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Death in Venice : a personal narrative

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Benjamin Britten, consistently perverse in his choice of opera subjects, has once again proved the impossible. Thomas Mann's 'Death in Venice', a compressed and intense story, an artist's inner monologue, lacking conversation, lacking plot, has against all the odds become a great opera.

Edward Greenfield, *The Guardian*, June 18 1973

Britten always tended to be sensitive about his projects becoming public knowledge, but in early 1971 it was common knowledge in the Faber Music office, where I was working part-time as a copyist and editor, that plans for *Death in Venice* were well advanced. His touchiness about publicity had caused problems with operatic projects in the past - notably *King Lear* and *Anna Karenina* in the mid 1960s - the latter a collaboration with Colin Graham, which reached an advanced stage before it was abandoned when news of it became too widespread for Britten's comfort. So when a piece appeared in the *New Statesman* - I can't recall quite when, or who wrote it - on the lines of 'Rumour has it that Britten's next opera is to be *Death in Venice*. Please let it not be true', there was some concern that this might presage another aborted project.

Problems with the subject matter had already arisen : Britten had been advised to keep his plans under wraps because of the complicated negotiations with Warner Bros., who saw a conflict with Luchino Visconti's film which was in production at the same time. (Britten first approached Thomas Mann's son Golo for his approval, which was freely given, in September 1970; the film was premiered at the 1971 Cannes Film Festival.) Agreement with Warner Bros. was not finally reached until June 1972, by which time Britten had composed nearly half of the work; but the negotiations had been concluded in principle in time for Britten to start talking in detail to Myfanwy Piper about the libretto in January 1971.

I had met Britten for the first time in 1970 at the rehearsals for *Owen Wingrave*, for which I had collaborated on the fair copy of the full score with my brother David¹. My first solo task for him was to edit the continuo part for his edition of the Bach *St John Passion* in April 1971, taking down as far as I could Britten's semi-improvised accompaniment. He did not begin work on the music of *Death in Venice* until the end of that year, and my own involvement with it began in April 1972. Graham Johnson, who was to be Pears' rehearsal pianist, had been recruited to prepare the vocal score, but it became evident that he would be unable to keep up with the pace of Britten's composing. I was asked by Donald Mitchell if I would take over the score, and I began work immediately - by this time Britten had nearly reached Scene 7, *The Games of Apollo* (at that stage called *The Idyll*).

There was a great deal to do : but as Britten's commitments, including the June Aldeburgh Festival, meant that he would have to take a two month break from the opera, I had time to catch up. In some respects, making a vocal score for Britten amounted to little more than tidying up his sketch : he had always composed his operas as if writing for piano - he would regularly play back what he had composed, both for himself², and for others to hear³. But it was essential to make sure that the layout was properly pianistic, and above all that it would be very legible : part of the score had been engraved by the time of the first performance, but the great majority remained in my hand until the vocal score was published late in 1975. I worked from photocopies of the composition sketch (made laboriously by the thermofax process), sending back my pencil score by post (I worked in London, rarely in Aldeburgh at this stage). I did not write in the words - this was left to Britten's principal music assistant Rosamund Strode⁴ - I had no copy of the libretto, and Britten's attitude to the words could be a little idiosyncratic. Rosamund also kept a careful watch over my handwriting : I learned more from her about the standards of music copying than from anyone else.

I would receive back from Britten pages that had been hand-corrected by him. I find it hard to believe now that I made the corrections and rubbed out his handwriting without any of us who worked with him thinking to preserve some of these pages and have them recopied. They represent a minor but now irretrievable stage of the composition process. I have a number of pages of later revisions in his hand, and some pages of the dye-lined vocal score with his writing on them, but the original marked up pages are gone forever⁵.

In June 1972 I was in Aldeburgh to help Britten with his performance of Schumann's *Scenes from Goethe's Faust*, whose orchestration he had retouched in a number of places. He returned to *Death in Venice* in July, although *The Idyll* scene caused him problems, and there were interruptions - he conducted two performances of *The Turn of the Screw* in August, and recorded Schumann's *Faust* in September. The latter tired him greatly, and probably as a result he decided to ask Stuart Bedford to conduct the first performance of the opera in June of the following year. (The Schumann was the last music he was ever to conduct himself.) On his doctors' advice he set aside most of his engagements over the coming months in order to concentrate on *Death in Venice*, and gradually he picked up speed, completing the sketch on December 17. He spent a further week reworking the very end, whose first draft had dissatisfied him.

