



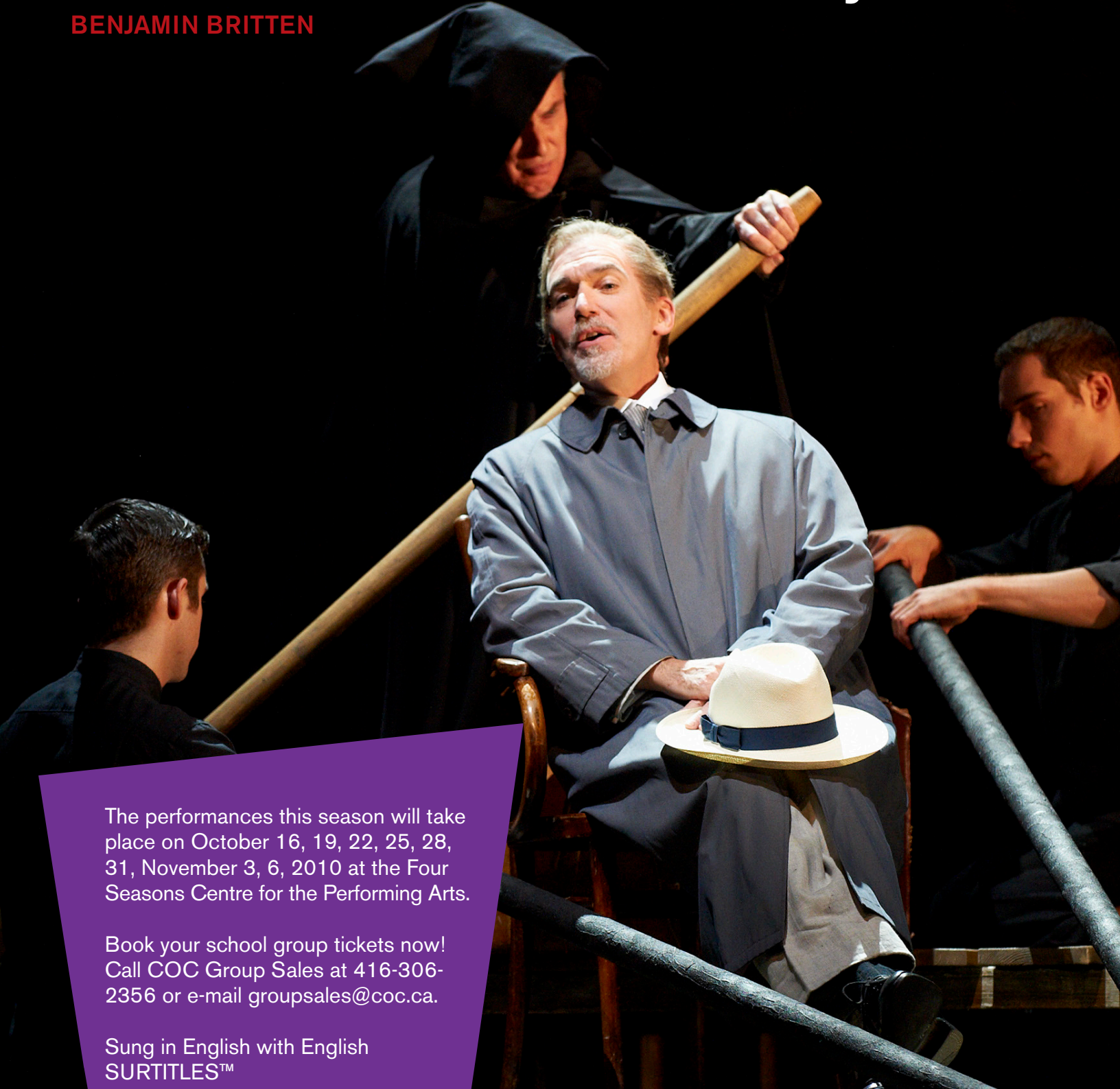
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EXPLORE & LEARN

Death in Venice

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Study Guide



The performances this season will take place on October 16, 19, 22, 25, 28, 31, November 3, 6, 2010 at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts.

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Background & Characters

Historical Background

Thomas Mann's novella *Der Tod in Venedig* (*Death in Venice*) was written in 1912. In 1911 the author had visited Venice with his wife and his brother. They stayed at the Grand Hotel des Bains (built in 1900) on the Lido, an 11-kilometre-long sandbank just over the water from Venice. The hotel became the setting for the novel, but a greater inspiration was found in a very beautiful young boy, Wladyslaw Moes, who Mann encountered during his stay, and who was the model for the young boy, Tadzio.

