“Strange, Strange Hallucination”:
Dozing and Dreaming in Benjamin Britten’s Death in Venice

By Shersten Johnson

Abstract

In the opening of Britten’s Death in Venice, the protagonist, Aschenbach, walks through a Munich garden and encounters a Foreign Traveler who commands him to "see" exotic marvels. The Traveler's aria foreshadows elements that recur throughout the opera: fantastic images, strange personae, phonemic sounds, and vivid music. The vision fills Aschenbach with wanderlust and prompts his trip to Venice. Critics generally assume that once Aschenbach "awakens" from the Traveler’s hallucination, his trip to Venice and the ensuing events comprise waking, diegetically real action. Given the multivalent processes that spring from the Aschenbach’s vision, though, I would like to challenge this commonly held conception and propose a reading in which Aschenbach never leaves Munich but merely dreams – or daydreams – of the Traveler, Venice, and Tadzio. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how the music even replicates a state of diminishing awareness approximating dozing right before the Traveler appears. From then on, we as listeners cross over into a fanciful sound world, leaving behind the consciously manipulated twelve-tone environment of Munich for good.

The story, written and set in 1911 by Thomas Mann, shows the influence of Freud’s theories of the unconscious and repressed desire. Drawing on tools of Freudian dream analysis, I further demonstrate how Britten’s music amplifies and reinforces the condensations of Aschenbach’s imagination, disguising his hidden desires. Along the way, I consider several productions of Death in Venice and ask how their interpretations stage the Traveler’s vision: Is the vision a dream or daydream? Is it an erotic fantasy or merely the workings of an artist's imagination before putting pen to paper?
“Strange, Strange Hallucination”:
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Venedig liegt nur noch im Land der Träume, Und wirft nur Schatten her aus alten Tagen.

[Venice still lies in dreamland, casting here only the shadows of her olden day.]

(Platen, 1825/1914, p. 4)

In the opening moments of Benjamin Britten's Death in Venice, the protagonist, Aschenbach, walks through a garden in Munich and encounters a Foreign Traveler who commands him to “see” exotic marvels. The Traveler’s aria describes the images, foreshadowing many of the elements and developmental processes of the rest of the opera, among them recurring patterns of strange intrusions, dangerous sensuality, and repressed desire. Aschenbach joins in at the end of the aria, responding to the vision in what Britten’s 1973 sketch labels “the Dream Duet.” “Strange, strange, hallucination,” he sings, in an exotic melisma that draws out the ah and oo sounds. These sounds, the vowels in the name Tadziù, initiate an array of musical/phonemic leitmotifs, fetishizing the name of the boy who will become the object of Aschenbach’s desire. Even the music of the aria returns verbatim in a later scene, and the Traveler himself becomes the first of seven characters concerted in the same bass-baritone role. All of these elements — exotic images, dramatic personae, phonemic sounds, and musical ideas — arise from the moment of the hallucination and develop, forming polysemic links throughout the opera.

Listeners generally assume that once Aschenbach “awakens” from the Traveler’s “dream,” his trip to Venice and the ensuing events comprise waking, diegetically real action (with two exceptions: when Aschenbach dozes off briefly on the boat to Venice and late in the
opera when he falls asleep in his Venice hotel and has a climactic nightmare). In most interpretations, then, the psychological overtones and fanciful images in the rest of the opera are just part of Aschenbach’s waking perceptions and self-analysis. Philip Rupprecht (2001, pp. 246-47) puts it this way,

In the operatic *Death in Venice*…my central claim is that audiences confront Aschenbach’s self most directly by vivid sounding translations of his physical perceptions – in particular the transfixed “sonic gaze” attending his awareness of Tadzio – more directly, even than by full-orchestral eruptions of what can only be called instinct. Meanwhile, those other moments of literary reflection set by Britten as recitative soliloquy are episodes in Aschenbach’s failed self-observation.

Ken Cazan, director of Chicago Opera Theater’s 2004 production of *Death in Venice*, expresses more doubt as to the reality of events,

Everything is representative, nothing is real; there is a sneaking suspicion that it may all be happening in Aschenbach's fevered mind. Both Mann's original novella and Britten's opera have significant surreal elements: time is rarely logical and not always sequential, there are the dream sequences of the Apollonian games (in the Britten) and the Dionysian revels (in both the Mann and the Britten) and, particularly in the Britten, there is the consistent character of the "nemesis" as we are calling him in rehearsals. (Cazan, 2004).

Given the multivalent operatic processes that spring from the Aschenbach’s vision, though, I would like to go one step further and challenge the conception that the opera is a dramatization of a character’s waking inner troubled thoughts and an encoding of his Venice perceptions in
sound, and propose instead a reading in which Aschenbach never leaves Munich and merely
imagines – or dreams – of the Traveler, Venice, and Tadzio. One can thus hear the rest of the
opera as recreating the sonorous and visual images of that dream.