I had got as far as the end of Scene 6, Aschenbach's 'So be it', by the beginning of September, and at that stage this first section of the vocal score was finalised and sent off to be made up for the singers. Britten had not yet made up his mind about the act divisions at the time he had finished the composition draft, and in fact the work was through-composed without a break⁶. But it had never been intended that the opera should be a single act of nearly two and a half hours (not quite as long as *Das Rheingold*); while separating out *The Idyll* as the second of three acts was dramatically inappropriate. In the event, the low fourth on B & E which followed Aschenbach's 'I love you', marked as a 'long pause', became both the final chord of Act One and the opening chord of Act Two.

But what, I wondered, would the first night audience make of this declaration of love? While preoccupied with the technicalities of making the vocal score I could not overlook what seemed to be a scarily autobiographical plot, and what I felt initially was music that was in many places under-composed. This latter was simply a misapprehension, deriving from the sparseness of the sketch, largely alleviated as I worked on the full score, and completely dissolved when I heard the orchestral textures for the first time in rehearsal. But my concern about the subject matter itself, and its treatment in the libretto remained, and to some extent still does forty years later, even though I never fail to be greatly moved by the work in performance.

One disquieting aspect of the story was that it seemed to have uncomfortably close parallels to Britten's infatuation with David Hemmings in Venice during the rehearsals for *The Turn of the Screw*, and that it revealed a side of Britten that, however innocent, was barely camouflaged behind the conflict between the Dionysiac and Apollonian impulses that underlies both book and opera. Britten would have deeply resented such an interpretation, and it was hardly something that I would have raised, having witnessed at first hand his anger when reading a critique of *Owen Wingrave* in *Opera* magazine - he hurled the magazine into a far corner.

But others were concerned : Pears is reported to have said to Sidney Nolan, 'Ben is writing an evil opera, and it's killing him.'⁷ What I found equally disconcerting was what seemed to me to be the over-simplification of a complex and multi-layered story : the very beginning, for instance, where, in Thomas Mann, Aschenbach is over-stimulated by too much creativity, finds the opera going in the opposite direction. Aschenbach cannot work, 'no words come'; and when they do, they tend towards the platitudinous : 'Light everlasting', chants the chorus, and Aschenbach responds 'Would that the light of inspiration had not left me'. 'They enter into the house of the Lord', 'Yes! From the black rectangular hole in the ground' - a line that I find particularly grating.

Such reduction of complexity to the more comprehensible narrative needed for staging made me anxious about its reception, although in the event this was almost entirely positive. Yet more than one commentator has been uneasy about these issues, notably finding *The Games of Apollo* as the weak spot of the opera - the games themselves more like school sports than Apollonian contests, with Aschenbach looking on like an elderly schoolmaster⁸. But Myfanwy Piper was clearly simplifying the plot in a way that suited Britten - was indeed instigated by him - and ultimately there is no room in opera for the subtleties of Mann's writing, with its elaborate and intricate prose musings⁹. Whatever my reservations, then or now, the opera works.

It was with *The Games of Apollo* that I resumed the vocal score. I was unaware at the time to what extent the libretto was being discussed and changed as the work was composed; and only after Britten's death did I learn of the notebook that he was using in order to sketch in outline the music that he was about to elaborate in the composition sketch. This unique document¹⁰ represents the only time that Britten committed so much advance detail to paper instead of keeping it in his head¹¹. There are several other notebooks for work in progress, but nothing with this level of detail : it contains more than 30 pages of sketches, comprising over 100 entries.

I completed the vocal score by the middle of January 1973 - if I remember rightly it still had the unrevised ending, which had to be corrected at a later stage since the complete score had already gone off to be reproduced for all the performers. More corrections had to be made as work on the full score threw up many minor changes¹² - and one major change when it transpired that a tune in the Players' scene that Britten had assumed was traditional was in fact in copyright. Since the publishers of the tune in question were intransigent in demanding a large share of the Grand Rights for its use, Britten recomposed the whole number - fortunately before getting to it in the full score. But 10 pages of vocal score had to be rewritten. A reworking of the Phaedrus aria in Scene 16 caused fewer problems, although again it meant replacing the vocal score pages; while many of Aschenbach's monologues changed as Pears began to learn them, and in the process suggested ways in which they could work more fluently.