Benjamin Britten had wanted to turn *Death in Venice* into an opera for years. In September 1970 he asked Myfanwy Piper to produce the libretto. Britten was in poor health while he wrote the opera, managing to finish it however, before entering hospital in May 1973 for open-heart surgery. After surgery he suffered a stroke, and, even though he kept composing, he was unable to attend the opening night of *Death in Venice*. The opera premiered on June 16, 1973 at the Aldeburgh Festival and was well received by the public.

Main Characters

In order of vocal appearance

Name	Description	Voice Type	Pronunciation
Gustav von Aschenbach	Aging writer	Tenor	GOO-stahv von AH-shen-bach
The Traveller, The Elderly Fop, The Old Gondolier, The Hotel Manager, The Leader of the Players		Bass-baritone	
Tadzio		Silent role	TAH-djooH
Voice of Dionysus	Greek God of Wine	Counter tenor	DY-uh-NY-suhs
Apollo	Greek God of Light, Arts	Counter-tenor	uh-POL-oh

More About the Characters

- The role of von Aschenbach was written for Britten's life partner, tenor Peter Pears. The opera is also dedicated to him.
- The roles of Tadzio, his family and his friends are silent and are played by dancers and/or actors.
- The character of The Traveller represents von Aschenbach's fate, and is reincarnated as The Elderly Fop, The Old Gondolier, The Hotel Manager, The Leader of the Players and the Voice of Dionysus. These roles are all performed by the same singer. Britten wrote the part for bass-baritone John Shirley-Quirk, a singer who Britten greatly admired for his acting as well as his singing.
- In von Aschenbach's dream (Scene 13), Apollo represents art, beauty, and civilization, with Dionysus suggesting primal passion, excess and intoxication, a complete letting go.

Synopsis

Act I

A spiritually exhausted author, Gustav von Aschenbach, is walking through Munich. He speaks to a traveller who tells him great stories about the lands to the south and encourages von Aschenbach to journey there.

On the ship, von Aschenbach speaks to an elderly fop* who teases him, telling him that he'll find everything he's looking for in Venice.

At a hotel in Venice, a manager shows him his room, complete with a view of the sea. Alone, von Aschenbach watches a Polish family pass by. He is struck by the beauty of the young son. Sitting on the beach, von Aschenbach watches the young Polish boy and learns his name is Tadzio. He notices Tadzio's pride and youthful beauty.

Von Aschenbach walks the streets of Venice, but the heat and smell of the city make him uncomfortable and he decides to visit the mountains for fresh air. At the hotel, Tadzio passes him in the hallway and looks at him for the first time. Von Aschenbach reconsiders his decision to leave. Looking out his hotel window, he watches Tadzio and realizes that the boy is the reason he has stayed.

On the beach, von Aschenbach watches Tadzio and his friends play. He approaches Tadzio, but at the last moment he cannot bring himself to talk to the boy. When Tadzio's family returns, the boy smiles at him. Von Aschenbach realizes the truth. Unheard, he whispers "I love you."



A fop was a derogatory term used in the 17th century to denote a foolish man who was over-concerned with his appearance, dress, and/or manners.

Act II

Von Aschenbach has begun writing as he struggles to put his interest in Tadzio into a creative context. In the hotel's barber shop, the barber asks him if he is afraid of the sickness. Von Aschenbach asks him to explain, but the barber refuses to elaborate.

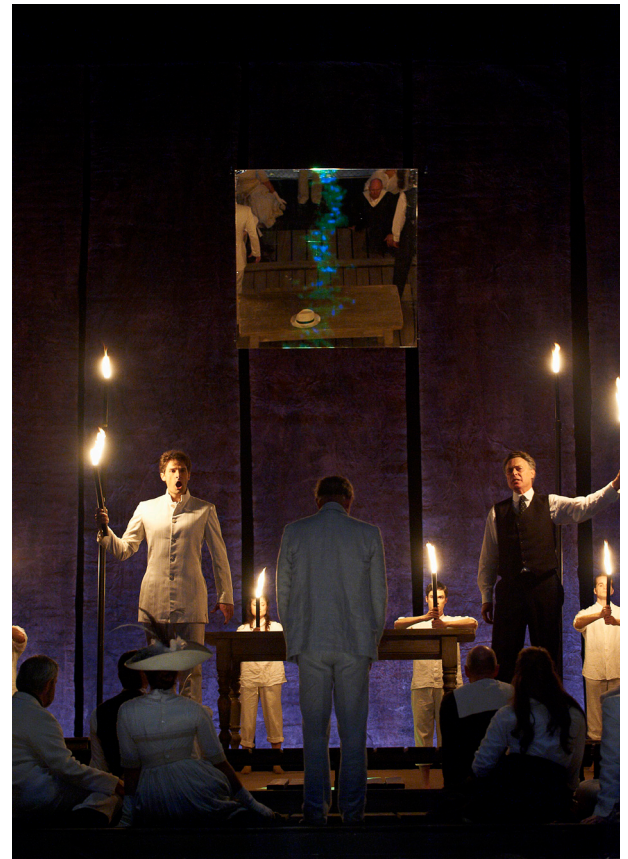
Von Aschenbach detects a medicinal sweetness in the air. He buys a German newspaper, where he reads that there are rumours of cholera in Venice and German citizens are being urged to leave. When he sees the Polish family, he determines that they must not know about the warnings. He decides to follow them. He follows them all day, not caring what anyone might think of him.

