

## **THE TURN OF THE SCREW**

Music by Benjamin Britten

Libretto by Myfanwy Piper

Based on the story by Henry James

First performed on September 14, 1954 in Venice.

### **Characters**

THE PROLOGUE (tenor)

THE GOVERNESS (soprano)

FLORA (soprano), a young orphan girl

MILES (treble), Flora's brother

MRS. GROSE (soprano), housekeeper at Bly, an estate in eastern England

PETER QUINT (tenor), former manservant at Bly

MISS JESSEL (soprano), former governess to Flora and Miles

Notes on the historical context of the opera's setting and the year of its premier, along with a discography, follow the synopsis.

### **Prologue** England, c. 1853

Somber piano chords introduce the Prologue, who holds up a tattered manuscript. "It is a curious story," he says. "I have it written in faded ink...a woman's hand..." In a piano-accompanied recitative, he tells of a young woman hired by a London gentleman to take charge of his orphaned niece and nephew on an isolated country estate. She received full responsibility and was never to contact him. As the Prologue recites, the details are silently enacted behind him.

The small orchestra hums slowly, then builds to a brisk rhythm. This theme returns in fifteen variations between scenes.

### **Act I** Scene 1

The Journey

The music evokes the motion of a coach as the Governess journeys to Bly. With no one to help her but an old housekeeper, she worries that she has taken on too much.

### Scene 2

The Welcome

The brief, moody first variation gains momentum. Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper, and the children wait before the house. Flora and her older brother Miles dance about and pepper her with questions about the Governess. Mrs. Grose has them practice bows and curtsies.

The Governess arrives and is pleased to find Mrs. Grose warm, the children angelic. She expresses pleasure while the housekeeper chatters that the children now have someone young and energetic. The children lead the Governess off on a tour.

### Scene 3

The Letter

A sprightly interlude leads into a scene inside the house — gloomy and Gothic. Stairs at the center lead to a tower.

Mrs. Grose produces a letter from Miles' school: he has been expelled. The housekeeper cannot believe it; he is spirited, but not wicked. The children are singing a nursery rhyme. Observing how gently Miles treats his sister, the ladies decide that the letter must be a malicious fraud. The Governess decides not to inform the guardian. "Bravo," says Mrs. Grose.

#### Scene 4

##### The Tower

A pastoral variation depicts a peaceful summer evening. The Governess, alone, extols the virtues of Bly. Her only regret is that her employer can't see how she is following his instructions. Suddenly she sees a man staring at her from the top of the stairs. She mistakes him for her master, but quickly realizes he is a stranger.

#### Scene 5

##### The Window

A sharp, tense variation introduces the children at play some days later, reciting the lurid tale of "Tom, the piper's son." Mrs. Grose sends them outside. The Governess appears, pale and weak with fright. She says she has just seen a man staring at her through the window — the same one she saw in the tower. He had curly red hair; a long, pale face; and was tall and handsome, but with a savage expression.

"Quint!" exclaims Mrs. Grose. "Peter Quint!" She explains that Quint was a valet in charge of Bly in his master's absence. Unsavory and disrespectful, he nevertheless exerted a strange fascination. Quint spent many hours alone with Miles and was intimate with the beautiful Miss Jessel, the governess at the time. "He liked them pretty, I can tell you, Miss, and he had his will morning and night," shudders the housekeeper.

Afraid to trouble her master, Mrs. Grose continues, she had remained silent. Miss Jessel left and eventually died. Quint slipped and fell on an icy road and was killed. "Dear God," moans Mrs. Grose, "is there no end to his dreadful ways?"

The Governess fears that Quint's influence lingers. Certain he has come for Miles, she vows to protect her charges at all cost. Mrs. Grose promises to support her.

#### Scene 6

##### The Lesson

Bustling music introduces Miles in the manor's schoolroom reciting Latin exercises with frequent prompts from Flora. The Governess praises him and asks if he remembers any other rhymes. In a hesitant voice he sings a curious verse, which he claims to have "found" somewhere:

Malo, Malo, Malo I would rather be  
Malo, Malo in an apple tree,  
Malo, Malo, Malo than a naughty boy  
Malo, Malo in adversity.

#### Scene 7

##### The Lake

Before a large rippling lake on the grounds, Flora gazes in awe at this "great wide sea," and the Governess invites her to give it a name. Breathlessly reciting the names of all the seas she can think of, the girl finally calls it the Dead Sea..

As the Governess sits reading, Flora sings a fanciful lullaby to her doll. The Governess looks up to see a woman in black across the lake. The figure disappears as silently as it came. She snatches Flora by the hand and sends her off .

"It was Miss Jessel! She returns too!" the Governess cries. Certain that Flora saw the apparition even though the girl said nothing, she wails that both children are lost and she is powerless to help them.

## Scene 8

### At Night

The variation features the celeste, whose otherworldly sound is associated throughout with Quint. From the tower Quint calls out for Miles. The boy eagerly answers the summons. Quint sings a strange melody describing himself as all things exciting, desirable and forbidden. Miles is enchanted.

Miss Jessel appears at the window and beckons for Flora, who enters. The dead woman laments her fate, evoking the names of legendary women who suffered men's cruelty, and begs Flora to comfort her.

