

Peter Grimes review – insightful recording is among the opera’s finest



All the scenery we need ... a semi-staged performance at the Royal Festival Hall, London, in November 2019, with Stuart Skelton, second right. The Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra is led by Edward Gardner. Photograph: Mark Allan

Skelton/Wall/Williams/Bergen Philharmonic/Gardner (Chandos)

Britten’s opera sounds huge and thrilling in a nuanced recording with sparkling interplay between singers and orchestra – it’s rarely sounded better

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hat kind of man is Peter Grimes? Beyond the guilty-or-innocent

question that lies, never quite answered, at the root of Benjamin Britten’s opera, there’s that of how to play the rough but visionary fisherman. Stuart Skelton’s interpretation – always convincing since he sang the role at ENO more than a decade ago – has

developed with his voice. Now, on disc for the first time, it's a rewardingly nuanced portrayal, burly and often aggressive on the surface, bewildered underneath. Skelton's tenor is on the heavy side for the role, but he makes a virtue of this; his voice almost cracks along with his dreams of marriage to Ellen, and if the aria in his hut seems too delicate for him, perhaps this underlines what a bad fit he'd be for the life of "a woman's care" he dreams about. His mad scene is beautifully done.

Edward Gardner conducted Skelton at ENO and, with him, has since made Britten's masterpiece a calling card for the Bergen Philharmonic, where he is principal conductor. He and his cast went into the studio between semi-staged performances in Bergen and London last year – themselves preceded by acclaimed concerts two years earlier, with the same team. This recording is thus extraordinarily well run-in, and the benefits are plain: even in audio only, it registers as a genuine music drama, the music leading us through the story in one urgent, vital sweep.



Genuine music drama ... Erin Wall as Ellen Orford and Stuart Skelton as Peter Grimes (carrying Samuel Winter as boy apprentice) with the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra in Peter Grimes, semi-staged at the Royal Festival Hall, London. Photograph: Mark Allan

The huge choral forces sound thrilling, and there is easy interplay between a supporting cast that includes such vivid singing actors as Roderick Williams, Susan Bickley, Catherine Wyn-Rogers, Robert Murray and James Gilchrist. Erin Wall's Ellen Orford stands apart vocally, her soprano soaring and full-bodied, her words sometimes cloudier than ideal; still, this distinctive nobility of voice feels right in context for Ellen, the only straightforwardly sympathetic character.

Gardner and his orchestra provide all the scenery we need in the interludes: the wide-open sea, its enormity revealed as first light brightens; the cold sunlight outside the church on Sunday morning, so brittle it could snap; the moonlight, the music unfolding in great, sleepy exhalations. The passacaglia, when the orchestra worries away at a repeated bass line and the villagers, off stage, begin to transform into a lynch mob, has a stuttering momentum, not quite inevitable, not quite out of control, that reflects the

point the drama has reached. This insightful recording is up there with this opera's finest.

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