Cover illustrations

Front: Scene from the Chicago Opera Theater production of *Death in Venice* by Ken Cazan (2004)
   Photo: Liz Lauren

Back: Scene from the La Monnaie production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by David McVicar (2004)
   Photo: Johan Jacobs

Second edition published by The Britten–Pears Foundation 2009

Edited by Lloyd Moore

Printed in Great Britain by Halstan & Co Ltd, Amersham, Bucks

Designed by David J Plumb ARCA PPSTD

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Britten’s operas form the most substantial and important part of his compositional legacy. Nearly all have firmly established themselves in the repertory and, as a whole, have come to be recognised as one of the most significant contributions to twentieth-century British music.

It was the popular success of his first full-scale opera, *Peter Grimes*, first performed in 1945, that established the future path of Britten’s career as an opera composer. Tempting though it may have been, following this triumph, to continue producing works in the ‘grand’ tradition, Britten chose to take up the greater challenge of exploring other avenues, and it is notable how relatively few of his subsequent works for the stage require the full resources of the large opera house, *Billy Budd* and *Gloriana* being the major exceptions. This trend reflects not only Britten’s artistic preferences for economy and clarity (matched in the post-war years by powerful commercial imperatives) but also his strong desire, with the formation of the English Opera Group, to bring what he once described as ‘the most exciting of musical forms’ to a wider audience.

The chamber operas - including *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Albert Herring* and *The Turn of the Screw* - employ small ensembles and are designed for the facilities of modest theatres, while the three Church Parables of the 1960s were composed specifically for the acoustics and ambience of church performance. The two works for children, *The Little Sweep* and *Noye’s Fludde*, are designed to introduce young audiences to the conventions of opera within a readily assimilable context. In the television opera *Owen Wingrave* Britten took advantage of this very public platform to make a powerful and passionate denunciation of war. His last opera, *Death in Venice*, was clearly intended as a summing-up of his own life’s work and crowns an operatic output of extraordinary depth and richness.
The producer Colin Graham showing Maria Spall how to leave the ark as the dove in the original 1958 production of *Noye’s Fludde*.
Benjamin Britten once said to me after an unsatisfactory rehearsal: “It’s the words that make me write the music I write, so they must be more important than the singers think they are!” Although each opera and its format inevitably gestated in his mind beforehand, not a note of music was ever written until he was entirely satisfied with the libretto. Similarly, he liked visual input from designers and directors at the libretto stage to be sure that everyone was on the same page as him.

He was once asked by a distinguished (but unenlightened) lady at an Embassy dinner: “Mr. Britten – what is the difference between Peter Grimes and The Rape of Lucretia?” After a moment’s thought, Ben replied “The notes, Madam, are the same, but they’re in a different order.” At that point he left the table.

Ben’s unchallenged genius is the way he manipulated all those notes and words in such varied form in seventeen operas. And he never wasted one of them – not even in the “big operas” of Peter Grimes, Billy Budd, Gloriana and Death in Venice. The same can also be said of choral works such as War Requiem. “I need to express the maximum emotion using the minimum of means.” Whether in Death in Venice or the tiny Golden Vanity he wrote for the Vienna Boys’ Choir. (“No female characters, PLEASE!” the boys begged before he wrote it.) the extraordinary and passionate conjunction of music, text and emotion never fails to grip their audiences. Even the comedies of Albert Herring and A Midsummer Night’s Dream, speak with the same passion.

It is this passion that involves us all, audience and performers alike and which, in recent years, has swept his operas into public acceptance. Works which may have reached a restricted audience at the time of their first appearance on the stage (or, in the case of Owen Wingrave, on television) are now being performed in Europe and America in hundreds of performances, reaching thousands of audience members who invariably find themselves deeply affected. In the United States the reactions to three very recent and different productions of the once-despised Gloriana are witness to the emotional excitement the opera has brought to its audiences. Having been present (in the Gallery) at the opera’s chequered world premiere at Covent Garden, I shall never forget the New York premiere by ENO in the Eighties when a stunned audience rocked the Metropolitan with their overwhelmingly enthusiastic response.

Britten was a genius. His operas, every single one of them, are the proof. They are providing audiences world-wide with great rewards and at every performance those audiences are vociferously acknowledging their pleasure.

If I may be allowed a final BB quote, the proof is in the pudding. Although he was often distressed by some productions that distorted his operas beyond his intentions, he once said to me this distress was his own fault, not the fault of the production: “If my operas are any good, they will stand on their own two feet, whatever may be done to them!”

They are, and they do.

Colin Graham
St Louis, June 2006
Paul Bunyan, Britten’s earliest operatic venture, was originally conceived as a ‘choral operetta’ for student performance. Troubled by dramatic flaws and the negative reviews of several critics, Britten withdrew the work after the first run of performances in New York in 1941 and it was only revived (with a few revisions) in 1976, since when the work has entered the repertoire and proved to be a valuable addition to the canon of Britten’s stage works. It marked the composer’s largest, and only operatic, collaboration with W.H. Auden whose story of the giant lumberjack of American legend is set by Britten in a score of striking freshness and ingenuity. The musical influences run from Donizetti through Gilbert & Sullivan and Kurt Weill, to the blues and country-and-western, though this characteristically eclectic mix is melded into a highly individual synthesis that could be the work of no other composer. Although the ‘Broadway musical’-type structure is far removed from Britten’s later practice and there are as yet few hints of his main dramatic preoccupations, the experience and example of writing Paul Bunyan clearly prepared the way for the more fully-realised achievement of his first full-scale opera, Peter Grimes.

The Ballad Interludes are accompanied by guitar (or banjo), with solo violin (doubling the tune) and double bass (pizzicato) ad lib. (or other appropriate instruments).

An alternative instrumentation of the opera, with the accompaniment rescored for two pianos and percussion (1 player) by David Matthews, is also available.
Paul Bunyan tells the mythical story of the legendary giant American folk hero. In the Prologue, Four Young Trees are heard rebelling against their elders’ complacency. Three Wild Geese enter and prophesy the birth of Paul Bunyan, who will clear the forest to make way for civilisation, at the next blue moon. In the First Ballad Interlude, the Narrator relates the story of the birth and early life of Paul Bunyan. In a clearing in the forest, the lumberjacks appear. A Western Union boy enters with a telegram recommending Hel Helson as head-foreman. Bunyan hires him along with two cooks, and a book-keeper, Johnny Inkslinger. The Second Ballad Interlude then tells the story of Paul’s marriage to Carrie, the birth of daughter Tiny and Carrie’s death. After complaints about the standard of the food, Inkslinger employs Hot Biscuit Slim as cook. Bunyan returns to the camp accompanied by Tiny who attracts both Inklinger and Slim. Tiny goes off to help in the kitchen, to Inklinger’s regret. Helson is put in charge of the camp and is urged to challenge Paul’s leadership. Paul and Helson fight as Tiny and Slim declare their love. Helson loses and, presumed dead, is carried off to a mock-funeral march. Coming to his senses, he turns on his cronies. The Third Ballad Interlude tells of Helson’s reconciliation with Paul, the love of Tiny and Slim and the spread of Paul’s achievements. At a Christmas Eve party, Inklinger announces that Slim has found a position at a Manhattan hotel and is to wed Tiny, while Helson is off to Washington. The telegram boy returns with a message summoning Inkslinger to Hollywood. Paul’s work is accomplished and he bids goodbye, telling his friends that America is what they choose to make it.

**Synopsis**

**Recordings**

Pop Wagner, James Lawless, Dan Dressen, Elisabeth Comeaux Nelson, Chorus & Orchestra of The Plymouth Music Series Minnesota/Philip Brunelle

**Publisher**

Faber Music

**On sale**

0571519385 Libretto

0571506100 Chorus part

0571505384 Vocal Score

0571506801 Full Score
In 1941, Britten, then living in America, came across an article by the novelist E.M. Forster on the Suffolk poet George Crabbe, an encounter that was a decisive factor in Britten’s resolve to return to England for good. It was Crabbe’s poem ‘The Borough’ which subsequently served as the basis for Britten’s first full-scale opera, Peter Grimes, the work that launched him internationally as the leading British composer of his generation and which almost single-handedly effected the renaissance of English opera. The composer’s avowed aim in the opera was ‘to express my awareness of the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depends on the sea’ and anyone who has visited the coastline around the composer’s home town of Aldeburgh will recognize the uncanny certainty with which Britten has captured that land- and seascape in Peter Grimes. Perhaps more importantly, the opera also introduces some of the fundamental dramatic themes which characterise Britten’s entire operatic output: the individual against the mass, and the corruption of innocence.
**Synopsis**

At an inquest into the death of William Spode, apprentice to the fisherman Peter Grimes, coroner Swallow calls various witnesses, including Grimes himself, but the verdict of death in accidental circumstances does not satisfy most of the villagers, who regard Grimes as a violent criminal. Their attitude becomes one of open antagonism when his only friend, the schoolmistress Ellen Orford, collects another apprentice from the workhouse for him. In the pub that evening Grimes claims his new boy, to a reception from his fellow townsfolk that is openly and almost universally hostile. Ellen befriends the boy, John, but before long is horrified to find evidence on his body of mistreatment. Challenging Peter with this, she is struck in her turn, and while the pub landlady Auntie and her dubious nieces find some sympathy for her, the men of the village march in deputation to Grimes’ hut to tackle him. It is found empty – a moment earlier, the new apprentice had fallen to his death over the cliff edge and Peter had climbed down after him. Grimes now disappears, and the local gossip Mrs Sedley stirs the village worthies once more into action, this time with the entire Borough (minus Ellen and the retired sea captain Balstrode) forming a manhunt. While they chase after him, Grimes, completely unhinged by his experiences, turns up on the shore, to be sent by Balstrode to sink himself and his boat at sea. As the village returns to life the following morning, a report of a ship going down is dismissed as a rumour.

