for Dancing."[192]

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[190]Cooper, review of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 585.

[191]*Evening Standard* (London), 27 April 1951.

[192]P. H.-W. [Philip Hope-Wallace], "*The Pilgrim's Progress*: Vaughan William's New Morality," *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 3 May 1951, 7.

For Ernest Newman, Vaughan Williams's adaptation proved unsatisfactory as well:

> The attempt to translate Bunyan's allegorical figures and situations into terms of the concrete visible occasionally lands the production in naivetés which some people may find rather trying.

Also, for Newman, "some of the more realistic episodes, Vanity Fair and the contest with Apollyon in particular," did not "carry full conviction."[193] The anonymous reviewer for the *Yorkshire Observer* agreed with Newman: *The Pilgrim's Progress* disappointed because it failed to "carry dramatic conviction." [194]

Critics bemoaned the absence of passion in Vaughan Williams's music. Many reviewers found the compositional style of *The Pilgrim's Progress* comfortable, dignified, and worthy of veneration; yet, they also found it wistful, lackluster, and largely uninspiring. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, wrote D. Hugh Ottaway:

> The familiar elements of a noble and well-loved style are clearly defined: all that is missing is the additional fire which would make them appear as new discoveries, urgent and compelling, presented to the listener for the very first time. And that, pre-eminently, is the quality possessed by each new work that hits us squarely between the eyes.[195]

In short, Vaughan Williams "kindled the memory rather than inflamed the imagination"[196] with *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Other writers denounced the opera's sparsity of entertainment. "Certainly this is no opera," stated Geoffrey Sharp:

> Though we cannot truthfully claim to have been inveigled into the opera house under false pretences, for the entertainment was described as a "Morality." Nor was it

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[193]*Sunday Times* (London), 29 April 1951.

[194]*Yorkshire Observer*, 27 April 1951.

[195]D. Hugh Ottaway, "Some Aspects of *The Pilgrim's Progress*," *Musical Opinion* 74 (1951): 579.

[196]Ibid., 580.

> entertaining: but no one familiar with Bunyan's cast of mind and Vaughan Williams' previous output of sacred music could reasonably have expected to be entertained. [197]

Carner, recapitulating many of the opera's deficits, called the work a "noble failure":

> With a succession of (mostly) static tableaux, the absence of a plot in the dramatic sense, the concentration on a single leading character, essentially passive at that, the predominance of religious allegory over human drama and, last but not least, the considerable retarding of what little action there is by long stretches of lyrical writing and cantata-like choruses—with all this against it, it is not surprising that *The Pilgrim's Progress* proves, for all its many musical beauties, a noble failure. [198]

For most reviewers, *The Pilgrim's Progress* lacked the vital sparks of creativity, originality, and imagination.

The press came to similar conclusions about *Gloriana*. For many critics, *Gloriana* lacked the rich artistic imagination Britten had shown in *Peter Grimes*. Mosco Carner found the choice of subject for the opera ill-fitted. For Carner, music was "powerless" to cope with the complex "relation of Elizabeth and Essex":

> How powerless was shown in the opera by Lord Cecil's arid *Song of Government* which is but one example of several. It was only when we had the clash of real human passions on the stage—and such moments were few and far between—that we moved in the sphere of true opera. [199]

Critics derided Britten's music for its blandness and superficiality. In *John O' London's Weekly,* Sydney Harrison wrote, "All the way through…we have felt more light than heat."[200] The reviewer for the *Daily Worker* complained that there was "no heart in the music."[201]

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[197]G. N. S. [Geoffrey Sharp], "Covent Garden. *The Pilgrim's Progress*: 26th April, Oratorio in Fancy Dress," *Music Review* 12 (1951): 160.

[198]Carner, "*The Pilgrim's Progress*," 396.

[199]Carner, "*Gloriana*," 818.

[200]Harrison, "Homage to Queens," 573.

[201]*Daily Worker* (London), 10 June 1953.

According to Richard Capell, *Gloriana* was "pageant rather than drama." Britten and Plomer, Capell wrote, had been distracted from the more "interesting purposes of opera, and their banquet, at a table trimmed with cracker and floral decorations," was "rather wanting in food."[202] For Desmond Shawe-Taylor, *Gloriana* gleamed "with intelligence, charm, and skill"; however, the choice of a subject "intractable to operatic treatment" led to "a certain want of substance, or emotional impact and depth."[203] Additionally, two letters in the *Times* of London described *Gloriana* as shallow and dreary. For J. Thorburn Irvine, the opera's creators should have chosen "an episode more worthy of the great period of English history marked by the reign of Elizabeth I" and created "something to inspire other than purely musical people."[204] *Gloriana*'s premiere also failed to satisfy Marie C. Stopes. "Public resentment, intense and widespread," Stopes wrote, "is not at the cost [of *Gloriana*] but that the opera was unworthy of the great occasion, uninspired, missing the main glories of the times, its music inharmonious and wearisome."[205]

Integration

In addition to characterization and originality, the successful integration of variety with unity in *Peter Grimes* had a direct and powerful effect on English critics. William McNaught, for instance, wrote in the pages of the *Manchester Guardian* that Britten's orchestral score brimmed with "vivid suggestion and action, sometimes rising to a kind of white-hot poetry, resonant of the hates and agonies of the story."[206] For the reviewer for the *Liverpool Daily Post*, Britten expressed "the varied dramatic situations and the characterization…in the music with

[202]*Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* (London), 9 June 1953.

