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EDITOR’S NOTE

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1 The first performance of Benjamin Britten’s opera based on Henry James’s 1898 novella, took place in Venice at the Teatro La Fenice in 1954. Turning the text into an opera had required major changes, owing to the transposition of a complex Jamesian narrative form into a dramatic one. However, the librettist, Myfanwy Piper, working in close association with Benjamin Britten, had attempted to retain, to some extent, the undecipherable enigma around which the novella functions. James’s narrative system could hardly be maintained, on account of its complexity: a first nameless narrator begins the storytelling, relating a strange Christmas party in an old house, then introduces a second narrator called Douglas, who reads out from an old manuscript the story of a (nameless) governess and two children (christened Miles and Flora but without a surname), told by the nameless governess herself, who’s thus introduced as third and main narrator, and whose voice is heard until the novella ends.

2 Though no longer a narrator in the operatic version, the governess still has a crucial narrative function, since she is made to explain to the housekeeper and to the opera audience her own reading of the signs that appeared to her in the world of Bly—the name of the estate and country house of her nameless employer who is the tutor of the two children. Mrs Grose also retains in the opera the narrative function she has in the tale, as an eyewitness of the past of Bly. However, a new narrator is introduced in the
opera, according to a traditional dramatic device, under the impersonal designation of “Prologue”, who is made to convey, in recitative form with piano accompaniment, the circumstances that led to the governess’s presence at Bly (in the novel the information is given by Douglas, as his own “prologue” to the handwritten story he is about to read out).

The transposition from tale to opera was farther complicated by Britten’s decision to write singing roles for the intruders, visitors or visitants (James never calls them “ghosts”). So that Myfanwy Piper had to write a large number of speeches for which there is no basis in the original text. In the James novella the visitants only stare; in the opera they address the children who reply to them. All these “ghostly” voices (if that is what they are) have been set to music and the “ghosts” are as audible as they are visible—at least for the opera audience.

As to Britten’s music, it combines several kinds of musical organisation. As has already been shown, for instance by Eric Walter White in Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas (208), the whole opera is based on a twelve-note row, i.e. all the pitches that can be played on a piano keyboard on both white and black keys, first heard on the piano just as the Prologue ends, arranged in ascending fourths (A followed by D above) and descending thirds (D followed by B below and so on). The twelve-note row is called the “theme” and is followed by fifteen orchestral variations intervening between the “scenes” (i.e. accompanied vocal music), thus establishing almost unbroken continuity throughout the opera, except for the interval between Act 1 and Act 2. The theme and its variations, a traditional musical structure, may be viewed, in literary terms, as functioning somewhat like the “interludes” in The Waves by Virginia Woolf, the variations introducing the scenes, and the scenes sometimes echoing them. The twelve-note row, which is recurrently heard throughout the opera, is not however treated serially, but combines with the tonal system, Britten’s score continually shifting from one tonal key to another, also associating definite keys with some of the characters, and bringing characters into tonal conflicts. Also, as Christopher Palmer has pointed out (Howard 104), Britten resorts to the tuneful and weird effects that can be produced by pentatonic scales, i.e. five-note scales, without semitones. For example the pentatonic scale in E flat, which goes: E flat, G flat, A flat, D flat (all black keys on a piano keyboard), is recurrently associated with Peter Quint. Pentatonics are currently used in South Asian music, and Britten, who had made the journey to Bali, was familiar with Balinese modes. Heard in the context of western music by western ears, pentatonics are bound to sound eerie in a mysteriously tuneful way.

As to the voices, Miles and Flora should be sung by trebles, and although it is usually found convenient to have Flora’s role sung by a soprano, in the case of Miles it simply must be a treble, as for the Knabenstimmen in The Magic Flute (although the boy’s voice in Britten’s opera may relate to a somewhat different transcendence). All the feminine roles are written for sopranos: the governess, Mrs Grose, and Miss Jessel. The two masculine roles, Prologue and Quint, are for tenors. So the vocal score, as opposed to traditional opera, uses mostly the upper registers of the human voice.