A clerk at the travel bureau is trying to help a crowd of travellers leave Venice. Von Aschenbach asks why they are all leaving. When pressed, the clerk admits that Asiatic plague has hit Venice. Von Aschenbach is frantic to warn Tadzio's mother. She walks right by him, but again he is unable to speak. He wonders what it might be like if everyone were to die and only he and Tadzio were left alive.

Von Aschenbach is disturbed by a dream in which Apollo** resists Dionysus'*** call to indulge his baser instincts. As he awakes, von Aschenbach realizes he can fall no further. The next day, he watches Tadzio and his friends play on the beach.

The hotel barber dyes von Aschenbach's hair and applies makeup to face. Von Aschenbach sees the Polish family on the streets in Venice, and follows them as usual. Tadzio hangs back a little and looks at von Aschenbach directly. Von Aschenbach is flustered but excited that Tadzio did not betray his presence. He continues to follow the family until he is too weary to go on.

The hotel manager and porter arrange for the departure of the Polish family. Out on the beach, von Aschenbach sits in his usual chair. Tadzio is wrestling with his friend, but the game becomes rough and Tadzio is pushed into the sand. Von Aschenbach attempts to go to him. Tadzio slowly wades out into the sea, turning with a beckoning gesture to von Aschenbach, who slumps back into his chair, dead.



**Apollo: In Greek mythology he was recognized as a god of light and the sun; truth and prophecy; archery; medicine, healing and plague; music, poetry, and the arts; and more.

***Dionysus: Ancient Greek god of wine and fertility.

Britten's Life, A Brief Biography

Benjamin Britten, Composer

(1913 – 1976)

Known as the foremost English composer of the 20th century, Benjamin Britten was a child prodigy. He started to write music at age four, began formal music studies at the age of 11, and by 12 had composed a dozen large-scale works. In 1930 he entered the Royal College of Music and, by the age of 21, was earning his keep as a composer for film, radio and theatre. In his early 20s, Britten was a member of a group of left wing intellectuals, led by the poet W. H. Auden. It was Auden who encouraged his interest in theatre and wrote the libretto for Britten's first operetta, *Paul Bunyan* (1941).

In 1942, Britten and his lifelong partner Peter Pears settled in a fishing village on the east coast of Britain. It was this landscape that encouraged Britten to compose *Peter Grimes* (1944/45), the dramatic story of an outcast fisherman. The opera premiered with Peter Pears in the title role and was hailed as the first great British opera since the time of Henry Purcell in the 1640s.

Britten never lost his childlike sensibilities, and was fond of writing works for children's choirs including *The Little Sweep* (1949), an opera for children in three acts; and *A Ceremony of Carols* (1942), a set of songs written for children's voices. However, he is most known in music classrooms as the composer of the very popular *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1946) which introduces young audiences to the instruments in an orchestra.

Britten continued to conduct and write a variety of symphonic pieces while composing several operas over the next 15 years. *Billy Budd* was a larger scale opera commissioned for the Festival of Britain in 1951. This opera, along with *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), *Owen Wingrave* (1971), and *Death in Venice* (1973), touch on the themes of the individual versus society and the violation of innocence.



For example, Britten's *Peter Grimes* is a disturbing look at a social outcast who is extremely proud and independent yet deeply insecure. Britten confronts the audience by showing the intolerance and insensitivity towards those who are different. He never lost the belief that art could convey fundamental truths about the world.

Britten himself was a lifelong outsider: a pacifist during the Second World War even at the height of the bombing of Britain. Britten was also homosexual at a time when such a life was a criminal offence. By elevating the use of English as a language to be sung and clarifying the text through the music, his works were very accessible. Britten was highly respected during his own lifetime and is one of the few 20th-century composers whose operas are regularly performed throughout the western world.