[203]Shawe-Taylor, "*Gloriana*, Cheltenham, Glyndebourne," 729.

[204]*Times* (London), 22 June 1953.

[205]*Times* (London), 20 June 1953.

[206]*Manchester Guardian*, 9 June 1945.

remarkable power and ingenuity."[207] In the *Birmingham Post*, the anonymous reviewer described Britten's music as the wellspring of the opera's atmosphere.[208] John Graham, in an article from *Sound Wave Illustrated*, praised Britten's "vivid orchestration" for its "commentary upon, or illustration of the action on the stage."[209] The initial reception of *Grimes* placed great emphasis on the correspondence of the music with the dramatic themes.[210]

Other writers made note of *Grimes*'s unification of diverse elements. Ernest Newman described the combination of unity and variety in the opera's texture.[211] For the London *Observer*'s William Glock, Britten employed variety in the musical devices used to convey the opera's narrative.[212] Philip Hope-Wallace celebrated Britten's "brilliant hold on the whole idea of drama conceived in terms of sound, of key-relationship, harmony and casting by voice-types."[213] The anonymous critic of the *Times* of London identified Britten's use of the chorus to promote the integration of diverse elements.[214] For English critics, the graceful coalescence of disparate elements strengthened *Grimes*'s appeal.

Balance between unity and diversity surfaced frequently as an important theme in English scholars' interpretations of music history. Donald Jay Grout explored the relationship between variety and unity in German Baroque opera.[215] Critics also described integration within the

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[207]*Liverpool Daily Post*, 8 June 1945.

[208]*Birmingham Post*, 8 June 1945. See also Harrison, "A New Birth of Opera," 125.

[209]John Graham, "Opera Notes: *Peter Grimes*—a Dark Canvas," *Sound Wave Illustrated* 3 (July 1945): 3.

[210]See also Stephen Williams, *Stage* (London), 14 June 1945.

[211]*Sunday Times* (London), 17 June 1945.

[212]*Observer* (London), 10 June 1945.

[213]Hope-Wallace, "*Peter Grimes*," 496.

[214]*Times* (London), 15 June 1945.

works of specific composers. Richard Capell found Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* "remarkable"; it was "a proof of the musician's genius," for Capell, "that out of constituents so scrappy, he [Mussorgsky] sustained a consistent style; the style of *Boris* never fails."[216] In many reviews of opera performances, Philip Hope-Wallace valued the suitability of a composer's music to the milieu. For example, the music of Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*, according to Hope-Wallace, was "never more perfectly fitting than in the opening scenes."[217] In an article on "Stravinsky's Opera," Colin Mason observed the unification of the many elements of *The Rake's Progress*, in which "certain keys carry certain associations in the opera" and "complete melodic phrases" recur effectively.[218] Ernest Sanders appreciated C. M. von Weber's efforts to "impart a measure of unity" to Planché's arrangement of *Oberon*, a "confused and eminently undramatic hodgepodge."[219] Critics also praised Britten's *Beggar's Opera* for its "impeccable integration" of musical themes.[220]

The shortage of integration became an implement of criticism with which to oppugn the new music of English and Continental composers alike. Eric Blom, in a review of the Festival Week at Bath, described *Music Comes*, a "superficially charming" and "amateurish" work "of the Choral Ballet type," by P. Napier Miles: "The music ambles amiably from one idea to another without attaining to unity, and its lack of real individuality leaves no definite impression

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[215]Donald Jay Grout, "German Baroque Opera," *Musical Quarterly* 32 (1946): 582.

[216]Richard Capell, *Opera* (London: E. Benn, 1948; reprint, Westport, Conn.: Hyperion Press, 1983), 123.

[217] Hope-Wallace, *Words and Music*, 105.

[218]Colin Mason, "Stravinsky's Opera," *Music & Letters* 33 (1952): 5.

[219]Ernest Sanders, "*Oberon* and *Zar und Zimmermann*," *Musical Quarterly* 40 (1954): 524.

