

The Far-Shining Sail: A Glimpse of Salvation in Britten's *Billy Budd*

Author(s): Michael Fuller

Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 147, No. 1895 (Summer, 2006), pp. 17-24

Published by: Musical Times Publications Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25434380>

Accessed: 22-02-2019 00:44 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Musical Times Publications Ltd.* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times*

MICHAEL FULLER

## The far-shining sail: a glimpse of salvation in Britten's *Billy Budd*

IT HAS BEEN OBSERVED that *Billy Budd* shares with other Britten operas the theme of the corruption of goodness by evil.<sup>1</sup> In addition to this rather general assessment, two important interpretative tools have been widely used in order to offer further comment on *Billy Budd*. The first comes from noting the undercurrent of homosexuality which may be identified in opera and novella alike. The presence of this theme in the opera would appear to have been wholly intentional, on Forster's part at least. In a widely-quoted letter to Britten concerning the latter's setting of the act 1 soliloquy in which Claggart announces his intention to destroy Billy, Forster wrote: 'I want *passion* – love constricted, perverted, poisoned, but never the less *flowing* down its agonised channel; a sexual discharge gone evil.'<sup>2</sup> It has also been claimed that Vere loves Billy, and that this love is in some way salvific for him: parallels have been drawn here with characters in other works by Forster.<sup>3</sup> The story may then be accounted a tragic love triangle, with Billy being torn between two men: one (Claggart) recognises his love for Billy and, refusing to accept it, determines instead on his destruction; whilst the other (Vere) suppresses (or represses) his love and, through his deliberate inaction, effectively brings that destruction about. That Britten and Forster were both homosexual surely makes an analysis based on the sexual motivation of the characters an important tool for unravelling some, at least, of the meanings lying in this work; however, it leaves some questions unanswered (for example, regarding the sense in which human love can be salvific).

The second interpretative tool which has been utilised by commentators on *Billy Budd* comes from noting the theological language employed in it. There are many references to Christian images and ideas scattered throughout the libretto to this opera, although these are often allusive rather than direct quotations from sources such as the Bible. Such references are skilfully deployed, not least in aiding the delineation of character. Vere tells us that he has 'studied and pondered and tried to fathom eternal truth' (indeed, his name itself emphasises this aspect of his character); and some of his utterances amount to prayers. At various points, he exclaims: 'O God, grant me light, light to guide us, to guide us all!' and 'Oh, for the light, for the light of clear Heaven, to separate evil from god!'. Claggart's utterances on two occasions draw on biblical references, although they involve misreadings and misquotations. He refers to Billy as 'The pearl of great price', a reference to

1. Michael Kennedy: *Britten* (London: Dent, 1981), p.197.

2. See, for example, Humphrey Carpenter: *Benjamin Britten: a biography* (London: Faber & Faber 1992), p.292.

3. Philip Brett: 'Salvation at sea: *Billy Budd*', in Christopher Palmer, ed.: *The Britten companion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), pp.135–36.

a parable of Jesus's in which a pearl stands, not for a human being, but rather for the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 13: 45–46); and in his great act 1 soliloquy he offers a corruption of a famous passage from the Prologue to St John's Gospel, saying: 'the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehends it and suffers' (cf. John 1: 5). This passage has often been compared to Iago's 'Credo' in Verdi's *Otello*<sup>4</sup> (although, interestingly, it is a comparison Forster explicitly shunned<sup>5</sup>): whilst it is true that both passages tell us something of their characters' motivation, it would be wrong to refer to Claggart's soliloquy as his 'Credo' – it is not a statement of his beliefs, but rather an outpouring of malice on the part of one who knows he is in a position of power over others. Billy himself uses the name of Christ three times, but these are simply conventional ejaculations: ironically, when he is in irons and tells how the Chaplain has visited him and told him of 'the good boy hung and gone to glory, hung for the likes of me,' the name of the 'good boy' is not mentioned. In a further irony, as commentators have noted, it is at this point that Billy receives a 'symbolic nautical Eucharist' in the shape of grog and biscuit brought to him by a friend.<sup>6</sup>

More significant than such allusions, however, is the way in which the theme of salvation is developed in *Billy Budd*. This is an explicitly religious term, with powerful resonances in the Christian tradition. Terminology relating to salvation is present throughout, notably in the prologue (in which Vere asks: 'Who has blessed me? Who saved me?') and in the epilogue (in which Vere states that 'he [that is, Billy] has saved me, and blessed me'). These quotations clearly invite us to understand the story as some form of 'Christian parable'.<sup>7</sup> Some critics have seen *Billy Budd* in these terms: Philip Brett, for example, refers to it as a 'parable of redemption',<sup>8</sup> whilst Mervyn Cooke states that 'Britten and his librettists [...] make it very clear (almost *too* clear) that the operatic Vere is redeemed by Billy's sacrifice.'<sup>9</sup>

LET US NOW FOCUS on the idea of salvation as it is found in *Billy Budd*. A rich variety of responses has been made by critics to this theme, from urging an understanding in terms of traditional Christian theology to rejecting such theology altogether. The following responses made by commentators to the theme of salvation in *Billy Budd* move along a spectrum between these two positions.