As to the instruments in the orchestra, they range from the shrill and high-pitched piccolo flute (i.e. one octave higher than the ordinary flute) down to the lowest possible sounds that can be wrenched from the double bass. The intermediate range is filled by the string quartet (first violin, second violin, viola, and cello) and a rich combination of wind instruments, high and low, handled at times in a somewhat Mozartian way. One
must add a piano, a harp, a celesta, a glockenspiel, and a whole range of percussion instruments. However, the orchestra remains within the limits of a chamber orchestra, none of the instruments being doubled. There are of course definite associations between characters and instruments, and different musical styles for the children, the visitants, or the governess engaged in her tragic agon, with Mrs Grose cast in the role of an inadequate tragic confidante. The purpose of this paper is to show how these different styles alternate, blend, or fuse into one another in Britten's score.

As any reader of Henry James remembers, Miles and Flora are good or bad or both, angelic or fiendish or both; but as angels, even fallen ones, they are musical. Henry James draws attention to their musical sensibility: “The musical sense in each of the children was of the quickest, but the elder in especial had a marvellous knack of catching and repeating. The schoolroom piano broke into all gruesome fancies […]” (James 38). Further on in the novella, in chapter 18, when Miles plays the piano, he casts a spell on the governess so that she forgets to watch Flora, who can thus disappear unnoticed: “He sat down at the old piano and Miles played as he had never played” (64). James's text here contains a musical hint which a composer (and a pianist) could hardly resist, and Britten’s response is to introduce into the score a virtuoso piano piece, concerto-like, which runs through three sections of the opera (variation 13, scene 6 and variation 14, to end up in the opening bars of scene 6).

The score also contains a variety of songs: English folksongs, songs from schoolbooks (mnemonics for Latin grammar or geographic names), original songs, composed by Myfanwy Piper and Benjamin Britten, and a parodic canticle sung by the children outside the church. Among the popular English songs, I shall only focus on “Tom, Tom, the piper’s son”, sung by Miles and Flora:

> Tom, Tom, the piper’s son,  
> Stole a pig and away he run.  
> Pig was eat and Tom was beat,  
> Tom ran howling down the Street.

The song has a strongly rhythmic four-beat meter, the beats being strongly marked by the piano, with left-hand octaves, by the percussions (timpani and a side-drum), and by the double bass (score 59-70). The song is tonal and first sung in A major (the key that Britten usually associates with the order of the world), the children’s voices being accompanied, note for note, by the oboe, the clarinet, the bassoon and the horn, while the flute adds higher-pitched ornaments. This tonal song, however, works within a polytonal system, the key signature for this section being E major. The whole passage is besides perceived as dissonant, false relations being introduced by the percussions and piano accompaniment, and through modified alterations in the string quartet, undermining the tuneful “normality” of this boisterous piece of singing.

Among the original songs integrated in the score, “the malo tune”, as it is called, first sung by Miles (score 111-112), provides the second theme of the opera and is heard again in the last bars of the finale, as it is sung by the governess. Mifanwy Piper’s words deserve as much attention as Britten’s music, as is often the case here:

> Malo: I would rather be  
> Malo: in an apple-tree  
> Malo: than a naughty boy  
> Malo: in adversity.
The words obviously play on the different meanings of the Latin root *mal-*: *malus* (adj.), meaning “evil”; *malus* (noun) meaning “apple-tree”; *malo* (verb) meaning “I prefer”. The first two lines give the nearly exact translation of the noun and the verb, while the anaphoric repetition conveys fateful inevitability. Miles would prefer to be in an apple-tree than being placed, as he is, in adverse circumstances. The song states Miles’s own sense of doom, which is part of the overall tragic pattern of the opera.

The “malo song” starts in B flat minor, modulating briefly into A major, then rises to C minor modulating into C flat (Quint’s motif), then descends gradually down to A major, oscillating throughout between major and minor. The predominance of diminished thirds (ascending at the beginning, descending in the last bars) is part of the mournful, melancholy music of the “malo” tune, underlined in the orchestral accompaniment by the lament of the English horn and the sustained sounds of the viola.

