

MUSICOL 457: SEMINAR IN OPERA
The Operas of Benjamin Britten
Northwestern University, Spring 2011, Tuesdays 3-5:50, MAB114



INSTRUCTOR

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OFFICE

MAB 28, office hours by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In the immediate postwar period, a revival in newly-composed opera in English spearheaded by Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) reinvigorated the transatlantic opera scene. Over the ensuing 25 years, Britten would create a series of engaging operatic works, owing on one hand much to 19th-century dramatic conventions while on the other exploring complex contemporary social issues through aspects of musical modernism. His elusive characters embody issues of sexual otherness, taking Romantic notions of the wanderer or the outcast to new levels of meaning. The dichotomy between the “closet” and open homosexuality, both in Britten’s personal life and in his operatic narratives, parallels and informs the contemporaneous struggle for legalization of homosexuality in the UK, which occurred in 1967.

This graduate seminar will focus on four of Britten’s operas, *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *Death in Venice*. We will examine the literary sources, interrogate Britten’s musical construction of character, view the operas through the lens of queer and sexuality studies, and assess the historical importance of the operatic revival, especially in the context of other composers such as Tippett. Students will produce a critical research project on a topic of their choice by the end of the quarter.

MATERIALS

There are no items to purchase for this course. Readings and streaming video recordings of selected operas will be available through Blackboard, electronic resources, and/or on reserve in the library. Readings to be discussed must be brought to class for the session indicated.

ATTENDANCE

Attendance is crucial to the functioning of a weekly seminar. Please come to class.

ASSIGNMENTS

Weekly reading and viewing assignments due on the class session for which they are listed as well as weekly presentations on research material will be required, in addition to a freely chosen final project.

GRADES

Assessed according to the final project and weekly participation.

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

Week 1 - 29 March

Introduction to the Operas of Benjamin Britten
Screening of *Benjamin Britten: A Time There Was*

Week 2 - 5 April

Peter Grimes: Revival of Opera
articles to be discussed:

-Corse, Sandra, *Operatic Subjects. The Evolution of Self in Modern Opera* (Madison NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000), pp 17-48.

-*The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 209-221 and 321-340.

-Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp 120-141.

-Crabbe, George, *The Borough*, letter 22 and *passim*

-libretto to *Peter Grimes*

-Brett, Philip, "Britten and Grimes," *The Musical Times* 117: 995-1000 (1977).

project on contemporary opera

Week 3 - 12 April

Peter Grimes: Character and Sexualities
articles to be discussed:

-Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Between Men*, pp 1-15.

-Jeffery-Poulter, Stephen, *Peers, Queers and Commons: The Struggle for Gay Law Reform from 1950 to the Present*, pp 8-46

-Hindley, Clifford, "Homosexual Self-Affirmation and Self-Oppression in Two Britten Operas," *The Musical Quarterly* 76 (2): 143-168 (1992).

-Seymour, Claire, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2004), pp 41-74.

-Brett, Philip: "Grimes is at his Exercise: Sex, Politics and Violence in the Librettos of *Peter Grimes*?" in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, ed. Mary Ann Smart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 237-49.

-McDonald, Ellen, "Women in Benjamin Britten's Operas," *Opera Quarterly* 4(3): 83-101 (1986).

project on production history of Peter Grimes

Week 4 - 19 April

Week 5 - 26 April

Billy Budd

articles to be discussed:

-Melville, Herman, *Billy Budd*

-libretto to *Billy Budd*

-Porter, Andrew, "Britten's *Billy Budd*," *Music and Letters* 33:11-18 (1952).

-Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp 174-189.

-*The Wolfenden Report*, pp 27-128.

