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Intimacy 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 intimate 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 contexts of same-gender emotional affiliations. In critical interpretations, opera can be understood as an artistic medium through which Britten explores and projects emotional experiences[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. Their private relationship has informed biographical readings of the emotional relationships represented in the operas. 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-gender emotional affiliations 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 intimate relationships and love in music based on his identity, his experience, and society's attitude towards people with same-gender emotional affiliations. This paper intends to analyze Benjamin Britten's discussion of intimacy from four operas, Peter Grimes, The Turn of the Screw, Billy Budd and Death in Venice.

Keywords: Benjamin Britten; British Opera; Intimacy; Same-Gender Emotional Affiliations; Social Discrimination; Musical Expression

1. Peter Grimes

The opera is a creative artwork with different ways to perform the themes of intimacy 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 intimate relationship[2]. Elliott believes that exclusive interpretations of terms of same-gender emotional affiliations 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 the lack of acceptance of Britten's same-gender emotional affiliations. Britten thought, its recital-like writing, is more graceful and memorable than the aria-like sections[4]. There is much controversy about interpretations of the fictional 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]. Intimacy 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 person with same-gender emotional affiliations are presented in the form of opera. In reality, same-gender emotional affiliations face discrimination and limited social acceptance[6]. For example, there was also divergence about the age of the apprentice characters, including in the later stages of the tour. In some scholarly readings, these fictional young characters are interpreted as figures of projected longing. In Peter Grimes, scenes of coercion and violence can be read as expressions of anxiety and conflicting emotions in the characterization of Grimes. Such readings concern the fictional opera text and do not establish the composer's real-life desires or conduct. 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]. As the plot develops, Peter's search for social acceptance ends in suicide; some interpretations connect this exclusion with the marginalization of same-gender emotional affiliations. 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 B ♭ . 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 emotional longing 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. As the opera develops, the governess interprets the children's relationships with the former servants through her own fears and suspicions. Britten seems to reflect forbidden desires with phenomena, such as ghosts and imagination.

In some scholarly interpretations, the opera presents metaphors of desire projected onto fictional young characters through adult coercion or imagination, rather than accounts of real children's behavior. In the second act of the opera, Miles's death can be read as a metaphor for the repressive education imposed on him by adult control over childhood 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 an ambiguous metaphor of desire in this textual reading [10]. In this interpretive framework, Miles and Flora are depicted as vulnerable to the former servants' influence or the new governess's projections. These readings concern metaphors of desire and same-gender emotional affiliations in a fictional text, rather than factual descriptions of children's behavior[11].

In some scholarly readings, Britten's ghosts raise questions about identity, adult authority, and the projection of desire onto fictional young characters. The governess's attempts to interpret and control Miles can be read as exposing the limits of coercive education. Her admission, "I failed, miserably failed," expresses this uncertainty rather than establishing any behavior by the child. 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", can be read as engaging with social conventions surrounding homosocial affinities among men. The music and lights intensify the atmosphere of unresolved longing in this interpretation. In these textual readings, the fictional young character is constrained by class expectations and public judgment. 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 some scholarly readings, Peter Grimes indirectly explores desire projected onto the fictional apprentice through scenes of violence and coercion. The Turn of the Screw places greater emphasis on the ambiguity of adult projections onto young characters. Within this textual interpretation, the governess can represent conventional relationship norms, while Mrs. Grose represents class authority; neither reading establishes real children's behavior.

3. Billy Budd

Billy Budd is an opera interwoven with innocence and evilness. Billy's innocence contrasts with the possessive attachments projected onto him by other male characters in some interpretations. 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 interpretations of desire projected onto Billy Budd, and Claggart's death following his coercive hostility toward Billy. Benjamin Britten tries his best to keep the innocence of Billy in an environment of possessive desire and hostility, 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 same-gender 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 focus of affection and possessive longing on the ship.

Music implies the thinking of the characters, and same-gender longing 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 ♭ and B ♭ persists, the B ♭ 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, allowing Claggart's attachment to Billy to be interpreted as same-gender desire [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 ♭ 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 same-gender love is not accepted now in society, which hopes to make social changes to accept same-gender love with effort. In these textual readings, Peter's fictional apprentice remains vulnerable to coercion and violence. However, Billy, though unable to defend himself, struggles to resist the discrimination based on personal identity others impose on him. Peter Grimes and Billy Budd can be read as exploring the wish for respect and acceptance of same-gender emotional affiliations. 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 reflect the pressure of social stereotypes concerning Britten's same-gender emotional affiliations. 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 initially depicted as innocent, Billy becomes the object of others' projected desires. People respect him for his kind deeds which are beyond discrimination based on emotional affiliation. 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 for redemption rather than rejection as a social outsider. The reality was often the opposite. Overall, the opera impressed people with the comparison of the different attitudes on same-gender emotional affiliations as the themes, suggesting that individuals deserve social respect for their conduct rather than discrimination based on their emotional affiliations.

4. Death in Venice

Death in Venice has been interpreted through the theme of Platonic same-gender longing. This opera is very controversial compared to the previous three operas, which more clearly reflects the protagonist's experience of same-gender emotional affiliations. It was also adapted from a novella as the Britten's last opera. In some scholarly readings, the protagonist's idealization of the fictional young figure Tadzio is interpreted through Platonic aesthetics, rather than as a reciprocal relationship or evidence of the composer's conduct [14]. Death in Venice has invited autobiographical readings, with echoes of Peter Grimes, Billy Budd, and other works. Such readings treat the idealization of youthful figures as a textual interpretation, rather than establishing Britten's real-life attachments [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 same-gender emotional affiliations. After Britten toured Asia, such musical influences contributed to the representation of heightened

emotion 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]. In some scholarly interpretations, Peter Grimes, Billy Budd, and Death in Venice explore idealization and projected longing through fictional male figures, including youthful characters. This is an interpretive hypothesis about the works, not a factual claim about Britten's conduct [7]. The use of music increases the effect of the tragedy Particularly in the tragedy of Plato, the protagonist's idealized longing remains unfulfilled rather than forming a reciprocal relationship.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, art comes from life about the stereotypes of same-gender emotional affiliations. Social prejudice concerning the composer's personal identity should not determine judgments of the artwork itself. Opera has a significant meaning in reflecting the social issues of certain ages about intimacy 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. Same-gender emotional affiliations face discrimination and limited social acceptance [6]. The difference between the four operas is that as for Peter Grimes, violence toward the fictional apprentice can be read as a representation of coercion and conflicting emotions. Billy Budd is more similar to Peter Grimes for that their same-gender love is not accepted now in society, which hopes to make social changes to accept same-gender love with effort. In these textual readings, Peter's fictional apprentice remains vulnerable to coercion and violence. However, Billy, though unable to defend himself, struggles to resist the discrimination based on personal identity others impose on him. In addition, some scholarly readings of The Turn of the Screw identify metaphors of desire projected onto fictional young characters. The governess can represent conventional relationship norms, while Mrs. Grose represents class authority. These interpretations concern the fictional text, not real children's behavior. What's more, Death in Venice shows the connection between exotic music and same-gender emotional affiliations. The shift from piano writing to harp sound gives the opera a "broad and subtle expressiveness," intensifying the tragedy of the protagonist's unfulfilled, idealized longing. This Platonic interpretation differs from readings of coercion and violence in Peter Grimes. All the operas imply that people should respect the different values of people about their attitudes toward intimacy, 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 intimacy with innovative art performance styles.

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