

Ghosts in Opera

by Kathleen Watt

OPERA COMPOSERS HAVE never been afraid of ghosts. Though Benjamin Britten's chamber opera version of Henry James' novella *Turn of the Screw* may be unique in its plunge into Victorian Gothic psychodrama, from Monteverdi's *Orfeo* of 1607 to John Corigliano's *The Ghosts of Versailles* in 1992, opera has unabashedly embraced supernatural beings, ghosts or otherwise.

The gods and demigods of classical mythology figure importantly in operas of the 17th and 18th centuries. In Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, it is the rake himself—human, and quite alive—who bedevils man and maiden alike. But ultimately the Don discovers that his earthly charms hold no sway with ghosts. By the stony handshake of the Commendatore, whom he has murdered, he is dragged away to a fiery Hell. In some of Mozart's most onomatopoeic music, the statue of the Commendatore is limned by monumental diminished sevenths, cringing strings, and sepulchral trombones.

The nineteenth-century Romantics surrendered eagerly to the magic arts, exalting human passion over reason, and imagination as the portal to spiritual truth. Their general fascination with primitive folk culture and their appetite for mystery inspired a witch's brew of devils, specters, ghosts, and goblins. This period of overwrought naturalism and sublime pessimism was epitomized in Germany by the music of Carl Maria von Weber, and it cradled the heroic *Weltschmerz* of Richard Wagner. Meanwhile, in England and the wider world, Lord Byron popularized sensual debauchery and the beautiful death. Poet Aleksandr Pushkin introduced the Byronic hero to his native Russia, and it found musical voice in the works of Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Modest Mussorgsky—brooding melancholics, all. In Italy, Giuseppe Verdi turned to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where ghosts and goblins abound.

What makes an operatic ghost ghostly, anyway? In fact, there is a discernible language that makes music sound spooky. The Romantic period provides an excellent primer.

In Act II of *Der Freischütz*, for example, Weber's rendering of the Wolf's Glen (where the devil has his dealings) is a benchmark of horror-scoring for orchestra, radical for its own time and revisited ever since. Stagings of this phantasmagoria will always differ, but the images painted in sound are indelible. A bell chimes midnight in a distant tower; nocturnal flying creatures screech in the woodwinds, answering the hissing incantations of Caspar, the devil's henchman. Samiel—the devil—is identified by a *tremolando* in the violas and low winds that surges into the high strings, with throbbing timpani beneath. Where Samiel is, there too is the diminished seventh chord, and also C minor, "the key of dark powers," which prevails throughout. Weber invokes earth, air, fire, and water in disembodied voices from offstage. Under that ominous chorus, in the bass, is a "tritone" progression—the augmented fourth, called the *diabolus in musica* because it was so difficult to tune that it was once "forbidden" by music theorists.

Chromaticism (dissonant chords or melody by half steps) generally and the diminished seventh chord (a minor triad with a flatted seventh on top) particularly are basic to the supernatural musical vocabulary. Wagner relates of composing *Der fliegende Holländer*, "the pent-up anguish, the homesickness...were poured out in [it]...On the diminished seventh...I paused and brooded over the past; the repetitions, each higher, interpreting the increased intensity of my sufferings..."

Silence is also pretty spooky, when wielded by a master of musical imagery. Along with the woebegone Dutchman, Wagner brings a whole ragged shipload of ghosts onstage, but we hear not a peep out of them. The Norwegians' shouts of "Heia-ho!" and "Wachet auf!" ring and decay in the weird silence that follows. When the ghost crew does wake, so does a bewitched sea. Wagner creates roiling seas in full strings, heaving massively in minor scales, crescendoing to a crash of cymbals and timpani against echoing rocks. Drums and low strings shudder. A piercing wind whistles in the piccolos. The wanderer's motif is heard in declamatory brass over an otherworldly tremolo in high strings, the ghost crew's "Hui!" shrieking in voices and winds. Finally, the ghost crew outshouts the Norwegians with mocking laughter that crescendos to eerie silence once again, and the sea recovers an uneasy calm.

In Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades*, based on Pushkin's novel, the ghost of the Old Countess appears to the crazed gambler Hermann to avenge her granddaughter's

broken heart and her own sudden death, which he caused. Richard Taruskin describes Tchaikovsky's "unparalleled genius for grotesque combinations of instruments," and "a network of sinister doubles that haunt the opera..." An innocent sounding phrase in Act I, for example, evolves into a leitmotif that "governs all those moments in which Hermann makes contact, through the Countess, with the world beyond...until, in the last scene, it crushes him with the full weight of the orchestra."

Mussorgsky plumbs the psychological depths of the Tsar Boris Godunov by inventing a ghost not found in the Pushkin drama on which it is based. In Act II, Boris alone sees the ghost of Dmitri, the rightful heir whom Boris himself had slain to gain the throne. The hallucination is accompanied by a phrase which everywhere else is associated with the renegade monk who poses as Dmitri. Only Boris, in his guilty torment, mistakes the musical presence for that of the dead Dmitri. Under the burden of his own crime and the Pretender's leitmotif, Boris collapses, dead.

Verdi's *Macbeth* of 1847 differs significantly from its 1865 revision, which Verdi undertook specifically to intensify the chromaticism of scenes involving ghosts and apparitions. Macbeth's first heart-stopping vision of Banquo's ghost comes in the midst of a nervous banquet *brindisi*. The ricochet of staccato rhythms in the strings is signature Verdi, interrupted by the blow of Macbeth's terror, falling away sharply to a quivering *fil di voce* in the high strings and *sotto voce* chorus. In the apparition scene, Macbeth meets a parade of ghosts while Verdi's percussion thunders and *fortissimo* claps of lightening subside to a shivering woodwind. Macbeth's bated breath is held by a single trembling note in the strings, over which the ghosts foretell his doom.

Ghosts of the 20th century are more complicated—perhaps because they are ours. Even the concept of spirits, malign and benevolent, has entered the modern lexicon in an ambiguous way: "Peter Quint! You Devil!" (giving nothing away) is the child Miles' final utterance in Britten's *Turn of the Screw*. "The Child is an angel!" is Mrs. Grose's misapprehension of her charges. And between devils and angels wander the restless spirits of the merely deceased, haunting their human counterparts deliberately or unintentionally, seeking desperately, sometimes in vain, to finish earthly business. The ghost of the schoolmistress Miss Jessel may never find rest, suffering in death the same

unnamed cruelties that the villainous Quint forced upon her in her life. And because she seeks “a soul to share my woe,” the poor child Flora knows no peace, either.

While casting an understanding nod back toward the Victorian shadows that shroud James’ tale, Britten’s *Turn of the Screw* looks forward to our fearless postmodern intimacy with all things frightful, internal and external. These ghosts live, in many dimensions, and not least in the way they make themselves heard. Britten employs all of the traditional ghostly devices in the development of this orchestral language—leitmotif, weird harmonics, chattering rhythms, thundering percussion, ominous silences—and he makes them pierce the contemporary heart by “inverting the natural order” of everything (as Christopher Palmer **observes** in his essay accompanying the 1990 London Records CD re-release)—the relationship and function of children and adults, the meaning of light and dark, the assignment of instruments in this eloquent chamber orchestration.

Throughout the opera, for example, Quint appears through Miles’ ears. He calls in seductive melismas about gold, sweet secrets, and night-winged birds. To Miles, Quint is a hero; he desires to be “bad” for Quint’s sake. And the orchestra makes clear that Quint is more than a hallucination. Quint’s first appearance is not, after all, in Act I, scene 4, when the Governess catches her first glimpse of him in the Tower, but in the momentary peal of the celesta in scene 3, as Mrs. Grose reflects that “we were far too long alone.” The celesta motif becomes identified with Quint—his presence, his insidious influence, his evil designs. The choice of this “celestial” instrument for the sinister former manservant of Bly is both perverse and ingenious. It makes even us feel more charmed than poisoned. In it we understand Quint’s mesmerizing power over not only Miles, but also Miss Jessel. She too is heard before she is seen, in her sound signature, the **doleful** hollowness of the gong. And when these two sad beings converse in the orchestra, as in Variation VII, we have some sense of what beautiful, horrible things may have transpired at Bly. Britten’s effects freeze the heart. These are ghosts that he knows, and we could believe in.