At one end of this spectrum, we may note Graham Elliott's view that 'there is mounting evidence for the view of the opera as a Christian allegory.'<sup>10</sup> Indeed, some have gone so far as to suggest parallels between Billy and Christ. Michael Kennedy, for example, describing the 'Christian values' of the opera, writes: 'Billy is sentenced by a man who does not believe him guilty, a sentence legally just but morally unjust; his vigil before execution suggests Gethsemane; his cry to Vere from the scaffold is the equivalent of

4. This comparison goes back to the opera's premiere: see the review by Desmond Shawe-Taylor in Donald Mitchell, Philip Reed & Mervyn Cooke, ed.: *Letters from a life: selected letters of Benjamin Britten, volume three 1946–1951* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), p.686. See also Eric Walter White: *Benjamin Britten: his life and operas*, second edition (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), p.179.

5. PN Furbank: *EM Forster: a life* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1981), vol.2, p.284.

6. cf. Mervyn Cooke: 'Britten's *Billy Budd*: Melville as opera libretto', in Mervyn Cooke & Philip Reed, ed.: *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.38.

7. Donald Mitchell: 'More off than on *Billy Budd*', reprinted in Donald Mitchell: *Cradles of the new: writings on music 1951–1991* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), pp.379–81.

8. Brett: 'Salvation at sea', p.137.

9. Cooke: 'Britten's *Billy Budd*', in Cooke & Reed: *Billy Budd*, p.31.

10. Graham Elliott: *Benjamin Britten: the spiritual dimension* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.157.

11. Kennedy: *Britten*, p.197.
12. Christopher Headington: *Britten* (London: Omnibus Press, 1996), p.80.
13. David Matthews: *Britten* (London: Haus Publishing, 2003), p.104.
14. Brett: 'Salvation at sea', p.142.
15. Clifford Hindley: 'Eros in life and death: *Billy Budd* and *Death in Venice*', in Mervyn Cooke, ed.: *The Cambridge companion to Benjamin Britten* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.154.
16. Peter Parker: 'Evil... Helpless like a lover', in the programme for the 1995 production of *Billy Budd* by the Royal Opera, Covent Garden, p.29.
17. PN Furbank: 'E. M. Forster and *Billy Budd*', in the programme for the 1988 production of *Billy Budd* by the English National Opera (no page numbers).
18. Peter Evans: *The music of Benjamin Britten* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.171.
19. *ibid.*, p.174.
20. Arnold Whittall: *The music of Britten and Tippett: studies in themes and techniques* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.125.
21. Donald Mitchell: 'A *Billy Budd* notebook (1979–1991)', in Cooke & Reed, ed.: *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, p.115. It is interesting to contrast this with Mitchell's earlier suggestion that the opera is a 'Christian realization' of the 'potential' in Melville's novella, and should be read as a 'Christian parable'. See n.7.
22. Michael Wilcox: *Benjamin Britten's operas* (Bath: Absolute Press, 1997), p.53.

"Father, forgive them".<sup>11</sup> The same understanding of the opera – that it is concerned with Vere's redemption – can be inferred, even if no precise parallels between Billy and Christ are made. Thus Christopher Headington maintains that 'the opera's ultimate message is that Billy's goodness redeems Vere',<sup>12</sup> whilst David Matthews asserts that '[Vere's] redemption is the culmination of the drama.'<sup>13</sup> Philip Brett suggests that 'Platonic' understandings of the opera can coexist with such 'Christian' ones as these: that 'the love of Ideal Beauty can lead to wisdom, knowledge and forgiveness; and that in Christian terms, goodness and love have the power to forgive.'<sup>14</sup>

However, the Christian underpinning of the opera is called into question by some critics, who urge an interpretation along secular, humanist lines. Clifford Hindley has observed (in a perceptive essay, to which we shall return) that Melville's references to Christianity are 'often ironic', and that most of the overt reflections on Christian themes which occur in the novella are removed by the opera's librettists, to the extent that (in line with Forster's own convictions), 'Salvation in the opera remains a humanist experience.'<sup>15</sup> Peter Parker echoes this, maintaining that 'Vere's salvation comes not through the self-sacrifice of a Christ-figure, but through the love of one human being for another.'<sup>16</sup>