[220]Hans Keller, "Britten's *Beggar's Opera*," *Tempo* no. 10 (Winter 1948–9): 10.

behind, save that of having been vaguely pleasing."[221] Ferruccio Bonavia critiqued the music of Busoni in an article in *Music & Letters*. Namely, for Bonavia, Busoni's music sometimes missed "the unity that a work of art derives from a potent, overmastering individuality."[222]

Similarly, the English press perceived a lack of cohesion between the music and drama in *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana*. Mosco Carner, for example, noted the imbalance between multiplicity and similitude in the music of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. According to Carner, "Gloriously radiant and ethereal music there is in plenty of it—in fact, to the extent of tending to create a feeling of monotony."[223] For Martin Cooper, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

> might be given at a Three Choirs Festival in cathedral precincts and succeed; but in the theatre it fails for want of variety (both musical and dramatic) and of interest, either in the action or the psychological development of Pilgrim's character.[224]

Geoffrey Sharp, too, found the opera humdrum:

> The music cuts no new paths: the composer has reminisced over his music scrap-books of the past 50 years and in general reiterated the same basic sound patterns that are to be found in, for example, *Job* and the last three symphonies. The result is too long drawn out. It sprawls, lacks movement and quickly stagnates.[225]

In the *Daily Express*, Arthur Jacobs further described the opera's tedium:

> The plot lacks dramatic shape, the music lacks sufficient dramatic contrast. Bunyan's story provides not a developing action, but a series of tableaux. And, too often Vaughan Williams repeats the solemn chords, the trumpet fanfare, the pastoral melodies, until their effect becomes stale.[226]

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[221]Eric Blom, "Festival Week at Bath," *Musical Times* 62 (1921): 337.

[222]F. Bonavia, "Giacomo Puccini and Ferruccio Busoni," *Music & Letters* 6 (1925): 109.

[223]Carner, "*The Pilgrim's Progress*," 396.

[224]Cooper, review of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 585.

[225]G. N. S. [Geoffrey Sharp], "Covent Garden. *The Pilgrim's Progress*: 26th April, Oratorio in Fancy Dress," 160.

[226]*Daily Express* (London), 27 April 1951.

A surfeit of monotony, desultoriness, immobility, and stagnation, and a want of variety, interest, shape, and contrast all contributed to the unsympathetic reception of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Gloriana likewise suffered accusations of general wearisomeness, imbalance between variation and regularity, and inconsistency of music and drama. For instance, critics charged Britten with failing to provide music appropriate to the action. In the *Royal College of Music Magazine*, Greville Knyvett "was left with an overall feeling that" Britten could have made "much more use of the dramatic situation." [227] Desmond Shawe-Taylor also saw a discrepancy between the dramatic impact and the effect of the music, especially in the "grotesque episode (which has a historical basis) of the Queen's dressing up in the over-gaudy robe of a lady of the court." In this scene, according to Shawe-Taylor, "the composer's reluctance to use the full power of his orchestra and the distance from our ears of the string band on the stage prevent the musical effect from equalling the visual magnificence." [228] The incongruity between music and drama frustrated the anonymous critic of the *Times*: Britten displayed insufficient mastery of

> the full-blooded vigour of the age he set out to depict. And the root cause of that is partly technical—a curious reluctance to wed the sound of violins with that of voices, so that he voluntarily foregoes the lifting power of that alliance. The opera went well, grew in intensity dramatically, but did not quite make the strong direct impact that it ought to do.[229]

In *Music Review*, A. V. Cotton identified a lack of musical and dramatic integration of the opera's characters. According to Cotton, Gloriana's "large fault" was the difference between the singing and the acting: although the "cast sing well…most of them can neither act, move, gesture nor imply characterization—they are by Coleridge's axiom "unbelievable."[230]

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[227]Greville Knyvett, "*Gloriana*," *Royal College of Music Magazine* 49 (1953): 69.

[228]Desmond Shawe-Taylor, "Royal Operas," *New Statesman and Nation*, 13 June 1953, 701.

[229]*Times* (London), 9 June 1953.

[230]A. V. C. [A. V. Cotton.], "Opera: *Gloriana*," *Music Review* 14 (1953): 230.

In addition, inadequate cohesion of music and drama led critics to disparage the treatment of the opera's final scene. Mosco Carner, for instance, described the missed opportunities in the epilogue of *Gloriana*:

> The central situation in the Queen's inner drama lies in the very last scene when after signing away Essex's life she is caught in a mortal conflict of conscience. A convincing portrayal of this conflict cannot be achieved by vocal means alone, the instruments must here take over the chief role, interpreting the turmoil in the Queen's mind and probing into the depths of a soul *in extremis* with that wonderful range and variety of expression which the symphonic orchestra since Wagner and Strauss has been made capable of. Instead, the scene is treated as melodrama, the Queen *speaking* her lines between the strains of Essex's love song which is re-stated without the slightest attempt at a symphonic elaboration and modification to suggest the tremendous change of significance which this song had undergone since the Queen heard it first. Musically Britten remained completely outside this situation.[231]

