

EDUCATION PACK

THE TURN OF THE SCREW

a chamber opera by Benjamin Britten



STATE OPERA
SOUTH AUSTRALIA

FIRST THINGS FIRST

What is Opera?

Opera is a type of theatre which combines drama, music, elements of dance or movement with exciting costumes and innovative set design.

However, in opera, the actors are trained singers who sing their lines instead of speaking them.

A librettist writes the libretto - the words that are to be sung, like a script. Often, the plot of the opera is taken from stories in books or plays, or real world events. A composer writes the music for the singers and orchestra.

An orchestra accompanies the singers. A conductor coordinates both the singers on stage and the musicians.

An easy way to think of opera is that it is a story told with music. In a lot of operas, the people on stage sing all the way through. Imagine having all your conversations by singing them!



Opera Singers

It takes a lot of training to become an opera singer. A lot of aspiring opera singers will take this route: Sing in choirs, volunteer for solos, take singing lessons, study singing and music at university, then audition for the chorus or roles in operas.

Opera singers hardly ever use a microphone, which means that they train their voices to be heard by audiences, even over the top of orchestras.

THE CREATORS

THE COMPOSER

Benjamin Britten

Benjamin Britten was an English composer, conductor and pianist, considered to be one of the greatest composers of the 20th century. He was a child prodigy—learning to play the piano at the age of two and composing his first piece at five—and grew up to be the central figure of the British classical music of his time.

Although he attended the Royal College of Music, it was his private study with composer Frank Bridge that influenced him more. He first came to the public attention at the age of twenty with the a cappella choral work, titled, *A Boy was Born* and leapt to international fame within a short period with *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*.

He was a prolific composer and his large body of works included opera, other vocal music, orchestral and chamber pieces.

Over the years, he received a number of awards and honors. He was also the first musician to receive life peerage and become Baron Britten.

Today he is best remembered for works like *Peter Grimes*, and *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, and most importantly, *The War Requiem*.



THE LIBRETTIST

Myfanwy Piper

Myfanwy Piper was born Mary Myfanwy Evans in 1911 in London. Her mother was English and her father Welsh. She attended North London Collegiate School and studied English Language and Literature at St Hugh's College, Oxford.

In 1934 she met the artist and art critic John Piper, with whom she co-founded the Art Periodical Axis. The couple set up house together in Fawley Bottom farmhouse in Oxfordshire and married in 1937.

In 1947, Benjamin Britten invited John Piper to become a co-founder of the English Opera Group. A close friendship grew between the Pipers and Britten, and John Piper designed many premieres of Britten's stage works. Myfanwy Piper's collaboration with Britten began when she suggested he write an opera based on Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, which had its premiere at La Fenice, Venice, in 1954 as part of the Venice Biennale, with designs by John Piper.

In 1968, Britten suggested that Myfanwy Piper write the libretto for another Henry James adaptation, the television opera *Owen Wingrave* (1970). Their final project together began less than a year later, when Piper began work on the libretto for Britten's final opera, *Death in Venice*, which she adapted from Thomas Mann's story.

THE CHARACTERS

The Prologue, a character that introduces the story

The Governess, a woman employed to teach and look after children in a private household

Miles and Flora, children in her charge

Mrs Grose, the housekeeper managing the domestic duties in Bly

Peter Quint, a former manservant (an old fashioned word for valet or butler)

Miss Jessel, a former Governess



“IT’S A CURIOUS STORY...”

A work opening with this line already makes you wonder what could happen to its characters. But some curious events indeed happened before Britten’s masterpiece made it to the stage:

- Benjamin Britten wrote *The Turn of the Screw* in just four months! The premiere was so close that Imogen Holst, Britten’s assistant, would make a vocal score of each scene as Britten completed them so that the singers could begin preparing whilst the opera was still being written.
- The day of the premiere at the Venice Biennale was also fraught – the stage crew threatened to go on strike and then the performance had to be delayed because it was being transmitted live on the radio and an earlier broadcast had run over!
- However, the ghostly opera was not cursed after all – it was well received and today is the second-most performed opera in English worldwide. In 1959, it also became the first ever full-length opera to be broadcast on British independent television.