Adapted by Diana Weir, former Programming Coordinator, Education and Outreach

The Life & Times of Benjamin Britten

- 1913 ♦ Benjamin Britten is born on November 22.
- 1914 ♦ Archduke Frances Ferdinand is assassinated in Sarajevo. The First World War begins (ends 1918).
- 1924 ♦ Britten begins formal music studies and by the age of 12 has composed several large-scale works.
 - ♦ Composer of the famous opera *La Bohème*, Giacomo Puccini, dies at the age of 66 in Brussels.
- 1928 ♦ Britten begins regular composition lessons with Frank Bridge.
 - ♦ The Supreme Court of Canada rules that women are not "persons" who can be elected to public office (overturned in 1929 by the British Privy Council).
 - ♦ Amelia Earhart is the first woman to fly across the Atlantic.
- 1929 ♦ The New York Stock Market crashes.
- 1931 ♦ Canada becomes independent. The Statute of Westminster grants Canada full autonomy from Britain.
- 1933 ♦ Britten meets composer Arnold Schönberg, who revolutionized musical composition in the 20th century.
- 1934 ♦ Britten's father dies, and Britten briefly meets Peter Pears for the first time.
 - ♦ The Dionne Quintuplets are born in Callandar, Ontario.
- 1936 ♦ *Gone with the Wind* (Margaret Mitchell) wins the Pulitzer Prize.
- 1937 ♦ Britten's lifelong relationship with Peter Pears begins.
 - ♦ *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Disney animation) is released.
 - ♦ Canadian doctors discover insulin can control diabetes.
- 1939 ♦ Allied forces (including Canada) declare war on Germany, beginning the Second World War (ends 1945).
 - ♦ Britten sails with Pears to America.
- 1941 ♦ Britten is awarded Library of Congress Medal for services to chamber music and writes *Paul Bunyan*, encouraged by W. H. Auden.
- 1944 ♦ *Peter Grimes* is first produced by Sadler's Wells theatre.
- 1946 ♦ Britten writes *The Rape of Lucretia* and *A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*.
- 1953 ♦ Cigarette smoking is identified as contributing to lung cancer.
- 1960 ♦ Britten meets composer Dmitri Shostakovich and cellist Mstislav Rostropovich. He writes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *War Requiem*.
- 1967 ♦ Expo '67 is held in Montreal.
 - ♦ Pierre Elliott Trudeau becomes prime minister of Canada.
- 1973 ♦ Britten has an operation to replace a heart valve and completes *Death in Venice*.
- 1976 ♦ Britten is created a Life Peer, granting him entitlement to a seat in the House of Lords. He dies on December 4.

Britten's Music

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) was the first major English opera composer since Purcell, his predecessor by about 300 years. Unlike some twentieth-century composers, Britten always tried to maintain a musically accessible style, avoiding what some composers seemed to be doing—writing music that was intentionally unrewarding to audiences. While he was heavily influenced by his English musical heritage (both by composers like Purcell and by traditional folksongs), his music was also far from old-fashioned. His music often plays with both the diatonic (standard major and minor scales that we're used to hearing) and chromatic scales, making his work sound emotionally ambiguous. He was influenced later in his life by aspects of non-Western music, especially the Indonesian tradition of the gamelan orchestra. However, his style always remained versatile and supremely expressive for it.

Britten may certainly be ranked as one of the great composers of vocal music: his lifelong relationship with the tenor Peter Pears produced many operas and songs that drew from a deep knowledge of the musical capabilities of the human voice as well as a literary sensitivity to poetic texts. His first major opera, *Peter Grimes* (1945), catapulted him to the status of premier British composer and it remains his most popular work in the operatic repertoire. However, his operatic output was both prolific and highly varied: he composed “chamber operas” (written for much smaller orchestral and vocal forces) such as *The Rape of Lucretia* and *The Turn of the Screw*, “church parables” (a genre he invented), an opera for television, and a few to be performed by amateurs and children. Britten is celebrated for his virtuosic command of orchestration as evident in his most popular works in the concert repertoire, *A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* and the *Sea Interludes* from *Peter Grimes*, which depict a multi-faceted marine landscape with a breathtaking range of orchestral colours.



What to Look For

Background on the Director Yoshi Oida

When director Yoshi Oida approached *Death in Venice*, he understood the very real influences of European culture on the original novel and the opera (the characters from Ancient Greek culture and mythology and the parallels to the life of the 19th century German composer Gustav Mahler) but he didn't relate to them. Instead he approached the drama of von Aschenbach's travel to Venice and his death as a universal human drama, one for which there are no easy answers to the very many questions the story raises.

- Yoshi trained in his native Japan for many years in classic Japanese theatre as well studying the *Shinto* religion – a very structured and formal education. In 1968, Yoshi moved to Paris to study/work with the great Peter Brook who pioneered the use of improvisational techniques in theatre, a technique that was completely the opposite of Yoshi's training. This combination of Japanese formality and Western looseness is at the heart of Yoshi's work. In the end, Yoshi feels that theatre is a way to better understand ourselves – that all good theatre comes from honest dramatic impulses, which leads to absolute clarity on stage.