Quint sings "On the paths, in the woods, on the banks...I wait," with Miss Jessel echoing his melody. The children promise to attend them, while Mrs. Grose and the Governess, alarmed at the children's disappearance, call frantically through the house. As the ladies appear, the spirits vanish.

The Governess scolds Miles for being out of bed. "You see," he replies. "I am bad, aren't I?"

## **Act II** Scene 1

### Colloquy and Soliloquy

A dreamy variation finds Miss Jessel and Quint alone in the house. She reproaches him for having seduced and betrayed her. He asserts she was ruined by her own passions. He says he wants a friend. Miss Jessel offers herself, but Quint laughs. "I seek a friend, obedient to follow where I lead," he declares. "And in that hour," he says, quoting the poet Yeats, "The ceremony of innocence is drowned."

Miss Jessel yearns for someone to share her grief. She and Quint sing of their intention to steal the children.

As the phantoms fade, the lights come up on the Governess. She sings that she cannot deal with the evil around her.

## Scene 2

### The Bells

The variation includes tolling bells that establish the scene in a churchyard. The children march in, solemnly chanting a hymnlike tune that evokes the evil influence of Quint and Miss Jessel. As Flora and Miles sit on a tomb, Mrs. Grose enters with the Governess and observes how sweetly they are playing. Her companion coldly corrects her: "They are talking horrors." The Governess refuses Mrs. Grose's suggestion that she write their master. She wails that the children are slipping away.

Mrs. Grose leads Flora into the church, but Miles stays behind to wage a battle of wills with the Governess. Imitating the bells, he asks when he can return to school. "You trust me, my dear," he says, "but you think and think...of us and of the others. Does my uncle think what you think?" The Governess realizes that Miles has challenged her to act on her knowledge. Afraid that no one will help or believe her, she decides to run away from Bly.

### Scene 3

Miss Jessel

Following a brooding variation, the Governess is revealed in the schoolroom. Miss Jessel comes to claim Flora. Changing her mind about leaving, the Governess chases the specter away. She writes a letter to her employer asking to see him at once.

### Scene 4

The Bedroom

A moody variation fades into the 'Malo' theme. It is night. Miles sits on his bed, singing to himself. He spies the Governess and they resume their cat-and-mouse game. She says she has written his guardian and asks Miles if he has anything he would like to tell her. Quint's voice beckons Miles. Suddenly the candle goes out, plunging the room into darkness. "Twas I who blew it, dear!" says the child.

### Scene 5

Peter Quint

A brief variation suggests the depravity of Quint. He sees the letter and fears the Governess has revealed all. In a wild, galloping rhythm, "Easy to take, easy to take! Take it! Take it!" he compels Miles to steal the letter.

### Scene 6

The Piano

The scene is introduced with a piano melody. Miles plays the instrument for an enthralled Governess and Mrs. Grose. The Governess tells Mrs. Grose that she has written their employer. Mrs. Grose starts to play 'cat's cradle' with Flora, but the girl wills the tired old woman to sleep. Unobserved, Flora slips out of the room. The Governess soon realizes that Flora has gone to Miss Jessel, and awakens Mrs. Grose. The piano playing was a ruse to divert their attention. They run outside looking for Flora. Miles, now alone with Quint, plays a triumphant variation.

### Scene 7

Flora

Flora stands at the lake. The ladies call in the distance. Mrs. Grose rushes in. Snatching up the child, she scolds her. The Governess joins them. As she bitterly asks Flora: "And where, my pet, is Miss Jessel?" the dead woman appears across the lake, and calls to the little girl.

The Governess points to the apparition, but Mrs. Grose insists that there is no one there. Flora cries out that she also can see nothing, and fires spiteful invectives at the Governess. There is an agitated quartet, which closes as Miss Jessel fades away and Mrs. Grose leads off a distraught Flora.

The Governess despairs that she has lost her only ally and has failed to rescue the child.

### Scene 8

Miles

The final variation is tense. In the house, Mrs. Grose tells the Governess that all night long Flora uttered the most vile things as she slept.

Certain that Flora must get away at once, the Governess prepares to send her to London with Mrs. Grose to stay with the uncle, who must know everything by now. But Mrs. Grose says the

letter never was sent, and the Governess suspects Miles of the theft. Seeing them off, she braces for a confrontation with the boy.

"So, my dear, we are alone," says Miles, strolling in. Saying she would do anything to help him, the Governess urges him to confide in her. Suddenly Quint calls out to the boy, who looks frantically about but cannot see him. As the young woman continues to press Miles, Quint cautions him not to reveal anything. Miles finally confesses to having stolen the letter. The Governess demands to know why. "To see what you said about us," he blurts. Quint, by now visible in the tower except to Miles, snarls at him to be silent.

The Governess presses Miles to tell her who made him steal it, while Quint beckons him with "On the paths, in the woods."

Only say the name and he will be gone forever," begs the Governess. "Peter Quint, you devil!" Miles screams, collapsing in her arms. Claspings Miles to her bosom, she exults in having saved him, as Quint fades away. The 'Malo' theme returns. Then the Governess realizes the child is dead.