An Analysis of Ronald Stevenson's Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy

Sara Rebecca Gibbs

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AN ANALYSIS OF RONALD STEVENSON’S PETER GRIMES PIANO FANTASY

by

Sara Rebecca Gibbs

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts

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Throughout my years at the University of Memphis, there have been many people who have helped me along the way. First, a multitude of thanks to Dr. Janet Page, who has seen me through many edits and whose enthusiasm for my topic helped me to continue on through writing this document. I am incredibly grateful, thank you. To my committee members: Dr. Kevin Richmond, Dr. Artina McCain, and Professor Tim Shiu, thank you for sticking with me during this process and for encouragement along the way. To my piano teachers: Sam Viviano and Dr. Cathal Breslin, thank you for all the lessons and inspiration and insight.

To my family: thank you for all your support and encouragement. To my dad who passed away in 2018, thank you for taking me to piano lessons, and for supporting my enthusiasm for music. To my mom who was my first piano teacher, thank you for introducing me to music and for all of the conversations and support. To my siblings: Andrew, Paul, Luke, Nathaniel, Anna, and Philip, thank you for listening to me practice the piano for hours over the years and your friendship. To my grandparents, thank you for always being there to support me. To my boyfriend, Jose, thank you for encouraging me in finishing this document and for all of your support. To my colleagues: Dr. Steven DiBlasi and Dr. Lora Gubanov, I am grateful for your friendship and for all the laughs and support along the way.
ABSTRACT

Gibbs, Sara Rebecca. DMA. The University of Memphis. May 2023. An Analysis of Ronald Stevenson’s Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy. Major Professor: Dr. Janet K. Page

Ronald Stevenson (1928-2015) was a composer and pianist who was born in England and died in Scotland. He had a varied compositional output that included compositions based on other composers’ works that are more than transcriptions. Stevenson was acquainted with Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) and wrote the Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy based on Britten’s opera Peter Grimes. This dissertation is an analysis of the Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy and how Stevenson aptly depicted the opera’s main motives and atmospheric elements in just under seven minutes though the opera is over two hours in length.

The goal of this analysis is to give the performer a more informed interpretation of the Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy. I will give a background on the composer and composition then compare it to the work on which it is based. The first chapter is a biography of Ronald Stevenson. The second chapter is an overview of the piano fantasia genre in order to show the placement of the Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy within it. The third chapter is a background of the Piano Fantasy and Britten’s opera and the inspirations behind both. The fourth chapter analyzes the form of the Piano Fantasy and its major motives and thematic material and how it is based upon the opera. It delves into primary thematic motives borrowed from the opera and how Stevenson organizes them. The fifth chapter analyzes how the orchestral material has been transcribed into the Piano Fantasy. It shows side-by-side analysis of the opera and the Piano Fantasy and how Stevenson either kept the material the same or changed it to fit the piano. The sixth chapter concerns the vocal motives borrowed from Britten’s opera and how Stevenson uses them thematically to present the storyline of the opera in miniature form. He does this through layering motivic material and atmospheric elements from the opera, as seen in chapters 4-6. The last
chapter summarizes the relationship between the *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy* and Britten’s opera.
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INTRODUCTION

Ronald Stevenson’s Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy came to my attention when I was looking for recital material that was virtuosic, contemporary, and not in the standard piano repertoire. My piano teacher at the time, Sam Viviano, suggested Stevenson’s piano fantasy and I was quickly enthralled with the piece. It had technical difficulty combined with text descriptions that helped me to understand the piece from early on. The striking rhythms, the jumping from low to high on the keyboard, and the plucking of the strings inside the piano at the end of the piece also captured my attention.

In getting to know the composition, I saw that it was based on Benjamin Britten’s opera, Peter Grimes. I became curious as to whether the storyline of the piano fantasy followed the storyline of the opera. So, to understand the piece for performance purposes, I started researching the two compositions. In finding out that Britten was aware of Stevenson’s composition based upon his opera, and that the two were friends or at least fond acquaintances, I endeavored to find out more.

There are two published biographies of Ronald Stevenson. One is Colin Scott-Sutherland’s The Man and His Music: A Symposium, and the other is Malcolm MacDonald’s Ronald Stevenson: A Musical Biography. There is also a biographical dissertation by Mark Gasser: “Ronald Stevenson, Composer Pianist: An Exegetical Critique from a Pianistic Perspective.” In each of these, the Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy is mentioned though not in depth. The longest is Sutherland’s description of the fantasy, which lasts about fourteen pages. However, none of these resources were able to fully answer my questions regarding the relationships between the opera and piano fantasy, the friendship between Britten and Stevenson, and other questions that came up along the way. This dissertation will clarify how the piano
fantasy was developed, the inspirations behind it, similarities and differences between the two works, and how the town of Aldeburgh is intertwined through each composer’s compositional process.

The first chapter gives biographical background on Ronald Stevenson along with a brief overview of the types of compositions he has written and inspirations and influences in his life. The second chapter is an overview of the piano fantasy genre. The third chapter includes origins of the Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy, background on the development of the opera, and a discussion on the friendship between Stevenson and Britten. In the fourth chapter, I delve into the form and analysis of the piano fantasy. I compare the piano fantasy and opera, tracing where each theme comes from and if it stayed in original form from the opera or was altered. The fifth chapter discusses the use of the piano as an orchestra in the piano fantasy; and the sixth chapter deals with the vocal inspiration and techniques that Stevenson used. In the closing chapter, I summarize the comparisons between the piano fantasy and opera.
CHAPTER 1

BIOGRAPHY OF RONALD STEVENSON

Ronald Stevenson was born in Blackburn, Lancashire on March 6, 1928 and died in West Linton, Scotland, on March 28, 2015. Stevenson started piano lessons at age eight, and his first piano teacher was Ethel Pratt. He was diligent about practicing from a young age. However, he was an “unenthusiastic piano pupil … more interested in boxing, his father bribed him to study by promising a whole boxing outfit if he would learn to play the Variations from Flowtow’s Martha.”\(^1\) His second piano teacher was Dorothea Fraser May, and his memory of her was that “she taught him to how play a true legato which he has ever remembered.”\(^2\) This would be something that would influence his later life in regards to piano technique. At the age of twelve, Stevenson started to get excited about music and the piano. In 1943, at the age of fourteen, he began composing and also became an accompanist for the Blackburn Ballet Club (figure 1.1).

![Figure 1.1. Ronald Stevenson and members of the Blackburn Ballet Club. Colin Scott-Sutherland, Ronald Stevenson, The Man and His Music (England: Boosey and Hawkes, 1972), 25.](image)

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Stevenson came from a working-class family. His father was a railway fireman, and his mother worked in a woolen mill in Blackburn. However, his father also had a love of music, and Ronald said in an interview by his grandson, Rob MacNeacail, that his first memory was of hearing his father sing.\(^3\) His father was an amateur tenor who sang repertoire such as Scottish folksongs and Moore’s *Irish Melodies*. As Ronald grew older, he began to accompany his father on the piano.\(^4\) Ronald had one brother who was a comedian and also sang as an amateur vocalist. His father bought Ronald a boudoir grand piano (comparable to a baby grand piano by today’s standards) around 1945. Stevenson said, “the best present ever was a grand piano from my parents. Dad was very good at saving. He saved £1 per week for years and years to be able to buy it for me.”\(^5\) His father saw his dedication to music through his early compositions, love of the piano, and accompanying, and thus felt like this purchase of a musical instrument was worth the investment. According to Macdonald:

> Stevenson senior, like many Scots, ‘thrived on thrift,’ but was never thrifty with his son, who soon began to manifest unusual musical gifts. Indeed shortly after the Second World War he bought Ronald a boudoir grand piano, an enormous expense for a railwayman to incur … Music was clearly going to be his life.\(^6\)

Stevenson was composing by fourteen, accompanying, and then won a scholarship to Royal Manchester College of Music at seventeen, so this investment showed promise of coming to fruition.

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\(^3\) Ronald Stevenson, Interview by Rob MacNeacail, *Chapman* 22 (Winter 1998), no. 89-90, 5.


\(^5\) Ronald Stevenson, Interview by Rob MacNeacail, 8.

**Education**

In 1945-1947, Stevenson studied at the Royal Conservatory of Music on a scholarship, with Richard Hall as his official composition teacher. However, his assessment was that he did not feel he learned much from Hall. His piano teacher was Iso Elinson. Elinson had been a pupil of Felix Blumenfield, who was the teacher of Vladimir Horowitz. From Elinson, Stevenson learned the invaluable techniques of how to approach the piano with a “stroking touch, not hitting the keys,” and “contrapuntal clarity, making the separate voices ‘sing’ in the fugues from Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*.” This stroking touch combined with the aforementioned legato sound gave him a foundation for good tone. He also worked hard for contrapuntal clarity that would later influence his compositions, particularly his piano music.

After Stevenson graduated in 1947, he was drafted into National Service. His father had spoken of politics often at home and was a pacifist. Stevenson’s own belief of “pacifism … was influenced by his reading of William Blake and Albert Schweitzer.” He refused to serve and was sent to prison. He ended up being “moved from prison to prison, often sharing a cell with five or six hardened criminals: from Preston to Liverpool, to the ‘Dickensian’ Winston Green in Birmingham, and finally to Wormwood Scrubs.” While in prison, he continued to compose. One of the pieces he wrote in prison was the *Chorale Prelude for Jean Sibelius*. With the help of Michael Tippett who was also a conscientious objector and had been imprisoned in Wormwood

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8 Scott-Sutherland, *Ronald Stevenson*, 22.
Scubs for three months, he suggested to Stevenson “appeal to the Appellate Tribunal.” Thus, Stevenson was released from prison after six months to work in agricultural labor to finish the remainder of his two-year sentence. Once released from prison, Stevenson was able to live at home while doing agricultural labor. His wife, Marjorie, commented regarding serving in the war that, “He was a pacifist. He didn’t want to kill anybody. He said that he would, if he had been old enough in the War [World War II], have been prepared to work hard in the Medical Corps against the horrors of Hitler, He wasn’t against defence, he was against aggression.”