W. R. Anderson also disapproved of the absence of musical accompaniment in the final scene. In *The Musical* Times, Anderson wrote:

> I did not see the force of the spoken dialogue in the final scene, nor could I think very successfully the dramatic intention (considering the opera, for the time, as a drama to stand or fall by plot, character and situation).[232]

For critics, the lack of connection between music and drama diminished *Gloriana*'s worth. After the Second World War, English music critics recognized Britten's *Peter Grimes* as the finest English manifestation of operatic characterization, originality, and integration—aesthetic categories which pervaded opera criticism in postwar England and greatly affected the nature of opera reception. The specter of *Grimes*'s success, i.e., of an English realization of universal aesthetic ideals, haunted the critical reception of subsequent operas, notably Vaughan Williams's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Britten's *Gloriana*. The failure to fulfill the promise of *Grimes* constituted one of the primary reasons for the critical disappointment with *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana*.

[231]Carner, "*Gloriana*," 818.

[232]W. R. Anderson, "Round About Radio," *Musical Times* 94 (1953): 359.

CHAPTER FIVE

REVIVALS AND RECONSIDERATIONS

On *Peter Grimes*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and *Gloriana*, critics and historians have not changed their views considerably. Consistently performed since its premiere, *Peter Grimes* still occupies a preeminent position among English operas. *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana*, however, slipped quickly from the repertory, in part because they failed to maintain the aesthetic standards of *Peter Grimes*.

Many of the earliest historians of the postwar renascence of English opera recognized the magnitude of *Peter Grimes*. According to Francis Routh, after the close of the Second World War

> the musical public was ready for a fresh start in opera: *Peter Grimes* provided it. Recognizable characters in English; the place was geographically localized on the Suffolk coast that Britten knew so well; all traditions have to start in a particular place if they are to start at all. Moreover, as in the case of Gershwin, Britten's simple diatonic idiom was the most likely to appeal to a wide audience at that time. More sophisticated audiences than the English might have expected a more sophisticated style, but Britten's possessed that immediate impact which compelled attention, while the idiom was well within the broad operatic tradition of Verdi, Debussy and Puccini. In addition to this, Britten had an acutely instinctive flair for stage-technique, sharpened by experience in film, theatre and radio work.[233]

Peter Grimes, for Routh, provided the foundation upon which to build an English operatic tradition with international appeal. In *Music in Britain, 1951–62*, Colin Mason remarked: "The highly successful premiere of Britten's *Peter Grimes* immediately after the war did…much to stimulate interest in, and desire for, the cultivation of a native operatic tradition."[234] Following its premiere, *Grimes* "immediately went the round of the great opera houses in the world—

[233]Francis Routh, *Contemporary British Music: The Twenty-Five Years from 1945 to 1970* (London: MacDonald, 1972), 218.

[234]Colin Mason, *Music in Britain, 1951–62* (London: Longmans, 1963), 16.

something that had never happened [to an English opera] before."[235] Early scholars of postwar English opera thus viewed *Grimes* unambiguously, certain of the opera's dramatic and musical merit.

More recent interpretations have supported earlier impressions of the unique position of Peter Grimes within the history of English opera. Banfield's description of the premiere of *Grimes*, written in 1995, mirrored Routh's 1972 account. According to Banfield, *Grimes*

> was an overnight success. Why it was that this single work…initiated the rebirth of British opera that had defied composers of stature for decades has occupied critics for nearly half a century. It was written in an approachable, tonal idiom (but so was virtually every other British opera before it) and said nothing particularly new in its dramaturgy (following in a direct line of *verismo* from Puccini and in its portrayal of character from Berg). Yet its combination of music and drama and the authority of its stageworthiness were of a quality never before seen in a British opera.[236]

In his 1996 biography of Benjamin Britten, Michael Oliver wrote, "*Peter Grimes* was welcomed as the first important English opera since Purcell. It also established opera as a possible art form for a British composer."[237] Kildea, in *Selling Britten: Music and the Marketplace*, also affirmed the success and importance of *Grimes*.[238] Lew upheld the significance of *Grimes*, which deserved its reputation as "the breakthrough work for the genre of opera in Britain" and its "unprecedented historic import" primarily because it captured "a permanent place on the operatic stages both of its native country and of the world."[239]

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[235]Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 319.

[236]Stephen Banfield, *The Twentieth Century*, Blackwell History of Music in Britain, vol. 6. (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), 359.

[237]Oliver, 108.

[238]Paul Francis Kildea, *Selling Britten: Music and the Marketplace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 208.

[239]Lew, "A New and Glorious Age," 147.