**TIME AND PLACE**

The Borough, a fishing village, East Coast of Anglia, towards 1830

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**Scoring**

2 fl(=picc), 2 ob(II=ca), 2 cl in B flat & A(II=cl in E flat), 2 bn, dbn—4 hn, 3 tpt(I, II in C, III in D), 3 trbn, tuba—timp, 2 perc(sd, td, bd, tamb, trgl, cymb, gong, whip, xyl, rattle)—harp, cel—str

**Off stage**

org, bells, tuba

**Off-stage band members of the orchestra**

2 cl in B flat, perc(cymb, sd, bd), solo vn, solo db, pf(ad lib.)

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**Cast**

Peter Grimes
A fisherman Tenor

Boy (John)
His apprentice. Silent role

Ellen Orford
A widow, schoolmistress of the Borough Soprano

Captain Balstrode
Retired merchant skipper Baritone

Auntie
Landlady of “The Boar” Alto

Two nieces
Main attractions of “The Boar” Sopranos

Swallow
A lawyer Bass

Bob Boles
Fisherman and Methodist Tenor

Mrs (Nabob) Sedley
A rentier widow of an East India Company’s factor Mezzo-soprano

Rev. Horace Adams
The rector Tenor

Ned Keene
Apothecary and quack Baritone

Hobson
Carrier Bass

Dr Crabbe
Silent role

Chorus of townspeople and fisherfolk SATB

**Recordings**

Peter Pears, Claire Watson, Royal Opera House Orchestra and Chorus/Benjamin Britten

Decca 414 755-2

Also available in a digitally re-mastered version on Decca Legends, 467682-2

Jon Vickers, Heather Harper, Royal Opera House Orchestra and Chorus/Sir Colin Davis

Philips 46287

Anthony Rolfe Johnson, Felicity Lott, Thomas Allen, Royal Opera House Chorus and Orchestra/Bernard Haitink

EMI CDS754832-2

Philip Langridge, Janice Watson, London Symphony Chorus, City of London Sinfonia/Richard Hickox

Chandos CHAN 94478

Glenn Winslade, Janice Watson, Anthony Michael-Moore, London Symphony Orchestra/Sir Colin Davis

LSO Live label, LSO0054

**Publisher**

Boosey & Hawkes

On Sale

M-060-01494-9 Libretto

M-060-01493-2 Vocal Score

M-060-01492-5 Study Score (hardback)
THE RAPE OF LUCRETIA

op.37 (1946, rev.1947)

Opera in two acts
Libretto by Ronald Duncan after the play by André Obey

Duration
107 minutes

First performance
12 July 1946 Glyndebourne Festival Opera

CAST
Male Chorus
Tenor

Female Chorus
Soprano

Collatinus
A Roman General Bass

Junius
A Roman General Baritone

Prince Tarquinius
Son of the Etruscan tyrant, Tarquinius Superbus Baritone

Lucretia
Wife of Collatinus Contralto

Bianca
Lucretia’s nurse Mezzo-Soprano

Lucia
Lucretia’s Maid Soprano

SCORING
ff(pic & alto fl), ob(=ca),
cl in B flat & A(=bass cl), hn—hm—
perc ( timp, sd, td, bd, gong, susp cymb,
trgl, whip, tamb)—harp, pf—
string quintet(2 vn, va, vc, db)

TIMEPLACE
In or near Rome, 500 BC

It was a combination of economic realities and aesthetic preferences that encouraged Britten to develop the concept of chamber opera, employing a small cast and an orchestra of thirteen players. His first work in the new medium was The Rape of Lucretia, first performed just over a year after Peter Grimes, in 1946. There is, however, no loss of colour or atmosphere indeed the pared-down textures produced an intensification of Britten’s operatic vision which was to serve him further in Albert Herring and The Turn of the Screw. With the roles of the Male and Female Chorus, who comment on the action ‘out of time’ (as in Greek tragedy) and the use of solo piano to accompany recitative passages, Lucretia achieves a certain classical poise and detachment. However, Lucretia and Tarquinius are driven by real human emotions and desires (Lucretia’s music is surely some of Britten’s most beautiful) and the resulting amalgam is an opera of great musico-dramatic power and expressive richness.
The Male and Female Chorus describe the historical background to the story, and reveal their view of events to be that of a later, Christian era. The action is set in and around Rome immediately before the end of the reign of the Etruscan king Tarquinius Superbus in 510 BC. At a military camp outside the city his son, the prince Tarquinius Sextus, is drinking with two generals, Collatinus and Junius. They discuss an earlier, unfortunate bet, in which the constancy of various Roman wives was tried and found wanting. Of the married men (Tarquinius goes to brothels) only Collatinus can boast a faithful wife, Lucretia, who was discovered sleeping alone in her husband’s absence. Urged on by the malicious Junius, Tarquinius decides to prove Lucretia chaste by attempting her virtue himself, and rides off to Rome. His arrival at her house produces consternation, but hospitality forces Lucretia to offer him a room for the night, despite her misgivings and those of her servants. Tarquinius’s purpose, however, is made clear when he wakes her and forces himself upon her before leaving the house. The following morning her late appearance in a distressed, broken state is only slowly understood by her nurse Bianca and maid Lucia, and her husband is sent for. Collatinus arrives with Junius to hear the news, and despite his at least partial understanding of Lucretia’s shame it is too painful for her to bear, and she stabs herself. Her death provides the impetus for the Romans to throw out the Tarquins. The Male and Female Chorus attempt to come to terms with these events in a Christian context.
Britten’s second chamber opera was composed just a year after its predecessor, The Rape of Lucretia, in 1947. However, the contrast in style and subject matter could not be greater: instead of a tragedy based on a tale from Roman antiquity, Albert Herring is a comic opera set in the imaginary East Suffolk town of Loxford at the turn of the 20th century. The score contains some of Britten’s wittiest musical invention and his gifts for parody and caricature, already evident in Peter Grimes, are given full rein. However, the work is in no sense a farce: Albert is a sympathetic and credible figure who, tied to his mother’s apron-strings and frustrated by small-town pieties, experiences a liberating ‘breaking out’, a theme fully in keeping with the composer’s favourite subject of the loss of innocence. Moreover, such poignant passages as the third-act Threnody, in which Albert, presumed dead, is mourned by the gathered townsfolk, make Donald Mitchell’s description of the opera as ‘a serious comedy’ seem completely apt.

**CAST**

Lady Billows  
An Elderly Autocrat Soprano  
Florence Pike  
Her Housekeeper Contralto  
Miss Wordsworth  
Head Teacher Soprano  
Mr Gedge  
The Vicar Baritone  
Mr Upfold  
The Mayor Tenor  
Superintendent Budd Bass  
Sid  
A Butcher’s Assistant Baritone  
Albert Herring  
From the greengrocers Tenor  
Nancy  
From the bakery Mezzo-Soprano  
Mrs Herring  
Albert’s Mother Mezzo-Soprano  
Emmie  
Soprano  
Cis  
Soprano  
Harry  
Tutte

**SCORING**

fl(picc & alto fl), ob, cl in B flat(bass cl), bn—hn—perc(timp, sd, bd, trgl, cymb, castanets, tamb, gong, t bells in F,B flat,D, glock, whip, wb)—harp, pf—  
string quintet(2 vn, va, vc, db)

**PLACE**

The small East Suffolk market town of Loxford, 1900
In a small Suffolk market town Mr Gedge the Vicar, Police Superintendent Budd, Mr Upfold the Mayor and the local head teacher Miss Wordsworth meet at the home of Lady Billows to appoint at her behest a May Queen as an encouragement to local chastity. As they review the list of candidates, Lady Billows’s housekeeper Florence Pike, armed with reports of unworthy behaviour, condemns each and every one. Eventually none is left, and instead a May King is proposed and Albert Herring – blameless son of a widowed shopkeeper – is chosen. The group informs Albert and his mother at their shop – though the shy young man tries unsuccessfully to refuse. At the ceremony in a marquee in the vicarage garden, butcher’s assistant Sid laces Albert’s lemonade, so that his contribution to the occasion consists largely of hiccups and silence. Later, back in the shop, Albert casts envious glances at the affectionate relationship between Sid and his girlfriend Nancy and, armed with his prize money, sets off in search of a little adventure of his own. By the following afternoon, concern is growing at his disappearance.

The police are called in. Eventually the hasty villagers decide that he must have come to a bad end, and begin to mourn him. Up turns Albert, however, to face a telling off for going absent without leave and shocked reactions from his elders and betters when his carousing in public houses is revealed. Albert, of course, is unashamed, and celebrates his new-found independence by inviting three local kids into the greengrocers to share some peaches, tossing his May King’s orange blossom wreath into the audience as a final gesture.

**Synopsis**

In a small Suffolk market town Mr Gedge the Vicar, Police Superintendent Budd, Mr Upfold the Mayor and the local head teacher Miss Wordsworth meet at the home of Lady Billows to appoint at her behest a May Queen as an encouragement to local chastity. As they review the list of candidates, Lady Billows’s housekeeper Florence Pike, armed with reports of unworthy behaviour, condemns each and every one. Eventually none is left, and instead a May King is proposed and Albert Herring – blameless son of a widowed shopkeeper – is chosen. The group informs Albert and his mother at their shop – though the shy young man tries unsuccessfully to refuse. At the ceremony in a marquee in the vicarage garden, butcher’s assistant Sid laces Albert’s lemonade, so that his contribution to the occasion consists largely of hiccups and silence. Later, back in the shop, Albert casts envious glances at the affectionate relationship between Sid and his girlfriend Nancy and, armed with his prize money, sets off in search of a little adventure of his own. By the following afternoon, concern is growing at his disappearance.

