



Britten's Tenor

Thursday 14 & Saturday 16 May, 7pm
The Church, Alexandria

*The Opera Australia Young Artist Program is generously supported
by Principal Patron Maureen Wheeler AO*

Britten's Tenor

Composer Benjamin Britten

PROGRAM

Billy Budd Prologue
Libretto: Eric Crozier

On This Island Let the florid music praise
Poetry: W.H. Auden

Canticle II Abraham and Isaac
Text: The Chester Mystery Plays

Peter Grimes Act 2, Scene 2
Libretto: Montagu Slater

Billy Budd Epilogue

On This Island As it is plenty

Letters from "My Beloved Man: The Letters of Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears"
edited by Vicky Stroehrer, Nicholas Clark and Jude Brimmer. Boydell Press, 2026

CAST & CREATIVES

Tenor Elias Wilson

Counter Tenor Michael Burden

Music Director/Piano Jem Herbert

Director Benjamin Schostakowski

Digital Projection Design Susie Henderson

Production Manager Anna Frey

OPERA AUSTRALIA

Head of Young Artists Francis Greep

Young Artist Producer Jane Hennessy

Young Artist Co-Ordinator Sammie Bailey

2025/26 Young Artists Chelsea Burns, Jem Herbert, Claudia Osborne,
Shikara Ringdahl, Leon Vitogiannis, Elias Wilson

Wigs & Wardrobe Manager Rebecca Ritchie

Head of Props Manufacturing Carlos Johnson

PHOENIX CENTRAL PARK

Artistic Director Nena Beretin

Opera Australia Young Artist Program sincerely thanks Phoenix Central Park for the
use of The Church for this project

Cover image: Justin McLean

Creative Note

I first heard Britten's Peter Grimes as an undergraduate voice student, in a 2019 concert performance by the SSO, starring Stuart Skelton. His voice, at once startlingly powerful and delicately vulnerable, painted Grimes as a man tortured by his demons, whose struggles manifested as the realisation of his greatest fear: transformation into the very monster he was accused of being. Throughout the opera it also seemed to me that there was something that was not being said. The gossip and viciousness of the borough combined with the softness of Grimes' inner life echoed, to my ears, stories of gay men who had been pushed to their breaking point by communities whose fears turned to cruelty and violence.

Through my studies I came to know of Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears' lifetime of love and music, and what began as a possibly tenuous queer reading of a single opera emerged to me as a pattern in their collaborations. Encoded implicitly within their work was something of the emotional, if not the literal, truth of the two men's lives together in a society that, at best, preferred not to know about their true natures. It was from this place that the work for Britten's Tenor began, and continues to develop with the heartfelt and creative exploration of some exceptional colleagues and co-creators.

Pears wrote to Britten in 1970, "I am here as your mouthpiece and I live in your music - and I can never be thankful enough to you and to Fate for all the heavenly joy we have had together for 35 years."

As Chopin had the piano and Paganini the violin, Britten had the tenor - his tenor.

Elias Wilson

Texts

CAPTAIN EDWARD FAIRFAX VERE

I am an old man who has experienced much.

I have been a man of action and have fought for my King and country at sea.

I have also read books, and studied, and pondered, and tried to fathom eternal truth.

Much good has been shown me, and much evil, and the good has never been perfect.

There is always some flaw in it, some defect, some imperfection in the divine image,

some fault in the angelic song, some stammer in the divine speech.

So that the devil still has something to do with every human consignment to this planet of earth.

Oh what have I done? Oh what, what have I done?

Confusion, so much is confusion!

I have tried to guide other rightly, but I have been lost in the infinite sea.

Who has blessed me?

Who saved me?

LET THE FLORID MUSIC PRAISE

Let the florid music praise,
The flute and the trumpet,
Beauty's conquest of your face:
In that land of flesh and bone,
Where from citadels on high
Her imperial standards fly,
Let the hot sun shine on, shine on.

O but the unloved have had power,
The weeping and striking,
Always, always, time will bring their hour;
Their secretive children walk
Through your vigilance of breath
To unpardonable Death

ABRAHAM & ISAAC

Both (as the Voice of God) Abraham, my servant, Abraham, take Isaac, thy son by name, that thou lovest the best of all, and in sacrifice offer him to me upon that hill there besides thee. Abraham, I will that so it be, for aught that may befall.

Abraham My Lord, to thee is mine intent ever to be obedient. That son that Thou to me hast sent offer I will to Thee. Thy bidding done shall be. Make thee ready, my dear darling, for we must do a little thing.

Isaac Father, I am all ready.

Abraham This woode do on thy back it bring, we may Isaac Father, I am all ready.

Abraham Now, Isaac son, go we our way to yonder mount if that we may.

Isaac My dear father, I will essay to follow you full fain.

Abraham O! My heart will break in three, to hear thy words I have pitye; as Thou wilt, Lord, so must it be, to Thee I will be bayn. Lay down thy faggot, my own son dear.

Isaac All ready father, lo, it is here. But why make you such heavy cheer? Are you anything adread?

Abraham Ah! Dear God! That me is woe!

Isaac Father, if it be your will, Where is the beast that we shall kill?

Abraham Thereof, son, is none upon this hill.

Isaac Father, I am full sore affeared to see you bear that drawne sword.

Abraham Isaac, son, peace, I pray thee,
Thou breakest my heart even in three.

Isaac I pray you, father, laynt nothing from me, But tell me what you think.

Abraham Ah! Isaac, Isaac, I must thee kill!

Isaac Alas! Father, is that your will, your owne child for to spill upon this hilles brink? If I have trespassed in any degree with a yard you may beat me; put up your sword, if your will be, for I am but a child. Would God my mother were here with me! She would kneel down upon her knee, praying you, father, if it may be, for to save my life.

