

Sexuality in Four Operas by Benjamin Britten

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ABSTRACT

Benjamin Britten is a famous genius composer in England, who left several operas with distinctive personal characteristics in his life. In these operas, there is also a lot of detail about his characters in the sexual relationship as an expression of the stance to argue against the stereotypes of the gender relationship in the art. Many of Britten's operas deal with the relationship of males and males in love. And some even have specific homosexual backgrounds. As an outstanding talented composer, opera seems to be the form to explore Britten's clearest and strongest sexual desire, and even opera becomes the outlet of his impulse sexual desire^[1]. His partnership with Peter Peirce, who was also a major actor in many of his operas, was an important drive for spirits to write his opera. Because they are in a love relationship although they are not open news to the public, their stories are redesigned to be the art performance in the opera. The relationship between Billy Budd and the captain, who are the main characters in the opera Billy Budd, is believed to be related to Britten's own love experience. In some of his operas, including Billy Budd, and Death in Venice, same-sex relationships and sexual orientation are explored topics in these operas. These works have been interpreted as Britten's attempt to express his values and opinions on sexual relationships and love in music based on his identity, his experience, and society's attitude towards homosexuals. This paper intends to analyze Benjamin Britten's discussion of sexuality from four operas, Peter Grimes, The Turn of the Screw, Billy Budd and Death in Venice.

Keywords: Benjamin Britten; British Opera; Sexuality; Homosexuality; Social Discrimination; Musical Expression

1. PETER GRIMES

The opera is a creative artwork with different ways to perform the themes of sexuality in British opera culture at the time, and which does not follow the conventions of art design and art performance in opera before. The highly personal style of the text was seen as a provocation to the original opera with the emphasis on the sexual relationship^[2]. Elliott believes that exclusive interpretations of homosexual terms should be opposed at the expense of spirituality^[3]. In the opera, Peter Grimes often seems to be sidelined by others, which some scholars believe bearing some resemblance to Britten's experience of homosexuality is not being accepted. Britten thought, its recital-like writing, is more graceful and memorable than the aria-like sections^[4]. There is much controversy about the relationship between the apprentice and Grimes. Pierce held the tenor role throughout the opera's run. Although Britten and Pierce's love is considered illegal, they still dare to depict an image of their relationship with the world^[5]. Sexuality is seen in the characters and the expression of words, and music in the operas.

The opera by Britten reveals the problem of social isolation and persecution of gay men in society. It may be the pressure of public opinion for a long time so that Britten's rebelliousness and uniqueness as a homosexual are presented in the form of opera. In reality, a homosexual relationship is discriminated against in society, and it is difficult to be accepted by society^[6]. For example, there was also divergence about the age of the apprentice characters, including in the later stages of the tour, which is viewed as the theme of the love for the teenagers. As for Peter Grimes, some scenes of sexual violence seem to be an important part of Britten's characterization, who loved the young boys. Violence is the expression of the attitude towards love, and the ways to communicate about the love on the apprentice. The violent performance shows anxiety, and contradictory emotions, which are also projected as the negative desire for love with violence. For example, in the cabin scene, Peter suddenly loses his temper, and "picks up a short rope and spins it around"^[7]. The open and bright D major music is associated with Allen, which is opposed to the tritone and church bell semitone in A flat and E flat, highlighting Allen's alienation from the background^[8]. With the development of the plots in the opera, Peter looks for the acceptance of the identity of homosexuality in society, while he fails with the end of suicide. It makes the comparison to the lyrics at the beginning of the opera that he had a beautiful wish for life. For example, when Peter first appeared, he

sang the lyrics “I have my vision, fiery vision, they call me a dreamer”. This sentence seems to lay the foundation for his struggle against the social status quo ^[7]. In the masterful part of Act Two, Scene One, he capitulated to borough public opinion and incorporated his modality into the borough’s Bb. In Peter Grimes’ treatment of the ending, Britten did not follow the traditional creative conventions, but he adopted the repetition of the chorus of the first act and re-created it in the second act. The differences between the two stages of the play are clearly stated in the text. In the final scene, it is also to let it slowly dissipate, rather than solve it ^[9]. The opera by Britten reveals the social isolation and persecution of gay men in society.

2. THE TURN OF THE SCREW

Opera uses the ghosts as the symbols of the imagination for sexual desire with music. The opera is seen as a kind of Gothic horror story, which easily leads the audiences into painful dilemmas for the death of the characters in the movie with the narrative of the female house teacher. In specific, the opera discusses the female house teacher and two children battling ghosts. In this opera, Britten made extensive use of dissonant intervals, such as increased fourth, and decreased fifth to heighten the atmosphere of the opera. The music is used to express the struggle of the house teacher with lyrics, tone, and pace of music, which expects the audience to feel the depressed experience of the schoolteacher. With the development of the opera, she viewed the unaccepted sexual experience of the children with the previous female teacher and the hostess. Britten seems to reflect forbidden desires with phenomena, such as ghosts and imagination.

