Some years ago I was doing research on Benjamin Britten, his early career, and most particularly the circumstances leading up to the first performance — in June, 1945 — of his first and perhaps greatest opera Peter Grimes. I had been asked to the Aldeburgh Festival, an annual event in Suffolk centered on the music of Britten, to give the first Prince of Hesse Memorial lecture. I was particularly pleased to have the opportunity to spend several days after the Festival working in the Britten-Pears Library, attached to the Red House, where Britten had lived and where his great friend and colleague, Peter Pears, still was residing.

I had no reason to think that there was any special connection between Peter Grimes and Stanford; hence I was fascinated to find a reference to such a connection in one document listing the early productions of Grimes: London, at Sadler’s Wells, the world premiere on June 7, 1945; productions in Antwerp, Basel, Stockholm and the American premiere at Tanglewood, conducted by Leonard Bernstein in 1946; Berlin, Brno, Copenhagen, Hamburg, Milan and Covent Garden in London in 1947; and, in 1948, in New York at the Metropolitan on February 14, and then at Stanford.

Stanford! Naturally I was intrigued. And when the opportunity presented itself — not until some time later — I set about to discover more about these performances of Peter Grimes on May 27, 28, and 29, 1948 in Memorial Auditorium, a mere three years after it had first been performed. This was the first West Coast-originated production. (The Metropolitan had brought its touring version to Los Angeles a few weeks earlier.) What was the story of the performances at Stanford?

I discovered that the University, alas, had been rather erratic in its record-keeping. Neither the Music nor the Drama Department appeared to have its files for that period, and there was virtually nothing in the University Archives. Fortunately, some of the individuals who had been involved in the enterprise were willing to share their memories with me, and I had the pleasure of talking with Harold Schmidt, Leonard Ratner, Loren Crosten, George Houle, James Schwabacher, and Jan and Beta Popper. I am extremely grateful to them all.

The systematic production of opera at Stanford, though it continued for some years and is still done from time to time, was a direction not taken. There appeared to be a feeling in 1940, when the Opera Workshop was established, that though Stanford was not then a topflight university in the sciences, it might distinguish itself in the performing arts and the humanities. Peter Grimes was the highpoint of the Opera Workshop in the period 1940-1949, when it was under the guidance of the conductor, Herbert Jan Popper, who died this past September 3 at the age of 79.

Jan Popper arrived at Stanford in 1940, having come to America as a refugee from Czechoslovakia. There he had been a conductor at the Prague Opera and taught at the Prague Conservatory. In America he became acquainted with a businessman interested in music, James B. DePrau, who told Lucie Stern, a Stanford benefactor, of Popper’s need for an academic connection. It was she who brought him to the attention of the then-president of Stanford, Donald Tresidder. Popper was hired by the Music Department — more accurately the Music Division; it did not become a Department until the academic year 1947-48.

Quite soon he formed the Opera Workshop, an annual event in Suffolk centered on the music of Britten, to give the first Prince of Hesse Memorial lecture. I was particularly pleased to have the opportunity to spend several days after the Festival working in the Britten-Pears Library, attached to the Red House, where Britten had lived and where his great friend and colleague, Peter Pears, still was residing.

‘Peter Grimes,’ Jan Popper, and Stanford

By Peter Stansky

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Peter Grimes was the high point of Stanford’s Opera Workshop when it was under the guidance of Jan Popper, who conducted the opera in its West Coast premiere on campus.
Workshop, which gradually evolved into a group that would do an annual opera production in conjunction with the Stanford Players from the Drama Department. The inaugural opera was The Bartered Bride by the Czech composer Smetana. With that production, a close collaboration began between Popper, as conductor, and F. Cowles Strickland of the Drama Department, who would direct the operas. In successive years, they were responsible for the Opera Workshop productions of such operas as The Merry Wives of Windsor, The Magic Flute, The Beggar’s Opera, Der Freischütz. On the whole these were ambitious undertakings for a student group; interesting to do but not too far removed from the standard repertoire. Certainly the most unusual and ambitious undertaking of the Workshop under Popper’s direction was Peter Grimes.

I had a delightful lunch with Jan and Beta Popper last June and have spoken to others about the production. As far as I’ve been able to discover, it was decided to do Grimes because Popper knew the opera and felt that it was worth doing. (Certainly its emphasis on the importance of the chorus made it appealing for a largely student group.) Set in early 19th century England in a seacoast village (Aldeburgh), the story tells of a fisherman, Peter Grimes, at odds with the community because of his individualistic ways in general, and in particular because it was thought he drove his apprentices too hard.

