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Lucy Y. Liu

The University of Western Ontario

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Duality and Ambiguity in Britten's *Death in Venice*



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Year III – The University of Western Ontario

In September 1970, English composer Benjamin Britten began working on his last opera, *Death in Venice*, which is based on Thomas Mann's novella of the same title. *Death in Venice* tells the story of a well-respected writer, Gustav von Aschenbach, and his infatuation with a beautiful Polish boy, Tadzio, whom he meets while on holiday in Venice. Both the opera and novella detail Aschenbach's subsequent physical and moral decline, culminating in the protagonist's death due to Asiatic cholera. Mann's dense prose is fraught with irony that gradually reveals Aschenbach's true feelings, feelings that he suppresses in self-denial. In this vein, the opera is rife with double natures and ambiguities, which can be traced from both a narrative-symbolic and musical perspective. Three prominent themes emerge in Britten's work: the Venetian setting, the dynamic between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, and irony centering on repression and ontology. Musically, Britten's setting clarifies and interprets these abstract themes through the use of characteristic motives, instrumentation, vocal casting, harmony, and tonal conflicts.

In the opera, Aschenbach describes Venice as an "ambiguous" city where "water is married to stone, and passion

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confuses the senses.”¹ Linda and Michael Hutcheon elaborate on librettist Myfanwy Piper’s depiction of the city, stating that in Britten’s work, “[Venice’s] position and image blur boundaries of all kinds – geographical, historical, sexual.”² In May 1911, Thomas Mann visited the Lido in Venice and in a letter to his children described his sojourn as “that unique life between the warm sea in the morning and...modern silliness and corruptness” in the afternoon.³ Mann’s literary description of the city also remains ambiguous; the city of still canals, gondolas, and gilt palaces draws Aschenbach with its aesthetic appeal but also inflames his senses and consequently corrupts his reason. As Patrick Carnegy notes, “our adventurer felt his senses wooed by this voluptuousness of sight and sound, tasted his secret knowledge that the city sickened and hid its sickness for love of gain.”⁴ Carnegy’s “love of gain” refers to the fact that Venice’s largest income is generated from foreign tourism. Like the city’s concealed cholera epidemic, Aschenbach also guards his pederastic tendencies. To portray Venice’s ambiguous nature musically, Britten uses both tonal centres and atonal motives and employs a standard European orchestra as well as a large percussion ensemble featuring a Balinese gamelan group. However, the music itself is never excessive, as Britten only writes three *tutti* sections in the entire opera, which is otherwise dominated by chamber music textures. Linda Hutcheon calls

¹ Benjamin Britten, *Death in Venice: Vocal Score* (London: Faber Music Limited, 1974), 38.

² Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, “Bourgeois Un-ease and Homosexual Disease: *Death in Venice*,” in *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death*, 133-149 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 138.

³ Quoted in Christopher Palmer, “Towards a Genealogy of *Death in Venice*,” in *On Mahler and Britten*, 213-228, ed. Phillip Reed (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd., 1995), 214.

⁴ Patrick Carnegy, “The Novella Transformed: Thomas Mann as Opera,” in *Benjamin Britten: Death in Venice (Cambridge Opera Handbooks)*, 168-177, ed. Donald Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 170.

Britten's orchestral effect one of "intensity and restraint."⁵ Significantly, the intensity of these rare *tutti* textures depicts the passion that unravels Aschenbach, while the restraint of the chamber textures portrays his initial calm and self-discipline. One of the prevailing themes in Mann's text is that in every beauty there resides a potential sickness, and it is precisely Venice's waters, sunlight, and sirocco that make it susceptible to epidemics, both literal and symbolic.