Due to time spent in prison and agricultural labor, it was difficult for him to get a job teaching music, though he was qualified. Stevenson was eventually hired and able to work at “Boldon Colliery School in Durham County as a musician.” On working in the mining villages of Northumberland, Marjorie said,

Ronald was perfect to teach there, as he himself came from a working class background. It wasn’t easy to teach a bunch of teenagers, especially boys, but he could always silence them with his piano playing. The music of Percy Grainger came in handy, as he always wanted to collect and transcribe folk songs. This appealed to Ronald as well, and it gave him a hold over the rough boys at the school, who would react better to folk than classical music.

Ronald would practice hours till late at night while teaching until the headmaster would urge him to bed. Thus, he was able to get his playing skills back up to a professional standard after being

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15 Bannatyne-Scott, “Conversations with Marjorie Stevenson.”

16 Bannatyne-Scott, “Conversations with Marjorie Stevenson.”
imprisoned. He taught in Norton Park School, Carrickvale, Niddrie Marrischal, and Broughton High School over the course of eleven years.  

Stevenson moved to Edinburgh in 1952 to teach music appreciation and married that same year. Stevenson said in an interview with his grandson, “we met at my parent’s [sic] house, and I was 19 and Marjorie (your granny) was nearly 15. I was practising the piano at the time. Marjorie came visiting with her mother – Marjorie and I are second cousins. I thought she was very beautiful.” Marjorie was asked how she met Ronald by Brian Bannatyne-Scott in an interview published in 2022 and she described tea with his family and a piano recital (Figure 1.2):

I remember the day. It was April 12, 1947. Our families knew each other. Ronald’s family was in Blackburn, but my family must have migrated to Nelson, about twenty miles away! Ronald was 19 and he was giving his first public recital in St George’s Hall, Blackburn. My aunt knew about this, and because I was playing the piano, and loved music, she told my parents that I ought to go to this concert. She took me to Blackburn, where we had tea with Ronald and his family, and then he went off to the Hall, and my aunt I followed on for the concert. I was quite amazed. I was struggling to play some Chopin, but when I heard him, and this was my first recital, it was extraordinary.

17 Macdonald, Ronald Stevenson, 30.

18 Ronald Stevenson, Interview by Rob MacNeacail, 8.

19 Bannatyne-Scott, “Conversations with Marjorie Stevenson.”
Marjorie was also a pianist, and they had at least one of the same piano teachers in their formative years (Dorothea Fraser May). Two newspaper articles mention Marjorie Spedding winning an award at the Blackburn Music Festival in 1949. The first article reported that “Winner of the Walsh Cup with 91 marks in the open class for piano forte playing at the Blackburn Music Festival is 17-years-old Marjorie Spedding, of Heights Cottage, King’s Causeway.” Another commented that the “test piece was the Nocturne from the Miniature suite

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by York Bowen, who adjudicated and described her performance as extremely mature, with beautiful tone and a strong sense of beauty. Marjorie is a pupil of Dorothea Fraser May, of Darwen.”

Unfortunately, Marjorie’s dreams of being a pianist were put on hold. Her parents disowned her due to her relationship with Ronald. Marjorie said in her interview,

I went on occasion to see him at college in Manchester, and met his friends, and I heard some of his recitals there. He must have said something cheeky to my mother, and things got difficult. I didn’t get along with my mother myself, but he should have kept his mouth shut. The relationship with my parents deteriorated and I was forbidden to see him, which of course didn’t work. His friends at college and my friends at school (I was in the Sixth Form by now) collaborated in all kinds of clandestine things to meet, to arrange meetings and the like. I left home eventually at 17 and went to Dartington Hall, where I spent two years, and I broke off from my parents and never saw them again. They went to New Zealand, and that was that!  

She went to work as a domestic servant for the Elmhurst family at Dartington Hall in Devon, and during this time became friends with Imogen Holst. Imogen was at Dartington School of the Arts 1942-1951, and helped Marjorie receive a music scholarship there in 1948-1949 after hearing her playing the piano. Imogen stayed in the Stevensons’ life and later wrote a short biography of Ronald.  

In an interview with his grandson, Ronald Stevenson described his wedding to Marjorie as follows: “18th August, 1952, in a registry office in Edinburgh. We came to Scotland because Marjorie’s parents wouldn’t give their consent to our marriage, but in Scotland you could get married at the age of 16, whether your parents agreed or not. Marjorie was 20.” Figure 1.3

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22 Bannatyne-Scott, “Conversations with Marjorie Stevenson.”

23 Ronald Stevenson, Interview by Rob MacNeacail, 8.
shows Marjorie and Ronald Stevenson in 1989 on their thirty-seventh anniversary. During their marriage, Marjorie typed up all of Ronald’s writings for him encompassing notes, lectures and broadcast talks.24

![Image](image_url)


The Stevensons lived in Edinburgh for eleven years. They had three children: two daughters and a son. Their two daughters, Gerda and Ella, were named after Gerda Busoni (wife of Ferruccio Busoni) and Ella Grainger (wife of Percy Grainger); and their son Gordon was named after Edward Gordon Craig. Ronald continued to perform as a concert pianist while living in Edinburgh, and to compose as well. The Pizetti variations on *La Pisanella* were written during his time there as well as other compositions including his well-known *Passacaglia on DSCH*. His family did not leave Edinburgh until 1963.

Stevenson received a scholarship from the Italian government in 1955 and went there to study and research for six months. The subject of his research was Ferruccio Busoni who was an integral part of Stevenson’s development as a composer and pianist. Stevenson simultaneously studied orchestration at Academia di Santa Cecilia in Rome with Guido Guerrini, a pupil of

24 Bannatyne-Scott, “Conversations with Marjorie Stevenson.”
Busoni. In 1962, Stevenson was appointed lecturer at the University of Edinburgh. He was on staff at the University of Cape Town from 1963 to 1965. Stevenson toured as a concert pianist throughout much of his life and was known for having a virtuosic piano technique. He also wrote for the *Musical Times*, *Tempo*, and *The Listener*.

**Compositions**

Stevenson’s compositions encompass more than five hundred works. His largest and most famous is the *Passacaglia on DSCH* for solo piano written in 1960-1962. It was based on Dmitri Shostakovich’s name using the notes D – Es (E flat) – C – H (B natural). It is eighty minutes in length! Says Malcolm Macdonald, “it might be argued that Stevenson is a very rare case of a miniaturist of genius who completely transcends the limitations which that label usually implies … *Passacaglia* … is ultimately founded upon a multitude of miniatures. What is it in Stevenson’s art that so perfectly connects the epigram to the epic?”

Macdonald further comments that:

> The result is an unremitting showpiece of cumulative rhythmic tension, founded on a 12-note series that combines the letters of BACH, DSCH, FB (for Busoni), and (for Schoenberg) ASCH. It relates closely to the *Dies Irae* chant, which is drawn into the proceedings as the toccata – which has the character of a hectic night-ride – develops into a pulverizing *Totentanz*.

Stevenson was also inspired to write about his heritage though his compositions. His mother was from Wales and his father from Scotland. Thus, he wrote many works inspired by Scottish, Welsh, and Irish folk music. These included *Scottish Folk Music Settings*, *Scots Suite*, *Reflections on an Old Scots Psalm Tune*, *Three Scottish Ballads*, *Three Scots Fairy Tales*, and *A*.

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Scottish Triptych. He also delved into Irish folk music with the piano duo composition Irish Folk-song Suite and piano solo A Rosary of Variations on O’Riada’s Irish Folk Mass.

Other influences on Stevenson’s compositions were poetry and nature. According to Macdonald, “the love of physical exercise made him a keen hill-walker from an early age, taking his volume of Burns with him up on the Darwen moors.”27 This love of the great outdoors lasted into his adult years; one of his first settings of a poem was a composition based upon Byron’s So we’ll go no more a-roving. He also wrote compositions based on other poems such as Walter Scott’s Violets. In MacDonald’s opinion, “practically all Stevenson’s songs may be considered homages to the poets from whom he draws their words: he is an inveterate reader of poetry in many languages and dialects, as reflected in the totality of his vocal output.”28 This love of poetry along with a love of the rhythm and rhyme of the written word influenced his other vocal compositions to give them more vitality and structure in a poetic way.

Stevenson’s other compositions included two piano concertos, a cello concerto, chamber works, songs, solo piano works, a choral symphony, transcriptions, and orchestral works. He composed in a wide range of styles and forms and embraced the fugue in many of his writings. However, he never wrote in sonata form, though he did write three piano sonatinas in 1945-1948. He uses neo-baroque polyphony in some of his compositions. One of his commissioned works (by West Midland Arts Association) was a composition for tenor and harp. It was based on nine haikus and performed at Bromsgrove Festival on May 2, 1971.29 This type of piece combined his love of the written word and composition.

27 Macdonald, Ronald Stevenson, 5-6.
28 Macdonald, Ronald Stevenson, 76-77.
Stevenson wrote mostly for the piano, possibly because he had a fantastic piano technique. Virtuosic pianists who were also composers, such as Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninoff, and Paderewski, inspired him. The Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy has many virtuosic elements and many places where a melody is heard from within the accompaniment: the ability to make the piano sing was also a strong characteristic of his piano playing. With the piano being a combination of two different instrument groups: percussion and strings, it is often the goal of a pianist to try to make the piano sing with the approach of how the key is played through touch. One most often tries to avoid striking the key so as to create a harsh tone, and instead to use arm weight and a stroking of the keys so that a more beautiful tone is created. These ideas were spoken about by Tobias Matthy and other pedagogues in England while Stevenson was being trained, so it was not surprising that it was part of his training at RMCM.

