

2025|26 SEASON

BRITTEN'S

The Turn of the Screw Keynotes

The Nature of the Spectre

ALEX CHEN

Britten's Finest Chamber Opera

ROBERT HOLLISTON

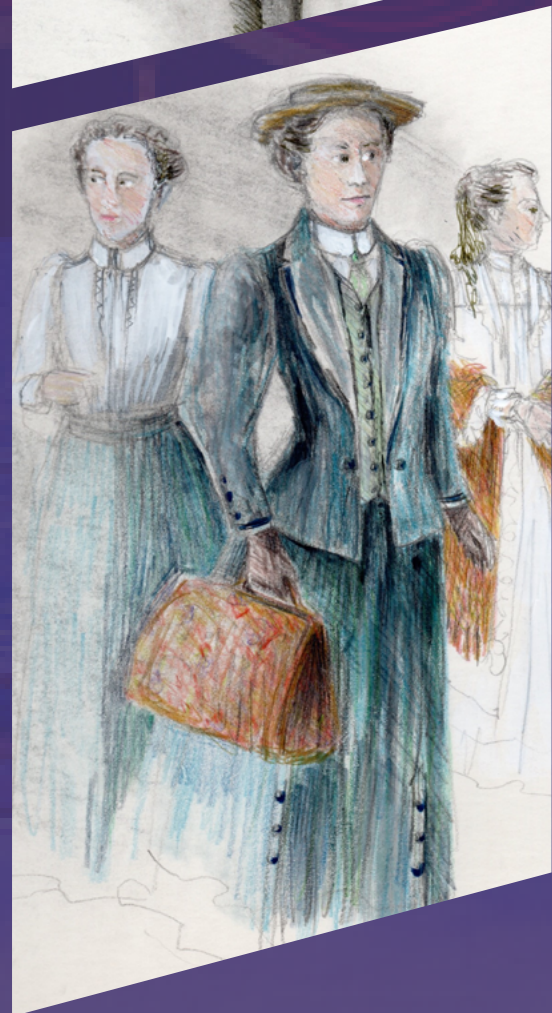
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INITIAL COSTUME SKETCHES BY SET & COSTUME DESIGNER SHAWN KERWIN

The Nature of the Spectre

When is a ghost story *ever* just a ghost story?

The plot of Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*, based on the novella of the same name by Henry James, works both as a straightforward ghost story and something more complex and fraught. The 1898 novella frightened audiences far and wide, initially interpreted as a simple yet effective gothic horror: a Governess goes to Bly Manor in the English countryside to care for the children Flora and Miles with housekeeper Mrs. Grose. While there, the living are haunted by the malevolent spirits of undead manservant Peter Quint and former governess Miss Jessel. However, in the more than a century since its publications, discussions have grown to ask whether the ghostly hauntings by the villainous Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are genuinely supernatural. Could *The Turn of the Screw's* whole spiralling plot be a fabrication — the Governess's hallucinated misconstruction fed by apprehension and hearsay from the out of touch housekeeper Mrs. Grose?



A CLOSE UP OF THE SET OF *THE TURN OF THE SCREW* IN PROGRESS

Consistent with the ambiguity of plot interpretation, the title of the novella and opera can be understood multiple ways. A 'turn of the screw' is an action that makes a bad situation worse, especially through the exertion of force (musically illustrated by an ever-evolving musical theme that introduces each scene in the opera). The 'turn of the screw' might be the degradation of our living cast due to the pressure exerted by the undead, or the deterioration of the Governess's grasp on reality when challenged and isolated in the countryside, away from the urban world and community she knows. The latter case lines up with Sigmund Freud's concept of the *umheimlich*, the influence of the 'un-homely' place that spurs the sinister and uncanny, that underlies the Governess's shifting relationship with her new home as she settles into Bly Manor.