In act II, scene 2 (“The Bells”, score 190-193), a parodic canticle is sung by Miles and Flora, to an accompaniment of bells played on the glockenspiel, and first heard in variation IX. Britten and Piper’s source is recognizably San Francesco d’Assisi’s *Laudes Creaturarum* (*The Oxford Book of Italian Verse*, 1), whose praise of the Lord and all his creatures is here rewritten in a nearly blasphemous register:

- O sing unto them a new song:
- Let the congregation praise him.
- O ye works and days, bless ye the Lord.
- O ye rivers and seas and lakes: bless ye the lord
- [...]  
- O ye paths and woods: praise him.
- O ye frost and fallen leaves: praise him.
- O ye dragons and snakes, worms and feathered fowl: rejoice in the Lord.

While the bells are tolling and the children singing, the strings down to the double bass and the wind instruments come together in long ample chords that at times sound like organ music. The children sing in the same key as the motif played on the glockenspiel (F sharp major, the sharpest tonality but one), and their voices by themselves might sound joyful enough. There is however something untuneful in the overall effect. On the one hand, there is the quite audible insistent trill played on the piano: the trill is on an F sharp, and the second note of the trill (G natural) collides against the F sharp of the children’s voices and the bells. Besides, the great chords are not in consonance with the bells and the voices, and intrusive alterations appear among the strings. The conjunction of verbal irreverence, odd behaviours, and dissonant sounds make up a web of conflictual relations that are to lead to the final catastrophe.

As to the ghostly visitants, a distinct verbal and musical material is used, working in a different register. Reference must be made at this stage to the fist scene of Act II, entitled “Colloquy and Soliloquy” (score 172-187), in which Miss Jessel and Peter Quint meet—according to the stage directions—“nowhere”. The scene stages a quarrel between estranged lovers, and has of course no basis in James’s text. It is also unique in the opera, for Peter Quint and Miss Jessel usually appear separately, or, if they happen to be on the stage at the same time, they ignore each other. The verbal exchange and the story it relates, as the two visitants look back on their past, have their own intrinsic interest. Miss Jessel is here accusing Peter Quint of having seduced her, to which Quint replies that it was the other way round. The visitants also talk about their own deaths, Miss Jessel accusing her former lover of having betrayed her when she died. She is here
in the role of the discarded mistress, while Peter Quint proclaims that he now "seek[s] a friend" (Miles). She mentions that she too "must have a friend", and the opera audience has heard her calling on Flora to come to her. Here however Miss Jessel attempts to win back the "ghost" of Peter Quint who declines to renew his pre-mortal relationship with her.

Another kind of relationship here appears to unite the two visitants, as the words of the libretto introduce a quotation from a poem by W.B. Yeats, which seems to have essential relevance concerning the historical and metaphysical vision conveyed by the opera. Both Miss Jessel and Quint, while disagreeing on other subjects, sing Yeats one after the other, then together, as if they shared the same transcendent knowledge of the world. The question of knowledge is of course central to the novella as to most of James’s fiction. What does Maisie know? What does Nanda know? What does Strether know? In the case of The Turn of the Screw, questions arise as to what Douglas knows, and more deeply as to what the reader can possibly know from the governess, and what she thinks she knows. The opera also raises another question which James never explicitly phrases: what do the dead know? What is here conveyed by the emphatic use of Yeats’s poem, “The Second Coming” (Yeats 210-211) is the visionary knowledge to which the visitants may seem to have access, as they sing Yeats’s lines:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

As it here refers to Yeats’s poetic and transcendent vision of the world’s history as a succession of “gyres” or cyclic phases, the libretto articulates what Henry James never explicitly stated, but may have been close to feeling when the First World War broke out: a sense of ultimate doom. Although Henry James (born in 1843) and W.B. Yeats (born in 1865) may have been a generation apart, they were both historical witnesses of the way “things fell apart” as the world entered the twentieth century. Literally an intrusion into the enigmatic verbal structure of James’s novella, the use of Yeats’s poem may here provide a plausible reading of Henry James, and of the sense of moral collapse discernible in his fiction. The “ghosts” have been turned, for one scene, into Yeatsian voices who know from prophetic experience that we are entering an age (what Yeats calls a gyre) in which innocence is no longer conceivable: “The ceremony of innocence is drowned”.