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The popularity of Britten’s three chamber operas proper (The Rape of Lucretia, Albert Herring and The Turn of the Screw) has tended somewhat to overshadow his brilliant realisation of John Gay’s The Beggar’s Opera, which was completed in 1948. Indeed, Britten’s harmonisations and arrangements of the pre-existing tunes, which he described as ‘among our finest national songs’, is so personal and idiosyncratic that the opera sounds like a totally original work. Despite the longish stretches of spoken dialogue, Britten brings all his skills of dramatic characterisation to bear and binds the work together by effective use of leitmotif and key-schemes. The scoring too is brilliantly imaginative with the range and constitution of the orchestra varied almost from number to number. Dramatically, the story reflects Britten’s preoccupations with the penultimate scene, where the condemned Macheath reflects on his fate, remarkably foreshadowing a similar moment near the end of Britten’s next opera, Billy Budd.

**CAST**

Beggar  
Speaking role

Mrs Peachum  
Mezzo-Soprano

Mr Peachum  
Bass

Polly Peachum  
Mezzo-Soprano

Captain Macheath  
Tenor

Filch  
Tenor (or Speaking role)

Lockit  
Baritone

Lucy Lockit  
Soprano

Mrs Trapes  
Alto

Ladies of the Town  
Mrs Vixen

Jenny Diver  
Suky Tawdry

Mrs Coaxer  
Dolly Trull

Mrs Slammekin  
Molly Brazen

Gentlemen of the Road  
Ben Budge

Wat Dreary  
Mat of the Mint

Jenny Twitcher  
Harry Paddington

Nimming Ned  
Tenors/Baroitones/Basses

**SCORING**

fl(=picc), ob(=ca), cl in B flat & A, bn—  
hn—perc(timp, trgl, vb, tamb, sd, td, bd,  
susp cymb, gong)—harp—  
string quintet(2 vn, va, vc, db)

An alternative version, with the role of Macheath sung by baritone, is available on hire.

**The Beggar’s Opera**

*op.43 (1948)*

Ballad-Opera by John Gay (1728)  
realized from the original airs by Benjamin Britten, in three acts

Libretto by John Gay *with additional dialogue by Tyrone Guthrie*

**Duration**  
108 minutes

**First performance**  
24 May 1948 *Arts Theatre, Cambridge*
At the den of Peachum, a receiver of stolen goods, he and his wife ponder the value of various rogues in their employ before turning their attention to the highwayman Captain Macheath, on whom their daughter Polly dotes. When Mrs Peachum and her husband charge her with having married Macheath she is forced to admit it. They console themselves with the prospect that he is likely to be impeached soon for his activities (by them, if no-one else) and Polly left a wealthy widow. She, however, is horrified, and confesses all to the Captain: they decide to part temporarily for safety’s sake. At a tavern near Newgate Prison, a criminal gang assembles with a view to hijacking a coach on Hampstead Heath. Macheath warns them he must lie low for a while. With the others gone, a bevy of loose women enters to entertain him though, primed by Peachum, they are actually there to betray Macheath, who is handed over to the constables as the act ends. In Newgate, Macheath offers to marry the jailer’s pregnant daughter, Lucy Lockit, but her father and Peachum have already hatched a scheme to share the reward due on his execution. The arrival of Polly with her alternative marital claims confuses the issue further: the two women come close to blows. Eventually, Lucy manages to free Macheath with some spare keys, but he is later recaptured and sentenced to death. Having failed to poison Polly, Lucy and her former rival plead with their fathers to get their husband off, but to no avail. Finally, the impresario of the opera, the Beggar, is prevailed upon to grant a reprieve.
Two of the major preoccupations informing Britten’s life and work, opera and music for children, come together in this ‘Entertainment for Young People’, the first part, Let’s Make An Opera, consisting of a play in which we see a group of children and adults write and rehearse an opera; the second part consisting of a performance of the finished opera itself. As such, the work can almost be seen as Britten’s operatic counterpart to The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra. Yet despite the light-hearted approach, The Little Sweep is also a morality tale in which Sam the sweep boy is sold into service and bullied by his elders like the apprentice in Peter Grimes. Thus the work embodies an involving theatrical experience, introducing young audiences to the conventions of opera by means of a simple yet affecting story. That Britten succeeded in his aim is demonstrated by the work’s universal appeal and popularity.

CAST
Black Bob
A brutal sweep-master Bass
Clem
His son and assistant Tenor
Sam
Their new sweep boy, aged 8 Treble
Miss Baggott
The housekeeper at Iken Hall Contralto
Juliet Brook
Aged 14 Soprano
Gay Brook
Aged 13 Treble
Sophie Brook
Aged 10 Soprano
Rowan
The nursery-maid to the Woodbridge cousins Soprano
Jonny Crome
Aged 15 Treble
Hughie Crome
Aged 8 Treble
Tina Crome
Aged 8 Soprano
Tom
The coachman from Woodbridge Bass
Alfred
The gardener at Iken Hall Tenor

SYNOPSIS
The housekeeper Miss Baggott shows the sweepmaster Black Bob, his assistant Clem and the new sweepboy Sam where they must start. Black Bob and Clem send the tearful Sam up the chimney and leave him to it. But he gets stuck, and his cries are heard by the children of the house, Juliet, Gay and Sophie Brook, and their visiting friends John, Hugh and Tina Crome. Having rescued the filthy little boy from the chimney, they decide to rescue him from the sweep too. First they make it look as if Sam has run off, then they hide him from Miss Baggott and the returning sweeps. Afterwards, when the coast is clear, they let the Cromes’ kind-hearted nursery-maid Rowan into their secret, and together they wash, feed and clothe Sam and plot how to get him back home. The next morning Rowan and the children hide Sam in the trunk they are taking with them and smuggle him out of the house.
SCORING
pf (four hands)—perc (timp, bd, sd, gong, cymb, trgl, castanets, large and small wbs)—string quartet
An arrangement for piano duet, with or without percussion is also available

TIME AND PLACE
Children’s Nursery of Iken Hall, 1810

RECORDING
Robert Lloyd, Robert Tear, Sam Monck, Heather Begg, Mary Wells, Finchley Children’s Music Group, Medici String Quartet/
Norman Del Mar
EMI Classics 5651112

PUBLISHER
Boosey & Hawkes
On Sale
M-060-01463-5 Libretto
M-060-01461-1 Vocal Score
M-060-01460-4 Study Score (hardback)
M-060-01462-8 Audience Songs (Eng)
M-2025-1922-6 Audience Songs (Ger)
Billy Budd

op.50 (1951, rev.1960)

Opera in two acts

Libretto by E M Forster and Eric Crozier adapted from the story by Herman Melville

Duration
Original 4-act version: 162 minutes
Revised 2-act version: 158 minutes

First performance of original version
1 December 1951 Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

First performance of revised version
9 January 1964 Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

Billy Budd was completed in 1951 and first performed as part of that year’s Festival of Britain celebrations. In 1960 Britten revised the work, contracting the original four acts into two, in which form it is generally performed today (though the original version is now again available for performance). The work is based on Herman Melville’s posthumously published novel Billy Budd, Sailor which Britten and his librettists (E.M. Forster and Eric Crozier) transformed into an opera of great musico-dramatic power and psychological subtlety. Although Billy is the opera’s eponymous hero, the real focus of the work is the moral dilemma facing Captain Vere who is confronted with an agonising choice between saving Billy and his sense of duty as the ship’s Captain (a theme further explored by Britten in Gloriana).

Billy Budd employs the largest orchestra of any Britten opera, capable of unleashing an elemental power when the situation demands it, but in general, the scoring favours the more sharply etched, transparent textures developed in the chamber operas.

CAST
Edward Fairfax Vere
Captain of HMS Indomitable Tenor
Billy Budd
Foretopman Baritone
John Claggart
Master-at-arms Bass
Mr Redburn
First Lieutenant Baritone
Mr Flint
Sailing Master Baritone
Lieutenant Ratcliffe
Bass
Red Whiskers
An impressed man Tenor
Donald
A sailor Baritone
Dansker
An old seaman Bass
A Novice Tenor
Squeak
A ship’s corporal Tenor

Bosun Baritone
First Mate Baritone
Second Mate Baritone
Maintop Tenor
Novice’s Friend Baritone
Arthur Jones An impressed man Baritone
Four Midshipmen Boys Voices
Cabin Boy Speaking role
Officers Sailors
Powder monkeys
Drummers
Marines

SCORING
4 fl, 3 ob, 1 ca, 2 cl in B flat (I=Eb flat and bass cl), bass cl, alto sax, 2 hn, dbn—
4 hn, 4 tpt (I,II,IV in C, III in D), 3 trbn, tuba—timp,
6 perc (xyl, glock, trgl, wb, tamb, sd, td, bd, whip, cymb, suscymb, small gong)—harp—
str/4 drums played by drummers on stage

TIME/PLACE
On board HMS Indomitable during the French Wars of 1797.
The opera is preceded by a prologue in which Captain Vere, as an old man, ponders the significance of events that took place long ago. The main action is set on board the British naval vessel HMS Indomitable in 1797. The crew goes about its tasks driven by the brutality of the ship’s Master-at-arms, John Claggart, who rules by violence. Three new sailors, press-ganged from a passing merchant ship, are brought on board. Two of them are meagre specimens, but the third – Billy Budd – is young, strong and handsome. His goodness wins the hearts of all except Claggart, whose dark world is turned upside down by Billy’s beauty and grace, and who determines to destroy him. To this end, he has his sidekick Squeak rifle amongst Billy’s belongings, and when the young sailor catches him, the old sea dog Dansker warns Billy that Claggart has it in for him. Claggart then has the Novice – cowed into submission by an earlier beating – try to bribe Billy into supporting mutiny, but to no avail. Nevertheless Claggart takes a complaint to Vere, but he is interrupted in his accusation by a brief skirmish with a French frigate that ends with the enemy escaping. Claggart then accuses Billy, who is called in by Vere to defend himself. His stammer, however, frustrates his attempts to speak and he knocks Claggart down with a single blow that strikes him dead. At the court martial, Vere fails to speak up for Billy, who is then condemned. He goes to his death with Vere’s name on his lips. In the Epilogue, we return to the aged Vere, who again scrutinises his role in these events.

