

BRITTEN'S TURN OF THE SCREW: A BASIC GUIDE

1. The Theme and Variation Structure
 - a. Each scene is preceded by a variation, which tends to introduce the predominant musical material of that scene.
 - b. Britten associates each variation with a further “turn” or tightening of the screw
 - c. The theme is based on the pitches, A-D-B-E-C#-F#-D#-G#-F-Bb-G-C, and uses all 12 notes of the Western scale. This gives it an intense, highly chromatic quality. (Act I; track 2)
 - d. It may be significant to note that the Theme is made up of intervals that are either “perfect” (4ths and 5ths) or “imperfect” (3rds and 6ths). Does this suggest the inevitable destruction of innocence?
2. The Malo Theme
 - a. The “hauntingly” memorable theme first sung by Miles, and associated with him. (Act I; Track 7; 2’18”)
 - b. Note that this theme is made up almost entirely of the “imperfect” thirds.
 - c. It may be reasonable to suggest that Britten identifies closely with Miles. When the melody is first heard it is accompanied by the viola, a favorite of the composer and an instrument that he played regularly, particularly as a child. Though Miles may well have been taught the song by Quint, note that when queried by the Governess’s he claims, “I found it. I like it. Do you”. Surely a most succinct description of the composer’s creative process.
3. Borrowed Music/Borrowed Texts
 - a. “Lavender’s Blue” (Act I; track 4; 2’19”)
 - b. “Tom, Tom the Piper’s Son” (Act I; track 6; 32”)
 - c. “Anglican church Music” (Act II; track 2; 50”)
 - d. “The classical piano concerto” (Act II; track 6)
 - e. Borrowed texts; Latin mnemonics in the schoolroom, The Book of Common Prayer, and Yeats
4. The Sonic World of the Ghosts.
 - a. The use of the celesta (Act I; track 7)—a keyboard instruments in which the hammers strike metal bars, creating an enchanting bell-like sound. An instruments of fairly modern origin, it was first used by Tchaikovsky in “The Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy” in “The Nutcracker”.
 - b. Note that the instrumental music of the Ghost’s is enormously strange and attractive, not unlike the seductive music of the Erl-king
 - c. Highly elaborate and virtuosic singing. (Act II; track 1; 6:40)
 - d. Britten specifically asked the librettist to provide words for the Ghost’s to sing, insisting that ghostly “moaning” would render the opera ridiculous.

Note: Timings are keyed to the Naxos recording.

The Cast

The Prologue.....Tenor
The Governess.....Soprano
Miles.....Boy Soprano
Flora.....Soprano
Quint.....Tenor
Miss Jessel.....Soprano

ACT I

Prologue

Tenor/narrator. Piano accompaniment

Theme

Presented most simply and audibly by the Piano, then grows into a musical depiction of the rattling of the coach in which the Governess travels to Bly.

Scene 1: The Journey

Musically related to the “coach” music. The Governess’s speech-like music is supported mostly the timpani or kettledrums.

Variation I

Theme presented most audibly in the strings with dense build up or colors in the other instruments. The music suggests the excitement of both the children and the adults at the Governess’s arrival at Bly.

Scene 2: The Welcome

The harp plays a prominent role. Note the descending gesture that depicts Mile’s formal bow, and the ascending gesture that accompanies Flora’s curtsies.

Variation II

The Theme is most easily heard in the lower string parts, though it is also fragmented in a dialogue between the wind instruments and the upper strings.

Scene 3: The Letter

A scene of dialogue between the Governess and Mrs. Grosse. Note the first appearance of the characteristic sound of the celesta). Viola—Britten’s own instrument-- is prominently featured. Quotation of the folksong “Lavender’s blue”.

Variation III

Out door music, with the flute, oboe and clarinet transforming the Theme into birdsong.

Scene 4: The Tower

Musically continuous with the previous variation. Quint/celesta appears on the tower.

Variation IV

Agitated repeated notes in the plucked strings. The Theme is most prominent in the piano and bass.