To support this reading, I advocate re-imagining the opening scene to hear how it points
to Aschenbach’s change of conscious state as he nods off. This analysis will demonstrate how
the music replicates a state of diminishing awareness that approximates falling asleep right
before the appearance of the Traveler. An audit of the rest of the opera will follow, interpreting it
as if Aschenbach were still in Munich dreaming – or perhaps daydreaming. Observations gleaned
from Britten’s sketches will reinforce this interpretation. Furthermore, since the narrative action,
set in 1911 by novelist Thomas Mann and adapted in 1973 by librettist Myfanwy Piper, shows
the influence of Freud’s theories, a natural next step will be to analyze this dream through the
lens of psychoanalysis. Precedent from the Mann reception literature, in which an author reads
part of the novella as a dream, will set the stage. I will listen for the way in which Britten’s music
amplifies or constrains the sense of the surreal, and further employ dream analysis to illuminate
the way music reinforces and even guides the condensations and displacements of Aschenbach’s
imagination and thus both masks and reveals his hidden desires. To provide a foundation for the
analysis, I will examine how Freud analyzed the dreams of fictional characters as well as his
own, and then apply his techniques to see what they can reveal about Death in Venice. Along the
way, I will consider several productions of the opera to see how each interprets Aschenbach’s
illusion: is it a momentary vision? Or perhaps a dream or daydream? Is it an erotic fantasy or
merely the workings of an artist’s imagination in preparation for putting pen to paper? Or perhaps
not a dream at all.
Aschenbach Nods Off

In the very first moments of the opera, we learn about Aschenbach’s fame as a novelist and his recent struggle with writer’s block. Almost schizophrenically, he vacillates between vehement, proud statements about his rigorous professional discipline on the one hand and befuddled queries as to why he is “now at a loss” on the other. Taking a break from his troubled writing work, he walks through a Munich garden and frets about his loss of words, baffled that he has not received any relief through sleep. <SOUND CLIP #3 – “My mind beats on…”> He begins singing, “my mind beats on, my mind beats on and no words come,” in a 12-tone phrase that musically hints at the source of his troubles: in seeking a “perfect” art, he eschews emotionality and matters of the heart, not unlike Adrian Leverkühn, who makes a deal with the devil to obtain the twelve-tone technique in Mann’s later novel *Doktor Faustus*. The next phrase, “taxing, tiring, taxing, tiring, unyielding, unproductive” inverts the opening music and links his writer’s block with exhaustion. A few measures later, he starts over in a parallel fashion, “my mind beats on, my mind beats on, no sleep restores me.” <SOUND CLIP #4 – “No sleep restores me”> Ex. 1 compares this statement with the opening, both of which begin identically throughout the texture, only differing in their third subphrases: in the latter statement (Ex. 1b), “no sleep restores me” substitutes for the earlier “and no words come” (Ex. 1a). The substitution uses the same pitch classes but reorders them for a more convincing move to an E tonal center avoided in previous sections. This key, in which Aschenbach sings about his reputation as a successful yet disciplined writer, becomes associated with the controlled productive state to which Aschenbach seeks restoration. Unfortunately, although the tonal center is briefly restored, Aschenbach’s ability to write is not. The musical parallelism of the two phrases shown in Ex. 1, combined with the parallel linguistic negation – “no sleep…no words” –
fosters the notion that no sleep “restores” because no sleep “comes.” Aschenbach, it would seem, suffers from insomnia and sleep deprivation: symptoms of which might indeed include hallucinations.

Ex. 1a-b: “no words come – no sleep restores”

Aschenbach (ms. 1-5):

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My mind beats on, my mind beats on, and no words come.
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Aschenbach (ms. 19-22):

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My mind beats on, my mind beats on, no sleep restores me.
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Fatigued from his creative struggle, from his lack of sleep, and perhaps even from his walk through the Munich garden, Aschenbach stops by a cemetery to rest. “O tender leaves and tardy spring refresh me,” he sings, relaxing into an as yet uncharacteristic lyricism, supplicating nature for relief from his fatigue. His phrase soon trails off following the fading accompaniment, and a subdued, repetition of a fragment of earlier fanfare music ensues. This time, Aschenbach remains silent while muted trumpets accompanied by pianissimo strings and timpani “quietly” echo the fanfare. Ex. 2a compares the earlier music that forcefully set the text, “I Aschenbach, famous as a master writer…” <SOUND CLIP #5 – “I Aschenbach…”> with its softer echo (Ex. 2b). <SOUND CLIP #6 – Fanfare Echo> This softer version, without the frenzied and defiant words of the proud declamation, draws us into Aschenbach’s inner world. Aschenbach no longer

Ex. 2a-b: Fanfare and Echo
speaks out loud as if introducing himself to others, but he sits musing to himself. Sextuplets in
the strings accompany the muted fanfare again, but this time, the figures are elongated by tied eighths that blur detail creating the sense of fuzzy memory. By mimicking the sonic mutations of more distant sounds, the sextuplet figure thus activates the conceptual metaphor STATES ARE LOCATIONS. 

In other words, we generally conceptualize the change from a state of conscious awareness to one of relaxed alertness as a change in location, with the latter being more distant and more removed from sensory stimulation. This conceptual metaphor leads to entailments like: “falling asleep,” “entering REM sleep” “drifting off to slumberland.” The imprecise fanfare fragments and blurred sextuplets thus aurally mime a state of reduced awareness and diminished cognitive activity not unlike that of falling asleep.