- Seymour, Claire, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2004), pp. BB 132-159.
 - Whitall, Arnold, "Twisted Relations: Method and Meaning in Britten's *Billy Budd*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2(2): 145-171 (1990).
 - Hindley, Clifford, "Britten's *Billy Budd*: The Interview Chords Again," *The Musical Quarterly* 78(1): 99-126 (1994).
 - Brett, Philip, "Salvation at Sea: *Billy Budd*" in *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), 133-43.
 - Cooke, Mervyn, "Britten's Prophetic Song: Tonal Symbolism in *Billy Budd*" in *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 85-110.
 - Allen, Stephen Arthur. "Billy Budd: Temporary salvation and the Faustian pact." *Journal of Musicological Research* 25 (1) (2006).
 - Emslie, Barry, "*Billy Budd* and the Fear of Words," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4(1): 43-59 (1992).
- project on production history of Billy Budd (week 5)**

Week 6 - 3 May

Michael Tippett's Operas

student driven projects and reading selections on Tippett

Week 7 - 10 May

Turn of the Screw

articles to be discussed:

- James, Henry, *The Turn of the Screw*
- libretto to *The Turn of the Screw*
- Robert J. Corber, Stephen M. Valocchi, *Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, Introduction
- Seymour, Claire, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2004), pp. 181-211.
- Hindley, Clifford, "Why Does Miles Die? A Study of Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*," *The Musical Quarterly* 74(1): 1-17 (1990).
- Brett, Philip, "Britten's Bad Boys: Male Relations in *The Turn of the Screw*," *repercussions* 1(2): 5-25 (1992).
- Brett, Philip, "Eros and Orientalism in Britten's Operas," in *Querring the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York: Routledge, 235-56).
- Stimpson, Mandell, "Drama and Meaning in *The Turn of the Screw*," *Opera Quarterly* 4(3): 75-82 (1986).
- Whitesell, Lloyd. "Britten's dubious trysts." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 56(3): (2003).

Week 8 - 17 May

The Church Operas

-librettos to *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, *Curlew River* and *the Prodigal Son*

-Hindley, Clifford, "Britten's Parable Art: A Gay Reading," *History Workshop Journal* 40 (1995), 62-90.

student driven projects on the three church operas

Week 9 - 24 May

Death and Venice

articles to be discussed:

- Mann, Thomas, *Death in Venice*
- libretto to *Death in Venice*

- Seymour, Claire, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2004), pp. 296-322.
- Hindley, Clifford, "Platonic Elements in Britten's *Death in Venice*," *Music and Letters* 73 (1992).
- Longobardi, Ruth Sara, "Reading between the lines: An approach to the musical and sexual ambiguities of *Death in Venice*," *The Journal of Musicology* 22(3): (2005).
- Johnson, Shersten R., "Strange, strange hallucination': Dozing and dreaming in Benjamin Britten's *Death in Venice*." *Journal of music and meaning* 5 (2007).

Week 10 - 31 May

Short presentations of final projects

LIBRARY RESERVE LIST

- Brett, Philip, *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- Crabbe, George, *The Borough* 821.7 C88b

- Evans, Peter, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979). ML410.B853E9

- Gill, John, *Queer Noises: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Music* (London: Cassell, 1995). ML63.G55Q8

- Howard, Patricia, *Benjamin Britten: The Turn of the Screw* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

- Howard, Patricia, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1969). ML410.B86 H8 1969

- James, Henry, *The Turn of the Screw* 831.4 J27tu 2001

- Jeffery-Poulter, Stephen, *Peers, Queers and Commons: The Struggle for Gay Law Reform from 1950 to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1991). 306.76609 J45p

- Mann, Thomas, *Death in Venice and seven other stories* 833.9 M28toX 1989

- Melville, Herman, *Billy Budd* 813.3 M531b.h

- Mitchell, Donald and Philip Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, vols. 1-4 (London: Faber & Faber, 1991-2004). ML410.B853A4

- Palmer, Christopher, *The Britten Companion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984). ML410.B853B7

- Seymour, Claire, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2004).

- The Operas of Benjamin Britten: The Complete Librettos* ML49.B74
- The Wolfenden Report*, 301.424 G786r 1963

White, Eric Walter, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). ML410.B853W4

TO CONSULT IN RARE COLLECTION

Banks, Paul, *The Making of Peter Grimes* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1996).