Venice represents a precarious balance between the East and the West. At the beginning of the opera, Aschenbach meets a traveller in Munich who urges him to travel to southern Italy because Venice, where "marvels unfold,"⁶ is the closest European location to the Orient without crossing the ocean. At the traveler's suggestions, Aschenbach's imagination soars and he visualizes tropical marshes, steaming, monstrous islands, and even the gleaming eyes of a tiger.⁷ However, Venice's exotic nature eventually propels Aschenbach to his spiritual and physical death. Carnegy confirms that Venice's ties to the Orient contribute to the protagonist's demise, describing the Orient as a "common source of the ecstatic, libidinous cult of Dionysus and of the Asiatic cholera which is the physical cause of Aschenbach's death."⁸ This description is reflected in Britten's orchestration, especially in the un-tuned "jungle drums" which "beat as if in preparation for some ritual sacrifice."⁹ By nineteenth-century bourgeois standards, cholera is a shameful

⁵ Hutcheon, "Bourgeois Un-ease and Homosexual Dis-ease," 139.

⁶ Britten, *Death in Venice*, 9.

⁷ Thomas Mann, "Death in Venice," in *The Norton Anthology of World Literature, Second Edition*, 1836-1890, ed. Sarah Lawall (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 1841.

⁸ Carnegy, "The Novella Transformed," 176.

⁹ Christopher Palmer, "Britten's Venice Orchestra," in *Benjamin Britten: Death in Venice (Cambridge Opera Handbooks)*, 129-153, ed. Donald Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 131.

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disease to die from because of its clinical resemblance to consumption and its association with wantonness.¹⁰ In nineteenth-century miasma theories, cholera was also thought to be related to “climate changes, fogs, and damp as well as strong stenches.”¹¹ Musically, the advancing plague is introduced in Act 1 as what Peter Evans calls a four-note “canker” motive played by the tuba, with a major third collapsing onto a minor third:¹²



Peter Evans, “Synopsis: the Story, the Music not Excluded”

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The short, chromatic motive is tonally disorienting because it is unclear which key(s) the four pitches may belong to or whether or not there is a referential collection (tonal or otherwise). Furthermore, the unstable semitone descent from E to D# creates ponderous suspense. In this passage, Britten’s juxtaposition of the descriptive text, “Marvels unfold,” with the ambiguous and twisting nature of the melodic line conjures up an ironic image that seems to combine wonder with the notion of pervading sickness, thus foreshadowing Aschenbach’s ruin. Right from the outset, seeds of doubt regarding the moral nature of these so-called “marvels” are sown.

¹⁰ Hutcheon, “Bourgeois Un-ease and Homosexual Dis-ease,” 135.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Peter Evans, “Synopsis: the Story, the Music Not Excluded,” in *Benjamin Britten: Death in Venice (Cambridge Opera Handbooks)*, 76-85, ed. Donald Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 77.

The central conflict embedded in *Death in Venice* is the contest between Apollo and Dionysus for Aschenbach's soul. Britten's use of key relations and harmonic features reinforces this battle, as he assigns a representative key to each god. F major represents Apollo, the god of cold intellect and light, while E major depicts the "darker," libidinous Dionysus. These two keys alternate back and forth throughout the opera to enact musically the symbolic battle, fought to win influence over Aschenbach's character and will. In the novella, Aschenbach as a youth is said to have had "a richly sensuous nature."¹³ At the outset of his career, however, the protagonist rejects his sensuous self in favour of discipline, austerity, and chastity in the interest of gaining popularity as a writer.¹⁴ As a result, Aschenbach devotes his whole career to simplicity, formal perfection, and quiet contemplation. Britten musically depicts Aschenbach's restraint with the opening line "My mind beats on, and no words come."¹⁵ The musical setting of this line links Aschenbach's initial self-discipline with Apollo, as the ascending chromatic row is accompanied by the muted, staccato sound of a solo piano, intoning on F.¹⁶

Slowly *Lento* (♩ = 60)

ASCHENBACH *p smoothly*

My mind beats on, ——— my mind beats on, ———

and no ——— words come. ———

Peter Evans, "Synopsis: the Story, the Music not Excluded"

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¹³ Mann, "Death in Venice," 1844.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1845.

