



The musical magic of ambiguity in Benjamin Britten's *Death in Venice*¹

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Abstract

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*This essay investigates the blurred musical significations in Benjamin Britten's **Death in Venice**, an opera based on Thomas Mann's important novella **Der Tod in Venedig**. The discussion of multiple meanings links up with two categories of ambiguity as set out by William Empson in his **Seven Types of Ambiguity**, that is two or more meanings which do not agree among themselves, but combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind, and two opposite meanings that show a fundamental division in the mind of the protagonist. It is indicated how this opera, as a story through music, portrays the physical and moral decay of the anti-hero, Gustav von Aschenbach, who enters the opera as a celebrated, world-renowned writer.*

1. Introduction

Arts and letters of our time, since they are a reflection of a complex society, of necessity reveal a multiplicity of meanings. Understanding the world (the eighteenth century ideal) or shaping the world (the nineteenth century ideal) seems no longer to be possible since fixed certainties were undermined by philosophical ideas such as Darwinian evolution, Marxist dialectics, Freudian and Pavlovian-Behaviourist psychology, and Einsteinian relativity (Smith, 1976:255-256). Any work of art that claims to be intelligible at first glance is at once suspect, at best it might be thought naive. In interpretation the emphasis has shifted from finding definite answers to the process of searching for meaning. Meaning now becomes "a journey rather than a destination" (Pople, 1994:xi).

1 This article is an updated version of a lecture with the same title delivered at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in April 1999. The title is derived from the expression that Mann himself used ("musikalische Zweideutigkeitszauber").

As arts and letters reveal a great variety of meanings, it is almost impossible to locate *the* meaning in a work of art. Plurisignation in Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig*, written in 1911 (see Mann, 1912) musically enhanced by Britten's opera of 1973 (see Britten, 1975), has given rise to varied interpretations of and numerous writings on the novella and the opera. *Death in Venice* is indeed considered as one of the most widely admired short novels of the twentieth century (Schmidgall, 1997:293).

There is a strong autobiographical aspect to this novella because it relies rather heavily on Mann's own experience in Venice – his fascination for a young Polish boy during their Venetian holiday was described by his wife in her memoirs (Schmidgall, 1997:295). The Polish Count Wladyslaw Moes (1987:184) reported in 1965 that he could be the boy in Mann's novella because his family's visit to Venice coincided with that of Mann and that, apart from the similarity with regard to dress and behaviour compared with the novella, the diminutive of his name *Wladzio* could have been misheard by Mann as Tadzio.

Additional to this autobiographical association, Zlotnick-Woldenberg (1997:549) pointed out that the outcome of the plot is already suggested by the names of the two main characters in the sense that they both suggest death, Aschenbach through its reference to ashes, and the association with the German word for death (*Tod*) in Tadzio's name. According to Edward Said, Venice is a place where one finds a special kind of finality, referring specifically to Wagner's death in 1883 (Said, 1999:46).

Apart from the fact that ambiguity lies at the heart of the life and work of both Thomas Mann and Benjamin Britten, multiple meaning in *Death in Venice* first of all manifests itself in the overall message of the novella as perceived by various scholars. Some writers, such as Erich Heller, describe the downfall of the middle-aged, world-famous writer as "tragic" while Rita Bergenholtz (1997:145) argues that "Mann presents us with a parody of tragedy, which satirizes the romantic assumptions that enable such an exalted view of humankind". On the other hand, Martin Travers refers to the banality of Aschenbach's exit (Bergenholtz, 1997:145) and Bertellini (1997:12) believes that

... (t)he decadent artist is not concerned with a mimetic representation of the external reality (social, political, or historical), but with his own unexplored and spiritual inner life. ... (H)is art consists of morbid representations of the richness and ambiguity of his hallucinated and mysterious visions ... of sensuous mergings with the infinite ...

What is clear, however, is that Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* and Britten's *Death in Venice* portray the physical and moral decay of the anti-hero. This shift of emphasis from earlier heroic, rational, or sentimental ideas about the nature of the operatic hero to a representation of disoriented, fragmented man is but one manifestation of a complex postmodern society. Another paradigm shift is represented by the move away from emphasis on musical content to the way various opposing forces are juxtaposed in order to create dynamic dialectic relationships.