Other critics have moved away from seeing *Billy Budd* in terms of salvation at all, whether this term be understood in Christian or humanist terms. There is some justification for this. PN Furbank notes that Forster's writings show a changing understanding of 'salvation' for the novelist, and maintains that 'imposing the theme of salvation on Melville's story created a problem with no easy solution and one which one may feel, in fact, was never quite satisfactorily solved.'<sup>17</sup> Perhaps for this reason, attempts have been made to construe the opera less in theological terms and more in terms of ethical ideas, such as the conflict of good and evil. Peter Evans, for example, maintains that 'No listener can fail to understand from Vere's prologue that what we are to witness is a parable of good and evil'.<sup>18</sup> (Evans also asserts, curiously, that there is just one 'specifically Christian reference'<sup>19</sup> in the opera.) Arnold Whittall points to 'a persistent conflict between the tonal centres of B and B flat' in the opera, suggesting that these keys stand respectively for evil and for goodness, and that 'the whole "message" of the work is that evil is not vanquished by good, but at best submerged beneath it'.<sup>20</sup> Donald Mitchell has offered a helpfully nuanced gloss on the juxtaposition of good and evil in *Billy Budd*, maintaining that the opera should be seen as a 'conflict of authorities'.<sup>21</sup> Such analyses can be helpful; but in downplaying the theological aspects of the opera, something is surely lost. (And sometimes the opera's religious language is not just downplayed: Michael Wilcox suggests that '[t]he religious tone of Vere's musings' might appeal to some listeners, but be found 'grossly maudlin' by others.'<sup>22</sup>)

*Please note that users of libraries  
subscribing to [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)  
may access back issues of MT online.  
Please visit  
[www.jstor.org/about/participants\\_intl.html](http://www.jstor.org/about/participants_intl.html)  
for a list.*

It is the contention of this article that the theological language of salvation used in *Billy Budd* should not be overlooked in any interpretation of it. I have argued elsewhere that Britten enjoyed what was a conventional Christian upbringing for his time: that the influence of this upbringing remained with him; and that Christian understandings of concepts such as forgiveness and atonement exerted a profound influence on both the form and the content of his earlier opera *The rape of Lucretia* (1946).<sup>23</sup> It might therefore be expected that Britten brought to *Billy Budd* also a conceptual framework within which relevant Christian concepts may once again be explored. However, despite the frequent allusions to conventional Christian language (as noted in the examples above), the theological world inhabited by *Billy Budd* is far from conventional. We can see this if we examine a peculiar aspect of the opera: its emphasis on fate.

**W**HILST the adjectives 'good' and 'evil' appear regularly in the libretto of *Billy Budd*, the prevailing moral universe depicted in the opera is actually very different to the one these words might suggest. Clifford Hindley has commented that 'Critics have tended to overlook the pervasiveness of fate in the opera', noting that the edition of Melville's novella used by the collaborators on *Billy Budd* contained a preface (by William Plomer, subsequently himself one of Britten's librettists) which emphasised precisely this aspect of the story.<sup>24</sup> Hindley is quite correct: the idea of fate – and its correlate, an absence of choice – occurs repeatedly. Claggart comments: 'Having seen you [that is, Billy], what choice remains to me? None, none!'. Having been pressured into an attempt to frame Billy for mutiny, the Novice laments: 'It's fate ... it's fate ... I've no choice. Everything's fate.' Vere calls Billy 'Fated boy' immediately after Claggart has been killed. The officers sitting in judgment on Billy repeat the refrain 'We've no choice' over and over again as they ponder their decision. And Billy himself,

23. Michael Fuller: 'Living on the edge: renewal in Britten's *The rape of Lucretia*', in *The Musical Times* (Spring 2000), p.45.

24. Hindley: 'Eros in life and death', p.149.

as he awaits his execution, reflects: 'I had to strike down that Jemmy Legs [the sailors' nickname for Claggart] – it's fate. And Captain Vere has had to strike me down – Fate.'

This subjugation of ethical decision-making to the relentless power of fate is quite at variance with the conventional Christian moral universe, which is one in which people *do* have the freedom to act, and the freedom to make choices. This leads Hindley to the conclusion that the concept of salvation in this opera 'does not relate to sin or guilt, but is seen as a way of getting the better of hostile fate – courageously asserting oneself in the face of a hostile universe [...] through the support afforded by love.'<sup>25</sup>

Now, this is persuasive, up to a point. Billy finally realises, as he languishes in his bonds, that there is a possible alternative to the rule of fate:

I've sighted a sail in the storm, the far-shining sail *that's not Fate*, and I'm contented. I've seen where she's bound for. She has a land of her own where she'll anchor for ever. Oh, I'm contented. Don't matter now being hanged .... I'm strong, and I know it, and I'll stay strong, I'll stay strong, and that's all, all, all, and that's enough [*italics mine*].

