

Sunset Harvest



3. Incandescence

April 21, 2022

Incandescence

VENICE is a city long associated with decay and death, the *locus classicus* of *LateStyle*. But it is also famed for the light that can dissolve everything in an incandescent haze; Benjamin Britten's opera *Death in Venice* ends this way. For over two centuries painters, writers, and latterly film-makers have courted the *Serenissima* for the piquant coexistence of her two qualities in the one personality, light and death.

Our first hour will look at incandescence of other kinds: Claude Monet spending the last three decades of his life painting water lilies; Pierre Bonnard using every color on his palette to depict his wife in the bath; Derek Walcott in both poetry and paint linking the myths of Homer to the color of his native Saint Lucia; Richard Wagner luxuriating in the overripe sensuality of his seductive Flower Maidens, contrasted with Arvo Pärt writing a shimmering symphony for Los Angeles whose subject is precisely that: angels. *rb.*

A. Water and Light

In 1890, **Claude Monet** bought the house at Giverny, outside Paris, which he had been renting for several years. Over the next decade, he built up the extensive water garden, containing both native and imported water lilies, which became his principal subject for the last quarter-century of his life. **Pierre Bonnard** also lived in a house with a luxuriant garden, but the dominant subject of *his* later years was indoors, richly chromatic treatments of his wife in the bath.

Monet: *Grainstacks* (1890)

Monet: *Rouen Cathedral* (1894)

♪ **Monet:** *Water Lilies* (video with **Ravel** music)

♪ **Monet:** *Water Lilies in the Orangerie* (video, James Payne)

Bonnard: *Self Portraits* at 22 and 78

♪ **Bonnard:** late paintings (video with **Debussy** music)

B. A Caribbean Colorist

Derek Walcott won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992 for his epic *Omeros*, which retells subjects from Homer in terms of his native island of Saint Lucia. Although it is hard to pinpoint a time when his writing, always as highly colored as his painting, shifted into *LateStyle*, he nonetheless wrote some very moving poems in his last years addressing the loss of love and waning of talent.

Peter Walcott: *Derek Walcott Painting*

Derek Walcott: various paintings

♪ **Walcott:** excerpt from *The Bounty* (read by the author)

♪ **Walcott:** *Love after Love* (read by Tom Hiddleston)

Walcott: *Sixty Years After*

Walcott: “Be happy now at Cap”

♪ **Video:** *Poetry is an Island*, trailer

C. Flowers and Angels

The Estonian composer **Arvo Pärt** was 73 when his most recent large-scale work, his *Los Angeles Symphony* was premiered; its title refers not only to the orchestra that commissioned it but also to its subject: angels. Shortly after the premiere of his last opera, *Parsifal*, whose Flower Maidens sing some of the most highly-colored music he ever wrote, **Richard Wagner** came south for his health; his was literally a Death in Venice.

♪ **Arvo Pärt:** *Symphony 4, Los Angeles*, opening

Frank Gehry: Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, 2003

Ludwig Fahrenkrog: *Parsifal* and the Flower Maidens (1900)

♪ **Wagner:** *Parsifal*, Act II, Flower Maidens scene

Bayreuth, 1981. c. Horst Stein, d. Wolfgang Wagner. Siegfried Jerusalem (*Parsifal*)

D. City of Light and Death

From the eighteenth century at least, artists have treated Venice as the embodiment of *LateStyle*. We look briefly at some representations of Venice in art, in the **Thomas Mann** novella *Death in Venice*, and the film made of it by **Luchino Visconti** in 1971.

Guardi: Venetian scenes

Turner: *Santa Maria della Salute* (1844, Tate)

Whistler: *Blue and Gold; St. Mark's, Venice* (1880, Cardiff)

John Piper: Venetian scenes

♪ **Visconti:** *Death in Venice* (1971) excerpt;

Dirk Bogarde (Aschenbach); *Adagietto* from **Mahler's** Symphony 5

E. Britten's Swansong

Benjamin Britten and his librettist **Myfanwy Piper** chose to write a different setting of Mann's *Death in Venice* from the then-recent film, one in which the young object of the protagonist's affections would not even join him in the realm of opera; the role was written for a dancer. Britten knew it would be his last opera (1973); it is both highly personal and curiously abstract, a genuine *LateStyle* work. We shall watch it in the 1981 film by **Tony Palmer**, whose camerawork is a love-song to this City of Death.

♪ **Britten:** *Death in Venice* (1973), Act I selections and ending

Film by Tony Palmer, 1981. Robert Gard (Aschenbach), John Shirley-Quirk (Gondolier, Hotel Manager, etc.)

Full Names of Artists, Composers, and Writers

Pierre **Bonnard** (1867–1947), Benjamin **Britten** (1918–76), Claude **Debussy** (1862–1918), Ludwig **Fahrenkrog** (1867–1952), Frank **Gehry** (1929–), Francesco **Guardi** (1712–93), Gustav **Mahler** (1860–1911), Thomas **Mann** (1875–1955), Claude **Monet** (1840–1926), Tony **Palmer** (1941–), Arvo **Pärt** (1935–), John **Piper** (1903–92), Myfanwy **Piper** (1911–97), Maurice **Ravel** (1875–1937), Joseph Mallord William **Turner** (1775–1850), Luchino **Visconti** (1906–76), Richard **Wagner** (1813–83), Derek **Walcott** (1930–2017), James Abbott McNeill **Whistler** (1834–1903)