In Freudian terms the conflict in Aschenbach's mind could be described as a conflict between id and superego. Being originally a monolithic personality (his disciplined, intellectual, moralistic self relating to his father) and suppressing the passionate, artistic side of his personality (his mother's inheritance), Aschenbach is unable to accept ambivalence and sees the world in terms of polar opposites. He regards the two parts of himself as opposites that cannot coexist, "they do not communicate with one another, they are, like Italy and Germany, the two settings in the novella" (Zlotnick-Woldenberg, 1997:543). Although Aschenbach longs for human contact he is unable to establish human relationships and his "relationship" with the beautiful Polish boy with "the head of Eros" (Mann, 1912:35), remains a fantasy. The embodiment of beauty and moral decay represented by Tadzio's classical yet decadent beauty could be paralleled with the overripe contaminated strawberries which lead to Aschenbach's physical destruction (death).

2. Ambiguity in music and language

It was in Venice that Thomas Mann referred to the "musical magic of ambiguity" in a letter to his children Erika and Klaus in 1932 (Mann, 1962:317). This letter was written from the Hôtel des Bains on the Lido, the same hotel where Mann and his wife stayed in 1911 and also the setting for the novella.

In the letter Mann did not further expound on the expression "the musical magic of ambiguity". The reason for making a connection between music and ambiguity could be sought in the fact that words represent the conscious level and music the unconscious level of perception. From this statement one can deduce that music is able to express that dimension of the text which cannot be expressed verbally. According to the metaphysical aesthetics of Schopenhauer "music – unlike all the other arts, which merely represented the surface appearance of things – directly expressed the ultimate reality of the world" (Reed, 1987:163). The composer Warren Benson believes that music is in a sense non-conceptually communicative because it evokes some "rich potential that

we have for a kind of meaning that falls in the cracks of other languages" (1979:71). As music lacks precise verbal articulation, it elicits different expectations within various listeners and it is this kind of ambiguity of understanding of the meaning of music that, according to Benson, makes it an art.

One of the important characteristics of the literary work of art, is the principle of multiple meaning (Lotman, 1972:110). Since William Empson published his influential *Seven Types of Ambiguity* in 1930, the term *ambiguity* has been widely used in literary criticism (Abrams, 1988:9-10, and Cuddon, 1977:33). According to Abrams, Empson "helped make current a mode of explication which has greatly expanded our sense of the complexity and richness of poetic language".

Ambiguous meanings which I have identified in Britten's *Death in Venice* fall mainly within Empson's fourth and seventh categories. He defines an ambiguity of the fourth type as two or more meanings of a statement which "do not agree among themselves, but combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author" (Empson, 1953:133). According to the psychological criterion of the fourth class "several feelings, several reactions to a complex situation, are united by the writer, and can be accepted as a unity by the reader" (Empson, 1953:190). The seventh type of ambiguity "occurs when the two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind" (Empson, 1953:192). This type is the most ambiguous because, apart from the psychological idea of context, it also involves the anthropological idea of opposite. According to Empson the idea of "opposite", a comparatively late human invention, implies conflict and therefore allows great variety of interpretation. "(I)t is likely that those theories of aesthetics which regard poetry as the resolution of a conflict will find their illustrations chiefly in the limited field covered by the seventh type" (Empson, 1953:192-193). The resolution of a conflict plays an important role, not only in poetry, but also in dramatic presentation such as classical tragedy because tragic lives are not only ambiguous, but intrinsically conflicting as well (Oudemans & Lardinois, 1987:59).

3. Opposites in the opera

The opera, *Death in Venice*, offers many examples of opposites, to name but a few. The central theme of the opera revolves around the contest between Aschenbach's rational consciousness and irrational subconscious, contrasting a physical exterior world with a psychological interior world. In the process a psychological change takes place in the protagonist (reflected in the changing character of his music), thereby

creating a dynamic-static opposition between Aschenbach and Tadzio whose music remains the same till the end. "The beautiful Tadzio leaves the opera as beautiful and as untouched as he entered it, whereas Aschenbach undergoes the ultimate modification: from life to death" (Mitchell, 1984:245). Aschenbach's music fluctuates between recitative style² with piano accompaniment (demonstrating sophisticated detachment as both narrator and protagonist) and a more melodic style with orchestral accompaniment demonstrating the passionate side of his temperament. His infrequent verbal exchanges are with characters of secondary importance. Consequently the only meaningful dialogue is with himself.