Even at a young age, Stevenson was fond of counterpoint and invested time in the practice of it. Malcolm MacDonald said, “Stevenson was already, by instinct, a dedicated contrapuntist: for months he would arise at 6.00 am and do an hour of pre-breakfast counterpoint exercises from Johann Josef Fux’s historic treatise, Gradus ad Parnassum.” His teacher Iso Elinson also influenced this diligence in counterpoint. According to Scott-Sutherland, “Elinson believed that to train the fingers to ‘sing’ polyphonically as in great fugues from the ‘48,’ was the finest technical and musical foundation for any pianist.” This strong control of the individuality of lines in contrapuntal works allows a pianist to have greater control over all compositions where one must balance one or more melodies and harmonies between the hands. Early

30 Macdonald, Ronald Stevenson, 6.
31 Scott-Sutherland, Ronald Stevenson, 209.
contrapuntal works included *Fugue on a Fragment of Chopin* in 1949, based on Chopin’s *Ballade No. 4 in F minor*. Stevenson used many different contrapuntal techniques on Chopin’s work and treated it to counterpoint in the style of a canon. This love and fascination with contrapuntal compositions led him to write *A 20th Century Music Diary* in 1953-1959. This set of miniature piano works delves into techniques and styles such as fugues, atonality, tone rows, and modes.

Another inspiration was Bernhard Ziehn. Ziehn’s theoretical work in terms of harmony and counterpoint influenced Stevenson in several of his compositions in the *20th Century Music Diary*. Stevenson’s introduction to Ziehn’s *Canonical Studies: A New Technic in Composition* says,

> Ziehn accepted a tempered chromatic-enharmonic basis for his system of harmony and developed Kirnberger’s theory that all possible chords are reducible to the theory of adjacent thirds. In this way, Ziehn indicated connections between triadic and quartal harmony, whereas other theorist have regarded the two methods of chord construction as mutually exclusive. That is, harmony built on thirds has been regarded as traditional and harmony built on fourth as “modern.”

This usage of “enharmonic unity of triadic and quartal harmony” was part of No.1 of *A 20th Century Music Diary*. In the *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy*, Stevenson incorporates quartal harmony in mm. 39-43 and mm. 47-55 first in chords and then in arpeggiation accompanied by quartal chords.

Busoni was a great inspiration of Stevenson’s younger years and continued to be so throughout his life. Stevenson hand copied all ten volumes of Busoni’s *Klavierübung* to assimilate and understand the compositional techniques. In 1950, he went on a trip to meet Busoni’s widow, Gerda, in Stockholm. Stevenson had been unemployed and thus sold many of

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his belongings and raised money through a piano recital so that he could make this trip. They ended up staying friends throughout her life. Several of Stevenson’s compositions are inspired by Busoni and his techniques, particularly *Berceuse Symphonique*, *Berceuse elegiaque*, *Tanzwalzer*, and the *Fantasy on “Doctor Faust”* based on Busoni’s opera. Stevenson wrote, narrated and performed solo piano works for a BBC documentary on Busoni in 1974. He performed at the First International Busoni Festival. Stevenson also drafted a long book (unpublished) on Ferruccio Busoni and became known as an expert on him.

Many friendships influenced Stevenson’s life, among them, with the actor and director Edward Gordon Craig, the influential Scottish poet C. M. Grieve (pseud. Hugh MacDiarmid), the pianist John Ogdon, and Percy Grainger. Friends of Stevenson (such as Peter Pears, Ogdon, and MacDiarmid) would often stay with him and Marjorie and rousing discussions would be had, often lasting multiple days. Stevenson first met MacDiarmid by chance on a bus, they became fast friends, and MacDiarmid suggested to Stevenson that he write a composition based on *Ben Dorain*, a poem by Duncan Ban McIntyre originally written in Gaelic. Stevenson kept some of the original language in his symphonic work. Grainger, Stevenson, and Ogdon were all admirers of Busoni.

Grainger and Stevenson were faithful correspondents for four years from August 22, 1957 up to Grainger’s death on February 7, 1961. Grainger was briefly Busoni’s pupil in 1903, so Stevenson contacted Grainger originally for first-hand accounts of Busoni. In a letter to Stevenson dated October 18, 1960, Grainger wrote -

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Dear Ronald, You must not take it amiss that I do not write you in detail about your remarkable transcription of *Hill-Song I* for piano solo. To begin with, my eyes are too poor at present to be able to read any kind of complicated music with the care and & speed needful to get an artistic impression at all. That does not mean that I might not get a most vivid impression if it were played by somebody else — preferably you. In the meantime, please do not feel that I am unresponsive to the hard work & insight with which you have tackled the task. I am having a bad time — pains in most parts of my body and extreme exhaustion. Hearty greetings from us both. [Letter unsigned]

Stevenson and Grainger also brought notice to lesser-known composers and transcribing works of popular composers. Grainger inspired Stevenson to pursue the folk music of Scotland, as Grainger had done in his *British Folk-Music Settings*. Stevenson’s last letter to Grainger before his death was about his new composition *Passacaglia on DSCH*. In 1966, Stevenson ran into Ella Grainger (the widow of Percy), and this led him to put together an edition for children called *The Young Pianist’s Grainger* in 1967. Ella Grainger and Stevenson are shown together in figure 1.4 during a visit he paid around 1978 to her home in White Plains, New York.

Figure 1.4. Ella Grainger and Ronald Stevenson. Teresa R. Balough, ed. *Comrades in Art: The Correspondence of Ronald Stevenson and Percy Grainger 1957-61 with Interviews, Essays, and other Writings on Grainger* (Great Britain: Toccata Press, 2010), 43.
Stevenson wrote compositions based on motives of others in variation and fantasia form, starting with *18 Variations on a Bach Chorale* written for piano in 1946. Others include compositions written on motives of pieces by Chopin, Mozart, Delius, John Bull, Purcell, J. S. Bach, Bax, Beethoven, Boccherini, Brahms, Frank Bridge, Britten, Busoni, John Field, Gershwin, Gluck, Grainger, Granados, Grieg, W. C. Handy, Joplin, Mahler, Meyerbeer, Paderewski, Rachmaninov, Ravel, Schubert, and Tchaikovsky. Then there are variations and fantasies such as *Melody on a Ground of Glazunov, Minuet: Homage to Hindemith, Recitative and Air: In memoriam Shostakovich, Chorale and Fugue in Reverse on Two Themes by Robert and Clara Schumann*, the aforementioned *Passacaglia on DSCH, Simple Variations on Purcell’s “New Scotch Tune,” Variations on a Theme of Pizetti*, and many more. The focus of this paper, the *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy*, is a combination of a transcription and variation.

Around forty percent of Stevenson’s compositions are transcriptions. When does the art of transcribing rise from copying down an idea to originality? Creating something new from the old can make such a work an original masterpiece. In the case of borrowed material, it is respectful to take into consideration the opinion of the composer from whom the material is being borrowed if alive, and also to be on the safe side regarding copyright infringement. A new masterpiece can be created from borrowed material, and I think that Stevenson’s *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy* is such a work.
CHAPTER 2

OVERVIEW OF THE PIANO FANTASY GENRE

Is the *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy* similar to other piano fantasies or does Stevenson strike out on a different path? A fantasia/fantasy is either a singular piece or a set of pieces with a common link. Such pieces are a free form of composition often based on borrowed material or a descriptive text, written and used to show off the performer’s skill. Fantasies or Fantasia are just two of the variations of the spelling, all referring to the same genre of pieces. Fantasias can have an improvisatory feel to them even though they are written down. Czerny said of fantasies, “If a well-written composition can be compared with a noble architectural edifice in which symmetry must predominate, then a fantasy well done is akin to a beautiful English garden, seemingly irregular, but full of surprising variety, and executed rationally, meaningfully, and according to plan.”

Throughout the years, composers of keyboard fantasies include Mozart, Beethoven, Czerny, Chopin, Schubert, Schumann, Liszt, and Thalberg.

**Fantasies Based on Borrowed Material**

Fantasies based on borrowed material are often based on a theme(s) from another composer. However, sometimes they can be based on something else like a literary character. *Kreisleriana*, Op. 16 by Robert Schumann (1810-1856) is based on the character of an eccentric Kapellmeister named Kreisler in the works of E. T. A. Hoffman. A theme by Giles Farnaby (English composer and virginalist, c.1563-1640) was borrowed by Bernard Stevens (1916-1983) in his *Fantasia on “Giles Farnabys Dreame,”* for piano. Farnaby kept the original material and presented it clearly at first and then composed variations upon it.

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A fantasy could also be written on a composer’s own theme and recycled in a new composition. An example of this is Schubert’s (1797-1828) ‘Wanderer’ Fantasy in C Major, Op. 15 (example 2.1), which was based on the song Der Wanderer, D. 489 (example 2.2) also by Schubert. They are both in C# minor and the opening melody of the Lied is quoted in mm. 1-5 of the piano fantasy. However, Schubert added full chords to this melody line and changed the rhythm in the fantasy. The denseness of the fantasy is in contrast to the Lied’s thinner texture.


Opera Fantasies

Opera fantasies came about in the eighteenth century during a time when opera was a major part of musical life. People were excited to hear new operas, and melodies from the operas were sung in everyday life. They were often transcribed or arranged for a variety of instruments. There are many of these works in existence. Charles Suttoni said,

The opera fantasy for piano was, in many ways, the musical form that best typified concert life in the first half of the nineteenth century. Opera itself was popular musical theater and themes drawn from operas reached to almost all levels of society in the form of arrangements, dances, and even church music. A pianist playing a fantasy or an arrangement of opera themes presented the members of his audience with something that was familiar to them and to which they could respond.

Opera fantasies became increasingly beloved in the nineteenth century, particularly in 1830-1870. Liszt (1811-1886) wrote around fifty piano fantasies based on operas, and one of these is Réminiscences de Don Juan written in 1841 and based on Mozart’s Don Giovanni. It is about sixteen minutes long, while the opera is about three hours in length. According to Charles Suttoni, “unlike many other fantasy composers Liszt does not introduce his own material into the fantasies. Almost without exception, all the themes can be traced back to the opera … His fantasies are at once both the presentation of the opera themes and his commentary on the drama of the opera.” Thus, Liszt uses these ideas to create a new composition while staying true to the

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4 Suttoni, “Piano Fantasies and Transcriptions.”