While Aschenbach rests, an offstage chorus eerily recites the texts on the nearby mortuary facade, pulling him deeper into the phantasmal world of his catnap. Offstage male and female choruses sing ghostly phrases – “they enter into the house of the Lord” and “may light everlasting shine upon them” – accompanied by overlapping strings, which sustain each of the sung notes into “cold” clusters. Like the more relaxed version of the fanfare, which evokes previous music in a blurred way, these scriptural phrases rework the earlier music of Aschenbach’s lines from the opening of the opera, (heard in sound clip #3) similarly smudging musical details. Ex. 3a compares Aschenbach’s chromatic opening phrases, which articulate a twelve-tone row followed by its transposed inversion, with the scripture fragments sung later by the offstage chorus (Ex. 3b). <SOUND CLIP #7 – Scriptures> The example demonstrates the exchange of tightly controlled construction for an open, less tense, whole-tone version with the same melodic contour. Both the twelve-tone and whole-tone patterns articulate two phrases, with the second phrase forming a transposed inversion of the first. The example uses solid lines to

Ex. 3a&b: Aschenbach’s lines compared with offstage chorus
connect pitches arranged in the same order and dashed lines connecting E-flats with E-naturals to show this pitch-class substitution. The scripture fragments pick up on the predominately whole-step intervals of the twelve-tone theme, smoothing out the confusing downward slippage of step classes: F–G (slip) F#–G#–A# (slip) A–B becomes F–G–A–B and so on. Moreover, the scriptures condense Aschenbach’s 24 pitches into 12 with dream-like efficiency. Symmetrical whole-tone intervals become predictable and more relaxed while the offstage chorus, by virtue of their physical remoteness, further creates a sense of distance associated with the state of reduced alertness. The sustained, blurred whole-tone clusters, bring to mind the popular trope for entering
a dream state. Finally, static pianissimo strings lull Aschenbach into quiet reverie, and the white noise of a triple piano cymbal trill voices a continuous “shushhhhh.”

In early plans for the opera, these scraps of scripture were to have been projected on the wall of the staged mortuary chapel, but producer Colin Graham voiced practical considerations of readability, so Britten assigned the texts to the offstage chorus instead (Britten, Notes, 1973). This change adds to the aforementioned sense of interiority by pulling us into Aschenbach’s inner mental world. Rather than watching him read the verses — a waking action — we hear the disembodied voices of his imagination intone them as he relaxes his alertness. Aschenbach thus becomes the passive observer of his thoughts as other voices articulate them with dreamlike peculiarity. Although he fights sleep with brief outbursts resembling hypnic jerks, one might hear him finally succumb during the rest that immediately precedes the music signaling the appearance of the Traveler. The “light of inspiration” having left him, his consciousness dims, and contemplating “the black rectangular hole in the ground,” he enters the darkness of sleep. The whole-tone music swirls more rapidly and we can almost imagine the wavy lines that cross a television screen when a character begins to dream. From then on, we as listeners cross over the boundary into another, more primal and exotic sound world of the illusion, filled with oriental scales and foreign instruments, and strange figures like the Traveler. We thus leave the realistic, consciously manipulated twelve-tone sound world of Munich behind for good. In a sense, Britten’s Aschenbach inverts Leverkühn’s process: Aschenbach abandons his “soulless” ordered twelve-tone music, makes a deal with the devil (in the guise of Dionysus), and the resultant music resounds with the full sensuousness of pentatonic and modal scales accompanied with planes of major triads.

Dreaming in Thomas Mann’s Novella
Since the opera could be heard to mimic the sounds of Aschenbach falling asleep, one might wonder if the novella on which the opera is based depicts the same sleepy reveries. A close reading of Mann’s 1912 novella, *Der Tod in Venedig*, reveals an ambiguous mixture of narrative action that the reader accepts as real with language and surreal images that obscure those realities. Not surprisingly, then, some of the critical literature on Mann’s novella supports reading Aschenbach’s Venice experiences as a dream. In “The Imperative Daily Nap; or, Aschenbach’s Dream in *Death in Venice*,” (1992) Cynthia Bryson argues for just such an interpretation, situating the moment at which Aschenbach falls asleep about halfway through the novella. At this point in the narrative, Aschenbach has been in Venice for a time and has noticed Tadzio, the handsome youth playing on the beach, and has become intrigued with him. Feeling a certain unexplained uneasiness, which he blames on the weather, Aschenbach attempts to leave Venice to escape the unhealthy Sirocco. Lost luggage gives him a pretense for returning, though, and renews his hope of reencountering Tadzio. When Aschenbach settles back in his hotel, he sees Tadzio on the beach and realizes he in fact has returned to be near him. In resignation he says, “so be it.” Here the novella describes Aschenbach’s relaxed hands, slackened mouth, and something suggesting REM sleep: “His eyelids were closed, there was only a swift, sidelong glint of the eyeballs now and again…” (p. 71-72) At that point, Bryson suggests that Aschenbach in fact dozes off and does not wake again until shortly before the end of the novella. Ex. 4a tabulates the elements of the narrative with which she supports her argument, showing the changes in writing style and action before and after falling asleep. After Aschenbach’s return to Venice, fantastic mythological images replace realistic ones. The very next bit of action frames

