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Benjamin Britten

# *Death in Venice*

DONALD MITCHELL

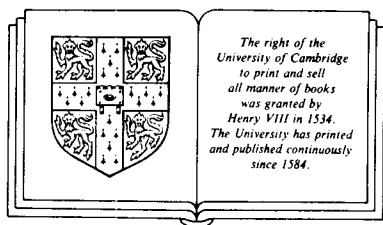


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# Benjamin Britten

## *Death in Venice*

*compiled and edited by*  
DONALD MITCHELL



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## CAMBRIDGE OPERA HANDBOOKS

### *General preface*

This is a series of studies of individual operas written for the opera-goer or record-collector as well as the student or scholar. Each volume has three main concerns: historical, analytical and interpretative. There is a detailed description of the genesis of each work, the collaboration between librettist and composer, and the first performance and subsequent stage history. A full synopsis considers the opera as a structure of musical and dramatic effects, and there is also a musical analysis of a section of the score. The analysis, like the history, shades naturally into interpretation: by a careful combination of new essays and excerpts from classic statements the editors of the handbooks show how critical writing about the opera, like the production and performance, can direct or distort appreciation of its structural elements. A final section of documents gives a select bibliography, a discography, and guides to other sources. Each book is published in both hard covers and as a paperback.

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## Preface

In a very real sense the inception of this book dates back to the early autumn of 1970 at Horham. Britten had asked me to visit him there at Chapel House and as we trudged round the margins of a very muddy Suffolk field before lunch he told me that he had quite definitely decided to go ahead with *Death in Venice* and asked me to begin the formal negotiations with the Mann family for the acquisition of the necessary rights. I picked up a Suffolk flint as Britten spoke and have retained it to this day as a keepsake.

The composer got his opera written and the contributors, in turn, got this book written. I thank my collaborators most warmly for their chapters and for their patient consideration of the many queries and suggestions I put to them. To one of the contributors, Philip Reed, the present Research Scholar at the Britten-Pears Library, I owe a quite particular debt, not just for his admirable chapter, but for the generous and painstaking editorial assistance he has rendered me throughout the production of the book. If I had not been able to rely on his skills and energy, this book would not have been seen through the press as speedily as it has been. Of course the responsibility for unnoticed errors (there will be some but not, I hope, too many) is mine alone.

Without virtually unrestricted access to the extraordinary documentary riches of the Britten-Pears Library and Archive at Aldeburgh, this book could certainly not be what it is. I am deeply grateful to the institution and its Trustees and especially to its Archivist, Rosamund Strode (who is also a contributor), and to the Librarian, Paul Wilson, whose contribution is none the less valuable for being as it were unseen. I should also like to thank our indefatigable copy editor, Vicki Deathridge, and Penny Souster, the music books editor of the Press, who supervised the publication of the book with a stimulating combination of enthusiasm and rigour. Jill Burrows kindly undertook the provision of the index.

Finally, we may be sure that the opera itself would not have been written at all had it not been for Peter Pears, the man and the artist. The opera was dedicated to him by the composer in all possible meanings of the word. It was my intention to surprise him on publication with the dedication of this Handbook. Alas, his death intervened and makes the dedication a posthumous one. But his incomparable achievement as the first Aschenbach will live on for as long as the opera itself survives; and as this book would seem to suggest, Britten's last work for the opera house is likely to have a very long future. It will not be forgotten while the world continues to value feats of high civilization.

London, November 1986

D.M.

## *Acknowledgements*

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# 1 *An introduction in the shape of a memoir*

DONALD MITCHELL

If this Handbook has a singular feature, it is this. Among its contributors are many who were working alongside the composer to help him bring his new (and, as it turned out, his last) opera to completion. Perhaps there will be other symposia on and about *Death in Venice*, but unless the contributors gathered together here are duplicated, I do not think that any one of them will be able to claim to give in quite the same way an account of the evolution of the opera, with all its attendant problems, of the revisions and modifications that both preceded and followed its première, of the hundred technical considerations affecting the course of its creation, which in this Handbook has its source in the recollections of those who, often on a day-to-day basis, were involved in the complex network of tasks associated with the launching of a major musico-theatrical undertaking. Everything of course had to be, and was, subordinated to the making of the music, to the composer's need to get his work written; and there were few activities by Britten's colleagues who had responsibilities in spheres other than the strictly compositional which now would have any significance if it were not for the music, which lends them, so to say, retrospective importance. Everything was geared, and so was everybody, to making it possible for the composer to get on with his composing, plagued by as few practical doubts and uncertainties as was humanly possible. This was not to be the case with *Death in Venice*, nor had it been the case with *The Rape of Lucretia* and *The Turn of the Screw*; indeed, Britten perhaps had more than his fair share of ill fortune when choosing texts for his operas in which copyright or an associated right was invested.