Grimes's success promised international appreciation for English opera. Unfortunately, this success also cast a pall over subsequent works, such as *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana*, which, consequently, have not played as great a role in the traditional narrative of twentieth-century English opera. Historical interpretation has reflected the mixed quality of the initial reception of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana*. Three years after its Covent Garden premiere, Cambridge revived *The Pilgrim's Progress* and staged an amateur student production of seven performances in February 1954. Although the revival improved reception, histories of English music have stressed the opera's problematic nature. Howes, in *The English Musical Renaissance* (1966), displayed uncertainty regarding the status of the work. For Howes, the opera

> raises special problems of atmosphere, which would seem to demand a cathedral or the grounds of ruined abbey rather than an opera house for its presentation. It is conceived for the theatre but has not had a sufficient number of performances to determine whether the alleged incompatibility is inherent or merely the superficial accident of first impressions. It seemed more at home, even dramatically, in the guildhall at Cambridge than in the Royal Opera House.[240]

In *A History of British Music* (1967), Percy M. Young reiterated one of the chief complaints of early reviewers: "*The Pilgrim's Progress,* being more in line with oratorio, did not commend itself to opera-goers."[241] Routh, in *Contemporary British Music* (1972), acknowledged the importance of Vaughan Williams's achievements as an English composer at the "orchestral concert level," "at the university level," "at the amateur level," "at the level of church music," and at "the level of chamber music and song-writing," but ignored the composer's operas.[242] In *The English Musical Renaissance* (1980), Peter J. Pirie viewed *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a

[240]Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 239.

[241]Percy M. Young, *A History of British Music* (London: Benn, 1967), 552.

[242]Routh, 8.

failure: "Vaughan Williams does not come within a million miles of the imaginative power of Bunyan's text. The music is patchwork, as one might expect in a work with so long and so troubled a history [Vaughan Williams composed the work over the course of more than forty years]." Also, for Pirie, "the recitative lacks grace," and "the hymn-tune-like passages are weak rather than inspiring."[243] The first histories of postwar English music regarded *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a confusing and disappointing contribution.

Current scholarship has concurred with earlier depictions of the work's problematic nature. In 1994, Karolyi only briefly mentioned *The Pilgrim's Progress* in his book on modern British music: Vaughan Williams's "operas are nowadays seldom performed, although *The Pilgrim's Progress* (composed between 1906 and 1951), based on Bunyan's allegory, is interesting because it represents an attempt to blend the forms of opera and morality play."[244] Banfield, in *The Twentieth Century*, and Heffer, in *Vaughan Williams*, attempted to explain some of the reasons for the failure of *The Pilgrim's Progress* to impress reviewers at its premiere. *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Banfield wrote, was a "humanistic 'quest' work," which seemed "old-fashioned or too liberally individualistic in ethos for the spirit of post-war reconstruction with its hard-edged corporate dogmas and authorities, be they of science, state or organized religion."[245] Heffer concentrated on the work's musical nature:

> *The Daily Telegraph*'s critic [Richard Capell] said that the production was "so wanting in the dramatic element—so anti-theatrical." It certainly would have benefited from not having to meet the conventional expectations of opera, and instead to have taken its place as a latter-day *Gerontius*. This, however, the composer was beyond seeing, which can scarcely be surprising after the amount of his life that he had devoted to the project. Returning to his theme later the same week, the *Telegraph* critic argued, cogently, that

[243]Peter J. Pirie, *The English Musical Renaissance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 193–4.

[244]Otto Karolyi, *Modern British Music: The Second British Musical Renaissance—from Elgar to Peter Maxwell Davies* (Rutherford, N.J.: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994), 28.

[245]Banfield, 417.

> the work was an 'aftermath', and that in the symphonies—the previous three in particular—the emotions that should have been expressed and realized by the Pilgrim had already been worked through; perhaps if Vaughan Williams had stirred himself to complete it earlier, its reception would have been better and its reputation more secure. However, by the time it was unveiled, his own art had already moved on past it.[246]

One of the "musical-dramatic weaknesses of the score," according to Lew, was Vaughan Williams's weak definition of musical character:

> The music does not adequately flesh out the Pilgrim, who is weakly drawn in the libretto. All of his major statements, beautiful and solemn enough on their own, do fall within a circumscribed stylistic universe, but Vaughan Williams does not differentiate this style from that of the other equally serious characters in the opera. There is no suggestion of a deeper psychological portrait, and the actual vocal writing is notably undemanding (in part because the Pilgrim is a stolid type who never experiences any strong emotions that might drive the music to greater extremes of rhythm or range.)[247]

Critics received the 1954 Cambridge production more warmly. According to Lew, the critical reaction to the revival at the Cambridge guildhall was "for the most part positive."[248] Nevertheless, the reviews clearly showed

> that, although the Cambridge production redeemed the work in performance, it could not solve its deeper problems. Familiar comments were heard about opera's series of static tableaux, loose construction, disregard of theatrical convention, thin characterization, and diffuse spirituality at the expense of human feeling; one finds the work described as a "symphonic meditation rather than a dramatic synthesis" (Bolton 1954) and as a "stage oratorio" (Blom 1954).[249]

An improved performance of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in other words, could not overcome the intrinsic aesthetic flaws of the opera's design.