5 Suttoni, “Piano and Opera,” 244.
opera itself. On the other hand, Thalberg (a contemporary of Liszt) would add his own ideas to the operas specifically in the Introduction. An example of an opera fantasy by Thalberg is the *Fantasy on Barbiere di Siviglia*, Op. 63. He uses the combination of original and borrowed ideas to create something new. Modern composers who wrote in the opera fantasie style include Emanuel Chabrier, Ferruccio Busoni, and Ronald Stevenson.

Stevenson wrote two pieces in the opera fantasy style. One is his *Fantasy on Doktor Faust* which later become part of his *Prelude, Fugue, and Fantasy on Busoni’s Faust*; and the other his *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy*.

**Free-Form Piano Fantasies**

There are also piano fantasies that are more free form and have an improvisatory quality. Some of the composers who contributed to this genre were C. P. E. Bach (1714-1788), Mozart (1756-1791), and Chopin (1810-1849). Mozart wrote four piano fantasies, and an example is his Fantasia No. 4 in C minor, K. 475 preceding the Sonata in C Minor, K. 457. The two compositions were published at the same time and are commonly grouped together.

C. P. E. Bach wrote nineteen piano fantasias and they are all classified as either “strict” or “free,” though he did not classify them as such until 1762. Chopin also wrote in an improvisatory style with his Op. 49 fantasy. Carl Schacter discussing Op. 49 says,

> Few genres of tonal compositions offer the musical analyst so many difficulties as does the fantasy; most of these difficulties relate to issues of unity and continuity, for the disruptions at the surface can make it hard to discern any guiding idea or underlying plan…it (Chopin’s Op. 49 fantasy) represents one of the last manifestations of a remarkable musical tradition; probably the decline in public improvisation spelled the

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6 Suttoni, “Piano and Opera,” 244.

end of the composed fantasy as a viable genre, except in debased and popularized forms like the medley of national airs and the operatic pot-pourri.  

In general, fantasies in this category will be difficult to analyze since they are more improvisatory and less structured. The piano fantasy fell out of popularity towards the end of the nineteenth century, though there are of course exceptions to this.

**Descriptive Piano Fantasies**

Descriptive piano fantasies use text descriptions to give the performer specific instructions and information on how to interpret the score. Some works include *La mort de Louis Seize* by F. D. Mouchy, *La journée d’Ulm* by Daniel Steibelt, *Battle of Waterloo* by Neville Butler Challoner, and *Grand fantasie lugubre au souvenir de trois héros* by Václav Vilém Würfel. Satie is a more well-known composer that contributed to the descriptive piano fantasy genre.

The descriptive piano fantasia by F. D. Mouchy, *La mort de Louis Seize*, was written in 1794 about Louis XVI and his family. The text descriptions are clear about what is going on in the story. For example: “Louis 16 au temple avec sa famille” (Louis XVI in the chapel with his family), “motion faite à la convention de le mettre en jugement” (motion at the convention to put him on trial), “Plusieurs orateurs parlent à la fois” (several speakers talk at the same time), and “tumulte” (uproar). These text descriptions are evocative and similar to what Stevenson does in the *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy*.

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9 Suttoni, “Piano Fantasies and Transcriptions.”


In Steibelt’s *La journée d’Ulm* (example 2.3), composed in 1805, there is a repeated rhythm of dotted eighth - sixteenth note in the right hand while the left hand has a syncopated double dotted quarter note followed by a sixteenth note rhythm. Both hands contribute an evocative sound of the “departure of the troops” as the text description suggests.

Example 2.3. Daniel Steibelt. *La journée d’Ulm* (1805), mm. 8-10 (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2021), 32.

In example 2.4, *Une promenade sur le Nil*, the text description is simply “departure,” and this is evoked in mm. 1-2 by eighth notes in both hands followed by a quarter rest and then repeated which is preparation for the journey. This is followed by an accelerating chromatic scale that also grows louder, suggesting motion of someone going on a journey.


František Kocžwara’s *The Battle of Prague*, composed in 1788, uses the idea of sound-pictures with text descriptions in the score. For example, “groans of the wounded” by
arpeggiation and rolled chords at a *ppp* dynamic level and a *lento* tempo marking. Another example of Kocžwara’s is “Word of Command” with accented single notes on F followed by two F Major chords, sixteenth note to a half note, that are indicative of the text description (example 2.5).


Another composer who used these sound-pictures is Satie, specifically in his *Sonatine Bureaucratique*, composed in 1917. There are text descriptions throughout the score (example 2.6). One example is, “Helas! il faut quitter son bureau, – son bon bureau (Alas! He must leave his office – his dear office).”

The accompanying music of this text is a rhythmic pattern of two eighth notes followed by an eighth rest and this rhythmic pattern occurs four times to show the reticence to leave. Then descending scalar pattern of sixteenths show the man leaving the office and an ascending scalar pattern with the eventual ending upon a major chord show the momentum of leaving.

Another example is *The Johnston Flood*, written in 1889 by Alberto Rivieri. The composition begins with “A peaceful valley scene.” The piece is prefaced by the following poem:

‘Deep called unto deep that day’ – Conemaugh – When by the mountain side, the floods above and floods below joined on thy swelling tide – and sweeping like an avalanche down upon each dreaming, pleasant town, the whelming water dealt the blow that laid thy pride and beauty low.¹²

Later in the piece, “A storm brewing in the distance” (mm. 41-49) has repetitive chords in the right hand while the left hand has an octave leap with a crushed grace note followed by a solo melodic line. At measure 50, the piece is forte with the right hand on a tremolo and the left hand continuing with an octave jump on a Bb octave with a text description of “the hissing winds and roar of thunder.” This representation of nature is similar to what Stevenson does in his fantasy.

Stevenson adds his own text descriptions in the *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy*. Examples include *come borbottamenti maliziosi* (like malicious mutterings) in mm. 3-5, *come rumore propagante* (like spreading rumor) in m. 17, *martellato come grandine* (like hail) in m. 72, *quasi corno da nebbia* (foghorn) in m. 99-101, and *ombroso* (shadowy) in mm.107-8. More information about the text descriptions used in the *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy* will appear in Chapters 4 and 6.

¹² *Descriptive Piano Fantasies*, ed. Goldberg and Bellman, 125.
CHAPTER 3

ORIGINS OF RONALD STEVENSON'S PETER GRIMES PIANO FANTASY

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) completed the opera Peter Grimes, Op. 33, on Feb 10, 1945 and it premiered on June 7, 1945. The opera was commissioned by the Koussevitzky foundation. Britten “conceived the vague idea of writing an opera based on [George] Crabbe’s poem centred round the character of Grimes,” and said, “I didn’t suppose anything would come of it but I mentioned the idea to Koussevitzky and he’s giving me a thousand dollars as a commission!”¹ Serge Koussevitzky, the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1924 to 1949, was a proponent of modern music. Britten dedicated the opera to Koussevitzky’s recently deceased wife, Natalie.

The story of the opera was based on the poem, “The Borough” by George Crabbe. Britten and his partner, Peter Pears, read “an article by E.M. Forster on George Crabbe,” in The Listener while in the United States.² According to his friend Ronald Duncan, Britten was homesick when he picked up “The Borough” and “reading the poem made Britten realise that he wanted to return home immediately.”³ Shortly after this, Britten and Pears returned to England.⁴

“The Borough” was published in 1810 as a thirty-page narrative and includes a set of twenty-four letters. Each letter is preceded by quotations by famous authors such as Homer, Ovid or Shakespeare. It is set in the town of Aldeburgh in the early nineteenth century and the first letter is a description of the town. The letters cover a variety of topics including religion,

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³ Duncan, Working with Britten, 35.
government, professions, amusements, and even specific people. The poet, George Crabbe, was born in Aldeburgh. His son described the town,

as a poor and wretched place lying between “a low hill or cliff, on which only the old church and a few better houses were then situated, and the beach of the German Ocean. It consisted of two parallel and unpaved streets, running between mean and scrambling houses, the abodes of seafaring men, pilots and fishers. The range of houses nearest to the sea had suffered so much from repeated invasions of the waves, that only a few scattered tenements appeared erect among the desolation.” As for the beach, then as now it consisted of “large rolled stones, then loose shingle, and, at the fall of the tide, a stripe of fine hard sand. Vessels of all sorts, from the large heavy troll-boat to the yawl and prame, drawn up along the shore – fishermen preparing their tackle, or sorting their spoil – and, nearer the gloomy old town – hall (the only indication of municipal dignity) a few groups of mariners, chiefly pilots, taking their quick, short walk backwards and forwards, every eye watchful of a signal from the office – such was the squalid scene.”

Thus, the Aldeburgh of Crabbe’s time becomes the Aldeburgh of the *Peter Grimes* opera and later on that of the *Piano Fantasy*. The writer of the poem, the composer of the opera, and the composer of the *Piano Fantasy* all lived in or had connections to Aldeburgh.

After he decided to write a composition based on “The Borough,” Britten asked Montagu Slater (1902-1956) to write the libretto. They had worked together before when Britten composed music for a few plays of Slater’s. The libretto for *Peter Grimes* was based on “Letter XXII: Peter Grimes” from “The Borough” and also added material on Ellen Orford from Letter XX. Britten and Peter Pears had already done some work on the subject matter and they edited Slater’s libretto, which ended up taking him longer to write than they hoped. However, the libretto helped to shape *Peter Grimes* into the powerful opera that it is known to be. The character of Peter Grimes may have been based on a real person: “Edward Fitzgerald, who was a

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7 White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas*, 40.
friend of Crabbe’s son has left it on record that the Peter Grimes of the poem was based on an actual fisherman named Tom Brown, who lived in Aldeburgh in the middle of the eighteenth century.”