Abraham O Isaac, son, to thee I say God hath commanded me today,
Sacrifice, this is no nay, to make of thy bodye.

Isaac Is it God's will I shall be slain?

Abraham Yea, son, it is not for to layn.

Isaac Father, seeing you muste needs do so, let it pass lightly and over go; kneeling on my knees two, your blessing on me spread.

Abraham My blessing, dear son, give I thee, and thy mother's with heart free. The blessing of the Trinity, my dear Son, on thee light.

Come hither, my child, thou art so sweet,
Thou must be bound both hands and feet.

Isaac Father, do with me as you will, I must obey, and that is skill, God's commandment to fulfil, For needs so it must be.

Abraham Isaac, Isaac, blessed must thou be.

Isaac Father, greet well my brethren ying, and pray my mother of her blessing, I come no more under her wing, farewell for ever and aye.

Abraham Farewell, my sweete son of grace!

Isaac I pray you, father, turn down my face, for I am sore adread.

Abraham Lord, full loth were I him to kill!

Isaac Ah, mercy, father, why tarry you so?

Abraham Jesu! On me have pity, that I have most in mind.

Isaac Now, father, I see that I shall die: Almighty God in majesty! my soul I offer unto Thee!

Abraham To do this deed I am sorrye.

Both (as God) Abraham, my servant dear, Abraham, lay not thy sword in no manner on Isaac, thy dear darling. For thou darest me, well wot I, that of thy son had no mercy, to fulfil my bidding.

Abraham Ah, Lord of heaven and King of bliss, thy bidding shall be done, i-wiss! A horned wether here I see, among the briars tied is he, to Thee offered shall he be anon right in this place. Sacrifice here sent me is, and all, Lord, through thy grace.

Both Such obedience grant us, O Lord! Ever to Thy most holy word. That in the same we may accord as this Abraham was bayn; And then altogether shall we that worthy King in heaven see, and dwell with Him in great glorye for ever and ever. Amen.

PETER GRIMES

Go there! Here's your sea boots. Take those bright and fancy buckles off your feet. There's your oilskin and sou'wester. Stir your pins, we must get ready! There's the jersey that she knitted, with the anchor that she patterned. I'll tear the collar off your neck.

Steady. Don't take fright, boy. Stop. Look. Now is our chance!
The whole sea's boiling. Get the nets. Come, boy!

They listen to money these Borough gossips, listen to money, only to money. I'll fish the sea dry, flood the market. Now is our chance to get a good catch, get money to choke down rumour's throat. I will set up with house and home and shop. I'll marry Ellen, I'll...

Coat off! Jersey on! My boy - we're going to sea!

In dreams I've built myself some kindlier home,
Warm in my heart and in a golden calm
Where there'll be no more fear and no more storm.

And she will soon forget her schoolhouse ways
Forget the labour of those weary days
Wrapped round in kindness like September haze.

The learned at their books have no more store
Of wisdom than we'd close behind our door.
Compared with us the rich man would be poor.

I've seen in stars the life that we might share:
Fruit in the garden, children by the shore,
A whitened doorstep, and a woman's care.

But dreaming builds what dreaming can disown.
Dead fingers stretch themselves to tear it down.
I hear those voices that will not be drowned.

Calling, there is no stone
In earth's thickness to make a home,
That you can build with and remain alone.

Sometimes I see that boy here in this hut.
He's there now, I can see him, he is there!
His eyes are on me as they were that evil day.

Stop moaning, boy.
Water? There's no more water.
You had the last yesterday.
You'll soon be home in harbour calm and deep.

There's an odd procession here.
Parson and Swallow coming near.
Wait! You've been talking.
You and that bitch were gossiping.
What lies have you been telling?
The Borough's climbing up the hill.
To get me. Me! O I'm not scared.
I'll send them off with a flea in their ear.
I'll show them. Grimes ahoy!

You sit there watching me
And you' re the cause of everything.
Your eyes, like his are watching me
With an idiot' s drooling gaze.
Will you move or must I make you dance?

Step boldly. For here' s the way we go to sea
Up the steps then down the cliff, to find that shoal,
That' s boiling in the sea.
Careful, or you' ll break your neck
'Round the cliff-side to the deck.

I' ll pitch the stuff down. Come on!
Now, shut your eyes and down you go.

CAPTAIN EDWARD FAIRFAX VERE

We committed his body to the deep.
The seafowl enshadowed him with their wings,
Their harsh cries were his requiem.
But the ship passed on under light airs toward the rose of dawn,
And soon it was full day in its clearness and strength.

For I could have saved him, I could have saved him.
He knew it, even his shipmates knew it, though earthly laws silenced them.
O what have I done?

But he has saved me, and blessed me,
And the love that passeth understanding has come to me.
I was lost on the infinite sea, but I' ve sighted a sail in the storm,
A far-shining sail, and I' m content.

I' ve seen where she' s bound for.
There' s land where she' ll anchor for ever.
I am an old man now, and my mind can go back in peace...

AS IT IS PLENTY

As it is, plenty;
As it's admitted
The children happy
And the car, the car
That goes so far
And the wife devoted:
To this as it is,
To the work and the banks
Let his thinning hair
And his hauteur
Give thanks, give thanks.

All that was thought
As like as not, is not
When nothing was enough
But love, but love
And the rough future
Of an intransigent nature
And the betraying smile,
Betraying, but a smile:
That that is not, is not;
Forget, Forget.

Let him not cease to praise
Then his spacious days;
Yes, and the success
Let him bless, let him bless:
Let him see in this
The profits larger
And the sins venal,
Lest he see as it is
The loss as major
And final, final.

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