

Preview

Britten's opera *Turn of the Screw* at Baldwin-Wallace: Questions for Benjamin Wayne Smith and Dean Williamson

by Daniel Hathaway



Benjamin Britten's tightly-wound chamber opera, *The Turn of the Screw*, based on Henry James's novella of the same name, opens for a four-day run at the Allman Theatre at Baldwin Wallace University on Thursday, February 14. A psychological thriller, the story involves a Governess hired to look after Miles and Flora, the wards of a London gentleman who are ensconced at Bly, an English country house run by Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper. Two former servants, Peter Quint and Miss Jessel have died but return as ghosts

visible only to the children, with whom they have a mysterious relationship.

We met up with director Benjamin Wayne Smith and conductor Dean Williamson (formerly of Opera Cleveland) in Smith's office at Baldwin Wallace to talk about the production, which has a cast of six singers (double cast for this production) and a chamber orchestra of fifteen solo instruments.

Daniel Hathaway: The Turn of the Screw is a very special piece in several respects: structure-wise, casting-wise, instrumental-wise. How did you choose this title for your Spring production?

Benjamin Wayne Smith: The conversation started last year with a few of the voice faculty members, particularly with Jane Eaglen, because she had a lot of students in the senior class. We always start looking at the student population to see what is going to be a good fit. Some of our vocal performance classes are as big as 17, and some of them are as small as four. This year we have seven or eight graduating seniors, mostly ladies, a few tenors. The senior class before this was a really men-rich group and from that we decided we should do *Don Giovanni*. Now we're looking at something we can do with a bunch of really great ladies — and a couple of great tenors. I've always loved Britten and it's the centennial of his birth. I worked on this piece as an assistant in graduate school but I've never directed any Britten myself, so I've been chomping on the bit to get my hands on it.

DH: There are lots of decisions to make because the story is full of ambiguities.

BWS: It is. The story is obviously drawn from the novella by James and I think the James is a lot more ambiguous about whether the ghosts exist or not — whether they're real or she's just going crazy. I feel like the opera is a little bit clearer in its point of view. The kids know about the ghosts and they're there. I know people do it the other way around, but I think the text is pretty clear.

DH: So you're not putting the Governess in an insane asylum at the beginning. I think they did that in L.A.

Dean Williamson: I think it's been done many times that way.

DH: Dean, have you conducted it before?

DW: Yes, I have. I first played the piano and assistant conducted it when I was principal pianist and coach at Seattle Opera and the great, dearly departed maestro Richard Bradshaw came to conduct it. He was head of Canadian Opera, a very dapper, dashing, tall, elegant British gentleman — until he got in the pit with the Seattle players. He just got you to play in the most intense, neurotic way. It was an amazing experience. I learned a lot from him about the structure of the piece, pacing, creating and holding the tension. When we did it with the Seattle Opera Young Artists Program in 2008 I was finally able to grapple with it myself as a conductor, which is very different than when you're sitting and playing it. Then as now we have double casts which of course doubles your work load. Disparate personalities will pull at you in different ways while you're just trying to keep everybody on the straight and narrow in a piece like this, which is all about the architecture and the rhythm. I'm really looking forward to coming back to it here.

DH: How are you casting the children?

RWS: Are we using boys for Miles? No, we're casting two young, petite sopranos who I think are going to be really convincing. I have to say I didn't spend long on that question because I think that in an academic scenario it would take away from the process. I think the piece probably clicks better with a boy, but for educational reasons I wanted to give the opportunity to students in the program. They're rising beautifully to the challenge. Our Floras are not so much shorter than the adult characters, but they bring such sparkle and childlike curiosity to the role — although one of them, a “non-traditional student” is older than all the rest of the cast. She totally makes you forget she's not an eight-year-old.

DW: Both Miles are very strong — all the “children” are strong in this production.

DH: And your Peter Quint?

RWS: I have a senior and a junior who both bring different things to the role. They're both great performers, but one starts from his head and the other from his body. It's really interesting, if you know what I mean. One is a musician's musician, a conductor.

DW: That's been fun in coachings because we can do conductor talk — usually you can't do that with a singer. He really gets it!

RWS: The other guy just has a very different perspective on the world and on the piece. He'll just show up on stage with things I would not have imagined. Not only is this whole group good musicians and good singers, but they're also just really good colleagues. We cast it before the end of last year and they've had the music since last April. We did quite a bit of coaching last semester. We had a coach who came in for a month and Dean came for two one-week periods. So when we hit the ground running with staging on January 11, they were ready to work. We were able to stage it in two weeks with two casts.

DH: The instrumental parts are challenging. I believe the original percussionist, James Blades, wrote a little book on how to play the piece.