Similarly, interpreters questioned *Gloriana*'s value as an opera. According to Routh, the "ill-fated" *Gloriana*, "in spite of its performance in the presence of the Queen on 8th June, 1953,

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[246]Simon Heffer, *Vaughan Williams* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), 125.

[247]Lew, "A New and Glorious Age," 415.

[248]Ibid., 405.

[249]Ibid., 405–6.

in honour of her coronation, is one of Britten's rare miscalculations. It is more a masque than an opera."[250] *Gloriana*, wrote Pirie in 1980, was "Britten's only operatic failure." Pirie's explanation echoed the sentiments of the opera's first critics:

> The opera is dramatically inept; it has no real central situation, and the long final monologue for the dying queen is in a different dimension from the rest of the work, and provides no dramatic climax. It has hardly been performed at all since its premiere, and is the only Britten opera, at the time of writing, that has not been recorded.[251]

Howes treated the opera more evenly. For Howes, Britten's "aversion from anything like a Wagnerian string texture cost him the success of *Gloriana*."[252] Despite *Gloriana*'s many ailments,

> there are specific occasions for recall in the lute songs of the Earl of Essex and the dances at Whitehall, but the strong lyrical sweetness which prevailed over the dangers, the recklessness, the intrigue of that seething cauldron of human passions and actions, is summed up succinctly by Britten in a single tune, the tune of the red rose, which may be quoted as an instance of the deceptive simplicity and the disguised complication of tunes found here, there and everywhere in Britten's output.[253]

The reception of later performances of *Gloriana* was warmer, but not effusive. "Thanks to the new production at Sadler's Wells in 1966 it has been possible to re-appraise the work," wrote Kendall in 1973, and "the general consensus seems to be that once all the extraneous considerations have been brushed aside, the work is a moving and touching exploration of its theme, though still a rather diffuse one."[254]

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[250]Routh, 221, 223.

[251]Pirie, 200–1.

[252]Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 320.

[253]Ibid., 321.

[254]Alan Kendall, *Benjamin Britten* (London: MacMillan, 1973), 30–2.

Writers of history still accentuate *Gloriana*'s shortcomings. *Gloriana*, Karolyi remarked, "has not proved to be Britten's best-loved composition."[255] Oliver described several reasons for the opera's failure:

> With its frequent changes of location and its discontinuities of narrative it has been described as more of a pageant than an opera, and even sympathetic critics have seen its relatively loose structure as a step backwards from the close motivic working and the symphonic thinking of *Billy Budd*.

Also, he noted, "recurring themes are relatively few, though memorable." According to Oliver, after its premiere *Gloriana* "soon fell from the repertory and was not staged again for another dozen years," even though it was "apparently well liked by the public (there were nine well attended performances after the gala premiere, and a revival the following season)."[256] Kildea clarified the audience's appreciation for the premiere and revival of the opera:

> The audience response to the first season of Gloriana did nothing to encourage in Britten a long-term return to grand opera. If not quite on the same scale as *Billy Budd*, the first run of *Gloriana* did reasonably well—an average attendance of 70 per cent, although this figure disguises some fairly undersubscribed performances. But most telling is the opera's rerun in January and February 1954, when audiences averaged only 36 per cent. Without the sustaining publicity of the first run of a new opera, *Gloriana* did miserable business. From Covent Garden's perspective, the Coronation opera displayed the worst traits of its genre: expensive and indulgent…, but without the appeal to counter these two qualities.[257]

The "early cool reception" of *Gloriana* has diminished appreciation for the opera, according to Banfield. The opera's worth, Banfield implied, deserves revaluation. For instance, Britten's preponderant use of the ceremonial in *Gloriana*, in Banfield's view, should be defended because it has "the dramatic effect of counterpointing the public Elizabeth with her private, emotional

[255]Karolyi, 67.

[256]Oliver, 150.

[257]Kildea, 143–4.

turmoil over Essex's apparent treachery."[258] Like *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Gloriana* has its advocates, but the majority of modern writers have presented *Gloriana* as a mediocre work, unpopular with both critics and audiences.