If we're to continue on a psychoanalytic interpretation (à la Freud), we're asked to consider what the creepy Peter Quint and Miss Jessel represent if they are not veritably supernatural figures. Do they represent the darkest fears the Governess has

towards society? For example, in a particularly eerie moment in the opera, Peter Quint and Miss Jessel conspire and repeat the line "The ceremony of innocence is drowned," a quotation from W.B. Yeats' poem *The Second Coming* which laments the state of post-World War I Europe. Do these apparitions represent the European continent's transformation into something un-homely as society has transitioned away from trench warfare, rife with trauma and suppressed memories?

Now comes the kicker: does it matter how we interpret the events of this opera? Objectively, no. We could take in the elements of the production at face value, engage in polite aesthetic conversations about the parts that stood out to us,

and then promptly forget about *The Turn of the Screw* until the next production rolls around. But if you were to see the stakes of this opera outside the confines of the Royal Theatre, perhaps the interpretation would matter.

The stakes include the life and death of children, the mental wellbeing of a human just trying to do her job, and the determination of whether manipulation is at play. I would argue that these things very much do matter and that *The Turn of the Screw* is an opportunity to reflect on how we grapple with those stakes on an individual level—whether real or imagined, how do we safeguard against the demons we face?

However you interpret the phenomena you witness as you experience Pacific Opera Victoria's production of *The Turn of the Screw*, be prepared for an eerie tale of psychological drama.

ALEX CHEN

Britten's Finest Chamber Opera

When *Peter Grimes* opened at Sadler's Wells, London, on June 7, 1945, Benjamin Britten became the first important English opera composer since the death of Henry Purcell 250 years earlier. Immediately praised by critics, *Grimes* also enjoyed enormous popular success, which has always struck me as

a bit baffling. In presenting such a very dark, disturbing, uncompromising story during the waning months of the Second World War and performing it in front an audience that had endured unimaginable loss, grief, hardship and privation for over four years, both management and creators were taking a considerable risk. But to confront and indict all levels of British society for conformism and hypocrisy - to pose unanswerable questions about good and evil - showed a commitment to truth-telling on the lyric stage that was and remains courageous. For eighty years, *Peter Grimes* has thrived in opera houses and remains a disturbing, thought-provoking, challenging masterpiece.

It has thrived, that is, in large and affluent opera houses: it is a *Grand* opera, requiring a large cast, chorus, and orchestra (all needing a high degree of skill). Looking around at his war-torn, post-war country, many buildings in ruins and most citizens living on ration coupons, Britten quickly realized that the future of opera in Britain required a repertory of works that could be mounted inexpensively and travel easily. Accordingly, he turned to the "chamber" opera, giving us *The Rape of Lucretia* in 1946 and *Albert Herring* the following year. Both require small orchestral forces and no chorus - and therefore easily performable in village halls and school gymnasiums. After two more grand operas - *Billy Budd* (1951) and *Gloriana* (composed for the 1953 coronation of Queen Elizabeth II) - Britten received a commission for the Venice Biennale. His friend Myfanwy Piper, who would become his librettist on the project, suggested as a subject Henry James's 1898 gothic horror novella *The Turn of the Screw*. Her instinct that this was a fit subject for him was spot-on: "corruption and innocence and their mutual effect" had also been at the heart of *Peter Grimes* and *Billy Budd*. Thus was conceived the third, last, and finest of Britten's chamber operas.

The collaboration proved an inspiring one: music critic Michael Oliver described Piper's libretto as "the finest that Britten ever set," solving a number of challenges "with subtle ingenuity." Among these: in the James novella, the ghosts never speak, but Britten and Piper were determined to give them dramatic characterization, making them extensive singing roles (rather than "nice, anonymous, supernatural humming or groaning"). In Michael Oliver's words, she gives the ghosts "words that are poised between the enigmatic and the explicit, extravagant yet poetic, corrupt yet potentially alluring to an imaginative

child." The addition of a single line from Yeats, "the ceremony of innocence is drowned," is a stroke of genius.

