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## **The Turn of the Screw: Benjamin Britten's Recreation of Henry James' Novella**

*The Turn of the Screw* is an opera written in a prologue and two acts by Benjamin Britten. The libretto by Myfawnt Piper is based on a Henry James's novella published in 1898 under the same title. The story of the governess in charge of two precocious and orphaned children in the Bly's County has been interpreted from numerous perspectives due to the ambiguity of James's text: from a gloomy ghost story with traces of sexual ambiguity to a fantasy world projected in a Freudian fashion by a sexually repressed governess who has to invent an entire fantasy world in order to cope with her traumas. In this regard, Edmund Wilson was one of the first critics to introduce the idea of a mentally ill governess in his famous essay 'The Ambiguity of Henry James', published in the April-June, 1934 issue of *Hound and Horn*. His words "the young governess who tells the story is a neurotic case of sex repression, and the ghosts are not real ghosts at all but merely the governess's hallucinations."<sup>1</sup> were questioned by other critics, who argued that James never had the intention of writing anything else than a ghost story, such as he acknowledged it in his letters, in his *New York Edition* preface, and in his *Notebooks* (1947). Nevertheless, later interpretations of the novella, such as the one of the critic Brad Leithauser, endorse an ambiguous reading of the work that might respond better to James's literary intentions:

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in David Garrett Izzo, *Henry James Against the Aesthetic Movement: Essays on the Middle and Late Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006), p. 22.

All such attempts to ‘solve’ the book, however admiringly tendered, unwittingly work toward its diminution”, since its “profoundest pleasure lies in the beautifully fussed over way in which James refuses to come down on either side (...) the book becomes a modest monument to the bold pursuit of ambiguity.<sup>2</sup>

There have been as well numerous speculations about the interpretation that Britten and Piper wanted to give to the text; for example, Lord Harewood, a close friend of Britten, believed that the composer had taken sides with the idea of the innocent governess that enters in contact with a world of corruption in which the children of the Bly mansion have suffered most probably abuses from their former servants. In Harewood’s words: “Britten felt he had to take sides, and he had decided that there was something malign at Bly.”<sup>3</sup> However, the good intentions of the governess—like in James’s novella—are corrupted by her experiences at Bly, so her suspicions might be as well a product of her mind,

having fallen in love with the uncle, the governess is bitterly disappointed to receive only the curtest of notes with the letter dismissing Miles from school and this apparently minor incident, repressed into the subconscious, works itself thorough inventions and hallucinations.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, whether the acts of abuse over the children are real or imaginary, it is a fact that the love that she experiences towards Miles and his uncle has turned throughout the narration into possession and corruption. Therefore, ambiguity prevails at the end in Britten’s opera, a work for which both composer and librettist have insisted that their intention was not to interpret James’s text, but to provide a recreation of the story in a different medium of expression.

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<sup>2</sup> Brad Leithauser, “Ever Scarier: On Henry James’s ‘The Turn of the Screw’, *The New Yorker*, Oct 30, 2012 <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/10/ever-scarier-on-the-turn-of-the-screw.html> (Accessed April 28, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Patricia Howard, *Benjamin Britten: The Turn of the Screw* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Vivien Jones, “Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*”, Patricia Howard (ed.), *Benjamin Britten: The Turn of the Screw* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 6.

But this desire does not exclude the introduction of important amendments by Piper and Britten in the libretto of the opera in regard to James's story: the most important changes include the displacement of the central figure, which is no longer the governess but the two children, and the materialization of ghosts that in the book only appear but never speak. These modifications invite the audience to think that the corruption of innocence and the evil atmosphere of the Bly mansion are not a product of the governess's fantasy but a frightening reality, so probably Lord Harewood was right in his former interpretation, but as Piper herself explains in a letter to Patricia Howard, "that evil exists whether in life or in the mind (...) and is capable of corrupting – or perhaps not necessarily corrupting but causing the loss of innocence—he was, I think, quite certain."<sup>5</sup>

In this regard, whether the events happen in reality or in the governess's imagination, there is a loss of innocence that Britten wants to highlight in comparison with James's text. The composer introduces in the libretto an emblematic verse by William Butler Yeats from his poem 'Second Coming' (1920) that directly alludes to this loss: 'The ceremony of innocence is drowned'. At the same time, Britten uses the song 'Malo' as a recurring motif that represents the ambiguity of Miles the boy, who sings this rhyme playing with the different meanings of the Latin word': "Malo, Malo, I would rather be / Malo, Malo, in an apple tree / Malo, Malo, than a naughty boy / Malo, Malo in adversity."<sup>6</sup>