Ex. 4a: Dream elements in *Der Tod in Venedig* according to Bryson
**Before Foiled Departure**
- Realistic images
- Aschenbach engages in reflective thinking
- Images of eating strawberries, a fountain in the city square, and cosmetics
- Specific time descriptions
- Mann’s writing style is cold and realistic
- Aschenbach is awake but in need of sleep

**After Return to Venice**
- Fantastic mythological children’s games
- Aschenbach is bent on wish fulfillment
- These images occur again, showing the “day’s residues” incorporated into Aschenbach’s dream
- Time descriptions become vague
- Mann’s writing turns luminescent, blurring reality with fantasy
- Aschenbach’s limited awareness is characteristic of is lucid dreaming

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Differences Between Novella and Libretto</th>
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the play of the children on the beach as an Olympic pentathlon with Tadzio taking on the role of various Greek gods. From there on, Aschenbach’s activities switch from reflective thinking to focusing on wish fulfillment (a dream function), and he follows Tadzio and his family through the streets of Venice in an effort to always be near him. 

Bryson (p. 181) poses that recycled images, like a return to the barber’s chair and eating strawberries for a second time, act as what Freud would call “day residues” – memories from the day preceding falling asleep that are incorporated into dream images. Descriptions of the passage of time, at first exact, become vague after Aschenbach returns to Venice, and Mann’s writing blurs reality with fantasy. In addition, Bryson argues that Aschenbach’s dream is a “lucid dream,” in which he is partially aware that he’s dreaming, and thus hyper-self-reflective.
Applying Bryson’s argument to the operatic version of Aschenbach’s tale yields a somewhat different interpretation. The moment in the novella at which Bryson suggests that Aschenbach falls asleep is analogous to a moment in Scene 6 of the opera, when he returns from his foiled departure and realizes that he came back to Venice to be near Tadzio. He sings, “so be it” and lifts his hands in a gesture of acceptance, giving himself over to fate. This is not, however, the first time he sings the “so be it” phrase. He has already sung these words in response to the Foreign Traveler’s hallucination in Scene 1, moments after the point where I suggest that we hear him fall asleep. Britten connects the “so be it” phrases with similar music and Piper connects them with similar phrases: “I will pursue this freedom and offer up my days to the sun and the south.” and later, “Here I will stay, here dedicate my days to the sun, to the sun and Apollo himself.” Although the stage directions in Scene 6 indicate that Aschenbach is weary, this moment doesn’t provide the same kind of pivotal before/after relations that suggest different states of consciousness (wakefulness and sleep) that Bryson reads in the novella. The fantastic mythological images of the children’s games, for instance, follow earlier references to Greek gods. In Scene 4, Aschenbach observes Tadzio for the first time and sings, “surely the soul of Greece lies in that bright perfection.” In Scene 5 he calls Tadzio “Eros” and later refers to him as a little Polish “god.” Moreover, as an audience, we have already gotten used to seeing Tadzio in the rarefied dance environment that evokes Greek statues and culminates in the Games-ballet.

As for Bryson’s observance of Mann’s cyclical themes, these repetitions are configured a bit differently in the opera. Bryson couples the character of the Travel Agent, who tells Aschenbach the truth about the plague, with the foreign traveler because his description repeats the images in the Traveler’s hallucination. But the opera doesn’t make this link. In fact, the
Travel Agent is one of the few characters other than Aschenbach and Tadzio who is not one of the Dionysian characters sung by the same bass-baritone. As Ruth Longobardi has observed, the Travel Agent is reserved, disciplined, and entirely “English,” and the presence of the complete Foreign Traveler’s aria underlying the English Travel Agent’s music in fact stratifies their roles into the Dionysian Traveler and the Apollonian Travel Agent (Longobardi, 2002, p. 6). Other cyclical themes that occur before and after the foiled departure, like the appearance of the Strawberry Seller and the visit to the fountain, are not as prominent in the opera as in the novella. Their before/after positions are diluted by other paired events that happen after the games, like both visits to the Barber (Scenes 8 and 15) and both times Aschenbach hears the Voice of Apollo (Scenes 7 and 13), to name a few. Furthermore, themes that recur consistently throughout the opera — the same singer in the guise of different characters, the recognizable musical motives, and the network of musical syllables echoing Tadzio’s name—also discourage hearing Scene 6 as pivotal by their very omnipresence throughout the Venice action.

With regard to Bryson’s point about reflective thinking and lucid dreaming, Aschenbach’s secco recitatives, with which he performs his self-analytical monologues, are still present after the games and continue up until he diegetically falls asleep in Scene 13. Hearing these as moments of lucid dreaming, or even just as the critical voice that accompanies dreaming, is not too much of a stretch to my ear and thus can support a reading of the Venice action as a dream.