- The production subtly combines influences of western and eastern traditions, a mixture which is prevalent in much of Yoshi Oida's work. The set is simple: wooden platforms evoke a Japanese aesthetic. It's a minimalist approach which helps focus the attention on the characters. This is, after all, a character study of one man in particular, and his personal descent towards death. On the set Venice is alluded to by images on a television screen, three gondoliers, and a small pool of water. Philosophically, the production tries to mimic the transient quality of Venice itself. Those who have visited the city will understand. The city is so ever changing, so difficult to map out, it feels as if, with every step you take, it changes behind you – there are so many bridges, so many paths, streets, alleys, that you never know where you are or where you've been. This feeling plays into the dreamlike nature of the production.

- The costumes are appropriately Edwardian, the original setting of the novella. For one of the artists, who plays multiple roles, including the Traveller, costume changes take place on stage, with the assistance of two “servants of the stage,” who move in the fashion of Japanese theatre to assist in changes from scene to scene. The mute roles in the opera are played by actors and dancers. The dancers have always been conceived as vital/crucial part of the production. They are not “window dressing”. They represent youth and sunlight and the conflict of age surrounded by youth.



Cool connection: In the 1950s Britten visited Japan. In the 1960s he reinterpreted a Noh* play he had seen there and composed *Curlew River*, a one-act opera.

Yoshi Oida, part of whose background is Japanese Noh* theatre tradition, directed a production of *Curlew River* in 1998.

*Noh Theatre is a form of classical Japanese music drama that has been performed since the 14th century. The focus of the art form is on tradition and not innovation: many actors perform in traditional masks and the performance lasts an entire day. The repertoire is generally limited to a specific set of plays.

Inspired Thinking

Benjamin Britten and Inspired Thinking

While he worked, in 1973, Benjamin Britten was urged by his doctor to undergo surgery to deal with aortic valve disease. He postponed the surgery insistent that he must finish the opera first, perhaps aware that this would be his last opera.

Death in Venice now takes on a new significance as it may be regarded as the conscious summation of Britten's life's work. He was one of the most influential opera composers of his century, and this was to be his operatic "swan song." But it is a very complicated work. It is controversial, unusual, and experimental; practically doomed to unpopularity. Why was this his last opera? To answer that question and to fully appreciate the piece, let's give the work context by drawing on all the factors that informed Britten's work. An exploration of what may have motivated the work, Britten's inspiration, may provide us with some insight as to why this work is significant. Of course, under the presumption that inspiration is an internal process, we can't really know what was going on in Britten's head or what the artist's intentions were, but we can hazard a few guesses.

The story, to give a brief synopsis, is of a German novelist (von Aschenbach) travelling to Venice to find artistic inspiration, but instead finds himself captivated by a twelve year old boy (Tadzio) in his hotel. A dream reveals to von Aschenbach his infatuation with the boy, and what ensues is an internal struggle wherein unreason and passion are suppressed by reason and intellect. Clearly Britten was inspired by the 1912 novella by Thomas Mann of the same name, and some obvious correlations may be made.

Peter Pears, his companion both personally and professionally can be said to have influenced the music in the opera because Britten wrote the role of von Aschenbach for him, to suit the particularities of his voice. In fact, Britten has even said: "I don't think I ever write an opera without knowing before I start who is going to sing the roles" (Mercer). In his article "See Venice and Die," John Simon suggests that Pears' age (he was 63 when the opera was first performed) had the effect of making his already modestly resonant voice even smaller. He goes on to speculate that the understated and minimalist nature of the opera's score was a way to make the role less taxing on Pears. (Simon)

In 1954, while one of Britten's earlier operas (*The Turn of the Screw*) was premiering in Venice, Pears said that he had trouble prying Britten away from the city. Venice itself was influential and the city's soundscapes can be deciphered in the music, but Britten's encounters with non-western musical traditions are on more blatant display. His use of the gamelan, an ensemble of percussive instruments such as gongs, xylophones, vibraphones, and plucked strings stands out as the obvious example. He discovered the gamelan while on vacation in Bali in 1956 where he described the music as "fantastically rich" and it is danced to by little boys and girls "with unbelievable stillness and poise." (Simon) From his description, we see clearly why he chooses to use the gamelan to accompany the silent and haunting dances of Tadzio.

"He never waited for inspiration because his way of writing, his way of thinking, was always inspired," Britten on Mozart.

The opera seems to also be influenced by the Wagnerian concept of '*Liebestod*,' which can be directly translated as 'love-death.' The "love-death" theme is prominent in many stories and operas, including *Romeo and Juliet*, but it appears in *Death in Venice* too in a less conventional sense. Basically, when two lovers cannot be together in life, their love can only be consummated in death which becomes their culmination of life. One sided as it may be, von Aschenbach's peaceful death which follows what might be his first actual contact with Tadzio is an example of this.

