Class 7: The Ceremony of Innocence

A. Words, Images, Music

1. Class title 1: Glyndebourne lake scene
2. Section title 1: Words, images, music

Before watching the rest of *The Turn of the Screw,* I want to do a kind of recap, using the scene we ended on last week, where the Governess sees Miss Jessel on the far side of the lake. The theme of the course is "Novel into Opera," and I need to make sure I don't underplay the Novel side by focusing too closely on the Opera. I posted a longer section from Chapter VI, where the Lake scene occurs, but I want you to hear an audiobook reading of the last part of this now. By what means does James achieve his effects, and how much of this is available to a filmmaker, librettist, or composer?

3. James: *The Turn of the Screw*, Chapter VI, end
4. Text of this, color-coded

Here is the opening of what we have just heard; I have given it a kind of color-coding. The **orange** is a brief account of the Governess and Flora being engaged in some make-believe game, though there are few details. The **green** are his equally brief descriptions of the physical settings. The **blue**—and the next two pages would all be blue—is his description of the inner workings of the Governess's mind, or rather her attempts to give a rational account of her own mind. A film director would not be able to use much of the blue directly—though an opera composer might put some of it into an aria.

5. Scene from *The Innocents* (1961), with color coding as above

Think of adapting this as a fim director or opera librettist. Both would have to fill out the details of the **dialogue** (orange); we have already heard Myfanwy Piper's little lullaby, and I'll show you two film clips in a moment. The physical **setting** (green) is everthing for the film director, though only of passing interest for the librettist. The **inner monologue** (blue) is of little direct use to the film director, though the librettist might be able to put some of it in the form of an aria—but only a very small proportion of the amount that James devotes to his inner monologue. Both director and composer have to rely on other elements to get most of this across: visual images for the director, music for the composer. Let's look at the scene in each of the two films I showed you last week, starting with *The Innocents* (1961). Note how the director, **Jack Clayton**, treats the little girl.

6. Clayton: *The Innocents*, lake scene
7. — still from the above (repeat)

What it the main impact of the scene for the Governess? I would suggest that it is not so much that she sees the ghost, but that she is convinced the Flora has seen her too, but is keeping quiet about it. With the opera in mind, I was also interested in Clayton's use of that song that Flora sings. Coming as it does

from an unknown source, it has much the same effect as Miles' "*Malo*" song, and I think either Piper or Britten were influenced by this movie by making the girl suddenly stop singing. Anyway, let's move to the 1999 Ben Bolt film with Jhodi May. He actually has two occasions on, or by, the lake; I have put them together, since I think they build interestingly on each other. And I have a question: who sees the ghost?

8. Bolt: *The Turn of the Screw*, lake scenes
9. Miss Jessel, in Mercury Theatre trailer

Bolt uses the trick twice of having the children suddenly break off and stare into the distance. The first time, though, the one with the heron, it seems a false alarm—or does it? The second all turns on the look that Flora gives the Governess after she has seen the ghost; it seems clear that she *has* seen, but again there is just that small amount of doubt.

B. The Unreliable Narrator

10. Section title B: Michelle Dockery in the 2009 BBC film

When I first read the story in college, I assumed that the ghosts were so-to-speak real, and that the tragedy came about as the result of supernatural forces that the Governess could not completely conquer. Looking at it again in preparation for my first production of the opera in 1982, I was surprised to find that 20th-century literary critics had turned this view around, suggesting that the Governess herself was responsible for Miles' death, as the result of an overactive psychosexual imagination, exacerbated by her extreme youth, her sheltered parsonage background, and her obvious crush on her employer. They point out that we have only the Governess's word for it everything, and that the only other adult at Bly, Mrs Grose, never sees the apparitions. The Governess is a prime example of the **Unreliable Narrator**, a figure whose objective veracity cannot be trusted even though they may not deliberately be lying. There are numerous examples of this from the earlier part of the last century, notably in *The Good Soldier* (1915) by **Ford Maddox Ford** and, in a more popular vein, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) by **Agatha Christie**. *The Turn of the Screw* is ambiguous through and through.

11. Cast list

Here is the cast list from my score, with the phone numbers of the long-forgotten singers! As you see, Britten and Piper decided to give singing roles to the ghosts; in an opera, how could they not? This has two effects: it eliminates or greatly reduces the ambiguity of the original—I'll come back to this point in a few minutes—and it means that words have to be written for them to sing, none of which can be taken from the original novella.

