

## Glitter of Waves : Imagery and Music

Originally written for the 1997 Aldeburgh Festival programme book

'Dawn', the first of Britten's *Four Sea Interludes* from *Peter Grimes*, has become so closely associated with the unique shore line of Aldeburgh that you could almost be forgiven for not knowing which came first : did that coast inspire the magical dawn opening, or did the music summon the sea into being? But a more serious question could be, what is it about that music that conjures up a feeling of landscape and place? Is there anything particular about its language or technique that can be defined or analysed?

A prosaic response might be that, if Britten had called it, say, 'Midday in Venice' there would be no particular difficulty in finding appropriate images to match : the abstract nature of music means that the mind is easily led towards associations, whether they are appropriate or inappropriate. Britten's essentially practical, somewhat objective, approach to composing means that he hardly ever resorted to simple 'tone-painting' - the evocation of a specific object or place by means of sound (the vivid pictures of, for instance, Richard Strauss's *Alpine Symphony* are far removed from Britten's world). Apart from *Grimes*, almost the only works that contain explicit imagery are the early *Canadian Carnival*, and the much later *Death in Venice* (and there, only the barcarolle-like music that evokes the rowing of the gondolier).

There is, of course, a difference between music that conjures up an atmosphere of place, and music that is deliberately pictorial. The representation in music of something specific, such as a bird or an animal, goes back a long way, from the stylised bird calls in Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* and Beethoven's quail, nightingale and cuckoo, and the imitation of a storm, in the *Pastoral Symphony*, and reaches forward to the sheep in Strauss's *Don Quixote* and Messiaen's innumerable birds (Respighi's gramophone recording of a nightingale in *The Pines of Rome* hardly counts!). The *Pastoral Symphony* is perhaps the first instance of an impression of place, even if it is nothing more precise than 'the countryside' (Beethoven's bird calls appear in the context of the stylised representation of a rippling brook). One of the earliest explicit representations of a particular place is *Fingal's Cave* - although in fact Mendelssohn notated the main theme of the piece before he was inspired to write the Overture by a visit to the Hebrides.

Opera, of course, is as likely to evoke place as any other medium. 'At the bottom of the Rhine', says the first stage direction in Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, at the head of the remarkable Prelude, and the same opera contains the first ever 'scenic interludes', depicting the descent into and ascent from the underground world of the Nibelungs (the use of 18 anvils in the score gives a reasonably clear picture of what it is the Nibelungs do under the earth). These interludes are at the same time a contrivance to allow the scenery to be changed; and the same is true of the 'Sea Interludes' - Britten had actually to extend the 'Storm' interlude when the producer Eric Crozier asked for more time in order to change the set between the scenes in Act I of *Grimes*. (I recall a production of *Albert Herring* at Snape where one of the longest interludes in opera was insufficient to effect the transformation into Mrs Herring's grocery shop.) The *Sea Interludes* themselves do not advance the plot - apart from the depiction of the storm, they remain largely abstract pictures. However the final Interlude - not included in the concert version - is a more graphic representation of the fog, the man-hunt, and Grimes's state of mind; while the Passacaglia, like Berg's great D minor interlude in *Wozzeck* allows the composer himself to step into the frame and express his feelings directly.

Although all four are called 'Sea Interludes', only the first specifically evokes the sea itself : Britten annotated the draft libretto 'Everyday. Grey. Seascape' at that point . The others - 'Sunday Morning', 'Moonlight', and 'Storm' have, if taken out of their operatic context, no inescapable association with the sea. But if we try to forget the link with Aldeburgh, difficult though that may be (the visual tie is almost as unavoidable as the identification between specific music and TV commercials that the

advertising industry works so hard to impose), is there anything that can be pinned down as, to put it crudely, 'sea music'?

The Dawn Interlude has three elements : a long tranquil, high line for violins and flutes - the grace-notes suggest the call of gulls, the melody itself perhaps evokes an open sky, early morning. Then there is a scurrying figure for clarinets, harp and violas, with the splash of a cymbal behind it - the gentle rise and fall of waves breaking on the shingle? Thirdly, a solemn brass chorale-like sequence of chords : the sea as elemental, a force of nature, perhaps. The imagery, though, is essentially objective - if the dawn incorporates a sunrise, it's a very understated one - the brass rise to a crescendo, but then fall, and the music fades back to its beginning (compare Strauss's epic sunrises in *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and the *Alpine Symphony*). The three ideas are mostly kept separate from each other, a simple block construction rather than a conventional musical development.

This is very different from what is perhaps the most famous of 'sea pictures', Debussy's *La Mer*, where the interaction between themes and textures is extraordinary fluid. Yet there are undoubted similarities - the long-limbed, not quite tranquil theme of the third movement of *La Mer*, the harp figuration and especially the pervasive soft roll of the cymbal, and the brass 'chorale' that ends both first and third movements. It is the treatment, and the sound world, that is so unlike. The more sensuous, impressionistic nature of Debussy's music makes it more immediately evocative of the sea : but, again, which came first? Is there anything really sea-like about the music, or is it because it has become so associated with the sea that we read more into it than is really there? If Debussy had called it simply by its subtitle, *Three Symphonic Sketches*, would we have any idea of what the work is 'about'? Perhaps we would be tempted to agree with the implicit criticism of Erik Satie, who, when asked what he thought of the first movement, 'From dawn to midday on the sea', replied, 'I especially liked the bit between half past ten and quarter to eleven'.

This is, of course, a circular argument. It's neither possible nor advisable to ignore - as deconstructionist theories would have us do - the composer's intention. Holst's *Egdon Heath* (played in the same 1997 Festival for which this essay was originally written) is a case in point. Here is a specific location (even though Thomas Hardy's Egdon Heath has its roots in fiction as much as in reality), but the music is essentially abstract : as it has to be - there are no musical rules for depicting a landscape, after all. But Holst appends a quotation from *The Return of the Native* -

A place perfectly accordant with man's nature - neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly : neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony.

- and thereby tells us what he is trying to portray. Consequently we can hardly help but hear in the piece something of the unchanging mystery and loneliness of the landscape. It is probably the strangest, and most elusive, piece that Holst ever wrote - for which reason we almost need to know what the work is 'about' in order to help our musical understanding of it; at the least the extra awareness helps us towards understanding the nature of the music.

So the answer to whether there is anything in the *Grimes* Interludes intrinsically of the sea, and of the locality in which Britten (and Peter Grimes) lived, is both yes and no. Britten, it goes without saying, intended to portray a sea-dominated landscape, but in a sense it is up to us to read what we will into the music : for instance, what I suggested might be the cry of a gull could just as easily be the call of a bird of prey over a moorland; but the fact that Britten has called it a seascape pushes us in the 'right' direction. The important point is that musically it does not matter at all what kind of bird it is, or whether it is a bird at all : if it did not have inherent musical interest no amount of verbal explanation would help. Our knowledge of Aldeburgh and the Suffolk landscape may colour our approach to Britten's music : but the music has no need of that knowledge in order to make its incomparable effect.