

“THE RIGHT SUBJECT”—BENJAMIN BRITTEN AND MYFANWY PIPER

“Britten composed *The Turn of the Screw*, his third chamber opera, in response to a commission from the Venice Biennale. The English Opera Group, conducted by the composer, gave the first performance (in English) at La Fenice on 14 September 1954 and introduced it to Britain three weeks later on 6 October. The idea for a musical setting of Henry James’s ghost story (published in 1898) came from Myfanwy Piper, wife of the artist John Piper, who had been a friend of Britten since 1935, and had undertaken the stage designs for *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946) and subsequent Britten operas. Britten asked Mrs. Piper to be the librettist. She was housebound by her children in 1953, so the collaboration largely depended on letters and telephone calls between Suffolk and Oxfordshire.”

Michael Kennedy

“I just thought it was the right subject for him. I knew he 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.

Myfanwy Piper

Britten had first become acquainted with Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* in 1932. He noted in his diary, 1 June: ‘Also listen to wireless...--a wonderful, impressive but terribly eerie & scary play “The Turn of the Screw” by Henry James.’ In January 1933 he read the novella for himself and the seeds were sown for an opera which would come to fruition twenty years later. It appears that initially a film version of the opera was considered.

“It was certainly a difficult work to bring off technically and spiritually. And, I think you are right in many ways about the subject being, as it were, nearest to me of any I have of yet chosen (although what that indicates of my own character I shouldn’t like to say).”

Benjamin Britten



“James’s story is not an obvious one for musical setting. Two of its principal characters—the ghosts—do not speak; the story is also very short. The solution to the first problem—to characterize the ghosts elaborately, and to give them extended singing roles—also solved the second, but simultaneously raised three more. One of these, the invention of dialogue without any basis in James that would at once retain the ghosts’ mystery and explore their influence over the children, was solved by Piper with subtle ingenuity. She gives the ghosts words that are poised between the enigmatic and the explicit, extravagant yet poetic, corrupt yet potentially alluring to an imaginative child. Indeed her libretto is the finest that Britten ever set, the addition of a single line from Yeats, ‘The ceremony of innocence is drowned’, a masterstroke.

The second problem, that making the ghosts ‘real’ removes the central ambiguity from James’s story—which can be read as though the ghosts were products of the Governess’s obsessive, unhealthy imagination—is perhaps inevitable, but Britten and Piper’s own ambiguities are so delicate that it is possible to read even those scenes between the children and the ghosts in which the Governess takes no part as projections of her obsession—imaginings of what the children are doing when she is not watching; even more horrifyingly still, that she is the one who corrupts the children, drawing them into the fantasies of a sick mind.”

Michael Oliver



“But that nothing happens is significant without the accompanying density of offered feelings and facts, echoes and memories. Britten used the voice as an instrument that detaches itself from the orchestra to tell the story, but depends for its full dramatic, as well as musical, effect on its relation to the whole fabric of sound and of echoes and memories of sound. He builds up the weight of musical experience as James builds up the weight of evidence and fantasy.”

Claire Seymour

“Ben and I argued about the haunting; had it to be explicit, or could it be the product of the Governess’s paranoia...I insisted on ambivalence, he on the need for the composer to make a decision—and he had taken one, that the haunting was real.”

Lord Harwood

“I don’t think Ben really took sides: but James’s story certainly underlines his own emotional attitude to the corruptibility of innocence. 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. The Governess’s good intentions were destroyed by her experiences, whether real or imagined, and her love of Miles was corrupted, in that it became possessiveness and she was aware of it. Hence the last words ‘What have we done between us?’

Britten was determined that [the ghosts] should sing—and sing words (no nice anonymous supernatural humming or groaning). Any words assigned to the ghosts would, of course, make clear the relationship between the ghosts and the children and define the nature of their ‘corruption’, which is left unspoken by James.” Myfanwy Piper