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Benjamin Britten's Use of Responsorial Singing to Foreshadow Important Events

Benjamin Britten's opera, *Peter Grimes*, is filled with sacred responsorial singing. It could be argued that Britten uses this style of writing to foreshadow important moments. One of the most important moments of the opera, John's untimely demise, is foreshadowed by the Borough through responsorial singing at the start of Act II.

At the start of Act II, we see Ellen sing to her son, John, the new apprentice to Peter Grimes. In the background we hear members of the Borough singing in church for their Sunday service. Starting at rehearsal number 7, the Borough begins with their opening prayer:

Now that the daylight fills the sky,
We lift our hearts to God on high,
That He in all we do or say
Would keep us free from harm today,

Within the church, this singing from the Borough is not intended as responsorial music. However, in the context of the scene, in between each of the Borough's lines of this sung prayer, Ellen sings directly to John, creating a responsorial structure between rehearsal number 7 and rehearsal number 9. Earlier in the opera, the Borough expressed their extreme hesitation toward allowing Peter Grimes the opportunity to take on a second apprentice. After letting the first die while under his care, they do not trust him to look after another. While Ellen and the Borough are not occupying the same space on stage, I believe that the Borough is indirectly singing to John. During this opening prayer of their Sunday service, it can be argued that they are praying to God to watch over them, but also to John, and "keep [him] from harm today" while he is under Peter Grimes' care.

The prayer for John from the Borough gets stronger when the Rector enters at rehearsal number 9. There is a brief shift in the responsorial structure of the music. Before rehearsal number 9, the call and response is between the Borough (inside the church) and Ellen (outside the church). When

the Rector enters, the structure shifts to a call and response between him and the Borough. However, this only lasts for three measures. In the fourth measure of rehearsal number 9, Ellen notices the tear in John's coat, shifting the responsorial structure back between her and the Borough, this time including the Rector.

There is also a dramatic shift in tone at this point. The initial prayer from the Borough asks for protection from God. In the fifth measure of rehearsal measure 9, the Rector and Borough sing together, "And we have done those things which we out not to have." Again, while Ellen does not occupy the same space on stage as the church goes, I believe they are speaking directly to her situation regarding her son's appointment to Peter Grimes. This line by the Borough and Rector speaks numerous characters collectively. First, they are asking for forgiveness from God for their allowance of Peter to take on another apprentice, which they fear will end in the same way as the first. Second, they also speak to Ellen, because she should not have let her son be Peter's apprentice. Last, they speak directly to Peter, because he should not have been trusted with care of another apprentice.

This all speaks to a potential foreshadowing of what will come to pass. Everybody in the opera is fearful for John, and they ask for his protection from God. However, this fear does not stop them from condemning John to a terrible fate. As the Borough, Rector, and Ellen sing in this responsorial style during the start of Act II, they foreshadow John's impending death.