The characters of the Peter Grimes opera from “The Borough” are Peter Grimes, Ellen Orford (schoolteacher), Swallow (coroner), the rector, Auntie (landlady of the Boar) and her nieces, Ned Keene (apothecary), Balstrode (retired skipper), and townspeople. Peter Grimes and Ellen Orford are in different letters of “The Borough,” so there was no interaction between them originally and this was added by Britten, Pears, and Slater. Britten and Pears had a definitive idea of what they wanted the storyline to be and what they wanted to do with it. Ronald Duncan, a writer and playwright, reworked a section of Slater’s libretto of Peter Grimes that Britten did not approve. In Duncan’s own words,

> When I had seen Ben in London a few weeks before he came to Devon, he had told me that he had run into difficulties with the libretto of Peter Grimes and was particularly dissatisfied with the lyrical passages and especially the end of the last act. He warned me that he expected my help and was going to try and finish the opera in Devon. Meanwhile he had given me Montagu Slater’s libretto to read. I had not been impressed, and as I had not at that time written a full opera myself, I thought his work could easily be improved. The dramatic structure and the characterisation was firm enough but, as Ben complained, it failed to provide him with any springboard in the lyrical passages.

Some of the dramatic conflicts that occur throughout the opera are the town vs. Grimes, Grimes vs. Ellen, and Grimes vs. his own inner torment. The Piano Fantasy focuses on Grimes and the town’s constant misunderstandings of each other, and the antagonization that builds throughout the Piano Fantasy until Grimes can handle it no more.

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8 White, Benjamin Britten, 101.

9 Duncan, Working with Britten, 49.

10 Duncan, Working with Britten, 37.
The unspoken central character in the opera is the sea. There are the descriptions of it, and the atmospheric sounds and feelings are present throughout, as is the relationship that Grimes has to the sea. Grimes spends the majority of his life at sea and continues to return to it no matter what tragedies have occurred, such as his apprentice dying. Fishing is also his source of income. It is fitting then that the ending of the opera shows him returning to the sea for the last time.

The reception of the opera was mostly positive. A review by Ernest Newman at The Sunday Times said,

For the first time in English opera, we have a mind both rich in musical invention and at home on the stage … The really great things in Peter Grimes, the things that make us feel that this is he who should come, are the moments in which 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.¹¹

Newman expanded his review into three parts, and they were published on June 10, June 17, and June 24, 1945. An anonymous review that appeared the day after the opera’s premiere (June 8, 1945) said, “expectations ran high and were not disappointed.”¹²

Britten moved to Aldeburgh in 1947. He then established a festival that began in 1948. The festival was a success and continued annually. The 1948 festival did not include a performance of Peter Grimes, however the opera still had a presence there, as “stage models and photographs of the opera were exhibited.”¹³

In 1972, BBC Television commissioned Stevenson to compose the Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy and it premiered on BBC Television (BBC2) in Summer of 1972 with Stevenson


¹² Brett, Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes, 92.

Stevenson’s *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy* is a six-minute depiction of Britten’s *Peter Grimes* that masterfully presents the opera, in miniature form, in such a way that Britten approved of Stevenson’s approach. Mark Gasser learned from conversations with Stevenson that:

when Stevenson played his composition to Benjamin Britten, he was so impressed by the Peter Grimes Fantasy that he arranged for his own publisher, Boosey and Hawkes to release the work (1972). As Boosey and Hawkes had sole possession of the copyright to Peter Grimes, this avoided any unreasonably complicated legal issues.¹⁵

Stevenson was also involved in the Aldeburgh Festival. The seven letters written between Britten and Stevenson mostly refer to the festival and additionally there were Christmas cards exchanged between the two families.¹⁶ Malcolm MacDonald says of the *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy*, “This magnificent fantasy was an earnest of Stevenson’s friendship with and regard for, Britten, developed over several visits to the Aldeburgh Festival.”¹⁷ A letter from Britten to Stevenson written on Dec 7, 1972 mentions the *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy*:

> My dear Ronald, Thank you very much for sending the P.G. Fantasy on my birthday – it was fine to have a copy signed by you. I think it is a splendid piece, and are we to have it played by you at the Festival? We all (especially me!) hope so. I am away from Aldeburgh at the moment, finding peace and quiet (apart from tempestuous rain and ___) to finish the sketches of the new opera. It is a very difficult and tense piece, and has all but killed me! With thanks once again, and love to all. Yours ever, Ben.¹⁸


¹⁵ Mark Gasser, “Ronald Stevenson, Composer Pianist: An Exegetical Critique from a Pianistic Perspective” (PhD diss., Edith Cowan University, Western Australia, 2013), 122.


¹⁷ MacDonald, *Ronald Stevenson*, 82.

¹⁸ Scott-Sutherland, *Ronald Stevenson*, 122.
The opera Britten referred to was *Death in Venice*. Stevenson performed the *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy* on June 25, 1973 at the 26th Aldeburgh Festival.  

Robert Hugill wrote in his article “Remembering Stevenson,” “I did hear him playing his *Peter Grimes Fantasy*, talking about how Benjamin Britten appreciated it apart from the section at the end where the pianist leans in to the piano and plays the strings directly.”

Stevenson’s admiration for Britten can be seen in his compositions based on Britten’s compositions and dedications to Britten over the years. He dedicated *Homage to William Shield (The Ploughboy)* to Britten and Pears; this composition was written around 1949-50, over twenty years before the *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy*. Stevenson also transcribed Britten’s *Walzt*, Op. 3, no. 2 [sic: Britten’s childhood misspelling] for chamber orchestra around 1980. After Britten’s death, Stevenson composed *Sonatina Serenissima in Memoriam Benjamin Britten* based upon *Death in Venice* by Britten.

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CHAPTER 4

FORM AND OVERVIEW OF THE PETER GRIMES PIANO FANTASY

The Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy combines vocal gestures and techniques, rhythmic gestures, and atmospheric elements pertaining to the weather and nature. Stevenson reduced the whole story to six and a half minutes by choosing enough of the motives that the story is told with the use of music and text descriptions. Stevenson wrote a brief description of the Piano Fantasy in notes for a CD that he recorded in 1985. He described the composition as a “fantasy-fugue preceded by a brief introduction and followed by a recitative-like cadenza and an ‘epilogue.’”

How Stevenson has sectioned his piano fantasy can be a springboard to the analysis. The opera is made up of a prologue, three acts (each of which includes two scenes), and six interludes interspersed between the scenes. The interludes introduce themes that are used in the acts that follow. Some gestures are easy to spot in the Piano Fantasy while others are hidden due to layering of themes. Table 4.1 shows the structure of the piano fantasy along with major themes used from the opera. It starts with an introduction then moves into a fugue followed by a free-form section. This leads back into fugal material which builds into a stretto with multiple fugue subjects and answers overlapping. This then transitions into a recitative/cadenza and ends with a long coda acting as an epilogue.

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1 Scott-Sutherland, Ronald Stevenson, 109n115.
Table 4.1 Form of Piano Fantasy:

Each motive is labeled with a color; Ellen Orford (purple), Grimes (red), vocal motives by others (blue), and orchestral motives (green).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>• mm. 1-2 original material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fugue Subject and Answer</td>
<td>• mm. 3-6 Motive A “malicious mutterings” fugue theme (Prologue)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Subject on tonic of Bb on beat 1 of m. 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Answer on Fb on beat 4 of m. 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episode 1</td>
<td>• mm. 7-9 Motive B “Peter Grimes” (Prologue)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mm. 10-16 arpeggiation imitating ocean (Interlude I)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mm. 11-13 Motive C “Great Bear and Pleiades” (Act I, sc ii)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mm. 14-16 Motive D “Let her among you without fault” (Act I, sc ii)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fugue Subject and Answer</td>
<td>• mm. 17-19 Motive A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Subject on tonic of Bb on beat 1 of m. 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Answer on dominant of F on beat 3 of m. 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episode 2 (fantasy/free form)</td>
<td>• mm. 20-27 arpeggiation imitating ocean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mm. 24-28 Motive E “What Harbor” aria (Act I, sc I and Act III, sc ii)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mm. 28-38 A major scales (Act I, sc i and sc ii)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• mm. 31-35 Motive E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mm. 39-46 Motive F “the storm” (Interlude II and Act I, sc ii)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mm. 46-49 Motive E partial quotation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mm. 47-55 arpeggiation imitating ocean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mm. 56-71 Motive G “con fuoco” (Interlude II)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• mm. 69-70 Motive E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mm. 72-73 “hail-like” section, original material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mm. 73-75 derived from Motive A with entrance on beat 4 of m. 73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mm. 76-77 transition material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stretto</td>
<td>• mm. 78-93 Motive A in different forms and variations</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Subject on tonic of Bb on beat 1 of m. 78</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Answer on dominant of F on beat 2 of m. 78</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Subject on tonic of Bb on beat 3 of m. 78</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Subject/Answer on C and G in mm. 81-82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Entrances on D and E in mm. 83-85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Melody of subject occurs in mm. 88-89 without the fugal rhythm</td>
</tr>
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Table 4.1 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Measures</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>• Subject/Answer on Bb and F in mm. 90-91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Subject/Answer on Bb and F# in m. 92</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mm. 94-97 derived from Motive B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recitative/cadenza</td>
<td>• m.98 unmeasured recitative, arpeggiation imitating ocean, cello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>imitation in bass line (Act II, sc i)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coda (epilogue)</td>
<td>• mm. 99-105 “foghorn” from opera in bass line</td>
</tr>
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<td>• mm. 101-104 Motive C</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• mm. 105-109 arpeggiation imitating ocean</td>
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<tr>
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<td>• mm. 110-113 Motive E</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mm. 114-128 Motive H solo flute and violin (Interlude I)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mm. 129-131 arpeggiation with left pedal to imitate opera ending</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Motive A, “Malicious mutterings,” the most important gesture of the piano fantasy and a prominent one in the opera is from the opera’s Prologue, mm. 1-2. It occurs first in the Piano Fantasy in mm. 3-6 and is indicated as *come borbottamenti maliziosi* (like malicious mutterings) in the fantasy. It is easy to imagine the town members gossiping from the articulation and rhythmic emphasis which alludes to the disapproval of the crowd of the actions of Peter Grimes. The opera has all instruments playing the motive simultaneously. This rhythmic motive provides the fugue subject. In m. 17, the subject of the fugue from mm. 3-7 recurs. The subject is first in the right hand on tonic with the text description “like spreading rumor” and then in the dominant in the left hand. This continues through m. 19. In m. 77, the “malicious mutterings” material from the opening fugue returns. In the right hand, the first presentation in m. 3 was on Bb$_2$. In m. 17, it’s an octave higher on Bb$_3$, and in m. 78 it’s on Bb$_4$, so the right hand is an octave higher each time. Measures 78-87 have fugal material, as shown in Table 4.1. Measures 88-89 are a variation on the fugue subject, keeping the same intervals but varying the rhythm. Stevenson’s diligent study of counterpoint can be seen in the similarity of the theme to those of some of
Bach’s Inventions such as Bach’s Invention No.1 in C Major (example 4.1), where the subject is presented in the right hand and then in the left-hand creating harmonies between the two presentations. This subject by Bach incorporates large leaps in a similar manner to Stevenson’s fugal subject as well as showcasing a distinctive rhythmic pattern.