Another opposition is created by juxtaposing human life with mythological figures such as Apollo who represents the rational on an epic scale, and Dionysus who represents the passionate in a more lyrical style. These two mythological figures symbolize the opposition of abstract ideas such as beauty, purity, order, simplicity, and discipline on the one hand, and confusion and derangement on the other hand.

The opposition of the home culture (German) with the foreign culture (Polish) runs parallel with the verbal articulation of the main character, and Tadzio who never utters a word in the opera. The music accompanying the aged Aschenbach (who represents the artist as individual) is played by traditional Western instruments, whereas the music of the young Tadzio (who forms part of an extended family) is provided by Balinese gamelan instruments. In a personal communication to Mervyn Cooke, Myfanwe Piper the librettist of the opera, remarked that "the type of melancholy gaiety in the Balinese sound is in total contrast to the rather Germanic character of Aschenbach's self-absorption and underlines his feeling of alienation" (Cooke, 1998:231). According to Cooke, for Britten the sound of the gamelan could be regarded as a "symbol of yearning towards an unattainable, perfect goal or ideal". Linking up with Britten's sexual preference, Philip Brett points out that the gamelan is regarded as "a gay marker in American music" (Cooke, 1998:248).

Just as aesthetically satisfying music is opposed to the vulgar banality of street musicians, the spiritual world is contrasted with the secular world. In the first scene the chanting of religious inscriptions on the façade of the mortuary chapel in Munich is followed by melodic strains of the traveller singing about foreign countries. In the piazza scene (scene 9) liturgical chant sung in San Marco is alternated with Aschenbach's

2 According to the American composer Ned Rorem (1987:188), the "endless recitatives" was one aspect of the opera which elicited negative comment.

anguished pursuit music. Another opposition is set up by contrasting the Games of Apollo (act I) which takes place during the day, with the nightmare (the dream in act II) in which the victory of Dionysus over Apollo represents the final triumph of Aschenbach's irrational sub-conscious over his rational consciousness. Opposites which, for Aschenbach, had been incompatible are "deliberately collapsed into each other threatening complete senselessness" (Said, 1999:53).

In a physical sense Venice itself also signifies an opposition between city and sea, concrete and water. For Edward Said, however, Venice's ambiguity lies much deeper, referring to the city as part Inferno, part Paradise (1999:50-53). As the city of death and desire and with a history of glory and degradation the transition from gorgeousness to garbage is swift. In Mann's letter mentioned earlier he describes Venice as *zweideutig* (ambivalent), a description he took over from Simmel. He specifically refers to the *musikalische Zweideutigkeitszauber* of the city (1962:317). In spirit as well as in its physical appearance Venice is an embodiment

... of the antithesis between beauty and ugliness, good and evil, darkness and light and all the extremes experienced throughout his history by ethical man. It was, therefore, a perfect setting for Mann's variation on the archetypal theme of the corruption of sense by the senses, the mind by the body, man by animal (Palmer, 1984:259).

The ambiguity of Venice could account for its appeal to all "double-natures" (Palmer, 1984:259), referring to individuals who are ambiguous with regard to sexual preference such as Thomas Mann, Benjamin Britten, and the late romantic poet August Graf von Platen, known as Platen. For the latter Venice had a special attraction because in Venice he is conscious of the "worm within the rose, the all-too-perfect ripeness poised on the brink of decay" (Palmer, 1984:252).

The milieu or the physical space of a work of art is more than just decorative background. Jurij Lotman believes that there is a strong connection between the subject of the literary work and the artistic space in which the events take place (Du Plooy, 1984:122) and reviewer Desmond Shawe-Taylor (1987:192) specifically connected the message in *Death in Venice* with its physical location when he referred to Venice as a manifestation of the ambiguous role of the creative artist caught between Apollonian order and Dionysian licence.