Britten was racing against time to complete the full score, not so much because of the need to prepare the orchestral material in good time for the first rehearsals as because his strength was declining. He had been advised to have a thorough medical examination as soon as the score was finished. Nevertheless the speed at which he worked was remarkable, and although I came to Aldeburgh a number of times in February and March to help in writing out the score¹³ - for which Rosamund Strode had prepared the layout, including all the vocal lines - the great majority of the full score, consisting of over 700 pages and completed by the end of March, was in his hand. I have a vivid memory from that time of having dinner with Britten and Imogen Holst in the Festival Club, when he seemed surprisingly relaxed - much more so than the other diners, who fell completely silent as he walked in.

The subsequent events were not happy. Britten had hoped that if an operation proved to be necessary it could be postponed until after the first performance of *Death in Venice*, but the examination revealed that the immediate replacement of a heart valve was essential. The procedure failed, in that all that was achieved was a stabilization of his heart which allowed him only three and a half more years of life, with a greatly reduced capacity for work. His post-operative convalescence did not allow for any attendance at rehearsals.

I worked on the editorial details of both scores during April and May, and in early June was at Stuart Bedford's first orchestral rehearsal, for percussion alone, in London. There were several more rehearsals before the opera reached the stage, where my strongest memory is of entering the Maltings for the first time just as the rehearsal reached the powerful music at figure 230 in Scene 9, *The Pursuit*. That passage never fails to send a shiver down my spine in performance, the memory of hearing it in its full glory remains so vivid.

Rehearsals were somewhat fraught, as without Britten's presence there was a tension between the protagonists. Pears of course, had the confidence of having known the work from its inception, and seemed remarkably at ease in spite of the prodigious nature of his role; but Colin Graham and Frederick Ashton were often at odds, the latter, as Graham put it, 'somewhat stumped when confronted by long jumps and sprinting races'¹⁴. Ashton seemed excessively temperamental, and the two of them

made life difficult for Steuart Bedford, especially when Colin Graham asked for cuts both in the Games and in Pears' recitatives. Britten did not have the energy to deal with the proposed cuts; and he later restored most of them. I recall him, sequestered in The Red House during the rehearsals, being asked specifically about one cut in Scene 6, between figures 115 and 118. Steuart Bedford and I contrived a solution at Colin Graham's request, to which he made two small adjustments, written in ballpoint pen with a feeble hand (see fig/platexx - the pencil markings are Steuart Bedford's).

Britten was advised to avoid any pressure during the Festival itself by getting away to his composing retreat at Horham, near the Suffolk border. There, as Rosamund Strode recalls¹⁵, he was unable to resist the temptation to listen to the broadcast of the second performance, but was so disconcerted by a deep hum picked up from the stage machinery that he switched the radio quickly off. He did not hear a tape recording until August; a special performance was given for him at Snape in September.

I was, of course, present at the first performance on June 16, but in retrospect it feels more like the culmination of the rehearsal process, in which I had been closely involved, than an event in itself. More memorable is the performance I saw in September of that year at La Fenice in Venice, where it was difficult to distinguish between the theatrical experience and the city itself.

Britten meanwhile continued to make revisions, and was well enough to come to London for rehearsals and performance at the Royal Opera in October. He phoned me with some of the changes that he wanted to make - the only time I can recall speaking to him over the phone, an instrument he was never comfortable with. I was surprised how well the production, very much tailored to the Maltings, transferred to Covent Garden; and it was the first time I had seen Britten since April, looking much better than I had expected, although that may have been partly due to the elegant maroon velvet smoking jacket he wore. I was shocked therefore to see how much weaker and in poor shape he seemed at the recording, made in the spring of 1974 at The Maltings. He followed the sessions from a converted dressing room, isolated from everyone except Rosamund Strode and Rita Thomson, who had been his devoted nurse since the operation.

I continued to work on the vocal score - a major task was to put in the words of the German translation for the German premiere in Berlin in 1974¹⁶. But by the time of the recording most aspects of the score had reached a more or less definitive form, although the substantial optional cut that Britten had agreed to in the first scene was, to his subsequent regret, followed in the recording. The vocal score was published eighteen months later, in time for Britten's 62nd birthday in 1975. Work on the full score began before his death a year later, but he was not shown any of the proofs, and Rosamund Strode and I saw it through the press for its eventual publication in 1979.