COMPLEX THEMES

Just like literature, stage shows and movies, storytelling means finding a way though art to talk about complex topics: life, love, drama, death.

Sometimes, the way these topics is represented on stage can be uncomfortable, controversial or confronting, especially for a young audience: for example, it can include depictions of violence against women, or hint to paedophilia. Mature content is always best discussed in class both before and after the performance as it helps students understand the context and unpack their feelings.

SYNOPSIS

PROLOGUE

A male figure tells the audience of "a curious story, written in faded ink": a Governess who cared for two young children at Bly. She was hired by their guardian, an uncle living in London with no interest in caring for them himself. He instructed her to follow three rules: never write to him about the children, never ask about the history of Bly house and never abandon the children.

ACT I

Theme - The Journey
The Governess travels to Bly

Variation I - The Welcome

The Governess is nervous about her new position but is warmly greeted by Mrs Grose, the housekeeper, and Flora and Miles, the two children to be in her charge. She feels a strange connection to Miles but is led off by Mrs Grose on a tour of the grounds around Bly.

Variation II - The Letter

Her fears depart her, but she is soon brought back to earth when a letter from Miles's school arrives informing her that Miles has been expelled. No reason is given, and she is convinced Miles is too innocent to have been expelled, and it must be a mistake. She decides to ignore the letter.

Variation III - The Tower

Wandering the grounds one evening, the Governess sees a strange man on the tower. She doesn't recognise him and is unsettled by the whole experience.

Variation IV - The Window

The children play indoors; the Governess watching over them spots the same unknown figure at the window. She is concerned and describing him to Mrs Grose learns that he appears to be Peter Quint, the former valet. Mrs Grose explains that Quint had an illicit relationship with the last Governess, Miss Jessel, specifically that he "made free" with her. They have both since died: Jessel away from the house, Quint falling on an icy road. Terrified, the Governess fears he has returned for Miles and swears to protect the children.

Variation V - The Lesson

Miles is reciting Latin with help from Flora and the Governess. Praising him, the Governess asks if he knows any other rhymes. Miles then produces one of the creepiest arias in all of opera 'Malo'

Variation VI - The Lake

By the side of the lake at Bly, the Governess sits reading whilst Flora sings to her doll. Across the lake, the Governess catches sight of a woman all in black, who disappears as mysteriously as she appeared. The Governess believes Miss Jessel has returned as well, and as Flora did not see her, she becomes convinced that the children are lost.

Variation VII - At Night

Quint calls out to Miles, tempting him from his bed with exotic and desirable visions. Miles is captivated. Miss Jessel appears, attracting Flora; she laments her fate begging Flora to comfort her. Together they try, successfully, to convince the children to find them. Mrs Grose and the Governess enter, terrified by the children's apparent vanishing. The Governess scolds Miles. released.

ACT II

Variation VIII - Colloquy and Soliloquy

Quint and Jessel flesh out their motives and backstory. They argue over their past and declare their determination to capture Miles and Flora. Separately the Governess despairs at the evil she feels, unable to decide how to act.

Variation IX - The Bells

The family head to church, the children singing a gently mocking variation of the 'Benedicite'. Mrs Grose remains unaware of the subtext until the Governess informs her of the children's bizarre behaviour. Mrs Grose suggests the Governess write to the guardian, which she unhappily declines. Miles creepily tells the Governess of his awareness of the Ghosts leading her to contemplate fleeing...

Variation X - Miss Jessel

Returning to the house, the Governess finds Miss Jessel in the schoolroom bemoaning her fate. Confronting her - Jessel vanishes. Believing the ghosts might not yet have the upper hand, the Governess writes to the guardian.