Apart from ambiguity suggested by physical space, enhanced density of meaning is created on an abstract level by intertextual references to Greek mythological figures, such as Apollo, Dionysus, and Eros. As

tragic lives are permeated with controlled ambiguity (Oudemans & Lardinois, 1987:59) these references play an important role in the creation of meaning and more specifically universal meaning of an ambiguous nature.

In a letter to the poet and writer Carl Maria Weber, Mann (1962:176-7)³ wrote in 1920 that the novel is based upon the distinction between Dionysian spirit of irresponsibly-individualistically flowing lyric and the Apollonian spirit of objectively constricted, socially responsible epic. More specifically Mann said that the subject of his narrative was passion as a means of confusion and disgrace.⁴

4. Opposites developed diachronically

Death in Venice as short novel and as opera could be regarded as an apposite demonstration of “musical magic of ambiguity” in the sense that, on the one hand, the contrasting of ideas, literary as well as musical, creates a coherent dramatic structure when it is viewed from a diachronic point of view.⁵ The oscillation between two or more states of mind during the opera, such as Aschenbach’s vacillating mood, is an example of a diachronic manifestation of ambiguity. On the other hand the simultaneous contrasting of ideas creates a polyphonic effect when it is viewed from a synchronic perspective. A synchronic perspective focuses on the occurrence of two or more meanings at the same time.

In the course of the opera Aschenbach’s state of mind fluctuates between the rational and the irrational, between Platonic idealism and Dionysian decadence. The conflict in Aschenbach’s mind is finally represented by the *Phaedrus* monologue (scene 16), based on one of Plato’s most important writings (Pieper, 1964:xi). In this document Eros, an ambivalent figure, plays a central role (Pieper, 1964:xiv). The ambi-

3 My summary and translation of: *Den artistischen Grund, warum es diesen Anschein gewinnen konnte, haben Sie klug und klar erkannt. Er liegt in dem Unterschied zwischen dem dionysischen Geist unverantwortlich-individualistisch sich ausströmender Lyrik und dem apollinischen objektiv gebundener, sittlich-gesellschaftlich verantwortlicher Epik.*

4 My summary of: *Leidenschaft als Verwirrung und Entwürdigung war eigentlich der Gegenstand meiner Fabel.*

5 The term *diachronic* is borrowed from linguistics but without taking over its full linguistic meaning. In this article the expression is used to describe the way a musical feature changes during the course of time, in this case, in the course of the opera. The way I use *diachronic* has to do with the way in which the “flow of time is shaped”, to use Kramer’s expression (Jordan & Kafalenos, 1989:131).

valent nature of this mythological figure is summarized as follows by the Greek scholar E.R. Dodds: Eros represents a combination of the physiological impulse of sex and "the dynamic impulse which drives the soul forward in its quest for a satisfaction transcending earthly experience" (Hindley, 1990:520). It is precisely this dualistic character of Eros that eventually leads to the disintegration of Aschenbach's mind and soul. After the confusing power of Eros has manifested itself at the end of act I, a progressive capitulation to the sensual takes place in the second act reaching a climax in Aschenbach's question: "Does beauty lead to wisdom, Phaedrus? Yes, but through the senses ... And senses lead to passion, Phaedrus, and passion to the abyss."

The unfolding of the music itself also reveals ambivalent meanings. The ingenious use of recurrent musical themes and motives results in a unity of expression that many writers have commented on. The study of themes and motives as musical constructs alone, restricts the investigation to the physical surface of the music. However, when the meaning of ambiguities implied by themes and motives is considered as well, the subtext reveals a density of signification which can only invite admiration for the composer's insight into the human psyche and his ability to express abstract ideas in musical terms.

It is impossible in the limited space of an essay to do justice to a musical and verbal text which is so rich in meaning. Therefore, I shall focus on the way pitch is organized to create ambiguous meaning, concentrating on the first act because here musical ideas that formed the basis for blurred signification are introduced.