Motive B, “Peter Grimes” occurs whenever Grimes’ name is sung in the opera, beginning in mm. 5-7 of the Prologue. It is present in measures 7-8 of the *Piano Fantasy*. In the opera, this motive leads directly into the inquest into the death of Grimes’s apprentice, and it recurs in the opera when Grimes is questioned or something ominous is about to happen. It recurs in the *Piano Fantasy* in mm. 94-97. The introduction of the *Piano Fantasy* is also derived from a version of the “Peter Grimes” motive from Act II, sc i of the opera. The Introduction will be discussed more in Chapter 6.

Motive F, “the storm” derives from Interlude II of the opera and recurs in Act I, sc ii. It is presented in mm. 39-46 of the *Piano Fantasy*. Motive G appears in the opera at Interlude II in mm. 57-71. Motive H, for solo flute and violin in the opera, is the motive at the opening of Interlude I. It does not appear in the *Piano Fantasy* until the end, in mm. 115-118, and at mm.
126-28, when it is plucked inside the piano to represent Peter going out to sea for the last time. The orchestral motives will be discussed more in depth in Chapter 5.

Several arias have a presence in the *Piano Fantasy*. Motive C, “Great Bear and Pleiades” is sung by Grimes in Act I, sc ii of the opera. It occurs in the *Piano Fantasy* in mm. 11-14 and mm. 101-4. Motive D, “Let her among you without fault” occurs in mm. 14-16 of the *Piano Fantasy* and is from Act I, sc ii of the opera. Motive G, “What Harbor” is from Act I, sc i of the opera and is presented briefly in the *Piano Fantasy* in mm. 69-70. These arias and their presentations in the *Piano Fantasy* will be discussed more in depth in Chapter 6.

**Text Descriptions**

Throughout the *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy*, there are added text descriptions to inform the pianist how to interpret the composition, and to give the audience an impression of what’s happening in the storyline. These text descriptions are a starting point for piecing together from where in the opera the gestures were taken and the inspiration behind what is happening in the music at that moment. Some of the indications included are “like malicious mutterings” (example 5.2), “like spreading rumor” (example 5.3), “like hail” (example 4.2), “fog-horn” (example 6.9), and “shadowy” (example 6.18). The pianist is able to make the music sound “malicious” and “like spreading rumor” by the articulation and dynamics used, which are the same used by Britten in the opera. The *Piano Fantasy* showcases these elements with sound-pictures. “Like hail” is a rapid descending group of notes that are meant to sound like frozen ice pelting (example 4.2). This idea is not in the opera but is original material by Stevenson based on the stormy atmosphere created by Britten. Stevenson ties these motives together by creating the environment of the sea town.

**Gestures in the Piano Fantasy**

Since the Borough is a seaside village, it makes sense that the sea is often in the background. The sea is ever-present as a character in *Peter Grimes* and thus also in the *Piano Fantasy*. There is the constant motion of the waves the “foghorn” coming from a lighthouse, and the ferociousness of the storm. The sea is the constant in Grimes’ life, to which he returns, at the end.

Stevenson draws from the antagonism between Grimes and the town. The moments that are in a major key are brief and often accompanied by something in a minor key or mode. For example, mm. 11-16 have the right hand in E Major while the left-hand sounds like a Bb minor chord missing the fifth. The A major scales that occur in mm. 27-31 and mm. 35-38 are of a frenzied and continuous nature and alternate with A mixolydian scales. The *Piano Fantasy* does not include moments of rest or respite. The end of the *Piano Fantasy* has an eerie calm to it.
charged with the emotion of what has transpired, and the knowledge of what is to come (i.e. the death of Peter Grimes).

Possibly one of the reasons that Peter Grimes has stood the test of time is the emotional response audiences have had to the storyline of the opera and to the character of Grimes himself. The finely drawn individual characters of the village contribute to the sense of Grimes as one man against the rest. However, the Piano Fantasy is missing most of the characters from the town. The overall nature of the town and how much the people despise Grimes is incorporated into the “malicious mutterings” motive and its fugal treatment, but the individuals are missing except for Ellen Orford, who is present with snippets from her arias. The “Peter Grimes” motive is also originally sung by Hobson and Swallow so they are somewhat present as well. Thus, the Piano Fantasy focuses on Grimes, the contempt of the town, and the atmosphere of the seaside weather.
CHAPTER 5

USE OF THE PIANO AS ORCHESTRA IN THE PETER GRIMES PIANO FANTASY

The orchestra of *Peter Grimes* is made up of two flutes doubling on piccolos as needed, two oboes with the 2nd doubling English horn, two clarinets in Bb and A as needed with the 2nd player doubling Eb clarinet, two bassoons, double bassoon, four horns in F, three trumpets with the 1st and 2nd in C and 3rd in D, three trombones, tuba, timpani, two percussion, celesta, harp, violins, viola, cello, and double bass. There are also offstage instruments including organ, bells, and tuba (fog-horn), and a dance-band with two clarinets in Bb, solo violin, solo double bass, and percussion. The orchestra of Britten is large and is used as atmosphere, to enhance the storyline as needed, and to support the voices. Stevenson makes use of the entire piano from the lowest range to the highest range and uses pedal to amplify it in the *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy*. Sudden contrasts of a high and low register as well as the constant repetition and alteration of themes in the fugue are used to evoke emotion and the town’s distrust and hatred of Grimes that is almost obsessive. The motives that Stevenson used in the Piano Fantasy from instrumental sections of the opera are detailed below. Stevenson uses range and texture on the piano to emulate emotional and atmospheric effects created by the large orchestra.

Motive A, “Malicious Mutterings” is the opening phrase of the opera played by the woodwinds. The opera setting is, “A room inside the Moot Hall, arranged for a coroner’s inquest. The room is crowded with the excited inhabitants of the Borough. Swallow is sitting at a raised table.” (Example 5.1). The motive appears first in the *Piano Fantasy* at mm. 3-5, where it becomes the fugue subject, the entry of the right hand three beats after the left. Both hands of the pianist are written in the bass clef (example 5.2). Gestures based on mm. 1-4 of the opera recur throughout both compositions. In mm. 1-14 of the opera, Britten only uses woodwinds for this
motive (flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, and double bassoon). Stevenson uses this phrase in the *Piano Fantasy* only in a low range on the piano for the first two presentations of the subject, which is an interesting choice since most of the woodwinds are of a high register minus the double bassoon. The low register used by Stevenson helps to give an ominous quality to this gesture. However, he does switch the motive to a high register in mm. 90-93 preceding the recititative section which is closer to the opera’s opening range. The *Piano Fantasy* starts with a dynamic of piano and the inclusion of articulations that are the same as the opera. The “malicious mutterings” motive that starts on Bb\textsubscript{1} creates the sound of the crowd muttering maliciously and “under their breath” at the town meeting. The rhythm Stevenson uses from the opera enhances this with the pattern of sixteenth note, sixteenth rest, and then sixteenth note slurred into an eighth note with a staccato release. This motive recurs in mm. 17-19 of the *Piano Fantasy* (example 5.3). It is also the basis of the fugue in the *Piano Fantasy* as detailed in Chapter 4.

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Example 5.2. Ronald Stevenson, Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy, mm. 3-5 (England: Boosey and Hawkes, 1972), 1.


Motive F, “storm” comes from Interlude II (example 5.4) of the opera and returns in Act I, scene ii (example 5.7). The “storm” motive is orchestrated with strings (violin, viola, and cello), and there is a solo in the timpani supported by the double bass and harp. It is harmonized with woodwinds and horns in F. The motive is used in mm. 39-46 (example 5.5) and 56-60 of the Piano Fantasy (example 5.6). In the opera, the tempo indication is presto con fuoco, and the dynamics start fortissimo, and then crescendo and diminuendo over three eighth notes creating the illusion of the ebb and flow of waves in a storm. In the Piano Fantasy in mm. 39-46, the
“storm” motive is in the right hand and has the motion of rapidly ascending and descending by seconds. That back and forth motion creates the sound of a storm accompanied by the sixteenths in the left hand.

Motive G, “con fuoco,” from mm. 56-60 of the *Piano Fantasy* is imitating the strings from Interlude II of the opera in not only the melody, but also with the dynamics. The rhythm is similar, though the *Piano Fantasy* is twice as fast with sixteenth notes and a quarter note when it begins, instead of like the opera motive with eighth notes and a half note which creates a diminution of the opera’s version. When the motive returns in Act I, scene ii, the scene setting says, “the gale is now at hurricane force and they push the door shut with difficulty.”¹ The text that goes with the return of the “storm” motive is, “the window shutters blow open.”²


² Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 171.
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**Instrumental Solos from *Peter Grimes***

Turning the piano into an orchestra means the imitation of instruments on the piano. An example prominent in the *Piano Fantasy* is Motive H flute and violin solo from Interlude I (example 5.8). It is one of the most important melodies from the opera and parts of it recur in Act I as well as at the end of the opera in Act III, scene ii.