The theme of alienation - of a perceived "outsider" shunned, ridiculed, persecuted and often ultimately destroyed by an uncaring, self-righteous, judgemental society is central to most of Britten's operas. In his own life, he was deeply conscious of his status as an outsider in (at least) three specific ways: as a homosexual at a time when this was illegal in his homeland (during 1953-6, 480 adult men in England and Wales were convicted of sexual offences with consenting adults in private); as a pacifist and most particularly a conscientious objector during World War II; and as a composer whose idiom did not fit comfortably into any of the prevailing pigeonholes: he neither wanted nor needed to compose music that alienated the public (although he adopts the technique of "twelve-tone" composition in *The Turn of the Screw*, his treatment of it is more rooted in tonality than that of its pioneer, Arnold Schoenberg). By the same token, he rejected the heavily folk-imbued style cultivated by John Ireland and Ralph Vaughan Williams (although he arranged a number of folk songs for voice and piano and even included two - "Lavender's Blue" and "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son" - in *The Turn of the Screw*.)

Britten's compositional style is complex and completely his own, but it is interesting to compile a list of his influences - i.e., the composers he admired: they range from Dowland and Purcell, through Mahler, Debussy, Stravinsky, Berg to Ravel and Shostakovich. And perhaps above all, Schubert. In 1964, Benjamin Britten received the inaugural Robert O. Anderson Aspen Award, an award for the humanities presented by the Aspen Institute in Aspen, Colorado. The speech he delivered in acceptance of this award gives us a great deal of insight into his perception of himself as an artist vis-à-vis his society. Britten spoke openly about composing for the particular musical identities of specific artists: Peter Pears, of course, but also Kathleen Ferrier, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Mstislav Rostropovich, Janet Baker - as did Handel, as did Mozart, as did Verdi. He also gave us the simplest imaginable précis of his work: "I want my music to be of use to people, to please them, to 'enhance their lives.' I do not write for posterity; I write music ... for anyone who cares to play it or listen to it."

ROBERT HOLLISTON

Colouring outside the lines of cultural canons: Teiya Kasahara 笠原貞野 in Conversation with Louie Lang Norman

Local trans performance artist Louie Lang Norman - also known as locally tolerated drag queen Ket Bush - sat down with Teiya to talk about transness and the performance of identity in *The Queen In Me*. Read the full interview online by scanning the QR code.



Louie Lang Norman: I will start with a confession: I have experienced live Opera only a few times in my life, and I'm far from an aficionado - I perhaps fall into

the camp of audiences that are being brought into your show due to being a fan of queer performance in general. How does *The Queen In Me* welcome new opera audiences in from the margins?

Teiya Kasahara 笠原貞野: A lot of people have told me that this was the first opera they ever saw - which makes me smile and laugh at the same time, because it's not technically 'An Opera', but it uses operatic material. It's a theatrical show - I feel like I'm doing drag when I'm up there. There's a lot of that sass, I'm directly addressing the audience and pulling them in and making fun of them and making fun of myself and being vulnerable at the same time. The character is quite vulnerable and goes through an extensive emotional journey and transformation: metaphorically and literally at the end. And I think people can relate to that as humans - you don't need to know anything about theatre or opera to appreciate it and to have fun.

LLN: I love that you referenced the relationship between this show and drag performance. Applying a draggy approach performing to cultural canons - whether they be pop music or opera - can not only reveal extra, re-iterative gendered layers of the cultural texts, but of ourselves too.

TK: Yeah - I guess that just being trans and playing a soprano hyper feminine character in and of itself is very much an act of genderqueering Opera performance. I don't want to spoil the climax, but there's a lot of liberation and catharsis that happens in the show - to honour me, Teiya. And to resist the notion that I somehow have to disappear in order to be an opera singer and play operatic characters.

LLN: I suppose you are showing that the text of YOU as a performer doesn't become mutable in order to privilege the accuracy with which the form of opera is being performed - you yourself become just as important a text as say, the score, for example.



