

# Death in Venice

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Opera in two acts (17 scenes), op.88, by Benjamin Britten to a libretto by Myfanwy Piper based on Thomas Mann's novella *Der Tod in Venedig*; Snape, the Maltings, 16 June 1973.

Gustav von Aschenbach <i>a novelist</i>	tenor
The Traveller <i>who also sings:</i>	bass-baritone
The Elderly Fop	
The Old Gondelier	
The Hotel Manager	
The Hotel Barber	
The Leader of the Players	
The Voice of Dionysus	
The Voice of Apollo	countertenor
The Polish mother	
Tadzio <i>her son</i>	choreographed
Jaschiu <i>his friend</i>	choreographed
Youths and girls, hotel guests and waiters, gondoliers and boatmen, street vendors, touts and beggars, citizens of Venice, choir in St Mark's, tourists, followers of Dionysus	
Choreographed roles: Tadzio's two sisters, his governess, other boys and girls, strolling players, beach attendants	
<i>Setting</i> Munich and Venice	

Britten had *Death in Venice* in mind as an operatic subject for many years, and in September 1970, very soon after the completion of *Owen Wingrave*, he invited Myfanwy Piper to write the libretto. She had finished a draft of Act 1 by September 1971, and it seems probable that Britten began the music that December, using preliminary sketches made during an autumn visit to Venice. The opera was

complete by the end of 1972, although some quite significant changes were still to come, and additional modifications were made between the première and the publication of the vocal score in 1975.

Of all Britten's operas, *Death in Venice* is the most dependent on the particular vocal qualities of Peter Pears, to whom it is dedicated. The intimate, intense character of the music reflects the refinement and delicacy of the Pears sound at that relatively late stage of his career, and the musical idiom – an economical blend of Britten's personal adaptation of 12-note features in association with those fundamental elements of tonal harmony that he never abandoned – is the fullest demonstration of the flexibility and focus of Britten's own late style. Not surprisingly, Pears was an indispensable asset to early revivals of the work after the première, as was John Shirley-Quirk in the bass-baritone roles. The opera's Covent Garden première was in October 1973 and its Metropolitan première in October 1974. A recording, conducted by Steuart Bedford, was made at Snape in April 1974.

## Synopsis

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### **ACT 1.i Munich**

The 'master writer' Aschenbach is weary and unable to work, but affirms his belief in order rather than passion. A traveller appears, whose account of the mysterious marvels of distant places stirs Aschenbach's desire to 'travel to the south'. In the first of the 'quasi parlando' recitatives with piano that are a special feature of the work (the pitches moulded to the inflections of Pears's speaking voice), Aschenbach persuades himself that such a journey may restore his 'flagging inspiration'.

### **1.ii On the boat to Venice**

This scene is punctuated by a haunting refrain on the word 'Serenissima' (adapting the 'magic' motif of the traveller's music from scene i). Among the predominantly young and lighthearted passengers is an elderly fop, rouged and dressed in a forlorn attempt to belie his age. Aschenbach is apprehensive that Venice will not provide its usual welcome. The scene ends with an interlude in barcarolle style, called 'overture', evoking the waters and bells of the city.

### **1.iii The journey to the Lido**

Aschenbach's belief in the healing powers of Venice is restored, despite the sinister refusal of his gondolier to obey orders, or wait to be paid. In a lyrical arioso Aschenbach muses on the fact that a black gondola is 'a vision of death itself'.

### **1.iv The first evening at the hotel**

The manager sings the praises of his establishment. To an expansive, consonant yet tonally unstable motif the obsequious manager shows the writer the view of the beach from his room, then leaves Aschenbach to reflect in recitative on his aims and ambitions as a creative artist. After a while he is

drawn back to the view before him. Among the hotel guests from various countries who pass he notices a Polish family, including a boy of great physical beauty (characterized by a sinuous modal motif on the vibra-*phone*) whose name, he learns, is Tadzio. Aschenbach meditates on the irresolvably ambiguous relation between the artist's sense of beauty and his desire to achieve a purely formal perfection.

### **1.v On the beach**

Aschenbach finds the atmosphere oppressive and cannot work, but nevertheless wishes to remain in Venice. As he watches, Tadzio arrives on the beach with his family and plays with other children, who accept him as their leader. Aschenbach reflects that he feels 'a father's warmth' for a beauty 'I might have created'.

### **1.vi The foiled departure**

Crossing from the Lido to Venice proper, which is crowded and stifling, Aschenbach resolves to leave. Back at the hotel he informs the manager of his decision, but after crossing to the city once more to take the train back to Germany, he learns that his baggage has been sent to Como. He returns to the hotel, both angry and delighted that his departure has been prevented. Seeing Tadzio on the beach, he makes a firm decision to stay on.