DW: In Seattle, the percussionist took up about a third of the real estate in the pit, and here we're wrapping the rest of the orchestra around her.

DH: There's a delicate theme in the plot having to do with the children that has a resonance in Britten's own personality. How are you handling that?

RWS: It's something we spent a lot of time around the table talking about. You know, it's interesting; the piece basically tells us that they had an intimate relationship, but not necessarily intimate in the modern sense. I think the thing that's more interesting than what happened is Miles's need to please the ghost of Peter Quint. Beyond that, I'm not sure the piece actually asks us to deal with that question.

Another directorial decision is whether to use the Variations to fill in some of the back story — and there's a lot of back story. We're not doing too much of that, except for the variation at the beginning of Act Two. It's more about what's happening now than what happened before. The question is more interesting than the answer.

DH: Good answer (laughter).

DW: I've had some frank discussions with the cast because I think it's important from a musicological standpoint that they know about the demons Britten was wrestling with in this piece, *Peter Grimes* and *Death in Venice* to the point where Britten's own friends said, 'Gee, it looks like you're trying to work out something.' Even if you don't use that in the forefront of your interpretation, it should be somewhere in the background so you're aware of why a composer wrote something in a certain way.

DH: What's the stage design like?

BWS: I think of the piece as flipping through the Governess's journal. We don't get every entry or maybe she only entered what she thought was important. During the prologue, we see the journal and we see her writing in it during the course of the piece. The design is built to support this idea of scenes as memories. The stage is a big, black set of levels with a 16' wide, 24' tall window — think of the back window of a country house that looks out over the estate. There are French doors at the bottom that open onstage and then in the Allman Theatre there is a balcony level with a second set of French doors that open upstage. The space is intimate but it's really, really tall. We have very little stuff; every now and then a chair comes on, a bed comes on. The props and costumes are very realis-

tic but the overall view is stylized so scenes can fade in, things happen, then fade away. The opera is written like a movie where you move from place to place and I don't think it's really too interesting to show that movement. I hope the acting will spark the audience to know where we are each time.

The costumes are very traditional and have been beautifully designed by Charlotte Yetman. One of the things we had to decide was whether the ghosts would be beautiful — or would they be ghoulish. I thought that this piece at its heart is about the seduction of the children by these ghosts, so they would need to be very appealing. So Peter Quint is in his most beautiful valet livery...

DW: A bit pale...

DH: But no green body paint! Dean, this is one of the most highly organized of opera scores. Is it a twelve-tone piece?

DW: Ambiguous, isn't it! (Laughter). I admire what he does — he starts with a tone row and uses it in his own language, just like Stravinsky. I did my first *Rake's Progress* last summer at Wolf Trap, and both of these pieces come from a time around 1950 when composers were struggling with where music was going to go next. Britten doesn't lose a sense of who he is even in the serialism. It's what Schoenberg wanted serialism to be: just a tool to help you as a composer to try to find some vertical and horizontal integration of harmony and for harmony to find a new musical language. Britten takes that and uses it to mold the variations and each of the scenes. I think one of the most important things in *Peter Grimes* and *Turn of the Screw* is his use of bitonality — using two keys at once. I think one key represents the spiritual world, the other the real world and the struggle between the two.

You also have a duality in the rhythm: a fast tempo versus a slow tempo half the speed, where the fast tempo represents the real world, the slow the spiritual world. Most of the ghost music is at the slow tempo, most of the Governess's at the fast. You also have three beats against four: every time the children encounter the ghosts their music is in four, pushing against the ghosts who are in three.

There are also key contrasts: blindingly sunny passages in a major key just before things turn dark. And contrasts between winds and strings, percussion and harp. And the contrasts between the two sides of Miles, the real Miles and the possessed Miles, represented by different music in the piano.

DH: When did the two of you begin talking about your concepts of the opera?

BWS: We haven't spent that much time talking about where our ideas meet. I think we come at it from the same understanding of the text and each of us wants our bit and we fight for that during every moment of every rehearsal. But I don't feel like any of Dean's ideas conflict with anything I want the students to be doing.

DW: I have an aversion to people who have to over-analyze. I learned from an old Italian conductor that the better the orchestra, the less you say to them. That's true in working

with directors and casts too. I like to listen a lot to what the director has to say and then let it mesh and merge. It's like going to a great cocktail party — you see where you can have a conversation, not try to impose your will on everything. You can't come into an opera production with the dictatorial symphonic conductor's idea that 'this is my show, follow me'. Somebody once told me that opera is a big compromise. Nobody gets everything they want, but together we make something that is really wonderful because we each bring something to the table.

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