**SYNOPSIS**

The opera is preceded by a prologue in which Captain Vere, as an old man, ponders the significance of events that took place long ago. The main action is set on board the British naval vessel HMS Indomitable in 1797. The crew goes about its tasks driven by the brutality of the ship’s Master-at-arms, John Claggart, who rules by violence. Three new sailors, press-ganged from a passing merchant ship, are brought on board. Two of them are meagre specimens, but the third – Billy Budd – is young, strong and handsome. His goodness wins the hearts of all except Claggart, whose dark world is turned upside down by Billy’s beauty and grace, and who determines to destroy him. To this end, he has his sidekick Squeak rifle amongst Billy’s belongings, and when the young sailor catches him, the old sea dog Dansker warns Billy that Claggart has it in for him. Claggart then has the Novice – cowed into submission by an earlier beating – try to bribe Billy into supporting mutiny, but to no avail. Nevertheless Claggart takes a complaint to Vere, but he is interrupted in his accusation by a brief skirmish with a French frigate that ends with the enemy escaping. Claggart then accuses Billy, who is called in by Vere to defend himself. His stammer, however, frustrates his attempts to speak and he knocks Claggart down with a single blow that strikes him dead. At the court martial, Vere fails to speak up for Billy, who is then condemned. He goes to his death with Vere’s name on his lips. In the Epilogue, we return to the aged Vere, who again scrutinises his role in these events.

**RECORDINGS**

Peter Pears, Peter Glossop, Michael Langdon, John Shirley-Quirk, Bryan Drake, David Kelly, Gregory Dempsey, David Bowman, Owen Brannigan, Robert Tear, Robert Bowman, Delme Bryn-Jones, Eric Garrett, Norman Lumsden, Nigel Rogers, Benjamin Luxon, James Newby, Ambrosian Opera Chorus, London Symphony Orchestra, Benjamin Britten
Decca 417428-2

Chandos CHAN 9826

Thomas Hampson, Anthony Rolfe Johnson, Eric Halvarson, Russell Smythe, Gidon Sachs, Simon Wilding, Martyn Hill, Christopher Maltman, Andrew Burden, William Dazeley, Christopher Gillett, Manchester Boys Choir, Hallé Orchestra and Choir/Kent Nagano
Erato Disques 3984-21631-2
(original 4-Act version)

**PUBLISHER**

Boosey & Hawkes

On sale
M-060-01397-3 Libretto
M-060-01396-6 Vocal Score
M-060-06554-5 Study Score
**Gloriana**

*op.53 (1953, rev.1966)*

**Opera in three acts**

*Libretto by William Plomer*

*after Lytton Strachey’s ‘Elizabeth and Essex’*

**Duration**

148 minutes

**First performance**

8 June 1953 Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

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**CAST**

Queen Elizabeth the First
*Soprano*

Robert Devereux
*Tenor*

Frances
*Mezzo-Soprano*

Charles Blount
*Bass*

Penelope (Lady Rich)
*Soprano*

Sir Robert Cecil
*Baritone*

Sir Walter Raleigh
*Bass*

Henry Cuffe
*Bass*

A Lady in Waiting
*Soprano*

A Blind Ballad Singer
*Bass*

The Recorder of Norwich
*Bass*

A Housewife
*Mezzo-Soprano*

The Spirit of the Masque
*Tenor*

The Master of Ceremonies
*Tenor*

The City Crier
*Bass*

Citizens

Maids of Honour

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Household

Courtiers

Masquers

Old Men

Chorus

Time

Concord

Country Girls

Rustics

Fishermen

Morris Dancer

Dancers

Pages

Ballad-Singer’s Runner

Phantom of the Queen

Actors

**SCORING**

3 fl(I, II, III—picc), 2 ob, ca, 2 cl in B flat & A, bass cl, 2 bn, dbn—4 hn, 3 tpt in C, 3 trbn, tuba—timp, 4 perc(glock, trgl, wb, tamb, sd, td, bd, cymb, t. whip, c. bells in D, E, F, G, A, B flat, C)—harp, cel—str

**Stage instruments**

Act I sc. 1

On Stage

tpt in multiples of three

Act II sc. 3

On Stage

Str and/or 3 ww(scored ad lib.), pipe and tabor (small side drum without snares)

Act III sc. 2

On Stage

Gittern, drum

Off Stage

sd (several)

Act III sc. 3

On Stage

Harp

Off Stage

sd, bd, cymb, wind machine
At a royal jousting tournament, the ambitious Earl of Essex picks a fight with Lord Mountjoy and is wounded. Queen Elizabeth’s punishment is that henceforth they shall always attend court together. They become friends. Cecil warns his monarch about Essex’s unruliness, and about the likely threat of an Armada from Spain. Working on her fondness for him, Essex flatters the queen and asks to be appointed her Deputy in Ireland, to quell the rebel Tyrone. Elizabeth temporises, conscious of her position as monarch and wary of his impetuousness. In Norwich, the Queen is welcomed by the citizens and entertained with a masque of Time and Concord. At Essex’s London house, the Earl, his sister Lady Rich and her lover Mountjoy plan their advancement to power: his wife counsels caution. At a grand ball in the Palace of Whitehall, the Queen, perceiving the lavish dress of Lady Essex’s wife to be an insult, insists the ladies change after a strenuous dance; she reappears wearing the offending dress, which is much too small for her, to shame Lady Essex. Essex is furious, but mollified when Elizabeth announces the appointment he has long craved and sends him to Ireland. His campaign, however, is a failure and on his unexpected return, he insists on admittance to the monarch while she dresses: he confronts an old woman without wig or make-up. He pleads his cause, but she is unconvinced and later Cecil warns her of his scheme to replace her. In London, Essex’s supporters fail in their attempt to win the people over to his rebellion. Essex is condemned, and when a deputation of his wife, sister and friend to plead for him goes badly awry, Elizabeth signs the warrant for his execution. In the final scene, the dying monarch recalls the tests she has withstood during her reign.

**SNOPSIS**

At a royal jousting tournament, the ambitious Earl of Essex picks a fight with Lord Mountjoy and is wounded. Queen Elizabeth’s punishment is that henceforth they shall always attend court together. They become friends. Cecil warns his monarch about Essex’s unruliness, and about the likely threat of an Armada from Spain. Working on her fondness for him, Essex flatters the queen and asks to be appointed her Deputy in Ireland, to quell the rebel Tyrone. Elizabeth temporises, conscious of her position as monarch and wary of his impetuousness. In Norwich, the Queen is welcomed by the citizens and entertained with a masque of Time and Concord. At Essex’s London house, the Earl, his sister Lady Rich and her lover Mountjoy plan their advancement to power: his wife counsels caution. At a grand ball in the Palace of Whitehall, the Queen, perceiving the lavish dress of Lady Essex’s wife to be an insult, insists the ladies change after a strenuous dance; she reappears wearing the offending dress, which is much too small for her, to shame Lady Essex. Essex is furious, but mollified when Elizabeth announces the appointment he has long craved and sends him to Ireland. His campaign, however, is a failure and on his unexpected return, he insists on admittance to the monarch while she dresses: he confronts an old woman without wig or make-up. He pleads his cause, but she is unconvinced and later Cecil warns her of his scheme to replace her. In London, Essex’s supporters fail in their attempt to win the people over to his rebellion. Essex is condemned, and when a deputation of his wife, sister and friend to plead for him goes badly awry, Elizabeth signs the warrant for his execution. In the final scene, the dying monarch recalls the tests she has withstood during her reign.

**Dedicated by gracious permission to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II**, Gloriana was completed in 1953 and first performed as part of that year’s Coronation celebrations. The unjust critical furore surrounding the premiere has now passed into history and the work can be seen as a worthy successor to *Billy Budd*, with which it shares a number of important features. However, the opera is unusual for Britten in that the three acts are generally made up of self-contained set-pieces, rather than the continuous narrative he normally preferred. Although there are scenes of ceremony and pageantry (as befits the occasion for which it was written), the work’s dramatic core is the unfolding relationship between Elizabeth I and the Earl of Essex, the Queen torn between her private affection for the Earl and her sense of public duty when he is found guilty of treason and condemned to death. The sound-world of the opera has an appropriately Elizabethan atmosphere, the famous Choral and Courtly Dances evoking a period flavour without lapsing into pastiche. The opera has had a chequered history, but it now seems as though Gloriana has finally taken its rightful place in Britten’s operatic oeuvre.

**SCENE**

England, around 1600

**RECORDING**


*Decca 440213-2*

**LIBRETTO**

M-060-01441-3 Vocal Score

**STUDY SCORE**

M-060-07457-8 Study Score (hardback)

**PUBLISHER**

Boosey & Hawkes

**ON SALE**

M-060-01442-0 Libretto
Regarded by many as the finest of all his stage-works, The Turn of the Screw, Britten’s final chamber opera, was written in the incredibly short period of just five months in 1954. The work is based on the novel of the same title by Henry James which Britten had known for many years: a tale of good versus evil, the natural versus the supernatural, possession and exorcism, set within the domestic proprieties of the Essex country house of Bly – ingredients which would have had an obvious appeal for the composer. Above all, the theme of the corruption of innocence must have attracted him more than any other. The story also lends itself to Britten’s gifts for apt and distinctive musical characterisation, the relatively pure and uncomplicated music for the opera’s mortals contrasting strongly with the alluring, other-worldly music associated with the ghosts. The work is one of the most tautly constructed and tightly-knit of all Britten’s operas, the musical material almost wholly derived from the twelve-note ‘Screw’ theme heard near the work’s opening. However, this very concentration helps give the opera its feeling of intense claustrophobic and its dramatic power can have an overwhelming impact in the theatre.

