

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

# The Turn of the Screw



Juilliard

## About the Opera By Roger Pines

---

It was, of all people, the Archbishop of Canterbury who presented to Henry James the basic elements of the story that became *The Turn of the Screw*. James wrote that he was told the following:

... the story of the young children ... left to the care of servants in an old country house through the death, presumably, of parents. The servants, wicked and depraved, corrupt and deprave the children ... The servants die (the story vague about the way of it) and their apparitions, figures return to haunt the house and children, to whom they seem to beckon ... It is all obscure and imperfect, the picture, the story, but there is a suggestion of strangely gruesome effect in it.

And there it was—the basic material from which James would create arguably the subtlest, most imaginative, and ultimately most terrifying ghost story ever written. He famously confessed to one of his many correspondents, the writer Edmund Gosse, that, after correcting proofs of the story, “I was so frightened that I was afraid to go upstairs to bed.”

By this time the 55-year-old James had been writing for well over three decades, and with stupendous productivity: 14 novels, 75 novellas and short stories, numerous plays, and much matchlessly astute literary criticism. Living in England but longing for wider acceptance at home, he sold *The Turn of the Screw* to a popular magazine, *Collier's Weekly*, which serialized it in 1898. Critical reaction varied widely, from “perfect, rounded, calm, unforgettable” to “distinctly repulsive.”

Benjamin Britten was initially fascinated by the story in his late teens, when he heard it dramatized on the radio. Perhaps its operatic possibilities occurred to him, but they lay dormant for more than two decades. Those years saw a full flowering of his gifts, especially in opera. By the time *The Turn of the Screw* returned to his consciousness, he had acquired all the necessary tools, musically and intellectually, to do James full justice.

The evolution of Britten's seventh full-length opera began when producer/director Gabriel Pascal attempted to persuade the composer to create an opera specifically for film. That project never happened, but Britten did discuss it with Myfanwy Piper, wife of artist John Piper (designer of many Britten world premieres) and an art critic herself. She suggested that the film be an adaptation of *The Turn of the Screw*. Piper recalled later that “I knew [Britten] was interested in the effect of adult, or bad, ideas on the innocence of children. I also thought it was densely musical prose, which would suit his work.”

When Venice's Biennale expressed interest in presenting a new Britten opera, Basil Douglas (manager of the English Opera Group, co-founded by Britten and others to propagate new chamber-scale works), traveled to Italy to negotiate the commission. Once all was arranged, Britten now

## About the Opera By Roger Pines (continued)

---

considered possible dramatic content. His life partner, tenor Peter Pears, then recalled Piper's suggestion of James's story.

Having never embraced the idea of opera composers writing their texts themselves, Britten needed a librettist. When Piper offered ideas of how *The Turn of the Screw* could be adapted, Britten urged her to take it on. Although apprehensive, with no experience in this field, she agreed, and simply listening to Britten's music buoyed her confidence: as Alan Blyth has written, Piper had only to notice "what happened to words that are sung, and to understand, through many talks with Britten, the difficulties that beset composers and writers when their work comes together."

Annoyed and frustrated by bursitis in his right arm, Britten was unable to begin work on the score until late March 1954, less than six months before the premiere. He always managed to compose rapidly when under pressure, although he admitted to the production's director, Basil Coleman, "I have never felt so insecure about a work." It must surely have encouraged Britten to anticipate the pleasure of hearing this music performed by three singers closely associated with his operas: the exquisite Jennifer Vyvyan (Governess); Joan Cross (Mrs. Grose), a formidable artist who had never sung a supporting role but did so on this occasion out of loyalty to Britten; and Pears, bringing his unique timbre and penetrating musicality to both the Prologue and Peter Quint. With a sound as distinctive as Pears's, Greek/Armenian soprano Arda Mandikian was to play opposite him as Quint's fellow ghost, Miss Jessel.

Casting the children's roles proved challenging. The idea of a child as Flora was considered, but ultimately Britten felt that the maturity of an adult singer would be hugely helpful for the boy playing Miles. He chose Olive Dyer, a diminutive soprano experienced in portraying children onstage. The search for his Miles led Britten to a performer who would achieve world fame in adulthood as a film star. If David Hemmings's treble lacked ideal strength, he sang accurately while communicating an almost unnerving charm.

