

the European conflict (and Pearl Harbor had not yet been bombed). Even after the United States entered the war, Britten was frustrated with the lack of awareness of the war's severity among the people around him. Moreover, he felt increasingly homesick for England. He wrote more and more pieces that evoked the British past, drawing inspiration in particular from the music of Henry Purcell (1659–95).⁹⁷ At last Britten made the decision to return to his homeland in 1942, even though he would have to face a tribunal to register formally as a conscientious objector. The tribunal initially voted *not* to exempt him from (noncombatant) military service, but after an appeal, they agreed to remove the requirement. Britten's only obligation was to give concerts on behalf of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and Arts (CEMA). To satisfy part of that condition, he went to Wormwood Scrubbs Prison to work in collaboration with Michael Tippett, who was overseeing a small prison orchestra (and sewing mailbags).⁹⁸

Despite the positive outcome of Britten's tribunal appeal, the remaining war years were an uneasy time for him and for Pears, and Britten later discussed how that sensation influenced his depiction of the title character in his opera *Peter Grimes* (1945):

*A central feeling for us was that of the individual against the crowd, with ironic overtones for our own situation. As conscientious objectors we were out of it. We couldn't say we suffered physically, but naturally we experienced tremendous tension. I think it was partly this feeling which led us to make Grimes a character of vision and conflict, the tortured idealist he is, rather than the villain he was in Crabbe.*⁹⁹

George Crabbe (1754–1832) was the poet of *The Borough* (1810), which contained the poem that was the opera's basis. *Peter Grimes* proved to be both a critical and popular success, helping to confirm Britten's position as a foremost English composer—an ironic outcome for a man who had felt so isolated because of his views.¹⁰⁰

Commission for a Cathedral

Some five years before the debut of *Peter Grimes*, on the night of November 14, 1940, the residents of Coventry, England, were helpless against a blitz of bombs dropped from German planes. By the next morning, their fourteenth-century St. Michael's



The ruins of St. Michael's Cathedral, Coventry. A portion of the new cathedral is visible to the left.

Photograph by Andrew Walker

Cathedral lay in ruins. Since the city had no strategic significance during the warfare, the bombing's sole purpose seems to have been to terrorize. Once the war had ended, the citizens of Coventry concentrated on building a new cathedral next to the skeletal remains of the old building; sixteen years later, they had accomplished their goal. Church authorities then approached Benjamin Britten to request a large-scale composition to honor the new cathedral's consecration. Britten saw this commission as a chance to focus on two things: the need to end the cruelty of war and the urgency of moving toward reconciliation.¹⁰¹

There could not have been a commission more suited to Britten's tastes and deeply held beliefs. He set to work on the *War Requiem*, a massive piece that would use three soloists, a boys' choir, a full (adult) mixed choir, an organ, a chamber orchestra, and a full symphonic orchestra. Still, there were various wrinkles that needed ironing. Britten had to push back against the clergy's hope that he would donate his composition. He told a friend, "They must be prepared to pay for it just as they have had to pay the workmen to build the Cathedral."¹⁰² As the premiere drew near, he discovered that the acoustics in the new cathedral were "lunatic," and matters were complicated by the church authorities' refusal to allow a temporary platform to be built for the vocalists. Without the platform, there wasn't enough room for the two choruses, two orchestras, and soloists to be positioned where they could all see the conductor. One suggestion was to reduce the number of choral singers, but the adult choir threatened to walk out if any members were cut. At last, Britten decided to work with an assistant