Variation XI - The Bedroom

Later that night, the Governess goes to Miles's bedroom, coaxing him to tell her about what happened at his school. She tells him of the letter to his guardian, but he barely responds as the voice of Quint intervenes, she leaves despondent.

Variation XII - Quint

Seduced by Quint, Miles steals the letter from the schoolroom.

Variation XIII - The Piano

Miles is showing off at the piano. Flora sings, lulling Mrs Grose to sleep before slipping out. Noticing Flora's absence, the Governess awakens Mrs Grose. They hurry off to find her while Miles continues at the piano.

Variation XIV - Flora

They find Flora by the lake. Mrs Grose tries to comfort her, but the Governess seeing Miss Jessel, tries aggressively to make Flora admit that she too can see Jessel. Flora madly accuses the Governess of cruelty and leaves with Mrs Grose. The Governess realises she has lost Flora.

Variation XV - Miles

The next morning, Mrs Grose informs the Governess that having spent the night with Flora, she is convinced that evil has possessed Flora. They agree that Mrs Grose will take Flora to London, leaving Miles with the Governess. Mrs Grose also reveals that the letter was never sent and must have been stolen by Miles.

Alone, the Governess presses Miles to confess to stealing the letter, whilst Quint appears to savagely demand Miles not betray him. Miles admits to stealing the letter but will not name Quint as the person who made him do it. Finally, he cries out, 'Peter Quint - you devil' and dies. Quint disappears. The Governess weeps, holding the dead Miles.

FROM PAGE TO...



OPERA

by Benjamin Britten



BALLET

by Will Tucket



BROADWAY SHOW

by Jeffery Hatcher



MOVIE

The Turn of the Screw
(4 remakes)



MOVIE

The Innocents
(1961)



MOVIE

The Nightcomers
(1971)



MOVIE

The Haunting of Helen Walker
(1995)



NETFLIX SERIES

The Haunting of Bly Manor
(2020)

ADAPTING LITERATURE TO STAGE AND SCREEN

The idea of taking great literature and adapting it to a stage production is common practice in the opera world. Some of the most famous operas began as literary works, including *Carmen* by Georges Bizet and *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini. Some elements that are completely acceptable in literary form can be hard to translate onto the stage, such as jumps between a variety of locations making multiple scene changes necessary or characters having minor but significant roles to the story that are not cost effective to include in the stage production. It is for these and other reasons that often the composer/adaptor will have to make necessary changes or omissions to the stage production to allow the production to work in this new storytelling format.

In the case of *The Turn of the Screw*, the novel is told through the point of view of the Governess as found in papers she left behind, but the opera allows several other characters to take the lead in the storytelling. One choice that the libretto makes is the existence and at-least-partial visibility of the ghosts. Not all characters always have to see them when they are present on stage, and some characters may never see them depending on the production, but there is no doubt that they are there. This choice is cemented in act two Scene one, when the ghosts confront each other about their sins in life while the house sleeps. Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are seen talking about their past lives, clearly there is unfinished business between them. This change from the original text deviates from Henry James' idea of ambiguity regarding whether the ghosts are in fact real or just a figment of the ever-maddening Governess's imagination, by providing an interaction between the ghosts while no other characters are in sight.

LET'S GET IN THE PIT

The Turn of the Screw is a chamber opera, meaning that its orchestra has just 13 players, but these few players are used effectively to create an incredibly atmospheric sound world. The instruments used in this opera are:

2x Violins	Clarinet in A and Bb
Viola	Bassoon
Cello	Horn
Double Bass	Harp
Flute	Percussion
Oboe	Piano