The opera shows the early maturity of the children in the sex, which is forced or imagined by the adults with the plots in the opera. In the second act of the opera, Miles’s death can be read as a metaphor for the repressive education imposed on him by a typical restriction on the sexual behavior of children in society. Miles’ words imply that he symbolizes the boy who fell from the apple tree, which is Adam in love. And the description of naughtiness can also be a sexual innuendo ^[10]. The two children, Miles and Flora, are the objects of the fallen desires of the dead servant and governess, or the fantasy victims of the new governess, and this depiction also directly addresses the issue of child sexuality and homosexuality ^[11].

Britten uses the imagination of ghosts to present questions about sexual orientation with the impact on society to think about the early maturity of children’s sexual behaviors. The opera discusses about education and force cannot change the early and unaccepted sexual behavior of children, which should be guided. For example, Miles, a boy had early mature sexual behavior, which is not changed by the governess and Mrs. Grose. They accept the situation, such as “I failed, miserably failed.” The awakening of the consciousness of the tutor, bringing shelter to the children, gradually shifted from the tense tunes of the first high violin to the slow tones. Quint’s portrait in soft lighting, and the desire to live a comfortable middle-class “lifestyle”, once again represents the mainstream idea of male homosexuality that Britten wanted to portray. The music and lights increase the effect of sexual desire without acceptance. It has an impact on society that the bad boy in Britten’s works is subject to both class and freedom of public opinion. He takes the initiative to observe and describe the vivid characters through the performance of the opera. People begin to pay attention to this phenomenon and rethink how to deal with this problem more reasonably ^[11].

In comparison to Grimes and *The Turn of the Screw*, Grimes indirectly shows the sexual desire of young boy, such as the violent sexual behavior in the opera with the character of a young apprentice. However, in *The Turn of the Screw*, he directly explores child sexuality. The image of a female teacher can be seen as a symbol of heterosexuality, while Mrs. Grose is a symbol of class to oppress the young to have sex.

3. BILLY BUDD

Billy Budd is an opera interwoven with innocence and evilness. It is innocent for having no ideas of homosexual love initially, he is the targeted person by other males as the imagination of homosexual love or the expression of evil ideas on sex on him. Each of the protagonists is well portrayed, from Billy Budd, Claggart, and the captain of the story between the unfolding, to demonstrate guilt and innocence, right and wrong, which is shown in the plot of sexual imagination on Billy Budd, and the death of Claggart caused by him for the evil sexual desire on him. Benjamin Britten tries his best to keep the innocence of Billy in the environment with the evil sexual desire on him, who fights against the class and the regulations to kill the Claggart to keep the innocence and the right, who wins the respect of others ^[12]. In Billy Budd, there is an opportunity to write about the love relationships between men to symbolically evoke the power of homosexual love ^[7]. People on the ship are insane with the desire to possess Billy Budd, and are happy to see Billy angry but speechless, and who also enjoy calling him “beauty”, or “baby”. On the boring warship, the beautiful Billy has become the person to satisfy their aesthetic desire, and even the targeted person for love and sexual desire on the ship.

Music implies the thinking of the characters, and the desire for homosexuality with the increasing effect on the atmosphere, which also implies the plots and the results of the opera. In the prologue to *Billy Budd*, the musical conflict between B $\flat$ and B $\natural$ persists, the B $\flat$ major chord seems to be a kind of redemption. Vere's mental activity is reflected by the tangled music^[9]. In another interlude, Britten's use of harmonic triad notes F, A, or C contrasts sharply with orchestral and tessitura, where the tone is more cramped than before. Britten hints at the mental activity of Billy and Vere. Budd perfectly captures nuance and innuendo, suggesting that Claggart is gay and dramatizing it further^[7]. Near the end, after firmly appearing in F major, the voice of justice finally triumphs over evil. However, the sudden appearance of the B $\flat$ chord also caused people to rethink what Billy and Vere had done^[13]. The opera shows Britten's sensitivity to psychological depth and emotional complexity.