**CAST**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Singer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Prologue</td>
<td>Mrs Grose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quint</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Governess</td>
<td>Miss Jessel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quint</td>
<td>A former man-servant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flora</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quint</td>
<td>A former governess</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SCORING**

- fl=(picc & alto fl), ob=(ca), cl in A & B flat=(bass cl), bn—hn—perc (timp, bd, sd, td, tom-tom, gong, cymb, trgl, wb, glock, t bells)—harp, pf=(cel)—string quintet (2 vn, va, vc, db)

**TIME AND PLACE**

Bly, an English country house, mid-19th Century
In the Prologue, the tenor describes a written account of the action, in which a young woman tells how she accepted a position in a house with two children on the understanding that she would never contact their guardian. The main action sees the Governess travelling to Bly with trepidation but she is welcomed by the housekeeper, Mrs Grose, and takes an instant liking to her young charges, Miles and Flora. A letter, however, arrives from Miles’s school, dismissing him as ‘an injury to his friends’. She decides not to discuss it with him. Seeing a strange man on the tower in the grounds, the Governess describes him to Mrs Grose, who identifies him as Peter Quint, the guardian’s valet, who ‘made free’ with the former governess, Miss Jessel. She left and died, and Quint subsequently died himself. The Governess fears for Miles. At the lake, she becomes aware of the presence of Miss Jessel and that Flora has pretended not to see her. Quint and Miss Jessel then call to Miles and Flora at night, and though the Governess intervenes she does not question the children. The Governess next sees Miss Jessel in the schoolroom. She decides to write to the guardian, but Miles – lured on by Quint – steals the letter, and distracts the adults with his piano playing so that Flora can go to Miss Jessel. Mrs Grose is unable to see the ghost, but her night spent with Flora convinces her that something is badly wrong and she takes the girl away. When the Governess confronts Miles with her suspicions, Quint approaches and speaks directly to the boy, who suddenly dies in the Governess’s arms.

**Synopsis**

In the Prologue, the tenor describes a written account of the action, in which a young woman tells how she accepted a position in a house with two children on the understanding that she would never contact their guardian. The main action sees the Governess travelling to Bly with trepidation but she is welcomed by the housekeeper, Mrs Grose, and takes an instant liking to her young charges, Miles and Flora. A letter, however, arrives from Miles’s school, dismissing him as ‘an injury to his friends’. She decides not to discuss it with him. Seeing a strange man on the tower in the grounds, the Governess describes him to Mrs Grose, who identifies him as Peter Quint, the guardian’s valet, who ‘made free’ with the former governess, Miss Jessel. She left and died, and Quint subsequently died himself. The Governess fears for Miles. At the lake, she becomes aware of the presence of Miss Jessel and that Flora has pretended not to see her. Quint and Miss Jessel then call to Miles and Flora at night, and though the Governess intervenes she does not question the children. The Governess next sees Miss Jessel in the schoolroom. She decides to write to the guardian, but Miles – lured on by Quint – steals the letter, and distracts the adults with his piano playing so that Flora can go to Miss Jessel. Mrs Grose is unable to see the ghost, but her night spent with Flora convinces her that something is badly wrong and she takes the girl away. When the Governess confronts Miles with her suspicions, Quint approaches and speaks directly to the boy, who suddenly dies in the Governess’s arms.

**Recordings**

- Peter Pears, Jennifer Vyvyan, David Hemmings, Olive Dyer, Joan Cross, Arda Mandikian, English Opera Group Orchestra/Benjamin Britten
  Decca 425672-2
- Phyllis Cannan, Eileen Hulse, Philip Langridge, Feliciy Lott, Sam Pay, Aldeburgh Festival Ensemble/Steuart Bedford
  Naxos 8-660109-10
- Ian Bostridge, Joan Rodgers, Julian Leang, Caroline Wise, Jane Henschel, Vivian Tierney, Mahler Chamber Orchestra/Daniel Harding
  Virgin Classics 5455212
- Mark Padmore, Lisa Milne, Catrin Wyn Davies, Diana Montague, Nicholas Kirby Johnson, Caroline Wise, City of London Sinfonia/Richard Hickox
  Opus Arte DVD

**Publisher**

Boosey & Hawkes

**On sale**

- M-060-01550-9 Libretto
- M-060-01550-2 Vocal Score
- M-060-01459-6 Study Score (hardback)
Noye’s Fludde

op.59 (1957)

The Chester Miracle Play set to music by Britten

for adults’ and children’s voices, children’s chorus, chamber ensemble

and children’s orchestra

The text is from ‘English Miracle Plays, Moralities and Interludes’

Duration

50 minutes

First performance

18 June 1958 Oxford Church, Aldeburgh Festival

Noye’s Fludde, completed in December 1957 and first performed during the 1958 Aldeburgh Festival, is Britten’s most extended and elaborate work for children. In common with Saint Nicolas and The Little Sweep, the work is written in such a way as to combine professional and amateur performers, the music often tailored to take account of the abilities of less accomplished players but with no sense of compromise or writing down. Most of the main vocal parts are written for children (the exceptions being Noye himself, Noye’s wife and the Voice of God) and the orchestral forces comprise strings, recorders, bugles, handbells and a large assortment of percussion including such home-made instruments as sandpaper blocks and mugs hung on a line. The congregation also gets the opportunity to participate in three hymn arrangements, ‘Lord Jesus, think on me’, ‘Eternal Father, strong to save’ and ‘The spacious firmament’. Britten’s skill in integrating these various elements with musical invention of a consistently high order is undoubtedly one of his finest achievements, while the church setting and use of procession and ritual clearly point the way forward to the Church Parables of the 1960s.
The Voice of God
Speaking role
Noye
Bass-baritone
Mrs Noye
Contralto
Sem, Ham and Jaffet
Boy Trebles
Mrs Sem, Mrs Ham, Mrs Jaffet
Girl Sopranos
Mrs Noye’s Gossips
Girl Sopranos
Chorus of Animals and Birds
Children (SATB)
The Congregation

CAST

Scene from the Salisbury Cathedral production by Sonia Woodley (2003)
Scene from the Jubilee Opera production at Aldeburgh Parish Church (2000)

SIMPSON

After the congregation has sung the hymn ‘Lord Jesus, think on me’, the Voice of God is heard warning Noye that he has decided to destroy sinful man and all living things, save Noye and his family. They must therefore construct a boat according to God’s specifications. Noye and his family start building – all except his wife, who sits drinking with her ‘gossips’, as she calls her friends. Meanwhile Noye is instructed to collect two of all the animals. The animals duly enter, and since Mrs Noye continues to refuse to enter the ark, her sons carry her aboard just before the water sweeps away her gossips. At the height of the flood all join in the hymn ‘Eternal Father, strong to save’. After forty days, Noye sends a raven to seek for dry land but it does not return. Next he sends a dove, which returns with an olive branch in its beak – a sign of peace between God and man. When Noye and his passengers disembark, God sets a rainbow in the sky as a pledge of that he will never flood the earth again. All join in the hymn ‘The spacious firmament on high’.

STAGING

The Voice of God
Speaking role
Noye
Bass-baritone
Mrs Noye
Contralto
Sem, Ham and Jaffet
Boy Trebles
Mrs Sem, Mrs Ham, Mrs Jaffet
Girl Sopranos
Mrs Noye’s Gossips
Girl Sopranos
Chorus of Animals and Birds
Children (SATB)
The Congregation

SCOREING

Professional ensemble
trbl recorder—timp—pf (four hands)—org—
string quintet(2 vn, va, vc, db)

Amateur/children’s orchestra
desc rec(2 parts), trbl recs, bugles in B flat(in four parts),
12 handbells in E flat—perc(bd, td, sd, tamb, cymb, tubg, gong, Chinese blocks, wind machine, sandpaper, slung mug)—str(yn in three parts, va, vc in two parts, db)

RECORDING

Owen Brannigan, Sheila Rex,
Trevor Anthony,
East Suffolk children’s orchestra,
English Opera Group Orchestra/
Norman Del Mar
Decca 436397-2

PUBLISHER

Boosey & Hawkes
On sale
M-051-15032-8 Libretto
M-060-01480-2 Vocal Score
M-060-01481-9 Choral Score
M-060-01482-6 Hymn Sheet
M-060-01479-9 Study Score
M-060-01487-9 Full Score
M-060-83664-0 Production Notes

*All Salisbury Cathedral production photos reproduced by permission of the Chapter of Salisbury Cathedral and the Salisbury Nine Schools Music Partnership
Oberon  
King of the Fairies  
Countertenor

Tytania  
Queen of the Fairies  
Coloratura Soprano

Puck  
Acrobat/speaking role

Theseus  
Duke of Athens  
Bass

Hippolyta  
Queen of the Amazons, betrothed to Theseus  
Contralto

Lysander  
In love with Hermia  
Tenor

Demetrius  
In love with Hermia  
Tenor

Hermia  
In love with Lysander  
Mezzo Soprano

Helena  
In love with Demetrius  
Soprano

2 fl (=picc), ob (=ca), 2 cl in A & B flat, bn — 2 hn, tpt in D, trbn — 2 perc (trgl, cymb, tamb, gong, 2 wb, vibr, glock, xyl, tamburo in F# alto, sd, td, bd, timp, 2 bells in G# and F#) — 2 harps, hpd (=cel) — str (minimum: 4.2.2.2)

Stage band
soprantino rec, small cymb, 2 wb

As twilight falls, fairies attendant upon their queen Tytania enter, followed by Puck, spirit attendant on the fairy-king, Oberon. Soon the royal pair arrives, separately, having fallen out over a little changeling boy. They argue, then Tytania and her fairies leave. Oberon sends Puck to find a certain herb that causes those upon whose sleeping eyelids the juice is dropped to fall in love with the next live creature that he or she sees. Next enter lovers Lysander and Hermia, forbidden by Athenian law to marry (she must wed Demetrius) and so fleeing the city together. As they move off Puck returns with the herb, and Oberon instructs him to seek out an Athenian (meaning Demetrius) and anoint his eyes so as to make him fall in love with Helena. The four Athenians are hurled into violent discord, till Puck sends them to sleep and they wake up cured. Bottom too is eventually restored, Oberon and Tytania make their peace, and following the successful performance of Pyramus and Thisbe before his guests (whom we met earlier in the wood), they bless Theseus and his wife Hippolyta, and their house.