PHOTO CREDIT: DAHLIA KATZ

TK: Yeah - because that is so often the case. That is how I was trained, that was what was rewarded. To disappear myself in order to perform the canon, the practice, the tradition, to a very narrow, limited view of what it should be. It's reclamatory and it's healing and it's like - No! I'm performing femininity on MY terms. Not by how it's dictated by society or by the industry. You're playing, you know! I'm planning to start taking testosterone around December or January. It's gonna take a few years for things to change and settle, but I

really want to return to this character and this show, and I don't know in what capacity yet. I've got multiple ideas, but I'm really excited to return to this hyper femininity with a lower voice and a much more masculine presenting body.

LLN: From personal experience... it feels real good.

TK: Christmas is 10 years too late but it's coming! I just want to see what else I can do, what new skills I'm going to unlock with this...new Pokemon evolution of myself. The rules have been blown off, and I feel like taking testosterone (T) will allow me to feel even more free. Even now I don't know why I haven't always been singing whatever I want to sing. I feel like I'm still colouring in the lines, and T will give me permission to do whatever I want. I'm just excited to let creativity lead.

In Celebration: Honouring Gary Karr

1941–2025

Pacific Opera Victoria honours the life and generosity of Gary Karr; a distinguished artist, Bravo Society member, and former board member. His commitment to music and young artists will forever be an inspiration to this community, and to the artists and audiences he performed with around the globe.

As a musician, he elevated the double bass into the solo spotlight, performing internationally with major orchestras, inspiring composers to write new works for the instrument, and recording over 90 albums.

After retiring from the stage in 2001, Karr settled in Victoria where he and longtime partner Harmon Lewis made deep contributions to the Victoria music community. He served on the Board of Directors of Pacific Opera between 2006 and 2011 and as Chair of the President's Circle Committee.

We fondly remember Gary's many house concerts at their home; performing for guests and sharing their model trains collection! Gary's personal library of over 12,000 scores now form the Gary Karr Library in Toronto.

With gratitude and love, we celebrate his extraordinary legacy.

Ian Rye
CEO



Harmon Lewis and Gary Karr at Bravo Society event 2010

Bravo Society

Behind every opera lies a legacy—not just of music, but of belief in the beauty of performance. By naming Pacific Opera Victoria or its Foundation in your will or estate plan, you become an essential part of the community helping artists in opera thrive. The Bravo Society honors these visionary patrons in their lifetime—inviting you into a circle of celebration and enduring impact.

To learn more about the Bravo Society, visit: pacificopera.ca/support or contact Amy Cope, Senior Development Officer, at

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Q1 Impact Report

CELEBRATING THE RESULTS OF YOUR SUPPORT

From surprising passersby on street corners, to filling gardens with music, to inspiring the next generation of artists, this summer proved one thing: opera truly belongs to everyone, everywhere. In our first-ever **Youth Summer Intensive Program**, 26 young artists ages 8 to 18 joined a team of opera professionals for an unforgettable journey through music and myth in *Odyssey* at the Baumann Centre. From their first music rehearsals to focused staging sessions, these budding performers rose to every challenge — showing remarkable curiosity, resilience, and a joyful spirit of collaboration.

"It's truly remarkable what the cast and creative team accomplished in just 2.5 weeks. The quality of the performance—from the staging and costumes to the incredible talent of the youth and the overall production—was nothing short of professional." -Attendee

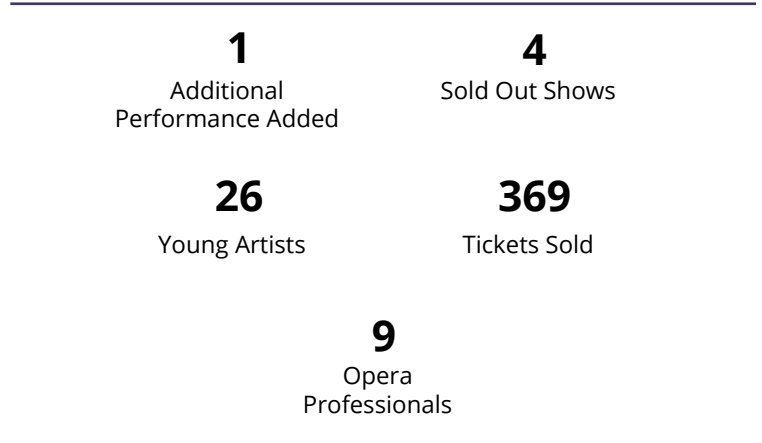
Met with overwhelming enthusiasm from participants, parents, and audiences alike — demand was so great that an additional performance was added, with every show selling out as the community rallied to support youth in opera.