As for the time-frame references Bryson traces through the novella, one notes that such references in the opera are minimal throughout. Vague stage directions imply the “passage of time,” but the operatic pacing scarcely gives sense to this notion. Sung references to time are more or less indistinct as well. When he first arrives in Venice, Aschenbach sings “Now, in this
beautiful, agreeable place, I intend to give myself to the leisured world for a spell.” Later he sings, “So the moments pass; and as they dwindle through the fragile neck dividing life from death I see them flow, as once I saw the thread of sand slip through my father’s hour glass.” Again, these references are quite vague and more philosophical in nature than an actual reference to elapsed time. Other characters make the few concrete references to time in the opera. After trimming Aschenbach’s hair, the Barber sets a future appointment, singing, “next week at the same time?” One might assume that the second barbershop scene occurs one week later, but there is little else to support or refute that assumption. The Travel Agent warns Aschenbach that “Rather than put it off till tomorrow, you would do well to leave today,” but this just serves more to underline the danger than to fix the time frame to a given day. In the last scene, the Hotel Manager sings, “The season comes to an end. No doubt the Signore will be leaving us soon?” Coupled with Aschenbach’s mention of “spring” in Scene 1, the Hotel Manager’s phrase leads one to speculate that Aschenbach has been in Venice all summer, but again, there is nothing to further support or refute that speculation.

Finally, if we are to hear a portion of the opera as a dream at all, the beginning of that dream ought to be situated at a moment that divides real from imaginary as Bryson has done with the return to Venice in the novella. Since the opera’s Venice action is unified in its fantastic tone, and contains images that are distinct from the Munich action and at least in some interpretations even more fantastic than the novella’s, it makes sense to suggest that Aschenbach falls asleep in Munich. With this interpretation in mind, Ex. 4b charts the elements of Munich and Venice action that frame the Traveler-inspired hallucination. The chart builds on Bryson’s observations and incorporates some of the musical elements that help enact the shift of conscious states.

Ex. 4b: Dream elements in *Death in Venice*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Munich</th>
<th>Venice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Realistic images</td>
<td>• A mix of real and fantastic images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Images of blocked writing and cemetery church</td>
<td>• Reconfigured images: blocked communication and St. Mark’s Cathedral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>act as “day residues” incorporated into Aschenbach’s dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No references to time</td>
<td>• Time references are vague throughout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Britten’s music is “realistic”: twelve-tone aggregate and inversion, traditional instrumentation, sung in English</td>
<td>• Music becomes exotic: whole-tone and pentatonic scales, tonality, adds percussion simulating an oriental gamelan ensemble, adds dancing, recitative, and singing in other languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Aschenbach is awake but in need of sleep</td>
<td>• Aschenbach’s limited awareness is characteristic of is lucid dreaming</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Surreal Images in Video Productions of the Opera

Given the rich interpretive possibilities available in Britten’s opera, any company producing *Death in Venice* might choose to underscore some dream-like aspects and ignore others. Let me take a moment here and consider how one interpretation approaches the opera’s Munich opening described above. The video version of the opera produced by Tony Palmer (1981) encourages speculative comparisons of the narrative with a dream in certain ways, most overtly, with its subtitle, “The Dream of Gustav von Aschenbach.” The production is not consistently literal in its presentation of this dream, though. It begins with Aschenbach in his study in Munich writing his name over and over in frustration — “I Gustav von Aschenbach” —
almost as if he were beginning his last will and testament rather than struggling with a novel. Editing cuts made back and forth between the Munich study and scenes of the garden lead the viewer to assume that Aschenbach merely dreams up the Munich garden as well as the Foreign Traveler who appears in it. Diegetic action of a more straightforward nature ensues when Aschenbach boards the boat to Venice, but the camera briefly returns to the Munich study when Aschenbach refers to himself as a novelist. Again, one could get the sense that all of the Venice action is in Aschenbach’s head as he sits in his study in Munich – a daydream, perhaps, or elements of the narrative he’s writing, but not necessarily a sleeping dream. <VIDEO CLIP #1 – Study and Garden>�

The ensuing scenes are a mix of very realistic shots filmed in the streets and canals of Venice, whimsical sound-staged shots, and close-ups of natural but disturbing images of stinging bees and a bloody sacrifice. Stage and film techniques create dreamlike qualities: dry ice, slow-motion camera work, and double exposures. In some instances the characters lip sync the libretto text, whereas in others they merely pantomime while the sound track carries the sung text. The decision whether to lip sync or not seems to be based on production concerns of feasibility in the realistic settings and determinations of other sounds to be included, rather than an attempt to set up distinct diegetic spaces like public action vs. private thought. When coupled with the very realistic scenes of Venice, though, these techniques lack a consistently surreal quality and thus miss the dream reading I am suggesting. <VIDEO CLIP #2 – Venice action> A more overt, albeit simplistic portrayal of “the Dream of Gustav von Aschenbach” might have him fall asleep in his Munich study by the cozy fire, but instead, we get the sense that this is at best a waking dream or delusion, or even perhaps the creative sparks of one of Aschenbach’s stories.
The Glyndebourne Touring Company production of *Death in Venice* (1990) does much to encourage comparisons of the operatic narrative with a dream by playing up some of the story’s fantastic images. In the opening moments of the opera, the Traveler sings a portion of his aria standing behind Aschenbach, just off his shoulder. The singer is dressed to simulate a shadow of Aschenbach: dark glasses substitute for Aschenbach’s spectacles, a dark trench coat and hat for Aschenbach’s lighter one, and gloves for Aschenbach’s bare hands. One cannot help but think that the traveler is in some way the dark side of Aschenbach’s own psyche, his *Doppelgänger*.  