It is heard in the *Piano Fantasy* near the end, in mm.115-117 (example 5.9) and in mm. 126-28 (example 5.10). Stevenson imitates the flute and violin combination by putting the melody in the same register and then makes the sound more ethereal by plucking the melody inside the piano.
Stevenson borrows from the sound effect of the harp’s arpeggiation that is heard in tandem with this motive at the end of the opera. He combines the harp’s sound effect with the motivic material of Motive H flute and violin solo to get a new sound effect. The melody in mm. 126-28 (example 5.10) is heard over a chord caught by the damper pedal that reaches the second lowest note of the piano (Bb) followed by at tremolo on an octave (Fb) followed by a return the second lowest note which creates an ambiance of distant thunder. Before the pianist plucks the strings inside the piano, the right hand plays a silenzio cluster chord on beat 10 of 114. The fives notes of Db – Eb – F – Gb – Bb are the ones plucked inside the piano in mm.115-17 and then an octave higher in mm. 126-28.


This melody plucked inside the piano creates a hollow, eerie feeling that matches the ending of the opera. As Grimes sails out to sea never to return, all that has occurred is echoing in his mind and in that of the audience, and it leaves all with a sad phrase of remembrance. Stevenson used extended techniques in other compositions of his as well such as his 2nd Piano Concerto where he is shown using the piano as a drum (figure 5.1).

![Figure 5.1. Stevenson using extended techniques.](Ronald%20Stevenson,%20The%20Man%20and%20His%20Music,%20(England:%20Boosey%20and%20Hawkes,%201972),%20151.)

Another example is Hobson’s drum, which is heard in Act II, scene i, as the town is going to hunt down Grimes (example 5.11). At the *ritmico* indication, the drum imitates the “Peter Grimes” motive from the opening of the opera as Peter is called to testify at the trial (Peter Grimes, Peter Grimes!). This rhythm appears in mm. 7-8 of the *Piano Fantasy* (example 6.3). It is in octaves in the low register, with the pedal held down for each iteration, creating an insistent, drum-like effect. Before this, this motive has only been in the vocal parts.

**Orchestral Technique to Create Atmosphere**

At mm. 8-9 of Interlude I, arpeggiation is used to demonstrate ocean waves in the clarinet, harp, and viola parts. Arpeggiation occurs first in mm. 10-16 of the *Piano Fantasy* (example 5.12) and the notes have been changed to Bb and Db in mm. 10-11, which hints at Bb dorian while the opera version was in G dorian (example 5.13). This portion of the opera is an arpeggiation of thirds while the *Piano Fantasy* uses only two notes though the pattern spans two octaves. Stevenson changed the arpeggiation to make more sense for the hand of a pianist, which allows for layering, in this case of reminiscence of the aria “Now the Great Bear and Pleiades,” in the *Piano Fantasy* to make more sense harmonically. Arpeggiation is also used to imitate waves in other sections of the *Piano Fantasy*: these include mm. 20-27, mm. 32-34, mm. 47-52, portions of the recitative in m. 98, mm. 105-109, mm. 122-123, and mm. 129-130.

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Scales are used to create forward momentum. In the opera, first as A minor scales in Act I, scene i (example 5.14) and then becoming A major scales. In Act I, the orchestration of the A minor scales begins in the flutes, oboes, bassoons, violin and cello and then switches to flute only with the scales alternating between 1st and 2nd flutes; these scales continue until they transpose to C minor. After this, there is an A minor scale that occurs in other instruments starting in bassoon. The pattern switches to A major scales, and the scales alternate between 1st flute and 1st clarinets and 2nd flutes and 2nd clarinets.
In the *Piano Fantasy*, there are A major scales only and they occur in mm. 28-31 (example 5.15) and mm. 35-38 and accompany the Motive E, “What Harbor” (discussed in Chapter 6). They overlap the same way as in the opera with the last note of each scale happening simultaneously with the first note of the next scale, as in the flutes’ patterns and in a similar octave range. The rhythm in the *Piano Fantasy* is the same as in the opera. The text that goes with this in the opera is “We strained into the wind, heavily laden. We plunged into the wave’s shuddering challenge. Then the sea rose to a storm over the gunwales.”³ This melody also prefigures, Motive E. These scales are also the only major key representation in the *Piano Fantasy*. They are accompanied by a “foghorn” representation in the bass on E₂ and E₃.


**Piano as Organ**

Pedal 3 (middle pedal) of the piano is used in an organ-like manner, several times in the *Piano Fantasy*. The first time is in mm. 23-28 (example 5.16). It enables the low E’s to continue while the tenor line (Motive E “What Harbor”) in the middle and the arpeggiation in the right-hand sound above. With Ped. 3, the bass notes can continue on without having to be connected to all of the other notes being played.

The next time this pedaling occurs is in mm. 30-35 and again in mm. 46-53. However in mm. 94-97, both the right and middle pedals are used and while this was assumed before, Stevenson specifically wrote it out in this passage (example 5.17). There are similarities between the opening of the *Piano Fantasy* and mm. 94-97 with the group of two sixteenths split between hands leading into the following chord. There is an indication for the right and left pedals with 2 *Ped* in mm. 105-9. An indication to switch to Ped. 3 alone occurs in m. 109 where the indication is *tre corde (senza ped)* with a Ped. 3 indication underneath, and then back to 2 *Ped* at the end of m.109. With 2 *Ped*, the damper pedal and una corda pedal are indicated, and this helps to create a
muted sound that gives the “shadowy” effect indicated in example 5.18. Example 5.18 is discussed more in Chapter 6 due to the motivic material.


The difficulty of pedal coordination in this piece is considerable, with the frequent switches between different pedals and different combination of these pedals. These different pedal combinations created a range of sound and tone colors. It can create different effects that would not be possible otherwise such as the “shadowy” effect mentioned earlier.
Auxiliary Percussion

The fog-horn is imitated by the tuba in the opera, and in the *Piano Fantasy* by playing a low Eb with the sostenuto pedal (example 5.19). The “foghorn” first occurs in the *Piano Fantasy* in mm. 99-105 on a low Eb and the middle pedal is depressed in order to catch the foghorn in that pedal so that it can continue for six measures. This example will be discussed more in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6

VOCAL INSPIRATION AND TECHNIQUES INFLUENTIAL ON STEVENSON’S
PETER GRIMES FANTASY

Peter Grimes is a through-composed opera with vocal writing that mimics natural speaking patterns of speech in its emotional context. This is probably because of Britten’s feelings about the voice: “the only thing which moves me about the voice is something that comes out naturally from...personality. I loathe what is normally called a ‘beautiful voice.’” In Britten’s own words:

In the past hundred years, English writing for the voice has been dominated by strict subservience to logical speech-rhythms, despite the fact that accentuation according to sense often contradicts the accentuation demanded by emotional content. Good recitative should transform the natural intonations and rhythms of everyday speech with memorable musical phrases ... if the prosody of the poem and emotional situation demand them ... which may need prolongation far beyond their normal speech length or speed of delivery that would be impossible in conversation.¹

In an opera, there are different styles of vocal delivery. There are lines that are fully sung, lines that are spoken, lines sung on a single pitch that are closer to speech and similar to Sprechstimme, and recitative. Stevenson emulates these vocal techniques in his piano fantasy.

Important Texts from Peter Grimes and Representation in the Piano Fantasy

Motive A “malicious mutterings” is instrumental only, without vocal text, for most of its presentations in the opera. However, it incorporates text when Swallow sings, “Peter Grimes, I hear advise you!” (Example 6.7). It appears in the Piano Fantasy as fugal material in mm. 3-5 (example 5.2), mm. 17-19 (example 5.3), and mm. 78-92 in stretto.

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An opera that starts immediately in a courtroom is sure to have intensity to it. Motive B “Peter Grimes” is repeated often in the opera and several times in the piano fantasy as well. The motive from the opening of the opera says, “Peter Grimes!” three times successively (example 6.2). The motives of the name “Peter Grimes” and of the text “Peter Grimes, Take the oath!” (example 6.3) are imitated in mm. 7-8 of the Fantasy on repeated A’s on octaves in the left hand and then using both hands (example 6.4). This is almost an exact replica with the repeated A’s of the opera. The fantasy has this representation of the “Peter Grimes” motive in several places. This rhythm recurs at the beginning of the recitative of the Piano Fantasy in m. 98, where it repeats several times over with indications of libero and molto agitato demente.

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The “Peter Grimes” motive is generally sung by other characters in the opera such as Swallow, Hobson or the chorus. Grimes sings it himself in Act III, scene ii when he is starting to lose his mind and the passage there ends with a long melisma. (Example 6.5). Stevenson quotes the phrase exactly, however he places it an octave lower than it sounds, and indicates it as *quasi violoncello* (example 6.6), turning a vocal line into an instrumental one. Both works have *lento* tempo markings and the dynamics are copied exactly.

**Motive C “Great Bear and Pleiades” aria is sung by Peter in the opera in Act I, scene ii** (example 6.7). The text says,

Now the Great Bear and Pleiades where earth moves are drawing up the clouds of human grief breathing solemnity in the deep night. Who can decipher in storm or starlight the written character of a friendly fate as the sky turns the world for us to change. But if the horoscope’s bewildering, like a flashing turmoil of a shoal of a herring. Who, who, who, who, who, who, can turn skies back and begin again?²

This aria shows Peter wanting to be given another chance while also recognizing that something awful has happened. He wants to be able to start over and begging the universe to give him another chance.

² Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 196-98.
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After this, the chorus erupts saying he has gone crazy and been drinking. They do not believe him and his effort to change. This motive occurs in the *Piano Fantasy* at mm. 11-14 in the top line with the repeated E’s and stepwise motion, overlapping with a presentation in the alto line (example 6.8). There is also a snippet of the motive in middle voice of the right hand in mm. 15-16 which occurs in-between Motive D presentations mentioned below (example 6.11). Motive C then recurs in mm. 101-104, where two presentations again overlap, but this time doubled at the octave each time (example 6.9). These overlapping presentations are further support of fugal material in the *Piano Fantasy*. 