The strength which Billy has found, which is 'enough' for him, has clearly come through his sighting of this 'far-shining sail that's not Fate'. And this appears to be the strength which Vere acknowledges in the epilogue that he, too, has found, his words resonating with (though not precisely recapitulating) Billy's: 'I was lost on the infinite sea, but I've sighted a sail in the storm, the far-shining sail, and I'm content. I've seen where she's bound for. There's a land where she'll anchor for ever.'

Questions remain, however. If Billy and/or Vere are saved through their 'getting the better of hostile fate', how has this happened? Is Billy aware of Captain Vere's love for him? (Perhaps this is something Vere is able to declare in the celebrated orchestral interlude in act 2 of the opera, during which he informs Billy of the verdict of the court: who knows?) Even if Billy is aware of it, does he feel any 'support' from his knowledge of Vere's love for him? (The sense of strength which he declares in the act 2 soliloquy quoted above seems, on the contrary, to be generated within himself.) As for Vere, he conspicuously fails in 'courageously asserting' himself at the time of Billy's trial, and (*pace* Hindley) he clearly does suffer a great deal of guilt in consequence, as we may infer from his anguished outburst in the epilogue: 'I could have saved him. He knew it ... O what have I done? O what, what have I done?' Billy dies with the words 'Starry Vere, God bless you!' on his lips: are we to assume that Vere interprets these as conveying the love which has saved him? If so, pronouncing a divine blessing is an odd circumlocution if the love being expressed is purely Billy's own.

Hindley may have correctly identified Forster's metaphysical stance towards salvation in his approach to Billy Budd, but this is an interpretation of the opera as a whole which still leaves many threads hanging.

25. *ibid.*, p.150.

Clearly, a key concept in the awareness of his salvation which Billy has somehow communicated to Vere is that of the 'far-shining sail' he has sighted, and which Vere, too, claims much later to have witnessed. But what is meant by this curious expression? A note of Forster's, preserved among drafts of the libretto, states that Billy 'sights the sail of love which isn't Fate', and that Vere subsequently 'sees what Billy's shown him'.<sup>26</sup> But this simply leads to a further question: What is the nature of that love? Vere speaks in the epilogue of 'the love that passeth understanding', a phrase which, like those of Claggart cited above, has clear biblical echoes (in St Paul's famous evocation of 'The peace of God, which passeth all understanding' – see Philippians 4: 7). What does Vere mean by this?

Vere comments that this love came to him at a time when he was 'lost on the infinite sea', and in a brief soliloquy in act 2, between Billy's killing Claggart and Vere's summoning of a drumhead court, he remarks: 'my heart's broken'. This is not the first occasion on which this juxtaposition of ideas has occurred. In the episode following the flogging of the novice, the notion of being 'lost on the infinite sea' is also associated with heartbreak, the novice's physical laceration being reflected in his inward brokenness. Vere's sense of 'lostness', we may infer, is similarly linked to his sense of heartbreak, to his being inwardly broken. In contrast, the love identified by Vere, which he has seen demonstrated by Billy, is a love which brings inward healing and wholeness. (Billy's experiences seem to have produced the same sense of wholeness in him: we may recall his words, 'I'm strong ... and that's all ... and that's enough.')

Hindley notes that 'The Christian myth concerns the sinless one as a *divine* saviour; yet Forster (however muddled his feeling for theology may have been) clearly and explicitly rejects this element.'<sup>27</sup> Billy is not presented to us as divine (nor, of course, is he sinless: he gets embroiled in a fight with another sailor, and he strikes Claggart dead, albeit under considerable provocation in both cases). Even if the libretto rejects the notion of a divine saviour, however, it clearly endorses the notion of a transcendent power; for how else can one comprehend the 'love that passeth understanding' that has come to Vere and made him inwardly whole? The allusive 'far-shining sail' is a symbol of precisely this transcendent power. The feeling associated with its sighting is to be contrasted with the feeling of being 'lost on the infinite sea', in parallel with the contrast between being made inwardly whole and being inwardly broken.