The disparity in the reception histories of *Peter Grimes* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana* closely parallels the performance histories of these operas. Since its premiere in 1945, major opera companies have continued to perform *Peter Grimes*, and music reviewers have exhibited an unflagging appreciation for the opera's aesthetic value. In February 2008, the Metropolitan Opera staged its third production of *Peter Grimes*. Peter G. Davis, in a review in *The New York Times*, described the opera:

> *Peter Grimes*, most would agree, is opera's classic study of the isolated, misunderstood, rejected individual: a man who is feared, even hated, because he is different and doesn't fit in. It's a recurrent theme in Britten's operas, but he never explored it with quite the explicitness and precision that he does in *Peter Grimes*, nor within a social environment so startlingly realistic.[259]

Davis emphasized the universality of the opera's themes: "As the critic Andrew Porter once put it, *Peter Grimes* is 'a presentation of a general human plight—that of the outsider at odds (for whatever reason) with those around him.'"[260] In a review of a 2006 performance of *Grimes*, Alfred Hickling also suggested the timelessness of the opera's theme. "It is over half a century old," wrote Hickling, "but *Peter Grimes* is an opera for our times. Its theme—a village vigilante campaign against a suspected child abuser—might be drawn from modern headlines rather than George Crabbe's 19th-century ballad." Of the work and its performance by Opera North, Hickling concluded, "It is generally accepted that *Peter Grimes* is the greatest of British operas.

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[258]Banfield, 363.

[259]*Times* (New York), 24 February 2008.

[260]Ibid.

On occasions like this, you find yourself wondering if it may be the greatest opera period."[261] Anna Picard, in a review of a 2004 performance at the Royal Opera House, also noted the opera's status: "Britten's 1945 study of social alienation in a small Suffolk fishing town is widely believed to be the most important English opera of the 20th century."[262] The press does not question *Grimes*'s inherent value as a masterpiece; instead, criticism of recent performances focuses upon aspects of the production, such as the staging, the lighting, the costumes, or the singers' performances.

The Pilgrim's Progress and *Gloriana*, on the other hand, have remained on the fringes of the opera canon. Companies have performed them far less frequently than *Peter Grimes*, and critics have treated them with reserve. Despite its partial success at the 1954 revival in Cambridge, according to Lew:

> *The Pilgrim's Progress* quickly dropped out of the repertory, and has received only infrequent revivals since. Few companies and directors, it seems, are willing to take up the work's *longeurs* and challenges to conventional operatic practice.[263]

An incomplete list of the occasional revivals of *The Pilgrim's Progress* includes

> the concert, radio performance, and recording under Adrian Boult in 1970–1 and the student productions at Charterhouse in 1972 and at the Royal Northern College of Music in 1992. In 1997, the Royal Opera for the first time revived the work with several concert performances and a recording.[264]

In June 2008 the Philharmonia Orchestra will present two special semi-staged performances of *The Pilgrim's Progress* to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Vaughan Williams's death. In a video promoting the performances on the Philharmonia Orchestra's YouTube channel and on the Sadler's Wells website, David Edwards, director of the Sadler's Wells Opera production

[261]*Guardian* (London), 28 October 2006.

[262]*Independent* (London), 4 July 2004.

[263]Ibid., 406.

[264]Lew, "A New and Glorious Age," 406.

of 2008, explained why he "leaped at the opportunity to direct *The Pilgrim's Progress*." "It was not an opera I am familiar with," Edwards said. "Very few people, I think, are familiar with it. So this is a huge opportunity for me and for the public to experience a work that, I think, has been unjustly neglected."[265] In the same video, Stephen Connock, Chairman of the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society, defended *The Pilgrim's Progress* from charges of parochialism:

> We all have our burdens on our backs, symbolically. And I think that for people today, spirituality, in the sense of desire for answers and a solution to the burdens that we face, is as relevant today as when Bunyan wrote it in Bedford Jail and when Vaughan Williams set it in the 1940s."[266]

Opera Australia performed a semi-staged production of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in March 2008, under the direction of conductor Richard Hickox, who previously recorded the work with the Royal Opera House Chorus and Orchestra in 1998.[267] The critical reaction to the Opera Australia performance was quiet, but generally positive. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Roger Covell described the failure of the Festival of Britain premiere in 1951: "Covent Garden opera was a different place then and *The Pilgrim's Progress* was not one of the postwar resident company's best efforts." Although the opera is "admittedly not an edge-of-the-seat story," Covell nonetheless maintains hope that Opera Australia's new production will overcome the first staging's "depressing effect" and serve as "a far better guide" to the opera's "passages of sinewy conflict, gentle humour and visionary glory."[268] In a review for *Australian Stage Online*, Eliza Eggler described *The Pilgrim's Progress* as "a religious work of great depth and beauty." At its premiere, "this opera without a heroine or any love duets received a cool reception—Thursday

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[265]Available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boDmrZib9Y8, and from http://www.sadlerswells.com/show/Philharmonia-Orchestra; accessed 7 June 2008.

[266]Ibid.