Motive D, “Let her among you without fault cast the first stone” is sung by Ellen Orford in the opera in Act I, scene i. Ellen sings a descending scale followed by a descending minor third to end on (example 6.10). The steady movement and emphasis on the words fault and stone seem like a reprimand (and Ellen is the schoolmistress). In mm. 14-16 of the Piano Fantasy, there is a quotation of this motive though it is not complete (example 6.11). It only descends for seven notes instead of an entire octave, the rhythm is changed to half notes on the last two notes and it is missing the ending portion of the phrase. The motive is also seen at the beginning of m. 14 with the descending pattern of five notes only. In mm. 14-16, the motive is seen in the highest voice in the right hand as well as the lowest voice in the right hand in mm. 15-16. However, none
of these presentations are complete. Thus, we hear only a whisper of this idea.

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This is in response to the chorus singing, “Ellen, you’re leading us a dance, fetching boys, for Peter Grimes, because the Borough is afraid, you who help will share the blame!” Ellen is empathetic to the plight of Grimes and tries to help him take care of his apprentice. She believes he deserves a chance to prove himself as a good person and that he just needs someone in his corner to help him. In the fantasy this melody is in the right hand while the left hand has a Bb

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3 Britten. Peter Grimes, 76-77.
minor chord arpeggiation undulating beneath. There is also the hope of a romantic relationship in
Act I, scene ii of the opera (example 6.12). However, this quotation is not in the Piano Fantasy.

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One of the most well-known and important arias from the opera is Motive E “What
Harbor Shelters Peace.” (Example 6.13). It is clearly shown in the right-hand melody of the
Piano Fantasy in mm. 69-70 (example 6.14). The aria opens with a distinctive major ninth
followed by a descending minor pentatonic scale. The fantasy quotes the opening intervals
exactly. This phrase also occurs in mm. 24-28 (example 6.15) and mm. 31-35 with the tenor line
hidden as one of the layers, and again the intervals are the same (example 6.16). There is a
partial quotation in mm. 46-49 in the tenor line (example 6.17). The opening of the Piano
Fantasy also has a major ninth leading into beat 3 of m. 1 and m. 2 with a crescendo as in the
opera, though hidden in the middle voice. The text for this aria is, “What harbour shelters peace,
away from tidal waves, away from storms, what harbor can embrace terrors and tragedies? With
her there’ll be no quarrels, with her the mood will stay a harbour evermore where night is turned
to day.”

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4 Britten, Peter Grimes, 127-33.
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An A major scale flourish occurs in this passage in the woodwinds and harp after the presentation of the opening phrase of the aria. This scale flourish can be seen in the *Piano Fantasy* alongside the presentation of the aria in examples 6.17 and 6.18.

It returns near the end of the *Piano Fantasy* in mm. 109-113 (example 6.18), with the melody clearly seen in the top line and in the bass line there is an inversion of this motive.


**Layering in the Piano Fantasy**

Layering is one of Stevenson’s most important techniques for compressing the material of the opera into a short piano piece. Layering is seen in example 6.8, where the top two voices are Motive C, “The Great Bear,” with the sea arpeggiation underneath. In example 6.9, the “foghorn” is the lowest layer while the top two voices are Motive C, “The Great Bear” in counterpoint with each other. Example 6.14 has Motive E, “What Harbor Shelters Peace,” as the
top voice, the tenor line in mm. 70-71 appears to be original material by Stevenson, and sea
arpeggiation is the lowest voice. Example 6.15 has the “foghorn” as the lowest voice, the middle
voice is Motive E, “What Harbor Shelters Peace,” and the top voice is sea arpeggiation. In
example 6.18, the top and bottom voices are Motive E, “What Harbor Shelters Peace,” with the
highest voice in original form and the lowest in inversion. There is a sixteenth note pattern split
between the thumbs of both hands as the middle voice that creates the “shadowy” effect. These
are just a few of the places in the Piano Fantasy where layering occurs. The harmonies created
by the usage of the overlapping motives from the opera create new sounds and colors of
Stevenson’s own making, while still keeping enough thematic material that is based on Britten’s
opera.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

Ronald Stevenson’s *Peter Grimes Piano Fantasy* re-tells the basic storyline of Britten’s *Peter Grimes* in the span of six-and-a-half minutes, cast as a fugue, cadenza, and epilogue.¹ It is an apt depiction of the opera on which it is based, and Stevenson does his best to adhere to the overall mood created in the opera by Britten. The animosity of the town and their hatred of Grimes is heard from the beginning of the *Piano Fantasy*. This melds into arpeggiation that demonstrates the rolling waves of the sea along with arias sung by Peter Grimes and Ellen Orford. The music builds in intensity and goes through motives heard in the orchestral parts as well as repetitions of arias. A storm builds during the *Piano Fantasy* and Stevenson adds his own hail to that storm. The repetitions of motivic material help to unify the composition and give it structure and form. The end of the opera and the end of the *Piano Fantasy* are eerily similar in the fading away of the music and the symbolism of Peter Grimes going out to sea to never be heard from again.

Stevenson takes important melodic and rhythmic motives in the opera mostly from Grimes’s music, and the ambiance of the weather. There is little material from the other characters and little extraneous material outside of the opera. The layering of themes and motives in the *Piano Fantasy* allows Stevenson to incorporate more of the motivic material; this added material occurs mostly in the episodes of the fugue and in the final section. Several of the themes that Stevenson chooses appear in imitation, to complement the fugal structure of the *Piano Fantasy*, showing the influence of J. S. Bach. Stevenson does not deviate much from the motives and atmospheric ambiance of the world of *Peter Grimes* and the town of Aldeburgh. However,

¹ Scott-Sutherland, *Ronald Stevenson*, 109n115.
Stevenson creates new harmonies that are not heard in the opera due to the way he combines Britten’s motives and atmospheric elements. For example, the use of arpeggiation to create the atmosphere of the sea combined with motives, and often the inclusion of the “foghorn” as a pedal point as the lowest voice.

During the *Piano Fantasy*, there is also a sense of forward momentum that builds to create, “an unremitting showpiece of cumulative rhythmic tension,” an idea mentioned by MacDonald during his discussion of the *Passacaglia on DSCH*. Stevenson does this in the *Piano Fantasy* by starting with rapid octave motion that jumps across the piano followed by the fugue motive, and he continues to build the *Piano Fantasy* with layering, rhythmic tension, and articulation. The *Piano Fantasy* continues to build till the unmeasured recitative which is indicated as *molto agitato demente* with rhythmic material that is syncopated and to be played *con summa forza*. It then builds to an arpeggiation flourish that moves quickly up to the highest Ab on the piano in a swift and percussive manner, and then backs away to be followed by a gradual forward momentum until the epilogue where everything gradually fades away.

Stevenson’s *Piano Fantasy* fits into the piano fantasia genre in several categories. He uses descriptive texts such as “malicious mutterings,” “like spreading rumor,” “shadowy,” and “like hail” in a similar way to descriptive piano fantasias. These texts are a good starting point for the pianist to gain an understanding of what is happening in the *Piano Fantasy* at that point of the composition, and ultimately the opera. The *Piano Fantasy* also takes memorable motives from the opera that could be sung and enjoyed by the public in the tradition of opera piano fantasias. In addition to borrowing memorable motives from Britten’s opera, Stevenson also shows us his interpretation of the opera and thus a commentary upon it. This can be seen not

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2 Macdonald, Ronald Stevenson, 102.
only the motives Stevenson chose to use in the Piano Fantasy, but also how frequently they are presented, what they are paired with, and also what he chooses to leave out. This can be related to Suttoni’s discussion on how Liszt’s “fantasies are at once both the presentation of the opera themes and his commentary on the drama of the opera.”³ Thus, Stevenson follows in the path of Liszt’s opera fantasies in this manner. The Piano Fantasy could also be said to borrow from the free-form fantasias during the recitative which is unmeasured and has an improvisatory quality to it.

The motives from Britten’s opera are re-written to make more sense for the hands of a pianist. For example, the arpeggiation is re-written in the Piano Fantasy to create a constant undulating motion while also incorporating other motives or atmospheric elements at the same time. The score alternates different numbers of staves used simultaneously to make it easier to read for the pianist as the composition often has jumps from one end of the piano to the other. Stevenson often uses the same articulation from the opera’s motivic material and that translates easily to the piano. The sostenuto pedal is used to keep the “foghorn” sound heard while not interfering with the other material being played. The different combinations of all three pedals that Stevenson uses during the Piano Fantasy help to create the ambiance heard in the opera. An example of this is the una corda pedal creating a “shadowy” effect due to a more muted tone produced from the piano.

Since the piano is an instrument that can encapsulate a wide range, it makes it easier to condense orchestral material and the ranges of instruments can be used. Stevenson sometimes uses the same range on the piano as in the opera, but as needed will change it to produce the atmospheric elements of a motive on a piano. In the first presentation of “malicious mutterings”

³ Charles Suttoni, “Piano and Opera,” 244.
in the *Piano Fantasy*, Stevenson uses Bb\(_1\) instead of one of the higher octaves used by the woodwinds. This was to create more of a “malicious” impression. Stevenson also chose to pluck Motive H, flute and violin solo inside the piano in the same octave range as in the opera, and borrows from the sound effect of the harp that immediately precedes this motive in the opera.

The most frequent arias used in the *Piano Fantasy* are Motive E, “What Harbor Shelters Peace,” followed by Motive C, “The Great Bear,” both of which are sung by Peter. Their inclusion along with the Motive D, “Let her among you without fault,” sung by Ellen and the Motive A, “malicious mutterings,” and Motive B, “Peter Grimes,” give the *Piano Fantasy* enough of the opera to present it in miniature form. Each of these motives is from an important part of the opera, and they give us the viewpoint of Peter set against the town’s misunderstanding and hatred of him. The brief depiction of Ellen’s motive is important, for she has an integral role as the one person who is trying to understand and help Peter.

Stevenson’s depiction of the motivic material is mostly chronological and enough so that the storyline makes sense when compared to the opera. The beginning and the end of the *Piano Fantasy* are almost exactly the same as the opera, and the way that the music builds captures the spirit of the opera. The gradual backing away of sound in dynamic level and a thin texture at the end are an accurate depiction of the opera and an emotive one. Stevenson’s composition based on Britten’s opera is more than a transcription. It is a representation of the opera that can make the performer more interested in learning the storyline of the opera and then using that knowledge to make a more informed performance.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