¹⁵ Britten, *Death in Venice*, 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* The piano part was not available for reprint in this paper.

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Aside from Aschenbach's early connection to Apollo, established by the repetitive iterations of F in the accompaniment, this passage presents an additional musical cue that further depicts his restraint. Sandra Corse points out that "[the] melody, with its small intervals and twisting movements, suggests energy and causes the listener...to anticipate a musical development."¹⁷ However, this energy is restless and futile, and is tightly controlled to convey Aschenbach's initial austerity.

After his arrival in Venice, however, Aschenbach's self-control is soon undermined by "Dionysian forces which emerge from passion."¹⁸ Hutcheon contends that in Mann's novella and in Britten's opera, Dionysus represents "rapture,...violent commotion and the 'un-selving' of the individual in a bond with others and with nature."¹⁹ To represent Dionysus's growing influence on Aschenbach, Britten uses E major during scenes in which Aschenbach's will unravels. For instance, at the end of Act 1, Aschenbach whispers "I love you" to Tadzio during a critical moment of self-realization. Significantly, his vocal line cadences on E major (rehearsal no. 188, mm. 7-10).²⁰ Britten's musical cue is clear: Aschenbach has finally given in to his perversion and Dionysus triumphs. In Act 2, Aschenbach continues to observe Tadzio silently from a distance. Later in the same Act, he has a dream in which Apollo and Dionysus battle for his soul. Apollo leaves defeated ("I go, I go now...")²¹ and Dionysus's followers come rushing down the hill, leading the opera to its orgiastic climax in the key of E major (rehearsal no. 283, bar 2ff); the

¹⁷ Sandra Corse and Larry Corse, "Britten's 'Death in Venice': Literary and Musical Structures," *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 73, no. 3 (1989): 344-363, 348.

¹⁸ Clifford Hindley, "Eros in Life and Death: *Billy Budd* and *Death in Venice*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, 147-164, ed. Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 155.

¹⁹ Hutcheon, "Bourgeois Un-ease and Homosexual Dis-ease," 147.

²⁰ Britten, *Death in Venice*, 159.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 232.

SATB chorus softly intones “Aaoo!” to diatonic rising 7^{ths} and crescendos into a *fortissimo* six measures later.

Mann describes this scene as follows: “From afar there approached a tumult, a turmoil, a mixture of noises...and a certain howl with a drawn-out *uuuu* sound at the end...But it was all suffused and dominated by the deep, beckoning melody of the flute.”²² Britten orchestrates this scene with wild pounding drums exuding a primitive sexual energy to depict Dionysus’s victory.

The FOLLOWERS OF DIONYSUS appear, dancing.
 Die GEFOLGSGESCHAFT DES DIONYSOS erscheint tanzend.

(♩ = 56) (freely) *f*

(all *p*, slow cresc.
tutti p, cresc. poco a poco) *p*

S. Taste it, taste the sa-crifice.
 Schmekket, schmekket Op-fe-rung. Join the wor-shippers,
 Wer-det An-be-ter,

Aa oo! aa oo! aa

A. Aa oo! aa oo! aa

CHORUS

T. Aa oo! aa oo! aa oo!

B. Aa oo! aa oo! aa oo!

str. perc. *con* *ced.*

pp *hn.* *slow cresc.* (cresc.)

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²² Mann, “Death in Venice,” 1884-1885.