Later in the production, Tadzio’s friend Jaschiu takes a position in the same manner, just off Tadzio’s shoulder while Aschenbach sings “there is a dark side even to perfection.” Mann (as cited in Bryson, 1992) summarized Freud’s dream theories by saying that the dreamer generates everything in the dream, and it is actually the dreamer’s unconscious will that seems like the agent of fate. In *Death in Venice*, the Dionysian characters, of which the Traveler is one, act as the agents of fate and usher Aschenbach along his journey. Following Mann’s formulation, they personify the dreamer’s will. In showing Dionysus as the dark side of Aschenbach, this production enhances Freudian notions of the divided psyche that is embodied, in Phillip Rupprecht’s words, in the polarized musical textures that “form the sounding topography of Aschenbach’s consciousness” (2001, p. 260).

The Glyndebourne production also takes a bit of an absurdist twist, bringing an uncanny quality to the opera by dressing the other Dionysian characters in fantastic costumes. The Fop dons a flamboyant orange coat with a fur collar and bright emerald green gloves and shoes, the Gondolier wields a neon oar, the Leader of the Players sports winged sunglasses of the type that Elton John might wear, and the Barber’s hair is bright construction-cone orange. Cinematic and theatrical techniques add to the fantastic nature of the Glyndebourne “dream”: slow-motion
camera work, dry ice mist, double exposures, and minimal sets. The Dionysian characters’ nemesis, Apollo, is another fantastic character. Originally scored as an off-stage vocal role, the Glyndebourne production literally embodies Apollo. The singer appears on stage made up with gold face paint suggesting the sun he represents, adding a layer of the metaphysical with his eerie countertenor voice. Other incongruous touches accrue, but none so strange as in the last scene where a man is hanging motionless over a piece of the set, perhaps symbolizing the death to which Aschenbach will soon succumb.

Psychoanalysis and Fictional Characters

If we accept for a moment the premise that Aschenbach dreams of Venice, as the Glyndebourne production might suggest, then it would follow that one could interpret that dream using Freud’s theories as Bryson has done with Mann’s novella. True, Aschenbach is not a real subject and cannot perform the free association necessary to the analysis, but there is precedence for trying to analyze the dreams of a fictional character. Freud did it himself on more than one occasion, including his famous elucidation of the Oedipus Complex in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s The Sandman. On another occasion, Freud (1907) reads Wilhelm Jensen’s Gradiva, and elaborately explicates his notions of repression and psychoanalysis using the story’s metaphors of burial and excavation. He analyzes the protagonist’s dreams and explains the evidence of wish fulfillment and state of mind that they reveal. Through his commentary also runs a narrative thread not unlike one in Mann’s novella: a meta-analysis of creative writing. The parallels between Jensen’s story and Freud’s analysis on one hand, and the novella on the other, seem far too profuse to be coincidental. In place of Jensen’s burial metaphors, Mann’s text uses the metaphor of a city
secretly infested by plague and the attempt to cover up that secret. Both main characters, Aschenbach and Hanold, feel an inexplicable wanderlust that leads each of them to Italy where they each pursue another character to whom they give Greek identities and incorporate those identities into their work (writing and archeology respectively). Both characters exhibit a lack of self-knowledge, and attempt to flee Italy blaming it on trivial circumstances. Freud interprets Hanold’s anxiety as sexual excitement, and analyzes the story’s secondary revision as disguising Hanold’s erotic feelings for the German woman he’s pursuing. Upon making a careful reading of both writings, Manfred Dierks (cited in Berlin, 1992) concludes that not only was Mann aware of Freud’s essay, but he also freely borrowed ideas from it and incorporated them into the novella:

The adoption of psychoanalytical knowledge around 1911 was no mere assimilation of ideas or montage of thoughts, so frequent elsewhere with Thomas Mann. His acquaintance with psychoanalysis met an existential need, and in this situation it stood the test both for himself and for his literary work — if a distinction between them can in fact be made…Sigmund Freud’s interpretation of Gradiva and Thomas Mann’s Death in Venice signify one of the many occasions in the first half of the century when the concepts of “literature” and “psychoanalysis” fall together. Now psychoanalysis, having learned so much from literature, exerts in turn its influence on the latter. (p. 111-112)