Billy Budd is more similar to *Peter Grimes* for that their homosexual love is not accepted now in society, which hopes to make social changes to accept homosexual love with effort. Peter's apprentice simply gives in to Peter's sexual violence without getting any better. However, Billy, though unable to defend himself, struggles to resist the sexual discrimination others impose on him. Peter Grimes and *Billy Budd* imply the wish of Grimes to have the respect and acceptance of homosexuality. Through the description of the opera form, Grimes' fate is lonely and sad. He is independent of society, but finally, he made suicide in pursuit of being accepted by society^[13]. This may also be a reflection of Britten's pressure of social stereotypes on herself for homosexuality. Peter's suicide is the depression for the society of not being accepted by society. However, Billy's death is meaningful for fighting with the evil force. Although he is a heterosexual initially, he is forced to be a homosexual. People respect him for his kind deeds which are beyond the discrimination on the identity of homosexuality. For example, while he prayed for God's mercy, he forgot that he was originally a social misfit. Although he tried to compromise with society in this way, praying that God would redeem him instead of discriminating against him for being rejected as gay. The reality was often the opposite. Overall, the opera impressed people with the comparison of the different attitudes on homosexuality as the themes, which shows the value that homosexuality is accepted and respected by society for their other expected behaviors, who will not be discriminated totally for the identity of homosexuality.

4. DEATH IN VENICE

Death in Venice shows Plato's love for homosexuality. This opera is very controversial compared to the previous three operas, which more clearly reflects the protagonist's homosexual background. It was also adapted from a novella as the Britten's last opera. In the opera, Britten portrays the protagonist, who is madly infatuated with a little boy, as perfectly as possible to explain the Platonic love between the two men^[14]. *Death in Venice* is seen as his musical autobiography, with echoes of works by Peter Grimes, *Billy Budd*, and others. He was often deeply in love with a series of boys^[15]. The opera is also regarded as one of the most significant works of Britten's artistic style, Britten's musical language in *Death in Venice* is complex and richly textured^[16].

This opera shows the connection between exotic music and homosexuality. After Britten toured Asia, the music of such exotic tunes seemed to reinforce or stimulate his imagination of sexual indulgence with prominent features in his compositions. Each character presents highly stylized with stylized music, such as some glissando, single notes, and rapid triplets, highlighting the characters' wild and passionate emotional performance^[17]. In Kennedy's opinion, Britten's shift from piano writing to harp sound gave the opera a "broad and subtle expressiveness" that characterized *Death in Venice*^[15]. With the use of harp melodies, Britten's musical composition of the tragedy may have been an attempt to convey his suffering rather than an escape from reality^[9]. In this period of music creation, Britten seems to be struggling and rebelling against the conventions of opera creation at that time. Orientalism in music was not accepted by Western musicians, just as he was not understood and accepted by the general public because of his sexual orientation^[11]. Britten's homosexuality involves a fondness for and idealization of young boys, which is reflected in Peter Grimes, *Billy Budd*, and the *Death of Venice*^[7]. The use of music increases the effect of the tragedy. Particularly in the tragedy of Plato, the loved couple in homosexuality could not be together with their sorrow for the unachieved love, and their love without acceptance in the society.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, art comes from life about the stereotypes of homosexuality. Whether the composer's sexual orientation is judged right or wrong in the current social context, the social prejudice against Britten should not be transferred to the artwork itself as well. Opera has a significant meaning in reflecting the social issues of certain ages about sexuality to call people to think and reflect on the social issues without the stereotypes. The opera by Britten reveals the problem of social

isolation and persecution of gay men in society. A homosexual relationship is discriminated against in society, and it is difficult to be accepted by society^[6]. The difference between the four operas is that as for Peter Grimes, violence is the expression of the attitude towards love on the apprentice, which is also projected as the negative desire for love with violence rather than true love. Billy Budd is more similar to Peter Grimes for that their homosexual love is not accepted now in society, which hopes to make social changes to accept homosexual love with effort. Peter's apprentice simply gives in to Peter's sexual violence without getting any better. However, Billy, though unable to defend himself, struggles to resist the sexual discrimination others impose on him. In addition, in *The Turn of the Screw*, he directly explores child sexuality. The image of a female teacher can be seen as a symbol of heterosexuality, while Mrs. Grose is a symbol of class to oppress the young to have sex. What's more, *Death in Venice* shows the connection between exotic music and homosexuality. It shows the shift from piano writing to harp sound gave the opera a "broad and subtle expressiveness to use music to increase the effect of the tragedy of the Plato love that the loved couple in homosexuality could not be together with their sorrow for the unachieved love and their love without acceptance in the society. Plato's love is different from the love in Peter Grimes as violence. All the operas imply that people should respect the different values of people about their attitudes toward sexuality, rather than discrimination in their pursuit of love, which proves the artistic value of the composers. His works have not been properly recognized as having true artistic value in the current period in which his works are presented with re-examination on the discussion about opera and sexuality with innovative art performance styles.

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