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It is difficult to disassociate my memories from the accumulated knowledge of the 40 years since the opera was composed. I know the work from the inside in a way in which I know few other works, in spite of which I think I can view it with a degree of objectivity. What remains largely an enigma for

me is Britten's motive in choosing *Death in Venice* as the subject for what he may have suspected would be his final opera - and certainly the last major role he would create for Pears. I have already suggested that the subject was a kind of 'camouflage', allowing him to indulge private fantasies in a publicly acceptable way;¹⁷ and that he would have vehemently denied that to be the case. But this was clearly part of Mann's own perception of the novella. He felt that it needed justification beyond the normal modes of literary criticism, writing, not long after its publication, of the central theme as 'passion that drives to destruction and destroys dignity'; while in a lecture given in 1940 he spoke of the work as 'a strange sort of moral self-castigation'. He even went so far as to describe the prose style of the work as Aschenbach's rather than his own, implying a kind of parody, or conceit.

Parody was certainly not Britten's intention, and he would never have thought to use a musical language that was not his own in this instance. Self-castigation perhaps plays a part. But the one element that both works share is the autobiographical one. Thomas Mann freely admitted that all the events of the story were based on fact (although the outbreak of cholera did not coincide with the Mann family's visit to Venice in 1911 - it occurred in Palermo). Remarkably the original of Tadzio, one Wladyslaw Moes, came forward in the 1960s, with his memories of an old man observing him at play on the beach¹⁸. (Mann's wife Katia was aware of what she called his 'fascination' with the boy, but maintained that, unlike Aschenbach, he did not pursue the boy all over Venice.)

An essential element that separates author and composer is that Mann was bisexual, more able to be dispassionate about the subject, and was at pains to dress up his infatuation behind a screen of Greek philosophy, something far simpler to do in words (note Myfanwy Piper's implied censure of 'extreme wordiness') than on the stage. An obsessive pursuit that Mann/Aschenbach can continually stand aside from to reflect upon, and disparage, becomes much more concrete in the opera's characterisation of the protagonists. Britten would have said that he had no alternative - as he pointed out when *The Turn of the Screw* was criticised, Henry James's ghosts can remain in the imagination while they are on the page : in the opera they have to sing. But here we are somewhat uncomfortably aware that Britten's own obsessions are being made flesh.

The most significant decision taken by Britten and Piper, however, was that Tadzio, unlike the ghosts, should not sing (just as he is silent throughout the novella), and that his role should be that of a dancer. Recent productions of the opera have avoided straightforward choreography in favour of what Britten - in the notes for the vocal score, approved by him - called 'stylized movement', to represent the world of the 'other' as seen through Aschenbach's eyes. The choreography was one of the failings of the original production, too elaborate and ultimately unconvincing. My own feeling is that relatively naturalistic movement works just as well : the gamelan-derived music associated with the Polish family, and the fact that they are effectively mimes, work to establish the sense of otherness to great effect.

Aschenbach is never able to speak to the family, so their silence on stage is appropriate. Yet without Mann's elaboratively descriptive prose Tadzio remains something of a cypher. There is no real 'dark side to perfection', the operatic Aschenbach's approval of Tadzio's antagonism to a Russian family,

vividly described by Mann as 'glaring forth a black message of hatred'; nor any suggestion that Tadzio is less than beautiful. In the novella, Ashenbach, observing him closely, sees his bad teeth, and reflects 'he's sickly . . . he'll probably not live to grow old', which gives him 'a certain feeling of satisfaction or relief'. This is not a theme that Mann develops, but it is completely absent from the opera.

The other major achievement of the libretto is the conflation of the various personae who make up the figure of The Traveller. This is implicit in Mann, notably by the strange motif of grimacing with bared teeth (surely intending a link to Tadzio in the description just cited) which is shared by the characters who in the opera become the Traveller, the Elderly Fop¹⁹, the Old Gondolier and the Leader of the Players. The Hotel Manager and the Hotel Barber are far less sinister figures in the novella, notably the former, who is usually described as 'the soft-spoken little manager'; which makes their transformation in the opera all the more powerful, and the equation of all of them in the Voice of Dionysus a logical outcome.

And yet in spite of these felicities, for the most part the libretto is disappointingly prosaic. Mann writes 'The boy would be summoned to meet a guest . . . he had an enchanting way of turning and twisting his body, gracefully expectant, charmingly shamefaced, seeking to please because good breeding required him to do so'. In the opera Aschenbach's reaction is the arch 'You notice when you're noticed', which becomes an irritating ritornello, almost the only music in the opera I would be happy to lose. Equally clumsy is the cod Italian of the Venetian characters, 'Il padre is sick, the bambini are hungry', a pointless attempt at local colour.