12. Quint's words to Miles

Britten eases us into the idea of words for the ghosts by starting Quint offstage, singing one word, "Miles!" for sixteen eerie measures. I'll show you that when I get to the piano in a moment. But when her actually gets onstage, he has to have words. Myfanwy Piper writes the kinds of images that might

appeal to a young reader with a classical education. In this respect, they are more words *for* Miles than words *from* Quint, but I think you hear Quint's own voice, sinister and vaguely sexual, in the third of these stanzas. Miss Jessel comes in later with a similar list of images for Flora, but hers are all abandoned women from mythology. Soon they are singing together, and this becomes a quartet. Then the Governess and Mrs Grose arrive, and it briefly becomes a sextet; listen for the original note row underneath them in the orchestra. Here's a brief piano talk, and then we'll hear the scene.

13. Roger-at-the-piano, Act I finale
14. Glyndebourne, Act I finale
15. Scene breakdown of Act II

Up to now, I have given a separate introduction to each scene. My plan had been to play the second act complete without interruption, to give you some sense of the cumulative effect of the opera. However, I do need to introduce the opening scene, we have to take our break in the middle, and I should also comment on the final scene. So I'll give you Act Two in three substantial segments, as shown here.

16. Quint and Jessel, Bury Court Opera

The act opens with a scene called **Colloquy and Soliloquy**, which is surely the most original scene in the opera. Not only does it involve a text that has no equivalent in the book, it also goes out on a limb to tell something of the back-story of these two characters, that is only hinted at by James. It is clear that Jessel was seduced by Quint, who then abandoned her, presumably pregnant. Both can now live again only through the children

17. "The ceremony of innocence is drowned"

One of the most brilliant strokes in the libretto is the borrowing of a line from **William Butler Yeats'** poem *The Second Coming*, "The ceremony of innocence is drowned." Quint and Miss Jessel use it as a refrain to their separate declarations of control over the children, then join in singing it together. Listen for the **note row** stated strongly as they sing together, and as for the "ceremony of innocence" line itself, the tune is none other than the Governess's "O why did I come?" from the very first scene.

18. "Lost in my labyrinth"

As I said, the scene is called Colloquy *and Soliloquy*. As the ghosts disappear, the Governess appears with this nightmare aria, "Lost in my labyrinth, which way shall I turn?" It has always struck me as a director that this is the one place where we can make the distinction between psychosis and possession: are the ghosts real, or has she created them in her mind? Bring the Governess on after the ghosts have left, and it does nothing to deny their independent agency. Have her interact helplessly with the ghosts, or better still show her sleeping onstage before they even enter, and you begin to suggest that they are figments of her imagination. At the time of writing, I can't recall how Jonathan Kent handled this at Glyndebourne. Let me give you a brief musical analysis, and then we'll see. We'll continue on to the second scene, in which the Governess and Mrs Grose accompany the children to church; with it, we are back on the scenario of the James novella.

19. Roger-at-the-piano, opening of Act II
20. Glyndebourne, Act II, scenes 1 and 2
21. Class title 2 (“Away from the poisoned place”)

C. Here, in my own room

22. Section title C: “Here, in my own room”

[The pictures I am showing, as I am sure you have realized, come from a variety of productions, not necessarily the one I am playing; I find it fascinating to see the range of ways people have interpreted the Britten, and beyond that the James.]

When we last saw the Governess, she was determined to get away: “Away from this poisoned place, away from those horrors!” I will play all but one of the remaining scenes without a break:

3. The Governess goes back to the house to collect her things, but finds Miss Jessel sitting in her place; the score sets this in the schoolroom, but other settings are possible. Anyway, this makes her realize that she can’t go; she must stay to protect the children. So she does what she promised what she will never do: write to the Guardian.
4. Next comes a scene with disturbing sexual overtones; she visits Miles in his bedroom. This is a nocturne; Britten has one in each of his chamber operas, each accompanied by the distinctive sound of alto flute and bass clarinet.
5. In the next sequence, Quint persuades Miles to steal the Governess’s letter.
6. Then a brighter episode, with music that might almost be Mozart. Miles is playing the piano; Flora plays cat’s cradle with Mrs Grose until she goes to sleep, then slips out.
7. The Governess and Mrs Grose go to the lake to find Flora. Miss Jessel appears. The Governess tries to force Flora to admit she has seen her, but only succeeds in turning both the girl and Mrs Grose against her.

23. Glyndebourne, Act II, scenes 3–7
24. The final struggle

So to the final scene. The Governess sends Mrs Grose back to London with Flora, and remains to confront Miles. He seems to have grown up overnight, and enters with swaggering confidence. But her repeated questions reduce him back to the child he is, especially when Quint appears for the last time and tries to exert *his* hold on him too. Let me explain the music—though it’s a little technical—and then play the scene. Note, if you will, the heartbreaking return of the “*Malo*” song at the end.

25. Roger-at-the-piano, Act II finale
26. Glyndebourne, Act II finale
27. Class title 3 (“His little heart, dispossessed, had stopped”)

Let’s disscuss.