This sort of unforeseen difficulty is described by Rosamund Strode in her authoritative chronology of the opera's composition, in all its multifarious dimensions, a contribution which is absolutely central for the symposium as a whole and a brilliant illustration of the immediacy which is at the heart of it. Miss Strode will have put paid

for ever to the idea that the creation of an opera requires no more than a text, a composer with ideas, and a large stock of blank manuscript paper. As she so convincingly shows, the impact of many other factors and events, and especially the intervention of the unforeseen, influence not only chronology but also the actual shape and character of the work itself.

In precisely the same way, the contributions of Myfanwy Piper, the librettist, and Colin Graham, the producer, allow us fascinating insights into successive stages of the work's assembly. These dialogues with his librettist and with the producer – I like to think of them as *duets* even – were fundamental to the process of Britten's composition, something that is not surprising in the case of the words (though even here it is of special interest in *Death in Venice* how many major textual decisions had to be made in the light of the shape the work took, as its composition progressed) but perhaps somewhat less to be expected in the case of the actual staging of the opera. But there was never any question of Britten as it were presenting his producer or designer (John Piper) with a finished musico-dramatic work that it was then their responsibility to get on the stage. On the contrary, the practicalities of the staging – not only stage movements, but timing and duration – how long did the Traveller require to accomplish his metamorphoses into Elderly Fop, Gondolier, Hotel Manager, and so on? – were from the very start intimately involved in, were part of, the compositional process. There was nothing new about that, of course. When composing *Peter Grimes*, Britten had asked his designer, Kenneth Green, to let him have a sketch – a suggestion – of how the stage might look: it was an essential aid to getting the work under way.<sup>1</sup> How things were going to look, how singers were to move, and where – much of all this was plotted *along with the music*.

And naturally enough, Britten's own ideas about his new opera changed as the work began to materialize. Both Colin Matthews (in his scrutiny of the 'Venice' sketchbooks, pp. 55–66) and Mervyn Cooke (in his study of the Balinese dimension, pp. 115–28) fascinatingly explore the fine detail of the sketches, revealing the options Britten pursued and (no less significant) those he discarded. One comes very close here to the inner workings of creativity. 'Inspiration' is an exceptionally difficult word to define though we use it all the time and think we can unerringly recognize it when we hear it. There were a couple of occasions that I can recall when Britten talked to me about the particular materialization of two of the

leading musical ideas in the opera (though the word 'inspiration' never passed his lips). The first concerned the famous 'view' theme, which crops up continuously throughout the ensuing contributions. (In its final form it first appears as Ex. 2 in Peter Evans' synopsis (p. 79) but see also Colin Matthews, Exx. 2 and 4, p. 57 and 59.) This particular theme, Britten said, came to him as it were quite out of the blue and virtually in its entirety, and he hastily jotted it down ('on the back of an envelope') when he was travelling through France with the Pipers in January 1971, a trip which had as its *raison d'être* discussion of the forthcoming opera. Britten confessed to me his surprise that, when it came to getting down to the actual composition of the opera, he found his sketch useful. Normally, he went on to say – and perhaps this is the most interesting part of the recollection – when early ideas (inspirations?) came to him too soon, in too finished a state, too complete, for those very reasons he was unable to import them into the composition. Thus the 'view' theme was a notable exception to the rule.