Britten also mentions in an interview the influence of a Japanese Noh play called *Sumidagawa*. Noh is a Japanese musical drama form that pairs carefully executed elegant dance with traditional music. *Sumidagawa* is the tragic story of a woman going mad because her child has been kidnapped by a slave driver. She eventually finds that her son is dead and unearths the graveyard soil to confront his ghost. This might explain why it was decided that Tadzio be performed in haunting dances. Also, Noh often deals with supernatural subject matter like Aschenbach's dreams where he encounters mythological figures and devils.

Britten had also been involved in conducting a recording of Robert Schumann's scenes from Goethe's *Faust*. This could be where he got the idea to have the figures in Ascenbach's dream sung by the same bass baritone, "turning them into a composite Mephistopheles [a devil] figure." (Simon) In these instances, we can see that Britten was influenced again by culture, by the other work he had seen and worked on in the past.

In a 1967 interview (just before his work on *Death in Venice*) that was published in Opera Canada, Britten speaks specifically about inspiration and how it affects his work process. He says, "I hear that word [and] I think of someone sitting at a table when suddenly an angel appears and gives him wonderful ideas and he writes for three days without stopping. That may happen, but mostly the true picture is of someone going to a desk, regularly at half past eight or nine in the morning, and sitting down and working. The inspiration is in us all the time." (Mercer)

Britten claims that the idea to write a new opera always comes from him, although it may be from a suggested subject years before that goes into his subconscious and comes out again later. He approaches a librettist with his idea and is constantly adding new ideas throughout the writing process, up until the first performance, and even after that. There is constant revision and editing, which ex-

plains the many layers and the complexity of his work. Even as things are coming together, he is being reminded of his past, the people, places, and things that have had meaning in his life. His experiences as an individual are layered and they combine to form something original.

Stephen Sullivan, former University of Toronto Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) intern, Education and Outreach

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Your creative work is an expression of the way you view the world and that view is constantly being formed and reformed as you live life.

What experiences have inspired you?

Listening Guide

From the beginning, listeners are thrown into a new territory both musically and dramatically in Britten's final opera, *Death in Venice*. It is an opera that simultaneously expresses complexity and simplicity in the text, musical composition, plotline, and characterization. To appreciate the score and storyline it is important to note some of the themes that permeate the opera: reality vs. dreams, musical language vs. visual language, aging vs. youth, and life vs. death. Look for ways these themes are evoked in the music, drama and visual aspects of the opera. The tracks listed below correspond to the complimentary Listening Guide CD provided to school group bookings only.

Not coming to the opera, but looking to explore *Death in Venice* in the classroom? The excerpts below can be found in the recording of *Death in Venice* with Peter Pears in the title role, and Stuart Bedford conducting the *English Chamber Orchestra*, on the Decca label.

Compiled by Misha Teramura, former COC Volunteer Speakers Bureau member

Listening Tips

- Percussion instruments evoke a sound that Britten associates with the youthfulness of Tadzio. The percussive sound also represents everything that is strange, disrupting the order in the rational world of von Aschenbach.
- Verbal communication intentionally does not exist between the two protagonists, von Aschenbach and Tadzio. Britten used the music to offer what cannot be spoken.
- The conventional orchestra is sometimes required to play “unconventionally” in the form of soundscapes (an atmosphere or environment created by or with sound) representing Venice, the sea and land.
- Throughout the opera Tadzio's music remains the same – bright, static, remote and rhythmic, reminding the audience that his character remains the same as he entered the opera. Von Aschenbach's music on the other hand is diverse in tempo, texture, dynamics and register indicating that he has gone through a tremendous mental and physical transformation since the start of the opera. He undergoes the ultimate transition from life to death.

Track 1 "My mind beats on"

Connection to the story

The opera opens on Gustav von Aschenbach, a famous German novelist, meditating on his artistic fatigue. As a writer, he has always exercised self-discipline and control instead of abandoning himself to passion, but now he finds himself without inspiration.

Musical elements and significance

Death in Venice is one of the most psychologically intensive operas ever composed and its main character is rarely off-stage. The opera begins without an overture and we are placed at once in the mind of the writer with a cold, almost jarring immediacy. Von Aschenbach's beating mind is underscored by the obsessive and complex repeated notes in the woodwinds and brass while his vocal line, torturously moving through all twelve tones, suggests his rigorous intellectualism.

Continued on next page...

Track 2 ("Who's that?") "Marvels unfold"

Connection to the story

Thinking that he is alone, von Aschenbach suddenly notices a foreign Traveller watching him. The Traveller sings an aria describing an exotic landscape, one both beautiful and threatening, filling von Aschenbach with a powerful desire to travel.