By means of cross references during the course of the opera ambiguous effects are created in a musical manner. I shall firstly discuss Apollo's music that appears in the form of four interpolations during the games (scene 7). In the opera the Games of Apollo is created by the librettist, possibly or not with the help of the composer, because the games itself does not appear in the novella. In the novella Aschenbach merely watches Tadzio and his friends playing on the beach. But in the opera Tadzio proves to be the winner in various sports items. The Games of Apollo which ends the first act portrays the systematic disintegration of Aschenbach and his belief in himself as disciplined writer, rational artist and servant of Apollo. At the end of the games Aschenbach arrives at the moment of truth: for the first time he acknowledges his love for the boy, Tadzio.

The fact that the opening strain of Apollo's music (example 1) at the beginning of the games can be traced back to Tadzio's music (see example 2) could be regarded as an indication of the effect of the

outcome of the games on Aschenbach. This music (143)⁶ of which the first two strains are derived from the first Delphic Hymn (Hindley, 1992:416) has more than one connotation.⁷ On the one hand Apollo's vocal part could be considered as symbolic of the Apollonian ideal of classical beauty and rational order as expressed by his words: "He who loves beauty worships me" in the scale of E major, in the opera the key associated with Aschenbach. On the other hand, the accompaniment refers to Tadzio through the sustained chord of A major, the tonal region associated with Tadzio. (Compare the accompaniment in the strings in example 2.) In Britten's works A major almost always symbolizes innocence and purity (Cooke, 1998:237-238). According to Cooke the relationship between Aschenbach's E major and Tadzio's A major scale could be regarded as "a symbol for their incompatibility yet (at least as far as Aschenbach is concerned) unique intimacy".

Example 1: Scene 7 – The Games of Apollo

6 The number in brackets refers to the repetition number in the score.

7 This fragment dates from the second century BC, according to Colin Matthews (Mitchell, 1987:64-65).

Further reference to Tadzio could be found in the expressive augmented fourth interval in Apollo's music against the words "who loves" (E – A# marked with a bracket in example 1). The split fourth degree (A# and A natural, marked with crosses in example 1) against the words "loves beauty" suggests that the concept of beauty is not monolithic either. The augmented fourth interval appears in the upper register of the Balinese *selisir* scale on which Tadzio's theme is based (Cooke, 1998:237). In example 2 the scale starts on A, thus forming the scale A C# D F# G# with the augmented fourth between D and G#.

Example 2: Scene 5 – On the beach

An ambivalent effect is created by the augmented fourth which represents two different scales, namely the Balinese *selisir* scale (with the augmented fourth in its upper structure) and the Lydian mode (with the augmented fourth in its lower structure). As a Lydian effect the augmented fourth suggests Aschenbach's fascination for the beautiful Tadzio. For example, at the end of scene 4 his monologue ends on C# ("beauty") forming an augmented fourth with G, the root of the G major triad against which it sounds.

Example 3: Transition from scene 4 to scene 5

Already at the beginning of the opera the presence of the ambivalent augmented fourth interval in Aschenbach's vocal line suggests doubt about his expectation ("My ordered soul shall be refreshed at last") when he decided to see the world (end of scene 1). Even without supporting evidence in this opera, the augmented fourth is by nature an ambivalent interval in itself if its enharmonic equivalent, the diminished fifth, is accepted as an auditory equivalent. In tonal context the resolution of the augmented fourth and the diminished fifth moves in opposite directions.

After the Games of Apollo at the end of the first act, the ambiguous fourth degree is central to the first of five strains in Aschenbach's monologue. This monologue depicts the conflict between the rational and the intuitive in Aschenbach's mind. ("When thought becomes feeling, feeling thought"). The five strains are accompanied by a sustained chord based on Tadzio's *selisir* scale. Alternating with orchestral interpolations, they demonstrate in a musical manner, on the one hand, the conflict between the Apollonian and Dionysian in Aschenbach's mind and on the other hand they anticipate the outcome of the conflict in the second act.

