

Grimes on the Beach #1 First rehearsal



Boat on Aldeburgh beach (c) Philip Vile

Tenor Christopher Gillett, Sinifini Music's *Inside Out* correspondent, is performing in a groundbreaking Aldeburgh Festival performance of Britten's *Peter Grimes*, which will take place on Aldeburgh beach itself, in June. He reports from the first day of rehearsals, where all - or at least part - is revealed.



Grimes on the Beach - Day One

It's twenty past six in the morning. I'm on a train to London from my home in Wiltshire for the first day of production rehearsals on an opera, and we're about to stop at Trowbridge. Surprisingly, those last two snippets of information do actually have a connection. The poet George Crabbe - usually associated with Suffolk - was rector of Trowbridge from 1814 until he died. He's buried there.

Four years before he moved to Wiltshire he wrote a heroic poem, a collection of 'letters', *The Borough*. The 22nd letter is called 'Peter Grimes'. As we pull into this scruffy county town, I wonder if Rector Crabbe could ever have imagined that his work would inspire an opera, let alone one of the masterpieces of the 20th century.

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It's [Britten's \(/uk/learn/composers/benjamin-britten\)](#) *Peter Grimes* I'm off to rehearse, in a warehouse near Wimbledon. My role is the Rector Horace Adams. Despite my ramblings about Crabbe and the felicity of coincidence, that's not what is really on my mind. The thing that I'm really anxious to know is how on earth we are going to perform *Peter Grimes* on Aldeburgh beach. It's Britten's anniversary year and this event is a highlight of the Aldeburgh Festival 2013.

You might think I'd have some idea about this already. I was booked a year ago, and we've already had some music rehearsals, but still I have no idea about anything to do with the production. I'd like to think it's all an elaborate secret but the fact is that, when it comes to opera, the last people who find out the production details – the concept, the design – are the people who have to go on stage and actually make it happen: the singers.

Today is the day we are finally told, and it's always an occasion pregnant with anxiety. I can only guess how the cast of Lyon Opera's recent *Fidelio* felt when, after they'd prepared themselves to sing a 19th-century opera based in a prison, discovered instead that the director had opted to set it in space with the singers whirring around the stage on Segways. I suspect the cast went straight to the pub after that particular director's introduction.

I'm not anticipating anything like that (though I'm not referring to the pub). My hunch is that the costumes will be conventional but probably not 18th-century. Actually I don't spend much time speculating about what I'll be wearing. It's everything else that intrigues me. Will we be playing in the round? Where exactly on the beach will we be? Will the sea, one of the key players in the opera, be in front of us, or behind us? Where? It's no secret that the orchestra will be pre-recorded, which is in itself the most daunting prospect and far outside the realms of what we usually do. How will that work exactly? How will we hear the orchestra, see the conductor, be heard? What will we use for dressing rooms? Loos? How much is the weather going to affect the process, let alone the performances?

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Rehearsing an opera is mostly about reducing the probability that something will go wrong. Old lags like me are well versed in seeing the usual pitfalls and assessing how to deal with them, but I anticipate we're going to have to hone a new set of skills for this production. Patience will probably be at the top of the list.

Anyone who is familiar with *Grimes* and Aldeburgh has surely stood on that beach and heard Britten's score playing in their head. Heck, sometimes you feel you can hear it coming out of the sea and the stones. To actually, physically make that happen will be an extraordinary thing. Without, I hope, destroying any of mystery of theatre, I'll let you know how we get on along the journey. More immediately I'll let you know what I discover at today's first rehearsal.

All has been revealed. Well, most of it...

I was surprised to see two cows being led into the rehearsal complex this morning, but it turns out they were for a different studio. I don't think our budget runs to cows. Nor to Segways.

I can reveal that the sea will be behind us, as it has to be, really. You can't have the audience gaping at the roofs of Aldeburgh while we on stage get to see the sea. That would never do.

We'll have to time the start of the performances so that it is almost dark by the third scene, the one set in a pub during a storm. And we, as well as the audience, will have to wear lots of warm clothes – the beach, we have been warned, gets very chilly after dark.

The beach at Aldeburgh tends to shape itself into a three-tiered slope and the plan is to build the set on the middle tier with the audience sitting slightly above, on the top tier. (There was a rumour once that we would be doing each scene 'on location', though I never understood how that could possibly work, the Moot Hall being far too tiny.) So, yes, there will be a set, in essence a 40-metre long, semi-derelict jetty scattered with boats, erected right on the pebbles.

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The conductor, Stuart Bedford, will be half-submerged in a hole in the beach, which is, many would argue, the very best place for a conductor. There'll be all sorts of electronic wizardry to help us, and a few lighting and stage effects that will be utterly spectacular if they work. That isn't meant to sound negative; we just have to accept that a lot has to be left to experiment and luck. As Tim Alberly, our director, said today: 'The worst-case scenario is that the weather is too awful to rehearse but perfect on the performance dates.' If that happens, it will be quite terrifying. The beach also has a habit of shifting – quite a lot, as it turns out – so the set may twist itself into interesting shapes.

There will be no wings, just beach for miles and miles, and as for loos, no-one seems to know yet.

And with all this information marinating in our heads, we set about staging the Prologue. 'Peter Grimes, Peter Grimes!'

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[christophergillett.co.uk](http://www.christophergillett.co.uk) (<http://www.christophergillett.co.uk/index.htm>)

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Read the next instalments in Christopher Gillett's [\(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/grimes-on-the-beach-2\)](/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/grimes-on-the-beach-2) blog diaries, [Grimes on the Beach #2](#) ([\(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/grimes-on-the-beach-2\)](/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/grimes-on-the-beach-2)) and [Grimes on the Beach #3](#) ([\(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/grimes-on-the-beach-3\)](/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/grimes-on-the-beach-3)), and his [photo gallery](#) ([\(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/grimes-on-the-beach-4\)](/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/grimes-on-the-beach-4)).