[267]Ralph Vaughan Williams, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Chandos, 1998, CD.

[268]*Morning Herald* (Sydney), 27 March 2008.

evening's performance [at the Concert Hall of Sydney's Opera House] did not."[269] Considerations of the most recent performances of *The Pilgrim's Progress* anticipate the possibility of a new appreciation for the opera.

Gloriana, too, never became a part of the repertory, but some critics have preserved faith in its ability to acquire admiration and respect. *Gloriana*'s first performance in New York was not until 1984. John Rockwell summarized the opera's effect upon the audience:

> There were times Saturday night at the Metropolitan Opera House, during the New York premiere of Benjamin Britten's *Gloriana*, that one felt oneself in the midst of an event—the sudden discovery of a neglected operatic masterpiece. By the end, that ebullience had not quite been sustained; this remains a flawed achievement. But its best moments are still very fine, and the English National Opera did honorably by this most quintessentially English of scores.[270]

Rockwell's account of the opera's flaws replicated the criticism of the first reviewers:

> The characters other than the Queen—even Essex himself—are uncompletely realized. Most problematic is the opera's epilogue, which was meant as a dreamy, almost surrealist scene in which the dying Queen transcends space and time and floats away into memories and dreams. At least on Saturday, the effect was inconclusive and anticlimactic. The decision to entrust much of the central character's final pronouncements to speech, rather than song, seems a particular miscalculation.[271]

In 1993 Boydell Press published the first volume of the Aldeburgh Studies in Music Series on Britten's *Gloriana*, edited by Paul Banks. Hewison, in his essay "'Happy Were He': Benjamin Britten and the *Gloriana* Story," posited optimistically that *Gloriana* would soon obtain the recognition it deserved,[272] but this has yet to arrive. Several companies have staged the work since 1993. In June 2005 Opera Theatre of St. Louis mounted a production of Britten's opera

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[269]Eliza Eggler, review of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, by Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Australian Stage Online*; available from http://www.australianstage.com.au/reviews/sydney/the-pilgrims-progress--opera-australia-1302.html; accessed 10 June 2008.

[270]*Times* (New York), 25 June 1984.

[271]Ibid.

[272]Hewison, "'Happy Were He': Benjamin Britten and the *Gloriana* Story," 16.

under the direction of Colin Graham, who had also directed the 1966 Sadler's Wells revival. Diana Burgwyn, reviewer for andante.com, repeated a common grievance of earlier critics; namely, that the characters, besides the Queen, were not fully developed. Largely, however, Burgwyn's review was enthusiastic, praising nearly every aspect of the work and its performance. Her reaction to the final scene contrasted starkly with Rockwell's earlier impression:

> So powerful was the last scene that this listener felt shattered on exiting the auditorium. Elizabeth's last words, some of them taken from the real queen's address to Parliament in 1601, were spoken (rather than sung) in a hollow voice, directly to the audience. An almost unbearable web of musical reminiscences accompanied her musings. As she slumped on her throne, a forlorn shadow of her former self, a huge three-dimensional starburst that had been stationed above the stage was slowly lowered behind her until only her face remained in the spotlight.

Burgwyn held out hope for the opera's eventual vindication:

> *Gloriana* fell out of the repertoire for a decade, then was presented on the composer's 50th birthday — a day remembered more sadly as that of John F. Kennedy's death. New productions began to spring up, and gradually it was realized that, far from being a lesser work, *Gloriana* could stand proudly among Britten's other masterpieces. St. Louis's superb production should certainly speed up that recognition — let's hope other enterprising companies will pick it up.[273]

Most of the criticism of *Gloriana*'s premiere and subsequent performances, however, indicates that *Gloriana* will remain within the shadow of *Grimes*.

Whereas *Peter Grimes* excelled not only as an English work, but also as an opera of the highest caliber on any stage, *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana* failed to achieve immediate success, nationally or internationally. After the premiere of *Grimes*, Britten's opera "went the round of the great opera houses of the world" and remained a part of the active repertory of English opera companies. Following their first performances at the 1951 Festival of Britain and the Coronation Gala of 1953, *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana* received neither international

[273]Diana Burgwyn, "The Triumphs of *Gloriana*," *andante.com magazine*, July 2005; available from http://www.andante.com/article/article.cfm?id=25715; accessed 10 June 2008.

recognition nor many subsequent performances in England. Many critics charged *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana* with parochialism; that is, while unmistakably English, these operas failed to realize the aesthetic principles of the most important Continental operas, principles which informed the critical thought of many opera reviewers in postwar England. *Peter Grimes*, in the tradition of the masterworks of Mozart and Verdi, exhibited powerful command of the depiction of musical character, originality of style, and unification of diverse elements. Subsequent English operas, including *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gloriana*, suffered from an inability to dispel the specter of *Grimes*.

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