Example 4: Scene 7 – The Games of Apollo (Aschenbach)

This section begins with a reference to the first strain of Apollo's music with its ambivalent fourth degree (D#, D natural, marked with crosses in example 4) but now in augmented note values. However, Aschenbach's tonal region of E (Apollo's music in example 1) has been replaced with Tadzio's tonal region of A. The second strain ends with a symmetrical formation based on the first four notes of Tadzio's *selisir* scale against the words "before beauty", but now transposed to Aschenbach's tonal area (E). Where the Lydian fourth (D#) and the upper tonic (A) in the third phrase outline the words "the ecstatic", the penultimate line displays a blurring of Tadzio's tonal area through chromatic inflections. Finally, however, in the last phrase the triumph of sensual beauty as represented

by Tadzio's magic is explicitly established by the first two notes, A – G#, that form the outline of the *selisir* scale (the Tadzio-call) followed by the symmetrical formation F#, D, C#, A representing Tadzio's beauty, but now in his tonal region. Here words and music emphasize the central role of Eros in this opera and also the fact that the *Phaedrus* dialogue deals with "the persuasive use of words" (De Vries, 1969:23). In a certain sense this Eros-Tadzio call could be regarded as a musical manifestation of Aschenbach's hope that his feeling for the young boy would cure the writer's block of which he complained at the beginning of the opera.

Another musical idea that changes its meaning in the course of the opera is the so-called vision theme. At the beginning of the opera this sweeping theme, with its expressive stringing along of thirds, typical of Britten's earlier years (Evans, 1979:546) is associated with the view of the sea from Aschenbach's hotel room (scene 4).

Example 5: Scene 4 – The first evening at the hotel

The ocean held a special attraction for Aschenbach – it symbolizes

... the hard-worked artist's longing for rest, his yearning to seek refuge from the thronging manifold shapes of his fancy in the bosom of the simple and vast; and another yearning, opposed to his art and perhaps for that very reason a lure, for the unorganized, the immeasurable, the eternal – in short for nothingness (Mann, 1912: 36).

In Mann's view the infinity of the ocean can be associated with infinity as an abstract concept and of ultimate spiritual reality (Hindley, 1992:408). At the end of the opera, before Aschenbach slumps down in his chair on the beach, the ocean symbolizes death itself, or mythologically speaking, the *Elysium*.

Example 6: Scene 17 – The departure

The spacious original vision theme with its sweeping gestures depicting an exterior view of a physical world, has contracted to a shadow of its former glory at the end of the opera, representing a forlorn interior view, accompanied by dissonant tone clusters (320).

5. Opposites developed synchronically

Many authors (for example Evans, 1979:535, Carnegy, 1987:176 and Matthews, 1987:63) mention the prominence of a pervasive four-note motive which symbolizes the plague and its several manifestations, generally referred to as the plague motive (against “(m)arvels unfold” in example 7). In its various guises this motive represents the physiological, psychological and mythological dimensions of Aschenbach’s downfall (Carnegy, 1987:176). Establishing itself in the first scene as an innocent expression of the Traveller’s delight at seeing the world, it actually anticipates the sense of foreboding and of the fatal attraction of Venice.

Example 7: Scene 2 – Munich

An ambiguous effect is suggested by the last three notes of this motive. Allowing for the auditory effect of enharmonic change, D# (heard as Eb) also causes a split third degree, creating a major and a minor third interval on C.⁸ This ambiguous three note formation⁹ occurs in many guises in the course of the opera as for example at repetition number 181 (example 4) against the words “when genius”, creating doubt about the statement. Another double meaning is created at the end of the first act when Aschenbach admits his affection for Tadzio. The words “love you” are expressed by means of a major third. However, a melisma on “I” emphasizes the minor third, signifying that the outcome of this confession could be of a dichotomous nature.

8 As the ambiguous three-note formation mainly occurs with a split third degree in this opera (e.g. 18 bars later as C#, E#, E and a further two bars later in inverted form as D, Bb, B), the question may well be asked why the second degree is split up when the fate motive is introduced. There could be two reasons for this: Either the split second degree was preferred to facilitate reading, or the reader of the score (the listener without a score cannot be sure!) was purposely misled by using D# instead of Eb.

9 Britten’s predilection for “mixed modes”, more specifically the major-minor third is pointed out by Peter Evans (1979:533).