The opera opens with a short prelude, a coroner’s hearing into the death of the latest apprentice. Although there is no finding against Grimes, he is instructed not to take another apprentice. Since he cannot fish without a helper, however, he chooses to ignore the coroner’s instruction, and the opera proper deals with the arrival of a new apprentice, the boy’s death in suspicious circumstances, and Grimes’ suicide. The grim story arises out of the question of the relationship of the individual to society, and, as in George Eliot’s Middlemarch, the town itself is a major character. Its continuity, like that of the sea, which is presented musically in the famous interludes of the opera, goes on no matter what Grimes’ problems were.

The difficulties inherent in the project did not deter Popper from the ambitious task of staging a virtually new opera that thus far had been produced nine times, only twice in America. The Opera Workshop had become more exciting as the war ended and the country’s campuses, Stanford among them, were revivified by the influx of veterans, anxious to acquire education and financed by the G.I. Bill of Rights. The Opera Workshop had not only regular Stanford students in the cast and orchestra, but also some players from Palo Alto. Leading roles might well be given to professionals or semi-professionals on the theory that it was a valuable experience for students to see and hear professionals at work and to participate in productions with them. Starting in January 1948 it was possible for up to 15 persons who satisfied an audition to register, on the payment of $100, as extension students in the Workshop.

Who would staff and sing in the Stanford Peter Grimes? The production people were names of great and continuing familiarity to the University. Jan Popper was the musical director, assisted by Leonard Ratner, who conducted the backstage orchestra. The stage director was F. Cowles Strickland. Harold Schmidt, assisted by Herbert Nanney, conducted the chorus, and Schmidt played the rector, the Rev. Horace Adams. Wendell Cole designed the sets. Howard Ross, a Los Angeles singer and a member of the American Opera Laboratory
Peter Grimes

Wendell Cole, emeritus professor of drama, was the opera’s stage designer. He drew these illustrations of the sets especially for Sandstone and Tile.

there, was designated an artist-in-residence for the quarter and played the title role. He did extremely well, providing a more sympathetic interpretation than is generally found in American productions. (The two most famous interpreters of the role are Peter Pears, who sang it first; and Jon Vickers.) Stanley Noonan — who had sung a leading role in the touring company of Up in Central Park and has had a distinguished career singing at Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco — played Captain Balstrode, the retired skipper who is the voice of wisdom and good sense in the story — a role perhaps most famously interpreted by Geraint Evans. Marjorie Dickinson, active in previous operas, played the leading feminine role, Ellen Orford, the schoolteacher who tries to befriend Grimes. She had been performing in a very successful offshoot of the Opera Workshop, an English version of Mozart’s Cosi Fan Tutte, done far less frequently forty years ago than now. It had also starred James Schwabacher, a teaching assistant in the Music Department, who played Bob Boles, a fisherman, in Peter Grimes. Also in Cosi was Joel Carter, who sang Swallow the lawyer in Grimes. (Theodore Uppman was another of the young men in Cosi. Although not in Grimes, he would go on to a notable career, particularly associated with Britten. He sang the world premiere of the title role in Billy Budd at Covent Garden in 1951 and the American premiere in Chicago in 1970.) Beta Popper was also in Cosi and played the dreadful Mrs Sedley in Grimes. No doubt many would recognize names from the program; George Houle was in the orchestra playing not only the oboe but the English horn.

The performances at Stanford, presented by the Stanford Players and the Department of Music in May 40 years ago, were important not only in the musical life in the University, but also in introducing the work to the Bay Area years before it was performed by the San Francisco Opera. In the words of the Daily Palo Alto Times on May 14 it was “the most ambitious production ever attempted by Stanford.” Rehearsals took place in Woodpecker Lodge, no longer in existence, then an abandoned gym. For the performances in Memorial Auditorium, there was a 54-piece orchestra made up mostly of students but with some local musicians, as well as a few professionals. The chorus, almost all students, had 43 singers. The three performances were sold out (all seats cost $1.20) and a thousand were turned away from the first performance.

The production received excellent reviews. Marguerite Slater wrote about it in the Palo Alto Times: “It was the sort of production that leaves one speechless with wonder and excitement. The Metropolitan Opera Company, with its top professionals, la-
bored over the prodigiously difficult score for four months. The Stanford music and drama departments, with a cast and chorus drawn almost entirely from the student body, have succeeded in mounting this opera with a style and sparkle that challenges comparison with the highest standards of artistic production. Jan Popper has done a tremendous job holding the colossal project together. Stanford is very fortunate indeed to have a man of his calibre to carry through to a rousing success this ambitious and rewarding undertaking."