### **1.vii The games of Apollo**

Aschenbach witnesses beach sports in which Tadzio takes part: the games are presented in choreographed form with a choral commentary and apostrophes from the voice of Apollo. At the end Tadzio's victory is celebrated, and Aschenbach exclaims ecstatically that 'the boy ... shall inspire me ... The power of beauty sets me free'. He develops this theme in an extended lyrical outpouring, and is forced to recognize the truth. As Tadzio passes him on his way into the hotel and smiles at him, Aschenbach confesses- though the boy cannot hear him - 'I love you!'

## **ACT 2**

In a recitative, Aschenbach attempts to come to terms with his love, and regrets his inability even to speak to Tadzio.

### **2.viii The hotel barber's shop**

He hears the first rumours of a sickness that is causing people to leave Venice, but the barber becomes evasive when questioned.

### **2.ix *The pursuit***

Aschenbach crosses to the city and learns that 'citizens are advised to take precautions against infection', but that 'rumours of cholera' are being denied. His only concern is that the Polish family should not hear such rumours; he begins to follow them about the city and, finally, back to the hotel, still without making any direct contact with Tadzio.

### **2.x *The strolling players***

Aschenbach is with other hotel guests on the terrace after dinner. A troupe of actor-singers presents a parody of courtship, with its leader adding a mock lament, 'So I shall never be able to marry'. Aschenbach accosts the leader, seeking the truth about the possible plague. Once again, the answers are worryingly evasive, and the leader's final song, with its chorus of mocking laughter, turns into a sinister attack on the hotel guests.

### **2.xi *The travel bureau***

Aschenbach arrives as a crowd of visitors seeks information and an early escape from Venice. At first the clerk offers the usual evasive responses, but in the end he admits to Aschenbach that 'death is at work. The plague is with us'. He advises him to leave before the city is blockaded.

### **2.xii *The lady of the pearls***

Aschenbach rehearses how he might warn Tadzio's mother of the danger, but when she appears in the hotel he cannot speak to her. In despair and joy he realizes that all he cares about is his love for Tadzio.

### **2.xiii *The dream***

In a feverish sleep, Aschenbach seems to hear a debate between Apollo and Dionysus: with the victory of Dionysus his followers sing and dance in triumph. Waking, he recognizes that he can 'fall no further'.

### **2.xiv *The empty beach***

Aschenbach watches as Tadzio and a few friends begin to play their beach games, only to abandon them and run off.

### **2.xv *The hotel barber' shop***

He submits to the kind of rouging and hair-colouring that marked the elderly fop in scene ii.

## **2.xvi *The last visit to Venice***

Aschenbach is almost hysterically exuberant in his new guise. Once again he follows the Polish family through the city, ever more strongly convinced that Tadzio understands his feelings and is encouraging him. He buys some strawberries, but they are musty and overripe. Bitterly he recalls his proclamation of his own creative beliefs from scene i, and in an understated yet supremely eloquent arioso summarizes the celebrated Platonic exchange between Socrates and Phaedrus which traces the path from the sensual discovery of beauty to the abyss of passion.

## **2.xvii *The departure***

This begins with a richly orchestrated fantasia on the 'view' motif from scene iv. The hotel manager and a porter discuss the departure of the guests. Aschenbach learns that the Polish family is about to leave, and the manager assumes that Aschenbach himself will soon follow them. Tadzio and a few other children play on the beach, and this time the game turns rough, with Tadzio being knocked down, his face pressed into the sand by Jaschiu. As Aschenbach cries out the boy gets up, unharmed. Aschenbach calls Tadzio's name, and, when the boy beckons him, collapses and dies in his chair. To a short postlude combining Tadzio's unearthly theme and the melody from scene vii for Aschenbach's phrase about the indissoluble fusion of feeling and thought, 'Tadzio continues his walk far out to sea'.

Britten's *Death in Venice* will always seem disconcerting to those who believe that Mann's claustrophobically intense story demands a music of Bergian expressionistic force – or Mahlerian nostalgia, as in Visconti's film – to do it justice. Yet Britten's relatively narrow range of tone colours, with the dry piano of Aschenbach's recitatives at one extreme and the gamelan-style tuned percussion for Tadzio and the beach games at the other, together with his unfailingly concise musical forms, bring Aschenbach's inhibitedness and obsession with the structures of art unerringly into the dramatic foreground. It is clear that we are seeing Venice solely through Aschenbach's eyes, and the simplicity with which the enticing Tadzio and Aschenbach's own fumbling attempts to express love are represented demonstrate how justified Britten was in trusting his own aesthetic principle and in 'tear[ing] all the waste away'. Only a deeply prejudiced ear could mistake this directness and economy for blandness or superficiality, and the opera's hushed ending is an inspired synthesis of the work's most memorable qualities – intensity and restraint.