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The vowel *ii* is sung by SATB chorus as part of the orchestration, both to invoke Tadzio's name (in Polish, "Tadzio" is pronounced *tæ-shuu*) and to suggest Aschenbach's shift of awareness from rationality to sensuality.²³ Perhaps more importantly, these musical components help to portray the surrender of an artist's individual self to the cultish and ecstatic moment.²⁴ As Mann's text describes, this scene leaves "the culmination of a lifetime of effort ravaged and annihilated."²⁵ Following this dream, Aschenbach emerges a completely changed man. He begins dressing in a foppish way and lingers in Venice for the sole purpose of following Tadzio despite his knowledge that the plague is advancing. As a result, Aschenbach not only dies of cholera but also suffers the loss of individual personality in "homoerotic Dionysian abandon," relinquishing his role as a professional artist capable of balancing the Apollonian and Dionysian.²⁶

Mann's novella has a certain intertextual debt to Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, since the novella champions the Platonic view of Beauty. As literary scholar T.J. Reed notes, "Beauty, Plato taught in the *Phaedrus*, was the one Absolute which had sensuous existence; hence its ability to mediate between sensuous man and the realm of the spirit."²⁷ In Plato's theory of Forms, ideal Beauty is of a higher, non-physical reality, and points to a world beyond carnal desire and corruption; however, if the artist is unable to sublimate his carnal desire into artistic creativity, then the artist's

²³ I am indebted to Adrianna Mika for informing me on the correct pronunciation of Tadzio's name.

²⁴ Palmer, "Britten's Venice Orchestra," 144.

²⁵ Mann, "Death in Venice," 1884.

²⁶ Hutcheon, "Bourgeois Un-ease and Homosexual Dis-ease," 149.

²⁷ T. J. Reed, "Mann and His Novella: 'Death in Venice,'" in *Benjamin Britten: Death in Venice (Cambridge Opera Handbooks)*, 163-167, ed. Donald Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 166.

obsession with beauty becomes an agent of destruction.²⁸ Aschenbach loves Beauty, not *through* Tadzio, but *by* him – he becomes enraptured with the object of beauty rather than Beauty as ideal. St. Augustine clarifies these two ways of perceiving beauty, and defines the distinction; one can revere beautiful objects as a manifestation of God or worship beautiful objects for their own sake, which leads to perdition.²⁹

'The Games of Apollo' scene in Act 1 serves as the turning point of the opera, during which Aschenbach relinquishes any possibility of sublimation. Britten borrows a Delphic Hymn from the second century BC to represent the Voice of Apollo, sung by a counter-tenor.³⁰ In this scene, a group of boys compete in a series of devotional sports on the beach and Tadzio wins every round. The chorus comments on Tadzio's god-like qualities and compares him to the mythological Hyacinthus: "Come, see where Hyacinthus plays/Basking in Apollo's rays."³¹ This passage firmly establishes Tadzio in a homoerotic context as Hyacinthus, the beautiful mortal youth loved by Apollo in Greek mythology. This scene marks the peak of Platonic idealism in the opera and presents Aschenbach with two options: to speak with the boy and enter into a platonic relationship with him, thereby "[rekindling] the dying spark of inspiration,"³² or to reject the opportunity and continue worshipping Tadzio from afar. Aschenbach fails to talk to the boy (Tadzio deliberately passes by the writer, who turns away), and his opportunity for artistic regeneration is lost.

²⁸ Vincent B. Leitch, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 33.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 186.

³⁰ Hindley, "Eros in Life and Death," 156.

³¹ Britten, *Death in Venice*, 125-126.

³² *Ibid.*, 157.

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Tadzio does not communicate verbally in the opera. His interaction with Aschenbach is achieved solely through mime, dance, and eye contact. Tadzio's theme is established in his first entrance with a “shimmering, gamelan-like chord” played on the vibraphone.³³



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The melodic fragments slowly oscillate between G# and A, but the lack of definite harmonic resolution, coupled with frequent pauses, creates the sense that time is stagnant. The static theme undergoes no development, lending an air of timelessness to Tadzio and appropriately reflecting Mann's description of Tadzio as a timeless work of art. In the novella, the boy's face is said to be “reminiscent of Greek statues from the noblest period of antiquity; it combined perfection of form with a unique personal charm that caused the onlooker to doubt ever having met with anything in nature or in art that could match its perfection.”³⁴ It is Tadzio, not Aschenbach, who is the meeting-point between Apollonian statuesque beauty and darker Dionysian desires. He is half-innocent and half-knowing, and he frequently passes unnecessarily close to Aschenbach, casting invitational glances at him. Aschenbach later observes that “Tadzio's teeth were not a very pleasing sight. They were rather jagged and pale...such as one sometimes sees in anemics.”³⁵ This

³³ Claire Seymour, “Death in Venice,” in *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion*, 296-322 (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd., 2004), 309.