THE CAST OF ODYSSEY, PACIFIC OPERA VICTORIA, 2025

"It was incredible getting the chance to work with so many experienced professionals in this production. They were all very kind, supportive and helpful... It was wonderful meeting so many amazing people of the arts!" - Youth Participant

"Our child LOVED every moment of the program and was incredibly motivated and dedicated to show up and rise to the challenge with an abundance of enthusiasm and positivity. It was amazing to see how much she learned and grew! Also loved how the whole team fostered amazing camaraderie and bonding as it resulted in wonderful new friendships and as well as deeper connections." - Parent



THE CAST OF ODYSSEY, PACIFIC OPERA VICTORIA, 2025

With your support— **Open Air: Opera in the Summer** brought moments of surprise, delight, and connection to thousands across the Capital Region with Pop-Up Opera and an all-opera program at The Butchart Gardens.



ABBY CORPUS PERFORMING POP-UP OPERA AT SAANICH WATER PARK, 2025

Pop-Up Opera returned in July, transforming everyday spaces into impromptu stages. Passersby discovered the thrill of live performance, while audiences gathered for the new mini-concerts that connected art songs and arias to the natural world around us.

5
Local Artists

32
Performances

875
Attendees

"I really needed to hear about connecting with nature today, so this was very timely and meaningful." - Pop-Up Opera Attendee

Then, under the stars **at the Butchart Gardens**, the Victoria Symphony and Pacific Opera joined forces for an unforgettable evening of opera led by Maestro Giuseppe Pietrarroia. With soprano Lauren Margison, tenor Adam Luther, pianist Patrick Cao, and the Pacific Opera Chorus, this signature summer evening welcomed **2000 music lovers** to share in this magical evening amongst the flowers.



ADAM LUTHER AND LAUREN MARGISON PERFORMING WITH MAESTRO GIUSEPPE PIETRARROIA AND THE VICTORIA SYMPHONY AT BEACON HILL PARK, 2025

Thank You for Your Support!

If you'd like to continue supporting programs like these— or you want to discover more ways to get involved supporting opera in our community— please visit pacificopera.ca/donate, or contact Chelsea Kutyn, Development Officer, at chelsea@pacificopera.ca | 250-382-1641 Ext. 214

OPEN AIR SUPPORTERS



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Upcoming Events



REMEMBERING MARY'S WEDDING

3:00 & 7:00 PM | Baumann Centre | NOVEMBER 8

2:00 PM | Dogwood Auditorium | NOVEMBER 11

Weaving together text from the original play and music from the 2012 opera of the same name, this new interpretation of *Mary's Wedding* features a narrator and two singers with piano, creating an intimate opportunity for remembrance. Photographs from the University of Victoria's Archives and Special Collections bring history to life, offering an opportunity to reflect on the realities of war.



ZOMBIE BLIZZARD | JANUARY 18

7:30 PM | The McPherson Playhouse

A haunting fusion of poetry, jazz, and classical song — composer Aaron Davis and soprano Measha Brueggergosman-Lee bring Margaret Atwood's words to life in an intimate meditation on loss, humour, and resilience.



FESTA A ROMA | FEBRUARY 23

The Royal Theatre

An evening of Italian elegance on the set of *Tosca*, in support of Youth Opera. Enjoy exquisite food, fine wine, and warm hospitality, with Giuseppe Pietrarola and Brett Polegato as your musical hosts. Bid on unique luxury items and experiences in our live and online auctions.

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Pacific Opera Victoria works and creates on the traditional lands of the ɫəkwəŋən speaking people, now known as the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations.