

Synopsis

On board the H.M.S. *Indomitable*, a seventy-four, during the French Wars of 1797

Act I

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| PROLOGUE | Vere |
| SCENE 1 | The main deck of the <i>Indomitable</i> |
| SCENE 2 | The captain's cabin |
| SCENE 3 | The berth deck |

Act II

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| SCENE 1 | The main deck and quarter deck |
| SCENE 2 | The captain's cabin |
| SCENE 3 | The bay of the lower gun deck |
| SCENE 4 | The main deck and quarter deck |
| EPILOGUE | Vere |

Prologue

Captain Vere, as an old man, looks back on his life at sea and reflects on the mysterious workings of good and evil.

Act I

Early in the morning, the crew go about their work. A cutter has been dispatched to board a passing merchantman and recruit the most able men for war service. It now returns with three impressed sailors, among them Billy Budd, an open-hearted, good-natured young man. Questioned by John Claggart, the master-at-arms, Billy reveals a stammer when trying to explain that he was a foundling. His shout of farewell to his former ship, *The Rights o' Man*, misleads the officers into believing that Billy is a potential source of danger in rousing dissent among the other sailors. They instruct Claggart to keep an eye on him. Left alone, Claggart voices his bitterness and disdain for the officers. He orders the ship's corporal, Squeak, to use every opportunity to provoke Billy. The old seaman Dansker warns Billy to beware of Claggart.

In Captain Vere's cabin, the officers express their dislike of the spirit of the French Revolution, which they hold responsible for the recent naval mutinies at Spithead and the Nore. They mention Billy as a potential troublemaker, but Vere disagrees and tells them that all he is guilty of is youthful high spirits.

That same evening, the men sing shanties on the berth-deck. Billy discovers Squeak rummaging through his belongings and attacks him. Claggart

intervenes and, realizing his man has bungled things, has Squeak arrested. His hatred of Billy growing stronger, Claggart forces the Novice to try and bribe Billy into leading a mutiny. But the Novice's efforts only rouse Billy's anger. Dansker appears and calms Billy down. He repeats his warning to avoid Claggart, but Billy is certain he has nothing to fear from him.

Act II

It is several days later. Officers and crew are eager to engage the enemy, but the ship is shrouded in mist. Claggart begins to explain to Vere his case against Billy when a French sail is sighted and the air begins to clear. The captain gives orders to pursue the enemy, and the men prepare for battle. A shot is fired but misses the target. The wind drops and the mist returns, putting an end to the chase. Claggart once again approaches Vere with his complaint that Billy is planning a mutiny. Vere refuses to believe him and sends for Billy to confront his accuser.

Alone in his cabin, Vere reflects on his conviction that the young sailor is innocent. Billy arrives, then Claggart, who repeats his charges. Asked to defend himself, Billy gets so upset that his stammer chokes him. He strikes out at Claggart, killing him on the spot. Vere, shaken, summons his officers and a drumhead court is constituted. Billy admits the deed but can't explain why Claggart should have wrongfully accused him. When the officers turn to Vere for an explanation, the captain refuses to respond. Faced with no other choice, the court pronounces the death sentence.

Early the following morning, Billy calmly contemplates his imminent death. Dansker appears with food and news that the ship is now indeed close to mutiny, the crew determined to prevent Billy's execution. Billy tells him to stop them—he has accepted his fate.

At dawn, the sentence is pronounced before the entire company. Billy blesses Vere and is hanged.

Epilogue

The old Vere is still plagued by doubt as to whether what he did was right. He acknowledges that he could have saved Billy, but the condemned man's blessing has given him comfort.

In Focus

Benjamin Britten

Billy Budd

Premiere: London, Royal Opera House, 1951 (original four-act version)/1964 (revised version)

An adaptation of Herman Melville's novella, *Billy Budd* is one of the most gripping and successful operas of the 20th century. Set almost entirely aboard a British warship during the Napoleonic Wars, the drama is a stark morality play about the inherent difficulty of recognizing the difference between good and evil. It focuses on a young sailor, the title character, whose essential goodness elicits unadulterated hatred from the ship's master-at-arms, Claggart. Moved to destroy Billy, Claggart frames him for mutiny, and Billy, who stammers and is unable to defend himself verbally, accidentally kills Claggart. The ship's captain, Vere, while convinced of Billy's innocence, is constrained by law to deliver him to a court-martial, resulting in Billy's execution. Viewed through a lens of symbolism, the opera's realistic details of nautical life take on additional dimensions: the ever-present fog becomes a sign of the moral murkiness surrounding all human choices, while the sea itself takes on a myriad of meanings, from the consoling to the menacing. Similarly, the motivations of the lead characters are compelling on a variety of levels—from the clinically psychological to the abstractly philosophical. Britten's score masterfully pulls together all the multiple strands, resulting in an opera that is as theatrically convincing as it is intellectually and philosophically engaging.

The Creators

British-born Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) was a leading composer in a wide variety of genres, and several of his operas are among the most enduring of the 20th century. Among his many outstanding librettists was novelist E.M. Forster (1879–1970), whose collaboration on *Billy Budd* remained his sole foray into opera. The libretto was co-written by Eric Crozier (1914–1994), an author and director who also worked with Britten on several of his other operas. The American Herman Melville (1819–1891) is regarded as one of the 19th century's preeminent writers, largely thanks to his novel *Moby-Dick*. His novella *Billy Budd, Sailor* was left unfinished and published posthumously in 1924.

The Setting

With the exceptions of the brief prologue and epilogue, the opera takes place in the year 1797 aboard the British warship HMS *Indomitable*. The

historical context is important: Britain was at war with France, whose armies, under Napoleon Bonaparte, appeared invincible at that point. Only the British navy, which had just endured two catastrophic mutinies (referred to in the opera), stood between the French and an invasion of Britain. These facts are crucial to the psychological and moral issues of the drama.

The Music

Britten's score employs the scale and many of the techniques of traditional grand opera, but within a distinctly modern idiom. The foremost challenge—virtually unique for an opera of this scope—was to create the necessary aural variety in the large, all-male cast. Captain Vere, a tenor, is often in dialogue with lower voices, and even roles in the same register are written in careful counterpoint. Many of the character roles among the ship's crew are distinguished by figures of speech. The orchestra also brings out different shades in the vocal lines: the character of the Novice is associated with the plaintive sound of the saxophone, while Claggart is introduced by gruff tubas and timpani, and the theme accompanying his entrance becomes his identifying motif. The role of the orchestra is notable throughout the opera, although there is little purely scenic music. The atmospheric touches that exist are always reflections of the internal struggles of the characters. Billy's most notable extended solo, for example, "Billy in the Darbies," is accompanied by a gentle swaying in the orchestra that might stand for the motion of the ship, but the more important implication is Billy's search for inner equilibrium—something his stammer prevents him from voicing explicitly. Perhaps most extraordinary in Britten's portrayal of this hermetic society are the ensembles and choruses. One of the most remarkable moments occurs at Billy's execution, when there is a sort of communal groan within the form of a fugue—a wordless utterance that combines traditional composition technique with a sense of primal theatrics.

Billy Budd at the Met

Billy Budd received its Met premiere in 1978 in the current production by John Dexter, with Raymond Leppard conducting in his Met debut. Richard Stilwell sang the title role, and Britten's life partner and frequent collaborator, tenor Peter Pears, was Captain Vere, reprising the part he had created at the opera's world premiere. James Morris sang Claggart, a role he would play another 35 times through 1997. Other memorable appearances include Thomas Allen (1989), Thomas Hampson (1992), and Dwayne Croft (1997) in the title role and Richard Cassilly (1980–89), Graham Clark (1992), and Philip Langridge (1997) as Vere.

Program Note

“It is a strange one, one which seems to have written itself in some way,” Benjamin Britten once remarked about *Billy Budd*. The opera, which premiered in December 1951, certainly ranks among the most richly enigmatic—even unprecedented—works in the repertory. Yet *Billy Budd* addresses a theme to which Britten persistently returned throughout his career: innocence destroyed. His powerful attraction to the material led him to intuit its extraordinary potential, moral and musical. This, perhaps, is what the composer had in mind by claiming the opera had “written itself.” In fact, *Billy Budd*’s gestation was unusually fraught and drawn out for Britten. Three years passed between preliminary discussions and opening night, and nearly a decade later, he revised his original four acts into the standard two-act version.