Scene from the La Monnaie, Brussels production by David McVicar (2004)

Scene from the Chicago Opera Theater production by Andrei Serban (2005)

Scene from the Central City Opera production by Paul Curran (2002)

As twilight falls, fairies attendant upon their queen Tytania enter, followed by Puck, spirit attendant on the fairy-king, Oberon. Soon the royal pair arrives, separately, having fallen out over a little changeling boy. They argue, then Tytania and her fairies leave. Oberon sends Puck to find a certain herb that causes those upon whose sleeping eyelids the juice is dropped to fall in love with the next live creature that he or she sees. Next enter lovers Lysander and Hermia, forbidden by Athenian law to marry (she must wed Demetrius) and so fleeing the city together. They leave as Oberon enters to observe a second Athenian couple, Demetrius (in love with Hermia) pursued by Helena (in love with Demetrius). As they move off Puck returns with the herb, and Oberon instructs him to seek out an Athenian (meaning Demetrius) and anoint his eyes so as to make him fall in love with Helena. Next, a group of Athenian workmen enters, intent on casting a play they hope to perform before Duke Theseus. Most prominent among them is Bottom, cast as Pyramus in Pyramus and Thisbe. They agree to return later to rehearse. Now the confusion begins: Puck mistakenly anoints Lysander’s eyes, causing him to transfer his allegiance to Helena, while Oberon anoints Tytania’s, causing her to fall in love with Bottom, whom Puck has mischievously given an ass’s head. The four Athenians are hurled into violent discord, till Puck sends them to sleep and they wake up cured. Bottom too is eventually restored, Oberon and Tytania make their peace, and following the successful performance of Pyramus and Thisbe before his guests (whom we met earlier in the wood), they bless Theseus and his wife Hippolyta, and their house.

Situation
A wood near Athens
In August 1959 Britten decided to compose a full-evening opera for the opening of the refurbished Jubilee Hall in Aldeburgh in June 1960. As this left no time for a libretto to be written anew, he chose to adapt with Peter Pears Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, a play he had always admired and which, as he declared himself, excited him by the various levels of action between the different groups of characters: the fairies, the lovers and the mechanicals. These groups are characterised by strongly differentiated colours: the bright, percussive sounds of harps, keyboards and percussion for the fairy world, warm strings and wind for the pairs of lovers, and lower woodwind and brass for the mechanicals. The opera is faithful to the spirit of the original and must be counted as one of the most successful operatic adaptations of a Shakespeare play. A Midsummer Night’s Dream is possibly the most enchanting of all Britten’s operas, a work with a spellbinding atmosphere that creates a unique, dreamlike world.

**Night’s Dream**

**op.64** (1960)

*Opera in three acts*

Libretto adapted from Shakespeare’s play by Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears

**Duration**

144 minutes

**First performance**

11 June 1960 Jubilee Hall, Aldeburgh

**Recordings**


*Decca 425663-2*

Sylvia McNair, Robert Lloyd, Ian Bostridge, Brian Asawa, Carl Ferguson, John Mark Ainsley, Paul Whelan, Ruby Philogene, Janice Watson, New London Children’s Choir, London Symphony Orchestra/

Sir Colin Davis

*Philips 454123-2*

**Publisher**

Boosey & Hawkes

**On sale**

M-060-01468-0 Libretto (Eng)
M-2025-1931-8 Libretto (Ger)
M-060-01467-3 Vocal Score
M-060-01466-6 Study Score (hardback)

**Scene from the Chicago Opera Theater production by Andrei Serban (2005)**
The concert tour of the Far East that Britten undertook with Peter Pears in December 1955 had profound consequences for his subsequent work. His encounter with gamelan orchestras on a visit to Bali made an immediate impact on the ballet The Prince of the Pagodas, and it was his experience of the austere, stylized ritual of Japanese Noh theatre that provided the main inspiration for the three Church Parables, composed at two-yearly intervals between 1964 and 1968. Of the three, Curlew River, the first to be composed, retains the closest link with the original Japanese by being adapted from an authentic Noh play, Sumidagawa (Sumida River) by Juro Motomasa. In Curlew River, however, the action is transferred to mediaeval East Anglia and given a specifically Christian context, symbolised by the use of the plainchant that frames the action, Te lucis ante terminum, from which the whole piece stems. The resulting work seems to invent a wholly new operatic experience while also containing some of Britten’s most intense and hauntingly beautiful music.

**Curlew River**

First parable for church performance

Libretto by William Plomer from the medieval Japanese No-play ‘Sumidagawa’ of Juro Motomasa

**Duration**

71 mins

**First performance**

12 June 1964, Orford Church, Aldeburgh Festival

**Time and Place**

A church by a Fenland river in early medieval times

**CAST**

The Madwoman

Tenor

The Ferryman

Baritone

The Traveller

Baritone

The Spirit of the Boy

Treble

Leader of the Pilgrims/The Abbot

Bass

Chorus of Pilgrims

3 tenors, 3 baritones, 3 basses

Three Assistants (Acolytes)

Silent roles

**SCORING**

fl (=picc) — hn — va — db — harp —
perc (5 small untuned drums,
5 small bells, 1 large tuned gong) —
chamber org

Inset right: Toby Spence in the Edinburgh Festival production by Olivier Py (2005)

Photo: Douglas Robertson
The Monks enter chanting the plainsong *Te lucis ante terminum*. The Abbot comes forward to address the congregation and introduces the mystery to be enacted. The Monks prepare for the performance. The Ferryman steps forward and reveals that a memorial service is to take place that day at a shrine on the far bank of the Curlew River. A Traveller enters describing his travels and tells of his intention to cross the river. The Ferryman delays departure to listen to the demented singing of a Madwoman who is approaching the boat. The Madwoman enters, singing of her lost child. After some resistance, the Ferryman agrees to take her across the river. During the crossing, the Ferryman relates the story of a stranger who, a year before, had arrived in his boat accompanied by a young boy of noble parentage who subsequently died from illness and exhaustion. The Madwoman weeps. She questions the Ferryman about the event and it becomes clear that the child was her abducted son. On reaching the grave, she sings a lament. The Monks pray with the Madwoman and the voice of the boy’s spirit is heard. The spirit then appears in full view above the tomb and the Mother, now cured of her madness, sings an *Amen*. The Monks resume their habits and the Abbot draws a moral conclusion. The Monks process away from the acting area, chanting the plainsong with which the work opened.

**SOURCES**

The Monks enter chanting the plainsong *Te lucis ante terminum*. The Abbot comes forward to address the congregation and introduces the mystery to be enacted. The Monks prepare for the performance. The Ferryman steps forward and reveals that a memorial service is to take place that day at a shrine on the far bank of the Curlew River. A Traveller enters describing his travels and tells of his intention to cross the river. The Ferryman delays departure to listen to the demented singing of a Madwoman who is approaching the boat. The Madwoman enters, singing of her lost child. After some resistance, the Ferryman agrees to take her across the river. During the crossing, the Ferryman relates the story of a stranger who, a year before, had arrived in his boat accompanied by a young boy of noble parentage who subsequently died from illness and exhaustion. The Madwoman weeps. She questions the Ferryman about the event and it becomes clear that the child was her abducted son. On reaching the grave, she sings a lament. The Monks pray with the Madwoman and the voice of the boy’s spirit is heard. The spirit then appears in full view above the tomb and the Mother, now cured of her madness, sings an *Amen*. The Monks resume their habits and the Abbot draws a moral conclusion. The Monks process away from the acting area, chanting the plainsong with which the work opened.

**RECORDING**

Peter Pears, John Shirley-Quirk,
Bryan Drake, Harold Blackburn,
English Opera Group/
Benjamin Britten
Decca 421858-2

**PUBLISHER**

Faber Music

**On Sale**

0571509943 Libretto
0571500021 Rehearsal score
0571507204 Full Score (cased)
Second parable for church performance

Libretto by William Plomer after the Book of Daniel, Chapters 1-3

Duration
64 mins

First performance
9 June 1966 Orford Church, Aldeburgh Festival

Op. 77 (1966)

After the inward concentration of Curlew River, Britten set out to make his second Church Parable, ‘something much less sombre, an altogether gayer affair’ as he put it. Based on the Old Testament story of Nebuchadnezzar and the three Israelites, The Burning Fiery Furnace uses the same basic vocal and instrumental forces as its predecessor and retains its most distinctive structural features, but the work makes a strongly contrasted impression. The attempt to write in a generally lighter vein results in a more flexible approach and a greater variety of colour (aided by Britten’s imaginative use of the rare alto trombone). Although the work is no less powerful and concentrated, the wider range affords such memorable diversions as the young acolytes’ entertainment during the Babylonian feast and the march before the raising of the image of Merodak when the players take up their instruments and process around the church.
Nebuchadnezzar
Tenor
The Astrologer/Abbot
Baritone
Ananias
Baritone
Misael
Tenor
Azarias
Bass
The Herald and Leader of the Courtiers
Baritone
Chorus of Courtiers
3 tenors, 2 baritones, 2 basses
Attendants
5 Trebles
fl(=picc)—hn, alto trbn—va,
db(=Babylonian drum)—
harp(=little harp)—
perc(5 small untuned drums, anvil(small untuned steel plate), 2 tuned wb, lyra glock, Babylonian drum, multiple whip)—
chamber org(=small cymb)