*The Turn of the Screw*, premiered in the Venetian theater *La Fenice* on September 14, 1954, displays the action in sixteen brief but effective scenes. All the action is contained in the structure of one theme articulated by fifteen variations; each variation ends and continues in the following scene in the form of the correspondent instrumental interlude for the next piece. The opera begins, then, with a prologue in which the action is introduced by the narrator; the main theme is already heard in the series of twelve notes that belong to the twelve-tone figure created

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Patricia Howard, *Benjamin Britten: The Turn of the Screw* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Britten, *The Turn of the Screw: Opera in two acts and a Prologue*. Libretto, Mynfyway Piper after Henry James. (Heathfield (East Sussex): Opus Arte, 2005).

by Arnold Schoenberg and adopted here by Britten in order to compose his twelve-tone 'Screw' theme, divided into equivalent tetrachords that represent, each one, a segment of the circle of fifths. Therefore, the theme is presented initially in three asymmetrical phrases, each one begins with the tonic followed by the subdominant and then as in a turn of a screw, just as the title of the novel suggests, variations go through the different tonalities of the dodecaphonic system: from the initial A minor of the prologue to the A flat major of the last variation.

The tonal route proposed by Britten in *The Turn of the Screw* provides a different musical coloration to every situation described in the libretto. It goes beyond dodecaphonism and adds an extra-musical component when one associates music to the words in the text. It is noticeable that the scenes from the first act follow a tonal progression that always have as tonic white notes from the piano, i.e, without flats or sharps:

Theme and scene I – A minor

Variation I and scene II – B Major

Variation II and scene III – C Major

Variation III and scene IV – D Major that modulates to g minor

Variation IV and scene V – E Major that modulates to e minor

Variation V and scene VI – F Major that modulates to f minor

Variation VI and scene VII – G Major

Variation VII and scene VIII – A flat Major

The seven scenes of the first act contain the exposure of the events that are in the spectrum of the real or tangible, but in the last scene of this first act a tonic tonality that coincides with a black key of the piano, i.e, a modified note by a flat alteration, coincides in the story with the first time that the ghosts speak. Therefore, it seems that this tonality introduces the supernatural in the story, and since the first time that the ghost Quint appears in the fourth scene, Britten uses a E flat chord from a prevailing tonality in D major, in order to indicate through dissonance the presence of the spectrum.

In the second act, the tonality path includes a considerable presence of alterations. Instead of following an ascending pattern, modulations tend to descend:

Variation VIII and scene I – A flat major modulates to g flat minor.

Variation IX and scene II – F sharp major modulates to f sharp minor.

Variation X and scene III – F major modulates to f minor.

Variation XI and scene IV – E flat minor.

Variation XII and scene V – E major.

Variation XIII and scene VI – C Major.

Variation XIV and scene VII – B flat major

Variation XV and scene VIII – A major modulates to A flat major.

This act is consequently characterized by the interventions of the ghosts, who play an important role representing individual desire, corruption and the limits of what is morally appropriate. Then, it seems logical that the ghost Quint, former servant of the mansion from which we know through the housekeeper Mrs. Rose that he was excessively close to Miles, should be associated with “persistentes armonías, embelesantes colores tonales y *roulades* tonales.”<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the governess represents order, rationality and determination. Then, her character will remain in those tones whose tonics are not altered notes. This contrast between the two characters will reach its peak in a combat represented musically by the tension between the A note –the governess– and the A flat note of the ghost Quint. Thus, the battle for the boy Miles is not just psychological but musical, and represents the clash between the social responsibility of the governess and the individual desire of Quint.

However, Britten goes beyond the social conflict and introduces a psychological dimension already present in James's novella, but reinforced by the British composer by his dissection of the corruption of innocence through the words of the ghosts, who become real in the opera. In this sense, the characters seem to be psychological constructs

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<sup>7</sup> “persistent harmonies, ravishing tonal colours, and tonal *roulades*” in Roger Parker, *Historia ilustrada de la Ópera*. (Barcelona: Paidós, 1998), p. 321.

rather than social beings: they act according to their inner needs, desires and nature, and they live isolated in the mansion of Bly without any contact with the rest of society, i.e, without any social norm to control their behavior.

This seclusion or restraint suggests music far away from great symphony orchestras and, consequently, Britten opted for a chamber opera. Furthermore, the importance of the white voices of the children in the development of the spectacle reinforces the idea of an orchestra reduced to thirteen instruments, but still the music reaches several expressive moments and effects of beauty during the spectacle. Seven different voices join the instruments of the orchestra: the narrator-tenor of the prologue, the two white voices of the protagonist children – Miles and Flora – the governess with a soprano role, Mrs. Grose – the housekeeper – with a role of mezzo-soprano or soprano, and finally the ghost of the former governess, Mrs. Jessel, and Quint, with a tenor role.