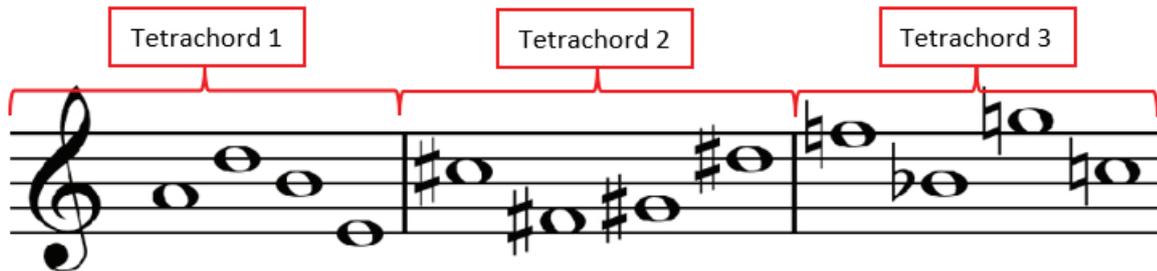


Photo: Naomi Jellicho

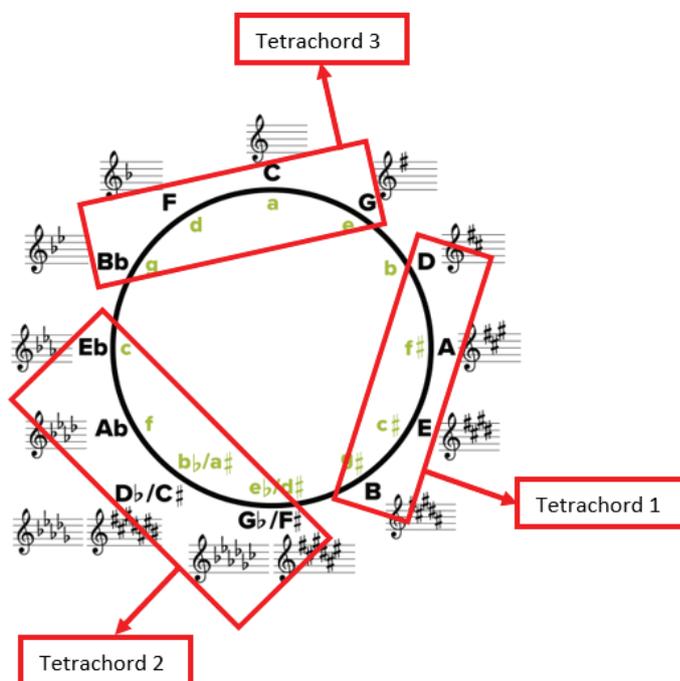
THE GENIUS IN THE MUSIC

The opera is in 16 scenes, each preceded by a variation on the 12 tone 'Screw' theme. In the first act, the theme and its variations are played ascending to signify the tightening of the screw. In the second act, we hear the theme and its variations played in reverse to signify the loosening of the screw.

Each connecting interlude is built around the 'screw' theme, which is composed as a 12-note row. The 12-note row is a popular musical idea wherein a composer uses every available note in an octave to create a musical theme. In the case of Britten's turn of the screw, the theme is three equal tetrachords (4 note chords) played as arpeggios. The notation of the main theme heard throughout the opera is shown below.



Each tetrachord is made up of broken sections of the circle of fifths. For example, the first bar uses the notes A, D, B and E which are segments of the circle of fifths in the wrong order (D=2#, A=3#, E=4# and B=5#). Part of Britten's genius is that this pattern continues with the other two bars of the theme, utilising each note contained within a section of the circle of fifths and keeping the creepy and eerie intention that the piece requires. See the example below for a clearer picture of how each tetrachord relates to the circle of fifths.



This idea is quite a simple one when understood fully, but the genius behind the music comes from Britten's ability to utilise this concept and incorporate it to not only fit the music to the scary overtones of the stage production, but also to then create a variation of this theme for each of the 16 scenes used throughout the opera.

Britten takes this idea one step further by making the sequence and its variations ascend during Act I and descend in Act II to represent the 'screw' being tightened and released throughout the whole opera in multiple variations.