Though briefly united by the Yeatsian intertext, Miss Jessel and Quint have distinct operatic identities, conveyed through both words and music. The libretto somewhat romanticizes the valet of the novella, as he is made to describe himself as “the riderless horse”, or “the hero-highwayman”, while however voicing his own perverse power of deceit: “I am the smooth world’s double face (score 135-137). King Midas and his power of turning all things into gold, and Mercury, as the messenger between the living and the dead, are also part of the composite image he is made to project of himself. Besides, in a way that points to a later opera by Britten (Midsummer Night’s Dream, 1960), Quint describes himself as belonging to another order of existence in which the mystery of life originates:

I am the hidden life that stirs  
When the candle is out;
Upstairs and down,
The footsteps barely heard [...]  
(Score 140-141)

In both Shakespeare’s play and Britten’s opera, “the hidden life that stirs when the candle is out” is represented by Puck and all the fairy characters. So that Quint may actually be double-faced in another sense, and have a magic appeal, at the same time as he is a scoundrel.  

Quint’s distinctive music in the opera renders his magic and dangerous appeal. The celesta, which is continually associated with him, conventionally has celestial overtones (Palmer 104). Here a celesta motif introduces Quint, even before he has even been mentioned, in the form of a little ornament, or double appoggiatura, which is also part of a pentatonic scale, B flat, D flat, E flat, and may be interpreted, according to Christopher Palmer, as “the signature-tune of the devil” (109). As to Quint’s voice, it is a lyrical tenor going through characteristic melismas, i.e. singing sequences of ascending or descending notes on the same syllable, starting with the single, protracted syllable of Miles’s name (Act I, scene 8, “At Night”, score 133).  

Miss Jessel’s words, in Myfanwy’s Piper’s libretto, make up a mythic identity, as she ranks herself among the forsaken beauties of former times, in particular of Greek mythology, Hesiod’s Pandora, Apuleius’ Psyche (in The Golden Ass, where she appears as Eros’ mistress). In the orchestral motif that introduces and accompanies her, the low sonorities of the gong and the double bass are prominent and form part of her own distinctive music. As to her voice, when it is first heard in Act I, scene 8, and starts calling on Flora (Flo—ra, with three notes for the first syllable), it goes through two ascending intervals, C-B flat above, then D natural—A flat, as if it were rising from the depths (possibly those of the lake). The second rising interval is recognizable as an augmented fourth, or tritone (three whole tones), known traditionally as the “diabolus in musica”: another demonic motif (score 142). Also, she is often made to sing in the lowest register of the soprano range, so that she often sounds lower-pitched than Quint, in particular in the vocal quartet that combines her voice with those of Quint, Miles, and Flora. As the governess and Mrs Grose join in, the quartet becomes a sextet, which concludes Act I, concentrating the central antagonism in which the children are at stake, as on the one hand Miss Jessel and Quint, on the other hand the governess, struggle for the possession (or doubtfully the salvation) of Miles and Flora.  

As in James’s novella, the confidante is not quite trustworthy, as she conceals for a long time what she knows about the past of Bly. Mrs Grose equivocates on the question of Miles’s goodness or badness, and she “won’t tell tales” (James 12). In the opera, the governess and Mrs Grose clash in tonal conflict, when the letter arrives from Miles’s school announcing that he has been dismissed. After Quint’s motif has been heard on the celesta (score 37), the governess’s words, “He’s dismissed from school”, are in E flat “(Quint’s key); while the governess, refusing to believe in Miles’s guilt, goes on singing defiantly in C major, and the two women sing a semitone apart, in a sequence of cross-relations. Eventually, after Mrs Grose has recognized Peter Quint from the governess’s description, she comes closer to her, reveals what she knows about the dead valet, and introduces the descending musical motif that conveys her fear of Quint’s doings: “Dear God, is there no end to his dreadful ways” (score 78). The “Dear God” motif, accompanied by all the strings, including the double bass, another structuring motif, is to recur throughout the opera, and to reappear, played by the harp, in the very last
scene of the opera (score 290), as the governess and Peter are going to fight each other over the fate of Miles.