Musical elements and significance

The Traveller is the first of seven roles sung in this opera by a single bass-baritone performer [lower male voicetypes]. While each of these characters is different, there is something disturbingly consistent about the figure that haunts von Aschenbach, always offering alluring yet menacing visions that seem to speak to some hidden part of von Aschenbach's soul. The "Marvels unfold" motif [0:53 – 1:02] will reappear throughout the opera, with each repetition gathering more sinister connotations. Listen for the building percussion accompaniment which evokes a deep, primal attraction.

Track 3 "Hey there, hey there you!"

Connection to the story

Von Aschenbach, now aboard a ship to Venice, watches a group of young men joking with the girls back on shore. They are joined by an Elderly Fop who disgusts von Aschenbach by his attempts to act younger than he is.

Musical elements and significance

Britten's orchestral ingenuity allows a kind of cinematic scene painting here: the loud trombone sound signals the ship's horn and the drums (played with household scrubbing brushes!) depict the engine noises of the ship getting ready to set off on its voyage [0:18 – 0:22]. The Elderly Fop is the next role performed by the bass-baritone but one with a wholly different vocal style: notice his grotesque femininity indicated as he gleefully breaks into high falsetto. The five-note "Serenissima" melody sung by the youths is another motif (representing Venice itself) [0:32 – 0:40] that resurfaces repeatedly in different guises throughout the opera.

Track 4 "Mysterious gondola"

Connection to the story

Von Aschenbach has arrived at his hotel and reflects on the strange gondolier who rowed him there against his will.

Musical elements and significance

This is the first of the opera's explicitly morbid meditations: Aschenbach compares his gondola ride to the mythological ferry journey of the dead across the river Styx. The ride of the gondola is a symbol of death. Underscoring Aschenbach's aria, the low strings grind out the "Serenissima" motif in a funereal lament of dense chords: the city of Venice is already being painted in darker tones.

Track 5 ("Children's games") "Tadzio, that is it"

Connection to the story

Taking a stroll on the beach, von Aschenbach encounters a Polish family staying at his hotel, taking particular interest in their beautiful son. As the children play, he listens to the boy's friends calling and discovers his name, Tadzio.

Continued on next page...

Musical elements and significance

The hypnotic music that accompanies the children's games sequence, with its tuned percussion and layers in different tempos, springs from Britten's fascination with the sonorities of Balinese gamelan music. So too does Tadzio's beautiful and exotic vibraphone theme (heard at the end of this clip) which delicately wanders through a modified five-note gamelan scale. The unbridgeable gap between the young Tadzio and the aging intellectual von Aschenbach is suggested both by the difference in their music and the fact that Tadzio and his family are all silent roles performed by dancers.

Track 6 "Fiorir rose in mezzo al giasso" ("Do roses flower in the midst of ice?")

Connection to the story

The hotel guests watch a troupe of strolling players perform a number of love songs which ironically resonate with Aschenbach, who at this point has discovered his hopeless infatuation with Tadzio. The last performance is the Troupe Leader's *Laughing Song*.

Musical elements and significance

The song is sung in Italian but the listeners clearly understand the words, which are meant to be absurd and provoke laughter. As the song progresses, it seems more and more to be directed explicitly at von Aschenbach ("Does a young man want to give an old woman kisses? Does a pretty girl wish to marry an old man?") and the audience's rhythmic mocking laughter becomes increasingly hysterical and savage. Importantly, the Leader is yet another of the bass-baritone's sinister roles.

Track 7 "In these last years"

Connection to the story

At a travel bureau, a young English clerk confirms von Aschenbach's fears that Venice is on the brink of a deadly cholera epidemic and that the city has become rife with crime and immorality.

Musical elements and significance

While the darker undercurrents of "La Serenissima" have been foreshadowed throughout the opera, here Britten gives us a full revelation of von Aschenbach's inevitable fate. The low strings repeat note-for-note the melody of "Marvels unfold" sung by the mysterious Traveller earlier, ornamented by sinuous woodwinds: Venice is revealed as the lagoon of physical and moral decay, both fatal but inescapably seductive. Perhaps it is important that the cholera comes from Asia, the same source as Tadzio's gamelan music.

Track 8 "Receive the stranger god"

Connection to the story

Having decided to stay in Venice despite the imminent danger, von Aschenbach has a dream in which the two Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus wage a metaphysical battle for his soul.

Musical elements and significance

Apollo, sung by a countertenor (a male voice type with a very high range), represents everything that von Aschenbach had once believed about art and life: reason, beauty and order. In the dream, the wild ancient Greek god of wine, Dionysus, representing chaos and passion (and yet another role played by the same bass-baritone), conquers the Ancient Greek god of truth, light, poetry and art, Apollo, and with his followers builds up a lustful chorus of wordless cries ("Aa-oo!") that echo the calls for Tadzio earlier in the opera. At its climax, Tadzio's vibraphone theme violently rings out, while the infected "Marvels unfold" motif slithers half-hidden below gamelan music.