³⁴ Mann, “Death in Venice,” 1855.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1862.

links Tadzio with the other tempters in the text, such as the traveler in the cemetery whose lips “were retracted to such an extent that his teeth...menacingly displayed their entire white length,” and the Lead Player who suggestively “let his tongue play lasciviously at the corner of his mouth.”³⁶ Thus, Tadzio is the final tempter, capable of inspiring literary regeneration while remaining coquettish and dangerous.³⁷

Nature and the elements are crucial symbols in the opera, as Mann depicts Tadzio as a creature of the sea and the sky. He is described in the novella as follows: “The sight of this living figure, virginally pure and austere, with dripping locks, beautiful as a tender young god, emerging from the depths of sea and sky, outrunning the element.”³⁸ Tadzio’s portrayal as a creature innately connected with nature provides a means through which the ideals of absolute Beauty can be realized. Britten incorporates other musical depictions of nature and the elements throughout the opera. For instance, in Act 1, scene 4, when Aschenbach opens his hotel window for the first time and views the beauty of the Venetian seascape, an expansive theme is introduced by the full orchestra.



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³⁶ Mann, “Death in Venice,” 1841, 1879.

³⁷ Reed, “Mann and His Novella,” 165.

³⁸ Mann, *Death in Venice*, 1868.

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Christopher Palmer argues that for Britten, “elements mean the ‘elementary’ triad, compounded of major and minor thirds, and for him chains of thirds seem to be associated...with water and the sea.”³⁹ Both Mann’s novella and Britten’s opera demonstrate a fascination with the sea for its duality not only as primordial perfection, but also as a source of aggressive chaos and yearning.⁴⁰

Aschenbach is a profoundly divided soul. In the end, his physical death by cholera is merely a manifestation of his spiritual death. Prior to his arrival in Venice and throughout his long career as a famed writer, Aschenbach completely rejected his sensuous self in favour of rigid self-discipline for fear that passion might paralyze his will to succeed.⁴¹ Thus, for the majority of his life, Aschenbach had only known solitary stoicism and never took to “sauntering about the world” or allowed himself to be “seduced away from...work.”⁴² As Claire Seymour notes, it is the “very repression [of his humanity] that is required to sustain his art.”⁴³ The consequence of Aschenbach’s seeming pursuit of scrupulous perfection, however, is that over the course of his career, he has become devoid of virtue. In his cold and detached emphasis on form and clarity, Aschenbach has abandoned moral inquiry and critical analysis of his motives and feelings. Aschenbach’s fall is swift and tragic; the moment he realizes that rigorous control has only led to artistic exhaustion and that his initial aloof admiration of Tadzio has become erotic passion, the transformation is complete – the predator becomes the victim, honour turns to unspeakable shame.

³⁹ Palmer, “Towards a Genealogy of *Death in Venice*,” 219.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁴² Mann, “Death in Venice,” 1842.

⁴³ Seymour, “Death in Venice,” 299.

Death in Venice, in Mann's own words, presents "passion as confusion and as a stripping of dignity."⁴⁴ Britten's depiction of Mann's novella is complex and is filled with ambiguities as he suggests that humanity's search for success, love, and beauty frequently leads to chaos. Thus, the opera displays Beauty's power to lead to divinity or to corruption and parallels the plagued Venice with the sickness growing in Aschenbach's heart just as it contrasts sensual indulgence with dry intellectual restraint and fatality and passivity with individual will.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Seymour, "Death in Venice," 316.

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