Before we come to the final confrontation, in scene 3 of Act II (“Miss Jessel”), is another moment of tragic intensity in the governess’s tragic agon. The idea for this scene is in the novella, where, after Miss Jessel has appeared to her in the schoolroom, the governess relates her experience to the housekeeper, and dramatizes the encounter:

“[...] I came home my dear,” I went on, “for a talk to Miss Jessel.” [...] “A talk! Do you mean she spoke?” “It came to that. I found her on my return, in the schoolroom.” “And what did she say?” [...] “That she suffers the torments—!” [...] “Do you mean,” she faltered—“of the lost ?” “Of the lost. Of the damned. And that is why, to share them—[...] She wants Flora.” (54)

In the operatic transposition of this imaginary confrontation, Miss Jessel’s words explicitly bring out the intensity of the tragic conflict: “Here my tragedy began, here revenge begins” (score 223). The governess, finding her own authority opposed and Flora threatened with destruction, resists Miss Jessel’s will (“She shall not! She shall not! I won’t bear it!”, 226), in an act of tragic defiance which is to bring about the catastrophe. The key signature is F minor, recalled repeatedly throughout the scene by the bassoon accompaniment (F, A flat, C), and emphatically reasserted in the governess’s final descending motif: C, A flat, F, C above, C, A flat, F. However, the two voices have kept deviating from the key signature, multiplying false relations, and just before she exits, Miss Jessel’s voice goes through one more of her ascending intervals, as she sings “Alas” on D followed by A natural, in a vengeful and triumphant cry, changing the key from F minor to F major.

The last two conflictual scenes in the governess’s agon are those that follow the Miss Jessel scene, and conclude the opera on her self-confessed failure and tragic awareness. Scenes 7 (“Flora”) and 8 (“Miles”) should be viewed in relation to each other, as they combine contrast and symmetry. In scene 8 (score 271), by “the sea of Azov” (as the lake is called in James’s text), the governess, as she discovers Flora (and beyond her, as she believes, Miss Jessel), aggressively asks the girl: “Where my pet is Miss Jessel?” (274). Flora shrilly replies that she “can’t see anybody, can’t see anything” (277), and nearly in hysterics asks to be taken away from the governess, whom she says she hates. The governess then acknowledges her failure and the “drowning” of her innocence: “But I have failed, most miserably failed, and there is no more innocence in me” (286).

The very last scene leads to the finality of Quint’s farewell to Miles, whose heart is soon to stop. As opposed to the previous scene, where the name of the visitant, Miss Jessel, had been uttered by the governess, in the last scene Miles is made to articulate Peter Quint’s name in Sprechstimme (that is a voice between singing and speaking) under the governess’s pressure: “Peter Quint, you devil”, which is a literal reproduction of the words used in James’s novella, with (ideally) the same ambiguity. Whom is Miles addressing? The governess, or Peter Quint? Michael Hampe, in his production of The Turn of the Screw, chose to believe that the devil thus addressed is Peter Quint. In Luc Bondy’s more recent production, first shown at the 2001 Avignon Festival, Miles looks neither at the governess nor at Peter Quint, but the former valet is distinctly more demonic than the governess. Benjamin Britten seems to have believed, in his
reading of the James novella, that the words are addressed to the governess. Ideally a production of *The Turn of the Screw* should keep the opera as undecidable as the novella.

There are distinct similarities in the ending of both opera and novella: the governess has sent away Mrs Grose and Flora, the visitants are also finally gone as there is no one for them to return to, and with the death of Miles, the governess is left to her tragic solitude.

One of the noticeable differences between opera and novella concerns the expression of circularity. In the novella the major figure of circularity is of course that of a turning screw, which appears three times: in the title, on the first page, and on page 77. The image of the turning screw is related to the round of tales read to the ring of guests before the hearth. When it recurs on page 77, it refers to the endeavours of the governess: “only another turn of the screw of ordinary human virtue”, as she is made to phrase it, while it actually refers to the overwhelming pressure she applies on the children. In the opera, the music has its own circularity, starting with the A of the twelve-note row, going through the whole range of tonal keys, then ending in A major, on the edge of silence.

Meanwhile, a Yeatsian gyre has been completed, one in which innocence and redemption were doubtful but conceivable. As the gyre ends, it conveys, if one follows Yeats, the character of the new gyre that is beginning, one in which innocence will have ceased to be conceivable, and with nothing more positive to it than “dreadful dreadfulness” (James 1), or, as the governess puts it, a “plunge into the hideous obscure” (77).

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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oeuvrecitee Turn of the Screw (The)