With the triumphant premiere of *Peter Grimes* in 1945, Britten had in one stroke ushered in a renaissance for English opera. The novelist E.M. Forster had played a crucial though indirect role in that triumph by inspiring Britten’s interest in the forgotten 19th-century poem by George Crabbe that provided the source material for *Grimes*. As a longtime admirer of Forster’s own writing, Britten relished the chance to collaborate with him directly. They began discussing ideas in 1948, following the composer’s successful launch of a new music festival in Aldeburgh (the seacoast town of his native Suffolk, where Britten and his partner, tenor Peter Pears, had settled on their return from America in 1942).

Britten had recently encountered a copy of Herman Melville’s final work of fiction, the novella *Billy Budd*—though, as biographer Humphrey Carpenter suggests, his first impression of the story may well have come from W.H. Auden’s reference to it in his 1940 poem “Herman Melville” (in a passage beginning with the famous line “Evil is unspectacular and always human...”). Shortly after the composer floated the possibility of adapting it into an opera, Forster replied: “Melville, I believe, was often trying to do what I’ve tried to do. It is a difficult thing ... the ordinary lovable (and hateable) human beings connected with immensities through the tricks of art. Billy is our Savior, yet he is Billy, not Christ or Orion. I believe that your music may effect the connections better than our words.”

It had already been decided that Eric Crozier would serve as co-librettist, since Forster felt apprehensive about undertaking his first (and only) opera libretto. A widely experienced man of the theater, Crozier was closely associated with Britten’s rapid emergence as an opera composer in these early postwar years. He had directed and produced the first *Peter Grimes*, written the libretto for Britten’s comic opera *Albert Herring* (1947), and, with the composer and Pears, co-founded the Aldeburgh Festival. Describing the division of labor, Crozier referred to himself as the “technician” and Forster as the “careful, wise mind who will write most of the text and dialogue.” An unusual feature of the resulting libretto is that it is almost entirely in prose. Britten later remarked that,

far from being a challenge to set, he “found [Forster’s] terse, vivid sentences, with their strong rhythms, melodically inspiring.”

One of the few passages of verse, occurring in a monologue shortly before the climactic scene of Billy’s execution, is taken directly from Melville’s ballad “Billy in the Darbies” (i.e., in handcuffs), which provided the germ for the author’s late-life novella. *Billy Budd* marked Melville’s return to fiction after decades of writing only poetry. He devoted considerable effort to wrestling the story down and was still in the process of revising it when he died in 1891. Like its author, the manuscript fell into oblivion and remained unpublished until 1924. It took nearly another four decades before the textual errors introduced by the earliest editions of the work were cleared up.

Forster himself contributed somewhat to the Melville revival, specifically drawing attention to the recently discovered *Billy Budd* in his lectures on the art of the novel. Carpenter observes that Forster harbored a view of its hero that paralleled the role played by the gamekeeper Alec Scudder in his own (then unpublished) novel *Maurice*, “with Billy as a specimen of lower-class goodness...destroying the ‘perverted’ aspect of homosexuality (Claggart) and becoming a savior-figure to the rest of the ship.”

While he was likewise attracted to the story’s homoerotic undercurrents, Britten arrived at a different understanding of Melville’s narrative. Captain Vere for him embodied “the moral problem of the whole work.” Britten later recalled that what especially captivated him was “the quality of conflict in Vere’s mind” in the choice between saving and sacrificing Billy. It is here, in fact, that the opera departs most dramatically from its source, by framing the entire sequence of events as a memory still tormenting the aged captain. (Melville describes Vere being killed in battle not long after Billy’s hanging.) Vere becomes the central figure, designed specifically with Peter Pears in mind. For that reason Britten conceived Vere, rather than Billy, as the main tenor role.

The different perspectives of writer and composer occasionally led to outright friction, particularly when Forster expressed his frank disappointment with Britten’s music for the Iago-like soliloquy of the evil master-at-arms Claggart. The librettist described this passage, in which he resolves to destroy Billy and his “beauty, handsomeness, goodness,” as “my most important piece of writing” and wanted it to illustrate “*passion—love constricted, perverted, poisoned....*” Britten for his part endured bouts of depression and self-doubt about a project that clearly held as deep a significance for him as it did for Forster. It may be, as Carpenter theorizes, that immersing himself in this “dark side” entailed a painful re-excitation: “Already in *Peter Grimes* he had uncovered and destroyed the Claggart in himself.”

The implications of repressed desire for Billy (on the part of both Claggart and Vere) have tempted some commentators to interpret the opera merely as a parable of thwarted same-sex love. But Britten scholar Donald Mitchell

cautions against reducing it to a love triangle reminiscent of “soap opera.” Indeed, the creative team’s sometimes conflicting points of view ended up enriching the resonance and complexity of the opera as a whole. They reinforce Melville’s vision of a universe shot through with “moral obliquities.” Rather than simplify his narrative into an overstated collision between good and evil, the operatic *Billy Budd* brings to it a new dimension. In the opening bars, for example, Britten establishes his musical coordinates using the device of bitonality, juxtaposing two keys a semitone apart, in major and minor: a perfect musical metaphor for the “fog” of ambiguity that enshrouds the tale itself.

With the assurance of Bach in his Passions, Britten proceeds to map out a web of tonal symbolism (to borrow musicologist Mervyn Cooke’s apt phrase) that, for all its intricacy, hooks our attention with its immediate emotional effect: Billy’s farewell song to the *Rights o’ Man* unconsciously echoes the oppressed crew’s opening chorus (with its hint of mutiny); the dread deep brass in F minor signals the black hole of Claggart’s depravity; a dreamily nocturnal C major introduces Captain Vere as a man of contemplation. In what has become the most celebrated passage of the score, harmony itself serves as an emblem of the ineffable: to depict the offstage encounter as Vere reports the court-martial’s death sentence to Billy, the orchestra intones a sequence of 34 major and minor triads (each derived from one of the notes of the F major chord).

This remarkably wordless turning point corresponds to the moment Melville himself singled out as a “sacrament” that must remain undescribed, when “two of great Nature’s nobler order embrace.” For all the libretto’s modifications of its source—both for practical reasons of compression and for differences of emphasis—the creators of *Billy Budd* showed an unmistakable reverence for Melville’s text by incorporating many specific details derived from it. In fact, Forster and Crozier even arranged early in the project to undertake a field trip to Lord Nelson’s ship, the *Victory*, as part of their close research into nautical details of the era in which Melville set his story. A great deal of attention was likewise devoted to the series of sea shanties they invented to distinguish the personalities of the sailors.

The result is yet another fascinating layer of tension in the opera: the tension between its realism and its metaphorical dimension. The HMS *Indomitable* is both a man-of-war in a specific period and a symbolic microcosm. In this regard, it’s interesting to note that aside from such larger set pieces as the abortive battle scene, Britten’s musical focus is on the interior, psychological landscape, made especially vivid through his tautly woven network of motifs. This aspect comes even more to the fore in his revision of the original four acts into two, when Britten cut a grand tutti scene that had originally introduced Captain Vere as a man of action mustering the sailors. (Pears’s reported discomfort with its vocal demands played an important part in Britten’s decision.)

While *Peter Grimes* famously evokes the natural seascape, Britten makes little use of this sort of tone painting in *Billy Budd*. Still, the latter's score calls for an even more expanded orchestra than *Grimes's* does (with six versus two percussionists). Through his ingenious orchestration and the detailed characterization of the varied male roles, Britten crafts a diverse sound world that belies the complete absence of women's voices. (Curiously, when Italian composer Giorgio Ghedini premiered his now-forgotten operatic treatment of the story shortly before Britten, he worked a soprano into the score by dramatizing the role of Billy's sweetheart back on land.) Traces of Britten's great operatic models are undeniably present—Verdi in particular, the Berg of *Wozzeck* as well—but Britten achieves something original in his balance of individual characterization against philosophical abstraction.

More than a quarter century elapsed between *Billy Budd's* premiere and its Met debut. The latter took place in 1978 (in the revised two-act version) and was widely recognized as a landmark production that helped anchor the opera in the repertory. Donald Mitchell praised director John Dexter and set designer William Dudley for "so scrupulously and ingeniously marking out the symbolic heights and depths of the opera in clear visual terms" and visually representing its all-important "hierarchical dimension." The opera's peculiar blend of realism and symbolism continues to fascinate, ultimately leaving audiences to work through its ambiguities. Although Britten seems to resolve them with the triumphant emergence of B-flat in Vere's epilogue, the captain is left trapped in his cycle of haunted recollection, as if the whole story is to begin again. —*Thomas May*