And this is the understanding of 'salvation' which we find in *Billy Budd*. We may agree that, despite some heavy-handed parallels between Billy and Christ, no personal redeemer-figure is intended in this opera, such as we find in the traditional Christian understanding; but the opera is nevertheless concerned with the idea of salvation, mediated through the transcendent

26. Quoted in *ibid.*, p.150.

27. *ibid.*, p.154.

power of love. This is the love which saves from the brokenness and lostness associated with the 'infinite sea', making a person whole; and it is, of course, a transcendent power which Christians have traditionally identified with God.<sup>28</sup>

**B**ILLY BUDD is certainly not a conventional Christian parable, although, as has been demonstrated, it borrows ideas and terminology from Christian sources. But it is not a purely secular parable either. It is a *tertium quid*; and this perhaps accounts, at least in part, for the difficulties commentators have had in providing satisfactory explanations of it.

Did Britten recognise this ambiguity in *Billy Budd* – that, despite the theological language used in the libretto, Billy is not a divine Christ-figure, and that salvation is mediated, not through a recognition of the divine, but through a recognition of the transcendent? If he did, he probably found it congenial. According to the report of the Local Tribunal to which Britten reported in 1942 for registration as a Conscientious Objector, he stated: 'I do not believe in the Divinity of Christ, but I think his teaching is sound and his example should be followed.'<sup>29</sup> However, despite any reservations he may have had about the concept of divinity, as Christians classically understand it, Britten was nevertheless conscious of being an artist working in a medium which allowed for expression of transcendent ideas. In his most extended articulation of his understanding of his art, Britten wrote: 'what is important in the Arts is *not* the scientific part, the analysable part of music, but the something which emerges from it but transcends it, which cannot be analysed because it is not *in* it, but *of* it.'<sup>30</sup> Britten, it would seem, was quite able to accept the reality of something which 'passeth understanding'; and this suggests that for him, at any rate, there were other alternatives to a traditional Christian understanding of salvation than a purely secular, humanist one. The extraordinarily powerful music which swells underneath Vere's affirmation of the transcendent 'far-shining sail' would seem to endorse this understanding.

Perhaps, in its affirmation of the possibility of moving from brokenness to wholeness through the mediation of a transcendent power, *Billy Budd* was intended (like *The rape of Lucretia*) to offer a model of healing for individuals living in a society still recovering from the devastations of the Second World War.<sup>31</sup> If so, it is unsurprising that *Billy Budd*, like *Lucretia*, draws on the Christian tradition, even if it eschews the explicit expressions of conventional piety which may be found in the earlier opera. And Britten continued to write works which drew heavily on Judaeo-Christian myth and symbol: indeed, his next major work after *Billy Budd* was *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*, and critics have not been slow to point out connections between the two.<sup>32</sup>

28. 1 John 4: 8 declares that 'God is love'.

29. Donald Mitchell & Philip Reed, ed.: *Letters from a life: selected letters and diaries of Benjamin Britten, volume two 1939–1945* (London: Faber & Faber 1998), p.1046.

30. Benjamin Britten: *On receiving the first Aspen Award* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), p.17.

31. cf. Fuller: 'Living on the edge', p.48.

32. Eric Walter White describes *Canticle II* as 'a parergon to *Billy Budd*' (White: *Benjamin Britten*, p.78). Humphrey Carpenter refers to it as an 'epilogue to his most recent opera' (Carpenter: *Benjamin Britten*, p. 304). Michael Kennedy considers it to be a 'second epilogue' to the opera (Kennedy: *Britten*, p.201). Peter Evans states that 'we cannot suppose the links between the two subjects to have escaped the composer' (Evans: *The music of Benjamin Britten*, pp.406–07). Graham Johnson notes interesting musical parallels between *Canticle II* and Billy's soliloquy in act 2 of the opera (Graham Johnson: 'Voice and piano', in Palmer, ed.: *The Britten companion*, p.295).

33. See Benjamin Britten, Eric Crozier & EM Forster: 'Discussion on *Billy Budd*', in Paul Kildea, ed.: *Britten on music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.199.

Perhaps Britten shunned the certainties of dogma because he shied away from rigid and inflexible systems, be they those which allow people to judge and condemn others, or those which imprison people within themselves and deny themselves wholeness and healing. The allusive tale of *Billy Budd*, and its treatment by his librettists, may therefore have appealed to him. Perhaps, too, he found something more 'real' than dogmatic certainty in Billy's glimpse of a far-shining sail: maybe, even, he found in the imprecise and nebulous nature of that glimpse analogies with his work as a composer – for, as he once commented, 'Music is an inexplicit art'.<sup>33</sup>

*Michael Fuller is Pantonian Professor at the Theological Institute of the Scottish Episcopal Church, and an Honorary Visiting Fellow of New College, Edinburgh.*