Britten conducted the successful premiere at the Biennale on September 14, 1954. Among the enthusiastic critics was Felix Arahamian in the *Sunday Times*, who declared flat out, "Not only is it Britten's most gripping score ... [it is] his finest." Shortly thereafter the opera triumphed in its British premiere, then toured to other European cities and gained further attention when recorded by the original cast. With its modest performing forces, it eventually became a staple of 20th-century repertoire, accessible to opera companies of every size, as well as to conservatories and colleges throughout the English-speaking world.

In creating *The Turn of the Screw*, Britten at the outset had to determine whether the ghosts would be visible to the audience, and more important, whether they would also sing. (James's ghosts do not speak.) Britten's

---

friend Lord Harewood would recall from their discussions that he had himself “insisted on ambivalence, [Britten] on the need for the composer to make a decision—and he *had* taken one: that the haunting was real.” It was clearly vital to both Britten and Piper to follow the actual events of James’s story quite closely, although some significant additions were made (the lesson scene in Act One and the fifth scene of Act Two, in which Quint exhorts Miles to take the letter the Governess has written to the children’s guardian).

Certainly Britten’s skill in dramatic structure was never more cogent. The two acts, each in eight scenes, cohere thanks not only to the extraordinary economy and imagination with which Britten sets Piper’s text, but also to the unifying of the opera through orchestral variations between scenes. Each variation perfectly sets up what immediately follows for the audience. Formed from the 12-note chromatic scale, the variations are arranged, explains Britten scholar Claire Seymour, “to imply a cycle of fifths, a traditional method of harmonic organization which always ends where it has begun.”

Thanks to Britten’s brilliantly judged vocal writing, artists possessing the necessary musical and textual responsiveness can achieve extraordinarily vivid character delineation in this opera. The Governess frequently expresses herself through declamatory lines of notable directness and urgency. In calmer moments, however, the soprano can relish Britten’s flowing lyricism, although the voice is often so nakedly exposed as to require the ultimate in breath control. Both warmth and a gleaming purity are crucial for the Governess to blend effectively with the children as well as with Mrs. Grose (for example, in their irresistibly ebullient Act One quartet). Listening to the latter’s music, particularly in more dramatic episodes, reminds one of Britten’s official designation in the score: Joan Cross’s voice may have been aging when she created the role, but it is nonetheless meant for soprano rather than mezzo.

The daunting task of conceiving music one can imagine as the utterances of visible ghosts is persuasively managed: Miss Jessel, in her hair-raisingly dramatic recitatives (including an unprepared attack on a sustained high C-flat when confronting Quint in Act Two); and Quint, on whom Britten lavishes lengthy melismas exuding an intoxicating seductiveness (he found inspiration in Pears singing a 12th-century motet, Pérotin’s “Beata Viscera”). Both Quint and the comparatively restrained, piano-accompanied Prologue—interestingly, a passage written to be sung entirely as recitative—were created by Pears. When the same tenor sings both in performance, they present quite a challenge in making the essential contrast of tonal color from one to the other. Many productions, however—such as this one—divide the roles between two different singers, thus automatically providing an opportunity for greater variety of vocal timbre within the cast.

## About the Opera By Roger Pines (continued)

---

Britten's understanding and appreciation of children's eagerness and energy ensures crucial believability whenever Flora and Miles are onstage. The latter—arguably the most emotionally complex role ever written for a boy—is given the mesmerizing “Malo” melody by way of communicating what Peter Evans in *The Music of Benjamin Britten* views as “the boy's simultaneous attraction towards and yearning to resist evil.”

Any conductor of this work must draw from Britten's 13-member orchestra both virtuosity and acute dramatic awareness. One notices constantly the harp—what a ravishing effect it makes early in Act One, when Mrs. Grose and the children are anticipating the Governess's arrival; solo violin, particularly when used as the sole instrument accompanying passages of essential recitative; winds, especially flute and clarinet; and percussion—above all celesta, inextricably associated with Quint and succinctly termed by composer David Matthews “the very embodiment of the uncanny.”

As with any good ghost story, *The Turn of the Screw* raises queries that must remain unanswerable: what did Miles do to be dismissed from school? If the Governess is not mad, why does no one else see the ghosts? When Quint was alive, what was the nature of his behavior toward Miles? These and other questions have everything to do with the hold the story still exerts on the public's imagination. With his enthralling skill as a musical dramatist, Britten brings James to life on the operatic stage as no one else could have done.

*Roger Pines, dramaturg at Lyric Opera of Chicago, is a regular contributor to Opera News and Opera magazine, as well as to recordings and opera-company programs internationally.*