Hardly ever coincide in the opera more than three voices on stage. It is significant, then, the sextet of the last scene of the first act, in which there is a confrontation between the six characters of the opera: the two adults, the two ghosts and the two children are reunited on stage introducing different tonalities according to their character. It is as well remarkable, the initial quartet in which the children Miles and Flora, along with the housekeeper Mrs. Grose, welcome home the new governess at the Bly mansion. This quartet is performed in the second scene of the opera called ‘The Welcome’, the children sing simple and cheerful melodies and nothing portends the gloomy and mysterious events that will occur later: from the mysterious expulsion of Miles from his school, the meeting of Flora and Miss Jessel close to the lake, and the tragic deaths of Miles in the arms of the governess after expelling the ghost Quint with the words: “Peter Quint, you Devil!”

Only Mrs. Grose’s welcome gives a hint to the governess that something is wrong in the mansion and there are hidden secrets and mysteries that will perturb the calm in the Bly county. Her hopeful speech, when the new governess arrives, is tainted by some dissonant chords when she speaks about the past in the mansion. On the other hand, the children are in this quartet and in a great part of the opera associated to nursery rhymes that portray them, apparently, as innocent

children who play and sing popular folk songs as 'Lavender's Blue' or 'Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son'. However, the songs have a more complex role in the opera, and the simple and original melodies are transformed into music with a potentially sinister meaning. The most notable example of this possible gloominess is found in the song 'Malo', whose ambiguity and perverse meaning aforementioned, represents perhaps Britten's best achievement in the opera.

The song, apparently simple, follows a melodic line that avoids symmetry. At the same time, the harmony is complex and does not respond to what is expected from a nursery rhyme. Miles sings for the first time 'Malo' in the sixth stage of the opera called 'The Lesson'. The melancholic song has different interpretations that arise from the ambiguity of the Latin word 'malo', and at the same time suggests the ambiguity of the boy Miles. As Valentine Cunningham suggested in his article 'Filthy Britten', Piper found the song in "an old grammar belonging to her aunt (probably HT Riley's Dictionary of Latin Quotations), and was to help boys distinguish the verb malo (I wish) from the nouns malus (apple tree), malum (apple) and malum (evil, adversity), and from the adjective malus (bad, wicked, noxious)."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the rhyme Miles sings acknowledges three possible meanings: adjective of wickedness, verb of preference, or apple tree. If 'Lavender's Blue' or 'Tom, Tom, Piper's song' already announced vestiges of violence and of a latent sexuality, with 'Malo' Britten manages to transform a school song into a metaphor of the corruption of the innocence of the child.

It is also important to highlight how Britten uses again the song 'Malo' in different parts of the opera, establishing it as the central motif of *The Turn of the Screw*. Then, the melody of 'Malo' serves as the theme of the variation VI, but it is also the accompaniment of the beginning of the second act, in which the ghost Quint sings the little song when he is looking for Miles: "I seek a friend, obedient to follow where I lead."<sup>9</sup> The melody reappears again as a coda in the

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<sup>8</sup> Valentine Cunningham, "Filthy Britten", *The Guardian*. Jan 5, 2002. <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2002/jan/05/arts.highereducation> (Accessed April 28, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Britten, *The Turn of the Screw: Opera in two acts and a Prologue*. Libretto, Mynfyway Piper after Henry James. (Heathfield (East Sussex): Opus Arte, 2005).

Act II Scene V in the form of a pizzicato played by the strings of the orchestra. Finally, Britten stresses the importance of the song at the end of the opera, when the governess holds Miles in her arms and sings it for the last time in A major as a form of lament. With Miles's death and the theme of 'Malo' sung by the governess, the idea of a corrupted childhood is reinforced. Innocence is drowned just as the verse of Yeats suggests: 'The ceremony of innocence is drowned.'

With *The Turn of the Screw*, Britten manages to make of the relationship between music and words a reality in which every character possesses their own musical character: the children Miles and Flora with their nursery rhymes tinted with ambiguity, Mrs Rose and the governess singing in tonalities where the tonic or fundamental is not altered, whereas the ghosts Quint and Miss Jessel, who represent the dark and irrational, prefer the field of sharps and flats. Therefore, each character has a distinctive and musical definition to be embedded in the theme of the opera, the twelve-tone 'screw' melody that runs along the different variations of Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*. Thus, the British composer rejoins the words and music of the story, and the meaning of the title of James's novella acquires a double significance: first, the presence of a child as the protagonist of a story that is set between the gloomy and the psychological, and second, the musical theme that 'turns' like a screw along the fifteen variations of the different interludes that build the opera.

Britten succeeded in his attempt to produce a distinguished recreation of James's novella through a different medium in which words and music are inseparable. The performative nature of the opera made the two arts to converge on the stage, and the result was a dramatic and musical text that manages to capture the mystery, terror and ambiguity that surrounds James's book.