Example 8: Scene 7 – The Games of Apollo (end of act I)

In the opera this ambiguous three-note formation occurs accompanied by words central to the plot of the opera. Occasionally this minor-major formation is inverted. Then the semitone lies below the minor third. In this ordering the permutation is especially striking when it accompanies the words “[s]o longing passes back and forth” at the end of the first act.

The piano accompaniment represents another static way in which doubt is created in the mind of the listener. After having settled down in the hotel (scene 4), Aschenbach meditates upon his purpose as famous writer: “Yes, I turned away from the paradox and daring of my youth, renounced bohemianism and sympathy with the outcast soul, to concentrate upon simplicity, beauty, form –”. The unaccompanied recitative-like soliloquy is punctuated by interjections in the piano, one hand playing on the black keys, and the other on the white keys. In reality the auditory effect is not one of simplicity when two scale systems, namely the pentatonic and the tonal system are combined, or even when the pentatonic scale on the black keys is combined with a pentatonic formation on the white keys. Ambiguity is further enhanced by the resultant semitone clashes.

In the final scene of the opera *Tadzio's theme* suggests the "otherness" of his world through the disembodied sound of the vibraphone (Evans, 1979:540). It occurs against a lengthy pedal point on G# which finally corrupts his tonal field (A), thereby suggesting his "disintegration" as well. On the other hand, the fact that the note which causes the final disintegration is so far removed from *Tadzio's* tonal field (A in the top register), could raise doubt about the nature of its disintegration.

6. Conclusion

It is the utmost form of irony that Aschenbach, the world famous man of letters and one who experiences life through his literary reactions, is unable to express his feelings for the Polish boy verbally, even when he has the chance to do so. As the protagonist in this drama does not communicate with the person who is responsible for instigating the dramatic unfolding of the plot, as well as his eventual disintegration, both spiritual and physical, the drama is set in motion and developed by intertextual references to mythological figures. These references, many of which are of an ambiguous nature, create a density of meaning. The manner in which these ambiguities are set in a musical environment enhances these multiple meanings.

The dialectic tension created by the multiple oppositions is reflected in the music in a diachronic and a synchronic manner. The synthesis between a dynamic diachronic manifestation and static synchronic occurrences of ambiguities, underlines the interdependency between the literary and the musical in this opera, thus achieving a unity of expression of the highest artistic order.

The final ambiguity in this opera is experienced when the boy, in the last scene, walks into the sea and Aschenbach collapses in his chair on the beach. Within the physical environment of the sea as symbol of infinity, death itself has ambiguous connotations. For many people death means the end, the final destruction of human physical existence. For others, death signifies the beginning of eternal spiritual life.

The ending of the opera defies narrative closure because it does not resolve the conflict. The final effect is one of irresolution.¹⁰ For Aschenbach there is no answer beyond the Dionysian-Apollonian conflict as he is unable to withdraw or fulfil his longing for the desired object. What lingers on in the mind of the listener is his yearning for the

10 Shannon McKellar also referred to "the unanswerable question" in Britten's *Owen Wingrave* (1999:391).

unattainable. Beginning, middle and end, which were the essentials of good story-telling according to Aristotle, have collapsed into each other to form "one great middle in a world where beginnings and endings extend into the unknown" (Smith, 1976:258).

The functional way in which the music in the opera enhances Mann's story elevates the aesthetic experience of this opera from a "story and music" (Said, 1999 :48) to a "story through music". The open-endedness of the opera and the numerous ambivalent significations¹¹ which are enhanced by the music emphasize that aspect of Thomas Mann's novella which makes it a typical postmodern story.

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11 If ambiguity is regarded as a typical postmodern characteristic, the basis for establishing a typology is laid. However, establishing a typology chips away at the foundation of postmodernism which precisely opposes classifications.

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Musical score

Britten, B. 1975. *Death in Venice: an opera in two acts, op. 88*. London : Faber. Vocal score.

Key concepts:

ambiguity
Benjamin Britten
Death in Venice
Thomas Mann

Kernbegrippe:

Benjamin Britten
Death in Venice
meerdereïgheid
Thomas Mann