

Attitudes Towards the Supernatural in Benjamin Britten's The Turn of the Screw

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Abstract : Background: Relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to the production of Benjamin Britten's chamber opera The Turn of the Screw. As one of Britten's most remarkable operas. The story of the libretto was from Henry James's novella of the same name. The novella was created in 1898 and one of the primary questions addressed to people in the story is "how real the ghosts are," which leads the story to a huge ambiguity in readers' minds. Aims: This research focuses on the experience of seeing the opera on stage over several decades. This study of opera productions over time not only provides insight into how stage performances can alter audience members' perceptions of the opera in the present but also reveals a landscape of shifting aesthetics and receptions. Methods: To examine the hypotheses in interpretation and reception, the qualitative analysis is used to examine the figures of ghosts in different productions across the time from 1954 to 2021 in the UK: by accessing recordings, newspapers, and reviews for the productions that are sourced from online and physical archives. For instance, the field research is conducted on the topic by arranging interviews with the creative team and visiting Opera North in Leeds and Britten-Pears Foundation. The collected data reveals the "hidden identity" in creative teams' interpretations, social preferences, and rediscover that have previously remained unseen. Results: This research presents an angle of Britten's Screw by using the third position; it shows how the attention moved from the stage of "do the ghosts really exist" to "traumatized children." Discussion: Critics and audiences have debated whether the governess hallucinates the ghosts in the opera for decades. While, in recent years, directors of new productions have given themselves the opportunity to go deeper into Britten's musical structure and offer the opera more space to be interpreted, rather than debating if "ghosts actually exist" or "the psychological problems of the governess." One can consider and reflect that the questionable actions of the children are because they are suffering from trauma, whether the trauma comes from the ghosts, the hallucinating governess, or some prior experiences: various interpretations cause one result that children are the recipients of trauma. Arguably, the role of the supernatural is neither simply one of the elements of a ghost story nor simply one of the parts of the ambiguity between the supernatural and the hallucination of the governess; rather, the ghosts and the hallucinating governess can exist at the same time - the combination of the supernatural's and the governess's behaviours on stage generates a sharper and more serious angle that draws our attention to the traumatized children.

Keywords : benjamin britten, chamber opera, production, reception, staging, the turn of the screw

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