But musically there are so many golden moments - the holding back of the 'Overture to Venice' to the end of the second scene, and its brazen, glittering paean to the city; the 'view' music as Aschenbach sees the sea from his hotel room for the first time; the strangeness of the Voice of Apollo, and Britten's use of the 2000-year old Delphic Hymn; the darkness and intensity of the prelude to Act II; the beauty of the simple eloquence of the Phaedrus aria, and the noble brass peroration that follows it. Above all the sombre final bars, deep and foreboding as Tadzio's music disappears into thin air.

The music transcends criticism. A better, more sophisticated libretto would almost certainly have unsettled Britten, whose sense of theatricality outweighs any fault-finding. 'Consistently perverse in his choice of opera subjects' he may have been, but he had an unerring sense of what could and could not work, and Edward Greenfield's 'it has against all the odds become a great opera' is nothing less than the truth.

NOTES

1 Britten had written out the full score at great speed and felt that it was too untidy for future use by other conductors; it was very unusual for a pre-publication full score not to be in his own hand.

2 Britten never composed at the piano, but he would play through what he had composed each day 'to fix the music in time', as he once explained to me. He went on to say that he had once, during the

composition of *Billy Budd*, written an extended passage without recourse to the piano, and that the timing had consequently gone wrong.

3 Donald Mitchell describes being sole audience to a complete performance of the opera, with Britten taking all the parts, in December 1972, in his introduction to the Cambridge Opera Handbook *Death in Venice*. A subsequent 'performance' was given to a small audience of those who would be involved in the production, including Colin Graham and John and Myfanwy Piper.

4 Rosamund Strode's account of the genesis of the opera in the Cambridge Handbook, A chronicle, is indispensable, containing greater detail about specific musical issues than I have given here.

5 The 350 pages of my handwritten vocal score are now in the Britten-Pears Foundation's archive.

6 There is no division into acts in the composition sketch, and Rosamund Strode says that the final decision was not taken until December 1973. However in a letter to Myfanwy Piper written in February 1972 Britten speaks clearly of 'Act I' and 'Act II'

7 In Humphrey Carpenter, Benjamin Britten, p. 546

8 Other interpretations would doubtless have been made had Myfanwy Piper's suggestion that the boys dance naked been pursued. Donald Mitchell's description of this proposal as 'somewhat unworldly' (Cambridge Handbook p. 13) is a masterpiece of understatement. It is significant though that this is one of the few Britten operas where no children's voices are heard.

9 Myfanwy Piper writes of the difficulty of reconciling 'the comparative austerity of language required by the composer with the extreme wordiness of the text' in her account of the libretto in the Cambridge Handbook.

10 See my article *The Venice Sketchbook* in the Cambridge Handbook.

10 'Usually I have the music complete in my head before putting pencil to paper. That doesn't mean that every note has been composed, perhaps not one has, but I have worked out questions of form, texture, character, and so forth, in a very precise way so that I know exactly what effects I want and how I am going to achieve them.' In Murray Schafer, *British Composers in Interview* (1963 - the interview was given in 1961).

12 Rosamund Strode says that in May 1973 she listed 346 corrections to the vocal score and 415 to Act I of the full score (Cambridge Handbook, p. 41).

13 An invoice in the Britten-Pears Foundation archive shows that I worked 22½ hours in Aldeburgh during March (for which I was paid £2 an hour).

14 Cambridge Handbook, p. 71

15 Cambridge Handbook, p. 41

16 The German translation was made by Claus Henneberg and Hans Keller, but it was a collaboration in name only. I have a copy of the vocal score in which Henneberg's attempted alterations to Keller's translation are roundly dismissed. Keller's translation of 'I love you' as 'Ich liebe', altered to 'Ich liebe...' (implying 'Ich liebe dich') meets with a diatribe : 'There is, of course, no violent objection to the 3 dots, since one won't hear them, but I can't see why one should make a meaningless concession to an illiterate idiot : the sentence was the best translation in the opera.' Keller goes on to cite two uses of the intransitive in Schiller and one in Goethe.

17 It is worth remarking that Warner Bros. had little confidence in the viability of Visconti's film, since they suspected that the subject matter would lead to its being banned in the USA. Their fears were only allayed when the UK premiere was attended by members of the royal family.

18 Mann was in fact only 36 years old at the time, 17 years younger than Aschenbach; Wladyslaw was not yet 11, as opposed to Tadzio's 14. See Gilbert Adair, *The Real Tadzio* (2001).

19 To the extent that his upper set of false teeth falls out as he leers at Ashenbach. The teeth of the hotel manager and barber go unremarked.