The second passage Britten talked to me about involved another theme, and this time an absolutely critical one – Tadzio's theme, which is scrutinized from very many angles by many of the contributors but first appears as Ex. 3a in P. Evans (p. 79). Here, Britten told me, he had brought his composition sketch to the point of Tadzio's first entry *without*, it seems, any clear idea of what the boy's musical profile – his distinguishing theme – was to be. He put down his pen (or pencil, rather) and did not resume work on the opera until the next day. As soon as he recommenced composing, the theme came to him, perhaps not altogether surprisingly because he was a great believer in the therapy of sleep and rest and the ability of his unconscious to help out with solving compositional problems. What was surprising, and at the same time a tribute to the methodology of the composer's unconscious, was the character and special properties of the theme itself, which, to quote Britten's own words, 'used up the notes that had been left unused the night before'. Precisely what he meant by this can be examined in Colin Matthews' chapter on the 'Venice' sketchbook (see his Ex. 4, p. 59). He replicates the sketch itself and the table of pitches which shows Britten systematically ticking off the notes that had been conscripted: once Tadzio's theme had materialized, all twelve pitches of the chromatic scale were consumed. Mervyn Cooke's chapter further shows (pp. 124–25) the subtle symbolism involved in the extrapolation of the boy's haunting melody. This passage had always struck me as a *locus classicus* of the

extraordinary degree of calculation that in fact is involved in what we deem 'inspiration'.

I mentioned Britten's changing ideas as work on the opera progressed, something of which I was powerfully reminded when Rosamund Strode (see p. 29) turned up in an old file some notes I had made in Edinburgh, in 1971, of a conversation with Britten about *Death in Venice*.<sup>2</sup> I had quite forgotten these and although Miss Strode also quotes from them, they strike me on reading them through as worth transcribing in full, since they give a faithful account of how Britten envisaged the opera two years before its first performance:

Royal Circus Hotel  
Royal Circus  
Edinburgh EH3 6SL  
BB/DM  
4.V.71  
Taxi in E!

#### D in V

3 levels of action

- 1) Narration (Aschenbach  
reading from his Diary,  
v. spare musical accomp't:  
his intellectual questing  
& doubts);
- 2) The Beach (together with  
visible Beach perc. orch: Boy  
& his family, etc.)
- 3) Venice, the Hotel, etc.
- 4) Pit orch. (Orchestra  
not yet decided)
- 5) To be produced *in*  
*the round* at *Snape*
- 6) only Two principals  
PP as Aschenb. &  
JS-Q as symbolic figure  
of death, singing all  
6 roles – Hotel Manager,  
Gondolier, etc., etc.



- 7) Chorus of men & women, to sing all other crowd scenes, minor roles or whatever.
- 8) Two Acts – about 2 hrs. overall.

Certain features of this document are worth a moment's consideration. Myfanwy Piper, in her account of working with Britten on her masterly libretto for *Death in Venice*, has suggested (see p. 49) that at one stage he had contemplated Aschenbach *speaking* (not singing) as he read from (or wrote in) his diary; and this seems to be borne out by my notes which refer to Aschenbach 'reading from his Diary, v. spare musical accomp't'. That description must have been Britten's own, and it indicates that in May 1971 he had not yet decided that it was the solo piano that was to serve the recitatives; or perhaps it was settling for recitative that finally determined that the 'v. spare musical accomp't' should take the form of a piano? One wonders what the 'spare' musical accompaniment might have been, had he pursued the spoken diary idea. But in any event, what he ultimately chose to do was as close to speech as fixed pitches can get, while the piano perfectly articulates the particular soundworld that Aschenbach in his monologues inhabits (see Plates 1 and 2).

For the rest, while there were fascinating ideas that were modified by sheerly practical considerations – Miss Strode remarks on the abandoning of the idea to produce the opera 'in the round' at Snape – there were also many that stayed the course: much of what he talked about in the taxi in Edinburgh in May 1971 actually happened along the lines of my hasty notes (though the opera turned out to be significantly longer than two hours in duration – 2 hours 25 minutes in all).

An idea that both stayed with the composer and yet was modified (again, no doubt, on practical grounds) was the concept of the independent percussion orchestra to characterize Tadzio, his family and the games on the beach. This is clearly outlined in my Edinburgh notes, which also, however, refer to Britten's notion of a 'visible' percussion band, i.e. an *on-stage* percussion ensemble. Britten would soon have realized that this was not a practical proposition, especially in view of the integration of the percussion band into the continuity of the music. Eventually the percussion band was assigned to the pit, along with the main orchestra, though maintaining its independence. But the Edinburgh notes rather interestingly show how