The Chronicle ran its review by music critic Spencer Barefoot as a news story, on the first page of the second section. "Stanford University . . . has just produced [its] greatest musical and dramatic success . . . Popper led his musicians through the tortuously difficult Britten score with a certainty, a spirit and a musicianship that left you filled with admiration, excitement and no small amount of wonder." Alexander Fried, in The Examiner, while somewhat muted about the opera itself, was extremely enthusiastic about the production. It was particularly striking that two Los Angeles critics came to Stanford to see Grimes. Mildred Norton in the Daily News was very positive about all aspects of the opera. Albert Goldberg, the well known music critic of the Los Angeles Times, began his review by pointing out that it was unusual for a critic to travel 500 miles for a performance. And, as in the other reviews, there was great praise for Popper, Strickland, and Cole for his "distinct improvement on the Metropolitan mounting."

The most dramatic testimony to the impact of the performance was the decision to perform it for one night at the San Francisco Opera House. Apparently Robert Watt Miller, the president of the San Francisco Opera, attended Grimes at Stanford and felt that it should come to the Opera House in the city. With a flexibility that is hard to imagine nowadays, the performance was arranged for June 29, sponsored by the musical impresario, Paul Posz. (There was a certain appropriateness in this considering that the San Francisco Opera had its start when Gaetano Merola produced I Pagliacci, Carmen and Faust in the Stanford Stadium in June 1922.) The unions were cooperative, and some supplement of union employees in the stage crew and the orchestra was all that was necessary. A highly enthusiastic audience of 3000 was joined by the same critics who had seen it at Stanford and praised it again: Spencer Barefoot wrote that it was "one of the most exciting nights that house of music has ever witnessed." Marjory M. Fisher of the San Francisco Call Bulletin was equally praising: "Memory recalls no operatic performance which has gripped its audience with such intensity or been rewarded with so great an ovation as was 'Peter Grimes' last night." (There was no mention of the one mishap when the curtain went down in the middle of Act I at the end of the round "Old Joe Has Gone Fishing," but the music continued, and the curtain went back up.)

The production of Peter Grimes was a complete triumph and testifies in particular to the accomplishments of Jan Popper, Cowles Strickland, Harold Schmidt, Leonard Ratner, and Wendell Cole. It seemed to argue that there would be major new developments in music at Stanford, perhaps a four year opera school. All looked set for a dramatic new departure.

In March 1948 in The Trumpeteer, Jan Popper had written of his hopes for opera at Stanford. The Opera Workshop would provide students with "training in acting, foreign languages, English diction, fencing and body movement, and, of course, the necessary coaching in operatic roles."

The next year, in May, the Opera Workshop scheduled a production of Jaromir Weinberger's Schwanda, the Bagpiper, famous for its polka but rarely performed. Appropriately, it is a Czech opera. That production also was taken to the Opera House but was not the success that Grimes had been. It turned out to be the last opera production at Stanford under Popper's direction. He left that year to form an opera workshop at UCLA. But in May 1948 he and all the many others who participated in the production of Grimes had made musical history at Stanford. A mere three years after Grimes was first presented, one of the greatest operas of the twentieth century had been brought to this University in an excellent production. It was a great feat of imagination and a considerable accomplishment to have done so before the opera had attained its present canonical status. It was a rare musical moment on the campus.

Hoover House to be quake-proofed

A second major campus building has been evacuated as an earthquake hazard.

Lou Henry Hoover House, residence of President Donald Kennedy and his family, has been closed for possibly up to a year. The Kennedys are living elsewhere.

The Kennedys got the word Jan. 8, less than a month after Roble Hall's 294 residents were told their historic dormitory was unsafe (see earlier story in Fall issue). All of the students were re-housed elsewhere on the campus.

Records of both buildings showed similar construction — reinforced concrete with hollow tile walls. "In a major earthquake, [the tiles] would surely pop out," Birge Clark, the architect, wrote of the president's residence in his memoirs. The house was built for Herbert and Lou Henry Hoover in 1920.

Testing is being done to determine the future of Roble Hall. The president's house will be strengthened and reoccupied.

The Hoover House is a California State Historic Landmark and is on the National Register of Historic Places at the national level of significance.