Scene 5: The Window

The children quote the familiar nursery tune, "Tom, Tom the Piper's Son" to an orchestral accompaniment that suggests a military (cavalry---the children are on hobby horses) march. The celesta marks the appearance of Quint at the window.

Variation V

Brisk and bustling. The Theme is obscured and very hard to hear in the complex fugue-like texture. This music reflects the growing anxiety of the Governess and the learned counterpoint sets up the schoolroom scene.

Scene 6: The Lesson

The first half of the scene focuses on Mile's recitation of his Latin lessons. I careful look at the Latin text is revelatory. The second half of this pivotal scene is Miles "Malo" song (.This is the simplest most melodically intriguing music of the opera. It is simply accompanied by harp, viola (again Britten's instrument) and the English horn, in spite of its name a kind of tenor oboe!

Variation VI

Another outdoor scene with the winds perhaps representing the shimmer of the lake on a sleepy summer afternoon. The plucked strings play versions of the Theme.

Scene 7: The Lake

Continues the atmosphere of the previous music. The appearance of Miss Jessel dispels the idyllic quality.

Variation VII

Mysterious nocturnal music, with the Theme prominently displayed in the horn. Quint's celesta is a constant presence.

Scene 8: At Night

Note the utter sensuousness of the Ghost's music: the melismatic singing is extraordinary and the celesta adds it characteristic glamour.

ACT II

Variation VIII

This serves as the introduction to Act II. The musical ideas seem to sum up what has come before. Note particularly Quint's florid melisma played on the clarinet. All of the instruments get characteristic cadenzas; the relationship to the Theme can be quite obscure.

Scene 1: Colloquy and Soliloquy

This begins as a duet for the Ghosts and features a climactic presentation of the Yeat's "Ceremony of Innocence" line in a particularly extraordinary version of the Ghost music. The scene ends with the Governess's singing "Lost in my labyrinth" in music of an extremely unsettled, labyrinthine character.

Variation IX

The Theme is most apparent in the bells, which introduce the following scene with its clear evocation of Sunday morning in the Churchyard

Scene 2: The Bells

Textual quotation from the Anglican liturgy, though the music is Britten's own. Both are later deformed or parodied by the children. The bell music eventually takes on a quite "mad" quality and the wheezy sound of the village organ is also suggested .

Variation X

The string and piano present the Theme, with rushing woodwinds above.

Scene 3: Miss Jessel

This scene is haunted by the sound of the flute and harp. In particular the simple triadic accompaniment figure (Do, mi, sol) that is associated with Miss Jessel's anguish is a compelling illustration of obsession. Though which governess is obsessed? The scene ends with a vivid musical depiction of the Governess hastily scribbling her letter to the children's uncle.

Variation XI

The alto flute and bass clarinet provide a florid canonic duet based on the Theme.

Scene 4: the Bedroom

The canonic textures continue obsessively throughout the scene. The sounds are usually very dark and oddly colored.

Variation XII

Note that the unseen Quint is present throughout this variation. Plucked strings characterize most of the music.

Scene 5: Quint

In this tiny scene Miles, at Quint's apparent urging steals the Governess's letter.

Variation XIII

A kind of mock classical piano concerto with Miles at the keyboard. Conventional Mozartean accompanimental pattern (Alberti bass) supports odd melodies based on the Theme.

Scene 5: The Piano

The concerto continues becoming ever more elaborate and disconcerting. Note that when Flora "enchants" Mrs. Grosse Mile's is playing Quint's celesta music on the piano.

Variation XIV

Here the piano concerto reaches its grandiose and grotesque climax with heavy chords. The Theme is in the orchestra, and is a radically slowed down version.

Scene 7: Flora

Full textures and dramatic

Variation XV

Very brief, with important solos for flute and timpani. Enormous dynamic range.

Scene 8 Miles

Quint's celesta music is powerful presence, and the theme, no longer just contained in the Variations proper, plays an important role, underpinning the scene. Note that at the climax Miles shouts rather than sings. Much of what the Governess sings is "infected" with the Theme, and the Malo theme is used with poignant and tragic irony.

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