The Monks enter chanting the plainsong Salus aeterna. The Abbot comes forward to address the congregation and introduces the miracle to be enacted. The Monks prepare for the performance. The Herald steps forward to announce that the king Nebuchadnezzar has commanded a royal feast to be given in honour of three men from Israel - Ananias, Azarias and Misael - who have been appointed to rule over three provinces in Babylon. The king enters accompanied by the obsequious Astrologer. The three Jews are to be given new names: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. During a divertissement given by three young entertainers, the Astrologer notices that that the three men are refusing all food. When they decline even to drink the wine offered, the insulted King rises and leaves the feast in confusion. The Herald enters to announce that a golden image of Merodak, the great god of Babylon, is to be set up. The instrumentalists warm up for their processional march while the Jews pray. While the Courtiers pay homage to Merodak, the three men refuse to serve the image of gold. The furious king demands they be thrown into the fire. The furnace is heated seven-fold, but the men emerge unscathed. The astonished king dismisses the Astrologer and the image of Merodak falls. The King, Courtiers and three Jews sing a Benedicite in praise of the one God. The Monks resume their habits and the Abbot draws a moral conclusion. The Monks process away from the acting area, chanting the plainsong with which the work opened.

Scene from the Landestheater Detmold production by Frank Düwel (2005)
The Golden Vanity was written in 1966 in response to a request from the Vienna Boys Choir who had asked Britten for an opera when the composer visited Vienna in October 1964. The resulting vaudeville, as Britten termed it, is designed to be played on a stage or a platform with the simplest of costumes and props and with the action mimed by the cast. The story, based on an old English ballad, tells of a brave and enterprising cabin-boy who, in exchange for the hand of the sea-captain’s daughter, succeeds in sinking the enemy ship ‘The Turkish Galilee’ only to be betrayed by the captain of ‘The Golden Vanity’ who refuses to keep his promise and lets the boy perish in the water. However, the work is primarily designed as an entertainment and the darker implications of the story are not dwelt on. The music is relatively uncomplicated, though the score does make use of various technical devices that Britten had been developing in the recent Church Parables. There are rousing choruses for the contesting crews, vivid roles for the principals, and the colourful piano part is well within the scope of resourceful teacher/pianists.
The boys march on and form two groups, those representing ‘The Golden Vanity’ and those representing the enemy ship ‘The Turkish Galilee’. The Golden Vanity is riding the Lowland Sea with a cargo of silver and gold when it comes across the marauding vessel. The ship floundering and vulnerable from a blast from the pirate ship, the cabin boy asks the captain what his reward would be if he were to sink The Turkish Galilee. The captain offers him the hand of his ‘pretty little daughter who lives upon the shore’. The cabin boy dives into the water and swims over to the enemy ship, boring three holes in the side. As The Turkish Galilee begins to sink, the boy returns to The Golden Vanity but the rascally captain and bosun refuse to let him back on and to honour their promise. Finally, the crew throw him a rope, but he dies on reaching the deck. He is buried at sea amid much sorrow and remorse. His voice can be heard evermore over the spot where he died.

**Synopsis**

The boys march on and form two groups, those representing ‘The Golden Vanity’ and those representing the enemy ship ‘The Turkish Galilee’. The Golden Vanity is riding the Lowland Sea with a cargo of silver and gold when it comes across the marauding vessel. The ship floundering and vulnerable from a blast from the pirate ship, the cabin boy asks the captain what his reward would be if he were to sink The Turkish Galilee. The captain offers him the hand of his ‘pretty little daughter who lives upon the shore’. The cabin boy dives into the water and swims over to the enemy ship, boring three holes in the side. As The Turkish Galilee begins to sink, the boy returns to The Golden Vanity but the rascally captain and bosun refuse to let him back on and to honour their promise. Finally, the crew throw him a rope, but he dies on reaching the deck. He is buried at sea amid much sorrow and remorse. His voice can be heard evermore over the spot where he died.
The third of the Church Parables was inspired by Rembrandt’s painting The Return of the Prodigal which Britten had seen two years earlier at the Hermitage in Leningrad. Completed in 1968 and, like its two predecessors, set to a libretto by William Plomer, the manner of presentation is consistent with the conventions established in Curlew River and The Burning Fiery Furnace, but the work marks a significant advance. New colours are provided by the mellow tones of the alto flute, primarily associated with the pastoral tranquillity of the father’s home, and by the small trumpet in D which accompanies the Tempter’s promises of excitement. The theme of an errant young man returning home the wiser from his travels is familiar from Albert Herring and it is perhaps significant that The Prodigal Son is the most traditionally ‘operatic’ of the three Parables. From here, with the triptych now completed, it was a logical step for Britten to return to the resources of full-scale opera.
The Monks enter chanting the plainsong *Jam lucis orto sidere*. The Abbot, disguised as the Tempter, moves through the congregation introducing the parable to be enacted. The Monks to play the Father and two Sons are prepared for the performance. The Father addresses his two sons, warning them of the evils of temptation. While the Elder Son goes off with the labourers to work in the fields, the Younger Son, encouraged by the Tempter, pleads with his father for his share of the inheritance. His portion duly granted, he heads off for the city with the Tempter at his side. The Parasites urge the Younger Son to indulge in whoring, drinking and gambling. After his period of debauchery, he is left penniless and starving. He decides to begin the journey home. On his arrival, his father greets him and orders a feast in celebration. Amid general rejoicing, the Elder Son comes forward to protest at this preferential treatment of the ‘waster’. The father reconciles the two brothers: ‘He was dead and is alive again, was lost, and is found’. The Monks resume their habits and the Abbot draws a moral conclusion. The Monks process away from the acting area, chanting the plainsong which opened the work.
CAST
Owen Wingrave
The last of the Wingraves Baritone
Spencer Coyle
Who runs a military cramming establishment Bass-baritone
Lechmere
A young student with Owen at Coyle’s establishment Tenor
Miss Wingrave
Owen’s aunt Dramatic soprano
Mrs Coyle
Soprano
Mrs Julian
A widow and dependant at Paramore Soprano
Kate
Her daughter Mezzo-soprano
General Sir Philip Wingrave
Owen’s grandfather Tenor
Narrator
The ballad singer Tenor
Colonel Wingrave
An apparition Silent role
Young Wingrave
His son, an apparition Silent role
Distant Chorus
Tribes

SCORING
2 fl (=picc), 2 ob, 2 cl in A & B flat(II=cl in E flat and bass cl), 2 hn(II=dbn)—
2 bn, 2 tpt in C, 2 ten trbn, tuba—timp(=tom-tom, susp cymb, vib),
3 perc (sd, td, bd, 2 wh, 2 whip, 2 large susp cymb, small susp cymb,
cymb, small gong, tom-tom, xyl, vib, glock, large gong (+t), bell in A,
tamb)—harp—pf—str
Off-stage
sd, bd, susp cymb

A reduced ensemble version by David Matthews is also available

TIME/PLACE
London, Paramore, late 19th century
Owen Wingrave was specifically conceived and composed as an opera for television. Although Britten had expressed reservations about the viability of opera on the small screen, it was the highly successful filming of Peter Grimes for BBCTV in 1969 that convinced him of its possibilities and he subsequently took up the challenge. First broadcast in May 1971, the work makes use of several televisual techniques such as cross-cutting, montage and flashback. Subsequent stage productions have, however, proved the work to be no less viable in live performance than any other of Britten’s operas. Like The Turn of the Screw, the work is based on a story by Henry James. The story of a young man who, groomed for a military career, rebels against his family for whom soldiering is a way of life provided Britten with an ideal opportunity to make a public statement of his deeply held pacifist beliefs. Far from being mere propaganda however, Owen Wingrave is a characteristically rich and multi-layered work, the supreme irony of Owen’s predicament being that in his battle with his own family, he shows himself to be just as much of a fighter as any of his warmongering ancestors. The opera’s scoring too is highly distinctive, with the symbolic prominence given to the large and varied percussion section clearly pointing the way forward to Britten’s final opera, Death in Venice.

**Synopsis**

At Coyle’s cramming establishment in London, Owen and his friend Lechmere are learning the strategy of battle. At the end of the lesson, Owen declares that he cannot go through with a military career. Coyle is angry but agrees to break the news to the Wingrave family for whom soldiering has been a way of life for generations. At the haunted country house at Paramore, Owen is rounded on by his aunt Miss Wingrave, his fiancée Kate Julian and her mother. The elderly head of the family, Sir Philip Wingrave, who fought at Bhurtpore, is similarly outraged. In the Prologue to Act Two, a ballad singer narrates the tale of the young Wingrave boy killed by his brutal father for refusing to fight over an argument with a friend. Sir Philip disowns Owen, depriving him of his inheritance. Kate humiliates Owen by flirting with Lechmere. After everyone has gone to bed, Owen, left alone, reflects on his predicament and reaffirms his passionate belief in peace. Kate comes looking for him. She taunts him with cowardice and dares him to sleep in the haunted room. Owen agrees and Kate locks him in. Lechmere is concerned for Owen’s welfare and alerts Coyle. Kate is heard sobbing from the doorway of the haunted room. The family rush to the scene. Sir Philip pushes the door open to find Owen dead on the floor. The ballad singer’s voice is heard once more.