When you hear the opera, be sure to listen to the music between the interludes to hear how this all plays out!!

ATTENDING AN OPERA

Before the performance:

It is a good idea to do at least a little research about the opera that you are to attend. Taking 10 minutes to review the plot or listening to excerpts from the piece, for example on Youtube, will make sure you are familiar with what you are about to see and help you to better enjoy all that is happening on-stage.

Find out where the theatre is, where you collect your tickets from, and aim to be there at least twenty minutes before the opera starts.

What do I do during the performance?

Enjoy the show and take it all in.

Respond as you would in a movie theatre. The story might make you laugh, it may make you cry.

Please turn off all phones.

Be aware that any filming, recording and photography is strictly prohibited.

Be considerate of all other opera-goers, so keeping quiet and not tapping or humming along is

How do I understand what is going on?

The Turn of the Screw was written, and is performed, in English, so it's easy to understand what's happening on stage.

However it is always advisable to familiarize yourself with the production before the performance, for example by reading the synopsis and understanding who the characters are.

There will be surtitle screens hung above the stage in the theatre which provide a script so you won't miss any of the action while reading.

After the performance:

- Discuss it with friends, teachers and parents!
- Attend a live opera when you can
- Find a Metropolitan Opera Live screening at a movie theatre
- Watch an opera on YouTube, either a whole one or just the highlights
- Read books about composers, conductors, opera singers or other topics we have mentioned.
- Ask your parents or teachers for advice on where they think you could find more information



OPERA GLOSSARY

The below terms may be helpful in understanding opera better:

ACT	a major section (like a chapter of a novel) of a dramatic production. Each act may consist of a number of scenes. An opera has one or more acts.
ACCOMPANIMENT	the music that supports or plays a secondary role to the melody. The accompaniment can be sung or played.
ARIA	a solo song.
COMPOSER	the musician who writes the music of the operatic piece.
CHORD	more than one note sounded at the same time (simultaneously).
ENSEMBLE	a group of musicians. In opera an ensemble can refer to any music written for two or more voices.
HARMONY	any combination of notes that are sung or played simultaneously. Usually the word harmony refers to a pleasing combination of those sounds (but not always).
KEY	the presence of tonality.
LIBRETTO	the text of the opera.
LYRICIST/LIBRETTIST	a writer who transforms prose into something suitable for a song setting. This writer has the skills of a poet to structure the text into verses.
MAJOR/MINOR	the modality in harmony. These can be demonstrated by simple triads or coloured by extra notes.
OPERA	a work for the stage that combines music with dramatic and theatrical elements. An opera can be of any length, combined with instrumental forces of any size, and can be based on stories of any type. An opera in the 16th century can be very different from those created in the 20th century.
TETRACHORD	a four note chord
TEXTURE	the layers of sound. Different combination of pitches and of instruments can create interesting sound that can be described as heavy or light, thick or thin.
THEME	a melody belonging to a passage of music or assigned to a dramatic character.
TIMBRE	the character or quality of a musical sound or voice.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- An introduction to opera's voice types (The Royal Opera)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLfvkwTnJVM>
- Information and sound clips: Opera 101
<http://www.theopera101.com/operaabc/voices/>
- Malo – The trance like aria sung by Miles
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQ_xJyrre5Q
- Prologue at the start of the show
www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8fb7bcBUuU

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From page to stage: tricks of the trade in adapting theater from books

https://www.oregonlive.com/performance/2012/04/from_page_to_stage_tricks_of_t.html

The Turn of the Screw: 9 Notable Film Adaptations Base on Henry James 1898 Novella

<https://www.imdb.com/list/ls096158910/>

The Turn of the Screw in a nutshell

<https://www.operanorth.co.uk/news/the-turn-of-the-screw-in-a-nutshell/>

The Turn of the Screw by Henry James

<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-turn-of-the-screw/characters>



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