Inspiration in the Classroom, Lesson Plan

Critical Learning

Students will do an in depth study of inspiration, a prominent theme of the opera, by exploring the possible influences in Britten's life. They will then be guided to learn by experience by creating work inspired by the influences in their lives.

Guided Questions

- » *What is inspiration? Where does it come from?*
- » *What separates inspiration from imitation?*
- » *What makes creative work original?*
- » *What might be the purpose of Britten's work, or just the purpose of creative expression?*
- » *Does it require purpose?*

Curriculum Expectations

- » Describe the social/historical context of the work being studied.
- » Organize and record information gathered through research. What is inspiration? Where does it come from?
- » What separates inspiration from imitation? What makes creative work original?
- » What might be the purpose of Britten's work, or just the purpose of creative expression? Does it require purpose?
- » Justify artistic choices of elements, principles, and techniques for presentation.

Method

- » When students explore the animated timeline of Britten's life, blank "Form of Inspiration Chart" (Page 17) will encourage note-taking that is more focused, precise, and organized.
- » You can download a flow chart to help guide the creative process from the Ontario Music Educator's Association (OMEA) website, www.omea.on.ca

Instructional Components and Context

Readiness

To ensure there is enough time for the activities, the article, "Benjamin Britten and Inspired Thinking" may be assigned as reading homework in the previous class. Additionally, you may want to distribute a synopsis of the opera prior to the lesson.

Materials

- » Internet access to visit:
- » [Animated Timeline of Britten's Life](#)
- » [Death in Venice Listening Guide to "Tadzio, that is it"](#)
- » Chart paper and markers.
- » Copies of the "Form of Inspiration Chart" to guide note-taking.

Suggested Modifications

- » The activity adapts well to English or Drama classrooms, but the process could be used to scaffold any sort of creative work. In a History class, students could write in role as a newspaper journalist, reporting on a significant event in their history or in Britten's.
- » The "Minds On" section could also inform a Visual Arts oriented or Media Studies class to depict what that moment of inspiration might look like.

Minds On**Approximately 25 minutes**

- » Students will work in groups to create a mind map (*Death in Venice* at center) which demonstrates the many possible influences and intersections of those influences that may have had an effect on his work.
- » The main resources that will inform student work will be the article and animated timeline found online.
- » On the back of the chart paper, students can list or represent visually the things that have influence on their lives.
- » Finally, the whole class will take part in a guided listening of a [2 minute clip from *Death in Venice*](#), with attention to what images, feelings, or memories that the music draws up from their past.

Action!**Approximately 40 minutes****Option A: Poem or Short Story**

- » Students will work individually to write a short story or a poem that reflects their reactions to the guided listening. They may draw on things they wrote on the mind map for inspiration.
- » Guide students by asking them to focus on showing a moment of change, or a realization in their poem or short story.
- » Students may share their work but save all comments and feedback for consolidation.

Option B: Short Scene

- » Students return to their groups where they will use the 2 minute clip as a structure for, and their mind maps to inspire, a silent scene that tells a story of some significant, life altering event.
- » Guide students by asking them to focus on showing a moment of change, or a realization for the characters in the scene.

Consolidation**Approximately 10 minutes**

- » To assess for learning, have the students write a quick reflection using the Guiding Questions provided at the beginning of the class as a starting point.
- » If students are going to be viewing a performance of *Death in Venice*, have them think about what has influenced that particular production. (i.e. what was the director's concept and what does it draw on?)

Assessment for Learning*Post-presentation student reflections***Assessment as Learning***Peer and teacher feedback during "Action!" phase.***Differentiation***The mind map portion of the lesson is appealing to visual/spatial learners, while the scene work addresses the oft neglected kinesthetic learner***Quick Tip***Refer to the Creative Process flow chart (in hyperlinks) during the lesson, by the end students should be "Producing Preliminary Work"***Link and Layer***Use pop-culture, bring in a song the kids are all into and get them to try to identify its influences.*

The Form of Inspiration Chart

Students can fill out this chart to ensure effective note-taking on both the article and the Animated Timeline of Britten's Life.

Instructions: Inspiration comes in many forms, here are a few you might encounter when researching Benjamin Britten. Use your resources to fill in this chart.

Form	Significance
People (teachers, friends, and family for example)	What influence might these people have had on Britten?
Places (Where has he lived or travelled?)	Our environment plays a significant role in our development, where might this be true for Britten?
Historical Events (wars for example)	Major events change the way people think, and can affect the art we produce.
Culture (films, paintings, theatre, literature)	Was Britten influenced by the work of others?
Other	



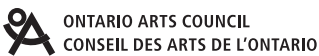
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