**Recordings**

Benjamin Luxon, John Shirley-Quirk, Nigel Douglas, Sylvia Fisher, Heather Harper, Jennifer Vyvyan, Janet Baker, Peter Pears, Wandsworth School Boys’ Choir, English Chamber Orchestra/Benjamin Britten

Decca 433200-2

Peter Coleman-Wright, Alan Opie, James Gilchrist, Elizabeth Connell, Janice Watson, Sarah Fox, Pamela Helen Stephen, Robin Leggate, Tiffin Boys Choir, City of London Sinfonia/Richard Hickox

Chandos CHAN 10473(2)

Gerald Finley, Peter Savidge, Hilton Marlton, Josephine Barstow, Anne Dawson, Elizabeth Gale, Charlotte Hellekant, Martyn Hill, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin/Kent Nagano

Arthaus Musik DVD

**Publisher**

Faber Music

On sale

0571502997 Libretto

0571505023 Vocal Score

0571515428 Full Score
**Death in Venice**

*op. 88 (1973)*

**Opera in two acts**

Libretto by Myfanwy Piper *after the novella by Thomas Mann*

**Duration**
145 mins

**First performance**
16 June 1973 Snape Maltings Concert Hall

Death in Venice was composed during a time of great physical and psychological stress for Britten: aware that he was in urgent need of major heart surgery, he postponed the operation until he had completed the work which was, in part, intended as a supreme vehicle for and tribute to the voice and artistry of Peter Pears, to whom it is dedicated. However, in choosing a story that embodied so many of the underlying dramatic themes that had characterized his entire output, Britten also seemed to be making his final opera a conscious summation of his life’s work. He is likely to have strongly identified with the opera’s hero, the writer Gustav von Aschenbach who, aware of failing powers, seeks inspiration by travelling to Venice where he falls in love with the young Polish boy Tadzio. Aschenbach, however, has no actual contact with the boy, his family or companions, and it was an inspired idea of Britten’s to cast them in non-singing roles as dancers, accompanied by the colourful, glittering sounds of tuned percussion to emphasize their remoteness. The music of Death in Venice is generally restrained and the textures subtle and economical, but the work inhabits a very distinctive and evocative atmosphere and is a gloriously fitting culmination to Britten’s operatic career.

**CAST**

*Gustav von Aschenbach*

**Tenor**

The Traveller/Elderly Fop/Old Gondolier/Hotel Manager/
Hotel Barber/Leader of the Players/Voice of Dionysus

**Bass-baritone**

The Voice of Apollo

**Counter-tenor**

Solo chorus parts:

Danish lady, Russian mother, English lady, French girl, Strawberry seller, Lace seller, Newspaper seller, Strolling player

**Sopranos**

French mother, German mother, Russian nanny, Beggar woman

**Contraltos**

Hotel porter, two Americans, two Gondoliers, Glass maker, Strolling players

**Tenors**

Ship’s steward, Lido boatman, Polish father, German father,
Russian father, Hotel waiter, Guide in Venice, Restaurant waiter,
Gondolier, Priest in St Mark’s, English clerk in the travel bureau

**Baritones and basses**

Youths and girls, hotel guests and waiters, gondoliers and boatmen, street vendors, touts and beggars, citizens of Venice, choir in St Mark’s, tourists, followers of Dionysus

**Chorus**

The Polish Mother, Tadzio (her son), her two daughters, their Governess, Jochiu (Tadzio’s friend), other boys and girls, strolling players, beach attendants

**Dancers**

**SCORING**

2 fl (=picc), 2 ob, 2 cl in B flat & A (Il=cl in E flat and bass cl),
2 bn (Il=dbl)—2 hn, 2 tpt in C, 2 trbn, tuba—imp, 5 perc (2 sd, 2 td, 2 bd (1 large), 3 tom-toms), 5 Chinese drums, small drum, tuned drum in C, cymb, small cymb, 2 sus cymb, tamb, wh, trgl, 2 whips (large and small), 2 tuned gongs, 2 t-t (large and small), wind machine, bells, bell-tree, crotales, vibr, 2 glock, 2 syl (1 small), mar.—harp—pf—
str (minimum: 6.4.3.3.2)

Philip Langridge in the Opera Australia production by Jim Sharman (2005)
SNOSS
Writer Gustav von Aschenbach is seen wandering the streets of Munich, seeking the inspiration that seems to have deserted him. He becomes aware of a mysterious Traveller who conjures up visions of an exotic landscape, rousing in Aschenbach the urge to travel. On the boat to Venice, Aschenbach is disconcerted by the grotesque appearance of a rouged Elderly Fop. A Gondolier rows Aschenbach towards the Lido, contrary to his intentions. On disembarking, the Gondolier mysteriously disappears leaving Aschenbach to reflect on the gondola as a symbol of death. On his arrival at the hotel, the Hotel Manager leads Aschenbach to his room and shows him the splendid view of the beach. As the Hotel Guests assemble for dinner, Aschenbach becomes aware of a Polish family, particularly the beautiful young boy Tadzio. Aschenbach ponders on the artist’s predilection for beauty. Next day on the beach, Aschenbach is troubled by the heavy atmosphere and greying skies, but the games of Tadzio and his friends offer distraction. Unable to fight off the oppressive mood, he decides he must leave Venice but a misunderstanding over his luggage provides a pretext for returning to the hotel. In an idyllic interlude, we see Tadzio and his companions competing in games and other athletic events - Tadzio is the victor in all. Aschenbach intends to speak to the boy, but at the crucial moment turns away. He realises the truth of his feelings in the anguished cry, ‘I love you’. Aschenbach is troubled by rumours of a cholera outbreak in Venice. He sees the Polish family and begins distractedly following them. In a travel bureau, the English clerk advises Aschenbach to leave the city. In a dream interlude, the competing voices of Apollo and Dionysus are heard, culminating in a dark orgy. All restraint cast aside, Aschenbach attempts a winning rejuvenation at the Barbers, ironically recalling the Elderly Fop that so disgusted him earlier. He starts to follow the family again, but sinks down, exhausted, by a well-head where he traces his path to the abyss via Socrates’ words to Phaedrus. Back at the hotel, Aschenbach learns that the Polish family is due to leave. Out on the beach, Tadzio wrestles with Jaschiu but is overcome. Aschenbach cries out as if to defend him. Tadzio begins a slow walk out to sea as Aschenbach slumps dead in his chair.

RECORDINGS
Peter Pears, John Shirley-Quirk, James Bowman, Kenneth Bowen, English Chamber Orchestra/ Stueart Bedford
Decca 425669-2
Philip Langridge, Alan Opie, Michael Chance, BBC Singers, City of London Sinfonia/Richard Hickox
Chandos CHAN 10280

PUBLISHER
Faber Music
On sale
0571514537 Libretto
0571505147 Vocal Score
0571505333 Full Score (cased)
Britten’s realisation of Purcell’s only through-composed opera Dido and Aeneas was originally made for a production with the English Opera Group in 1951. Britten had already revealed his sympathy for Purcell’s music in his 1948 arrangement of the Chacony in G minor, not to mention the clear Purcellian influence found in such original works as The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra, The Holy Sonnets of John Donne and the Second String Quartet. The idea was to establish a practicable performing version of Purcell’s masterpiece in the absence of the autograph manuscript and, hence, an authentic edition. In this task, Britten and Imogen Holst consulted the two known extant copies of the score (both prepared by copyists) to produce as close an approximation to Purcell’s intentions as possible. Prior to the Britten-Holst version, the work had been known in a worthy but somewhat ‘safe’ edition by Edward Dent (1925) which had smoothed out many of Purcell’s more surprising harmonic progressions and other unusual textural details. While accepting that no version can ever be definitive, Britten’s edition, based on practical performing knowledge of Purcell’s style, comes closer to the spirit of the composer. Moreover, Britten’s own experience as an opera composer helps him to see the work as a whole, helping to bind Purcell’s short forms together with an imaginative and resourceful realisation of the continuo part, thus shaping the work into a convincing musico-dramatic entity.
CAST
Dido
Queen of Carthage Soprano
Aeneas
A Trojan Prince Tenor (or Baritone)
Belinda
A Lady in Waiting Soprano
Second Woman
Soprano
Sorceress
Mezzo Soprano
First Witch
Mezzo Soprano
Second Witch
Mezzo Soprano
Spirit
Soprano
First Sailor
Soprano (or Tenor)
Courtiers, Witches and Sailors
Chorus

SYNOPSIS
Queen Dido’s lady-in-waiting Belinda attempts to cheer the lovelorn queen: surely the Trojan hero Aeneas returns her love. Dido admits her infatuation, and Aeneas enters to renew his love-suit. Belinda and the chorus encourage Dido’s acquiescence and predict a happy outcome. At their cave, however, witches plot the downfall of both the Queen and Carthage. Their spirit, dressed as Mercury, will impress upon Aeneas the need for him to leave immediately and complete his destiny to found Rome as the new Troy. During a hunt, a storm sends Dido and the courtiers back to the city, but Aeneas is held back by Mercury and submits to his commands. The following day, Aeneas’s sailors prepare to leave port. The witches are thrilled, but Dido is distraught and angry. Even Aeneas’s offer to disobey the gods and stay does not move her: she rejects him. He leaves, and before taking her own life she asks Belinda to remember her, but not her fate. The chorus calls on cupids to scatter roses on her tomb.

SCORING
Strings and continuo

TIME-PLACE
Carthage in ancient times

RECORDINGS
Dame Janet Baker, Norma Burrowes, Peter Pears, Felicity Lott, Alfreda Hodgson, Robert Tear, London Opera Chorus, Aldeburgh Festival Strings/Steuart Bedford
Decca 4685612
Claire Watson, Peter Pears, Jeanette Sinclair, Arda Mandikian, Patricia Clark, Rosemary Philips, John Hahessy, Michael Ronayne, Purcell Singers, English Opera Group/Benjamin Britten
BBC Legends BRGB 8003-2

PUBLISHER
Boosey & Hawkes

On sale
M-060-02144-2 Vocal Score
M-060-02143-5 Study Score
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