

Haunting: ENO revive 'The Turn of the Screw'

A revival of Benjamin Britten's spine-chilling adaptation of Henry James's 'The Turn of the Screw', by English National Opera, opens next week. Jessica Duchen is haunted by the power of ghost stories set to music

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Hallowe'en is about to arrive early in the opera world: next week English National Opera opens its revival of Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*, a taut and terrifying masterpiece based on Henry James's enigmatic ghost story.

A governess arrives to take on the care of a young brother and sister, only to find the pair possessed by the spirits of two mysterious characters, Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. These individuals' precise involvement with the youngsters is never revealed, but it is clear that they have destroyed the children's innocence; ultimately their haunting leaves the boy dead. With Britten's contribution, James's story may have won double its fame, for nothing enhances a tale of the supernatural as well as music to match it.

Ghost stories work on us in a very similar way to music. The best ones achieve their power via potent archetypal images that target our subconscious, making it face its own buried fears and urges. Music too has the exceptional power to bypass conscious thought and appeal straight to the emotions and the subconscious; moreover it can stimulate the listener to imagine vivid inner worlds in response, unfettered by the boundaries of reality.

Composers have been exploiting this natural partnership ever since the vogue for the ghoulish began in the 19th century. Indeed, operatic history is laced with supernatural goings-on that would have had Hollywood rubbing its hands in glee had it existed around 1830. Mozart was ahead of his time when he included the original and most icy of operatic ghosts in *Don Giovanni* (1787): the Commendatore who drags the antihero away to hell. But once the influence of

the German romantic poets, especially Goethe, began to filter through, along with the romantic sagas of Sir Walter Scott, a flood of supernatural stories was quick to reach the stage.

Such tales provided composers with a fresh challenge: to create sonic atmospheres that oozed mystery and inspired fear; characters neither human nor mythically godly but altogether more sinister; and settings that pitted humans against forces of unearthly power. As early as 1815, the 18-year-old Schubert composed his song "Erlkönig" on a poem by Goethe, condensing the essence of music's affinity with the supernatural. Just a few minutes long, it's effectively a mini-opera in which the singer plays three roles: a father, a feverish child, and the demon-like Erlkönig who gradually coaxes out the child's soul, while pounding octaves in the piano convey the father's desperate horseback ride through the night.

Presenting ghostly dramas on stage was the obvious next step for any composer with an appetite for ticket sales. Among the first, and best, was Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz* (1821) in which the Devil is summoned in one of the most terrifying scenes in all opera. Yet apart from this, most of the early ghost-story successes are little heard now: Francois-Adrien Boieldieu's *La Dame Blanche* (1825), based on several works of Sir Walter Scott, was highly influential; Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (first performed in Paris in 1831), featuring the raising from the dead of a group of nuns, was so popular that it became part of the mid-19th-century zeitgeist; and Heinrich Marschner's *Der Vampyr* (1828) was a massive hit that predated Bram Stoker's *Dracula* by 69 years. While these operas receive occasional airings – *Der Vampyr* was adapted and updated for television in 1992 – they're now remembered mainly for their importance in inspiring greater works that followed – most of all, Wagner.

Wagner's first masterpiece, *Der fliegende Holländer* (premiered in 1843), is the ultimate operatic ghost-story, and proves exactly why music is the natural home of the supernatural. The Dutchman travels the world on a ghost ship, under a demoniac curse; a young girl drowns herself for love, setting his soul free. The human world meets the supernatural head on – and to effect this, Wagner conjures two different musical worlds: for the supernatural, he unleashes the most destabilising chromatic harmonies and turbulent orchestration that he had yet devised, forming an aural sphere that is supple, seductive and overpowering beside the deliberate, plonking ordinariness of the everyday. The two forces collide, with a human ship's crew singing a sea shanty in jaunty duple time while the ghost ship's inhabitants retaliate in triple time from their own chilling soundworld, everything working simultaneously upon the audience's ears and minds.

Into the 20th century, music and the supernatural headed in more obscure directions, first into the realms of Symbolism – Bartók's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (premiered 1918) is a devastating drawing-together of fearsome legend and psychological depth; and Korngold's *Die tote Stadt* (1920) is based on a Symbolist novella by Georges Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, in which the "dead city" of Bruges represents the ghostly dead wife.

Today, music and spectres again walk hand in hand through the opera house, John Corigliano's *The Ghosts of Versailles* (1991) is set in the afterlife court of Louis XVI, where a Beaumarchais play is performed to entertain the ghost of Marie Antoinette. Still, the Met in New York has staged Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* as a Victorian ghost story, and, as recently as two weeks ago, a new ghost-story opera was premiered in Cornwall: *The Hanging Oak* by Paul Drayton, with a haunted archdeacon as its principal character.

The Turn of the Screw remains probably the most spine-chilling of all. It tells James's tale of unacknowledged desires and hinted paedophilia sparsely, letting the raw horror in the bones of the narrative shine through the dark. "The ceremony of innocence is drowned," cry Peter Quint and Miss Jessel; and the fearsome power of that phrase is enhanced by the fact that it appeals to our subconscious alone: we never learn precisely what it means – just as the invisibility of music increases its power far beyond the tangible. When story, stage and sound combine with matching force, there is nothing more powerful. I'd suggest it's time to jettison any cinema outing for Hallowe'en and head instead for the opera.

'*The Turn of the Screw*' opens at the London Coliseum on 22 October
(www.eno.org; 0871 911 0200)