In contrast, Rodney Symington (1998, p. 130), points out “it would be a gross oversimplification…to assume that Mann simply took some fundamental principles of Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis and based a novella on them.” He goes on to elaborate the amalgam of ideas “in the air” at the time, including Nietzsche’s notion of the Apollonian artist who suppresses the chaotic Dionysian.
As for Britten’s own study of Freud, not much has been written, but one can assume he had full familiarity with psychoanalytic theory based on its saturation in intellectual culture, the documented Freudian influence on Britten’s collaborators, and telltale evidence in his sketches. As mentioned above in connection with Mann, if psychoanalytical theories were “in the air” in 1910, they can be considered well assimilated by the time Britten begins writing dramatic music. As Britten’s early collaborator, W.H. Auden (Paul Bunyan librettist) wrote of Freud on the occasion of his death, “…if often he was wrong and, at times, absurd, to us he is no more a person now but a whole climate of opinion under whom we conduct our different lives…” (Auden, 1940) Auden’s studies of Freud are well documented as are those of other Britten collaborators and authors, among them E.M. Forster (Billy Budd librettist) and Lytton Strachey (Elizabeth and Essex author) who were members of the Bloomsbury Group, Henry James (Turn of the Screw and Owen Wingrave author) and, of course, Mann. Critic and champion of Britten’s music, Hans Keller, not only studied Freud intensely but wrote on Freudian themes many times, including his Three psychoanalytic notes on Peter Grimes of 1946 (Wintle, 2003). In addition, Britten’s sketches show that he was thinking along Freudian lines when working on Death in Venice. Terms like the aforementioned “dream duet” show up in the margins of his notes. In one draft of the scenario for the opera where Aschenbach is inspired by Tadzio to write his one-and-a-half pages of prose Britten notes in the margin, “he will write a poem of sublimation, a song for the admiration of the world” and later adds that Aschenbach “thinks of sublimating his feelings for T in beautiful prose.” He thus draws on the Freudian notion that Aschenbach’s dangerous attraction to Tadzio could be redirected in writing. Britten also makes much of the visual relationship between Aschenbach and Tadzio, making frequent notes about traded glances
between the characters, and thus drawing on the Freudian notion of voyeurism as perversion (Britten, *Notes*, 1973).

**Dream Mechanisms and Music**

Admittedly, trying to formulate a Freudian semantics of music in order to analyze Britten’s operatic “dream” is a difficult task. Many of the features that give the Venice action its surreal character are not new to Britten’s last opera; exotic scales and unusual timbres were used to symbolize a variety of things with dramatic effect in many of his operas, *Curlew River, Turn of the Screw*, and *Midsummer Night’s Dream* among them. Furthermore, cyclical themes, leitmotifs and condensed characters do not automatically signal day residues and dream condensations. And yet Freud’s dream phenomena exhibit basic structures that music can resonate with and amplify. Even Freud would agree that the condensations and displacements of dreams are found not only in daydreaming, but also in creative writing and other art forms. Indeed, Freud’s highly metaphorical theories (i.e. repression = burial) depend on the kinds of cross-domain mappings we also associate with music. Lawrence Zbikowski (2002, p. 64) suggests two important roles that cross-domain mapping plays in musical understanding “first, it provides a way to connect musical concepts with concepts from other domains, including those associated with language” (or, for our purposes, psychoanalysis). Zbikowski’s second point gets at how those commonalities can be established. He writes, “[cross-domain mapping] provides a way to ground our descriptions of elusive musical phenomena in concepts derived from everyday experience.” In other words, basic patterns from our knowledge gained from negotiating our world underlie more complex concepts. For example, the everyday notion of being in a location and changing locations grounds the more elusive musical notions of key and tonality. Music’s
patterns and structures, be they timbral, intervallic, rhythmic, harmonic, gestural, or otherwise provide the structure by which commonalities can be established with patterns in other domains allowing meaning to emerge. Just as in Freudian readings of texts, which tend to see the cross-domain mappings of metaphors as evidence of condensation and those of metonymy as displacement, metaphorical structures common to both music and Freudian theory facilitate my reading. I will limit my discussion to those elements that stand out in Death in Venice and that when taken together as a group can lead to the dream interpretation. These suggestions are all potential elements for a Freudian reading – not all will be realized in any given performance, as we have seen. Space does not allow me to explore a complete Freudian semantics of music, but for now I will examine three of Freud’s main dream-work mechanisms – condensation, displacement, and wish fulfillment – and listen for how Britten’s music (as well as Piper’s libretto) might express them.

Freud’s mechanism of condensation – two or more people or things merged to emphasize characteristics they share – foreshadows more recent notions of creativity. Cognitive linguists describe a phenomenon called conceptual blending that facilitates imagination by combining two or more seemingly different elements to create emergent meaning, a combination made possible by basic structures the elements have in common. One type of this kind of blending is personification, in which a non-human (plant, animal, object) is imbued with human characteristics in a fanciful blend. In my interpretation of Aschenbach’s dream, the Dionysian characters – several different personae that personify the abstract concept of “fate” – could certainly represent a condensation. Tadzio is another example: he is Polish, but his music is Balinese, and he is compared to Venetian statues and Greek gods. Tadzio is not just one person, but a condensation of sounds and images from Aschenbach’s imagination. From this
condensation emerges not a mere Polish boy, but an exotic foreigner with rarefied god-like qualities of beauty and timelessness.

More than just a literary condensation, though, Tadzio’s music hints at another blend: that of boy and sea. Tadzio’s emblem, first heard when he enters the hotel dining room, is constructed from a five-note slendro scale played most often by vibraphone. The theme leisurely wanders up and down the scale, but is limited in range and only minimally developed. <SOUND CLIP #8 – Tadzio’s Theme> In contrast, the music associated with the view of the ocean from Aschenbach’s hotel room imparts the impression of spacious grandeur with lyric waves of large melodic leaps followed by streams of descending thirds doubled in open octaves, accompanied by ascending plane of major triads. According to the Hotel Manager, this view will help Aschenbach relax and write. <SOUND CLIP #9 – View Theme> Tadzio’s music is seemingly unrelated to the View Theme, unique as it is in timbre, percussive techniques, pentatonicism, and lack of development. Two intermediary themes show their connection, however: a minor-mode version of the View Theme, which comes back while Aschenbach is looking out at the gray sky hanging heavily over the lagoon and considering what awaits him in Venice, <SOUND CLIP #10 – Future View Theme> and the music that heralds Tadzio’s mother’s first entrance. <SOUND CLIP #11 – Tadzio’s Mother’s Theme>

Ex. 5a-d demonstrates the connections between these four themes by comparing the melodic-interval contents of salient segments measured in semitones. The pitches in the top row are extracted from the second, longer, more striking wave of the View Theme (VT): the descending line that follows the leap of a twelfth. It begins with a C# neighbor tone that resolves down to B and then proceeds in a string of descending 3rds that arpeggiate major triads: E-major and F-major (and eventually coming to rest on D). The example indicates the melodic intervals,
measured in semitones, beneath the row of pitches. Part b of the example displays the pitches of the correlative portion of the minor variation of the view, the Future View Theme (FVT), associated with Aschenbach’s musings about what awaits him. As might be expected, the qualities of thirds in this version are merely reversed from those in the original (intervals of 3 semitones are replaced by those of 4 semitones and vice versa) consistent with the change of mode. Line c outlines the lowest pitches of woodwind chords in the theme that announces

Ex. 5a-d: Comparison of Themes: View, Future View, Tadzio, and Tadzio’s Mother

a. View Theme (VT)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Intervals:} & \quad -2 & -3 & -4 & -4 & -3 & -4 \\
\end{align*}
\]

b. Future View Theme (FTV)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Intervals:} & \quad -2 & -4 & -3 & -3 & -4 & -3 \\
\end{align*}
\]

c. Tadzio’s Mother's Theme (MT)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Intervals:} & \quad -2 & -4 & -1 & -3 & -1 & -4 \\
\end{align*}
\]

d. Tadzio’s Theme (TT)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Intervals:} & \quad -2 & -4 & -1 & -4 \\
\end{align*}
\]
Tadzio’s mother. The Mother’s Theme (MT) falls in waves like the View Theme, and its melodic intervals follow the pattern set up in both of the View Themes beginning with a descending major 2nd, but with a variation: rather than a long string of 3rds that arpeggiate major or minor triads, this descending stream alternates 3rds with 2nds. The resulting melodic stream contains all five notes of Tadzio’s Theme (TT) plus two more and maintains the initiating major 2nd. In addition, it shows the influence of both qualities of 3rds from both of the View Themes, and alternates thirds with seconds like Tadzio’s Theme. In short, the intervals descend: -2 (like all the themes), -4 (FVT), -1 (TT), -3 (FVT), -1 (TT?), -4 (VT). The fourth line displays the notes of Tadzio’s Theme, which also begins with a whole step followed by thirds alternating with a semitone. The Mother’s Theme, a hybrid of the View and Tadzio Themes, facilitates an aural connection between those themes.

Both Tadzio’s Theme and the View Theme are heard many times in the opera, and often in proximity when Tadzio is on the beach. The two musics, facilitated by their related interval patterns, become closely associated for the listener and thus amplify the condensation (cross-domain mapping) of boy and sea. More than mere association of location, though, a possible dream-work interpretation of the musical linking might translate water sonic images back into their related words (the flow of the waves could represent the flow of prose Tadzio inspires, deep waters could represent deep emotions he also inspires, and the limitless freedom of the ocean could represent the freedom from limits Aschenbach desires). The Palmer video production presents this condensation visually at the end of the opera when Tadzio’s image blurs into an image of the ocean.

The dream work can also perform displacement, disguising a latent element by replacing it with something more remotely related. Sometimes there are merely superficial connections
between the latent element and its manifest counterpart. Similarity of sound, for instance, plays a big part in dream construction. Freud mentions a number of cases where a word acts as a substitute for another linked by rhyme or some other phonemic connection. On one occasion, Freud (1901, p. 657) reports dreaming about “propyl” after having smelt an aroma similar to “amyl.” Similarly, one could speculate that Aschenbach dreams of “Tadzio” after having been working on one of his novels, perhaps the one about St. Sebastian (the type of hero Mann tells us he writes about) or some other saint (agios in Greek). Britten highlights these displacements of sonic material when he connects remote ideas via similar motives, emphasizing phonemic connections between related words, as for example when he connects Tadzio’s name with the warning calls (“Aou’”) of the gondoliers.

Another instance of musical displacement occurs when the character of the Strawberry Seller encounters Aschenbach on the beach. After some 35 minutes of music all dominated by the male voices of Aschenbach and the Traveler/Gondolier/Hotel Manager with the only female voices being fragments of crowd noise, we finally get a few lush phrases sung by a soprano. “Le bela fragole, La bela bela ua, Fine strawberries, fine strawberries, Signori, fresh today.” Not only is her voice “fresh” and “bella,” but with the exception of the second time Aschenbach encounters her in the penultimate scene where she sings similar phrases, this is the only solo female sonic presence in the entire opera. Her song is simple, limited to just four different tones set in a slow sing-songy dotted rhythm that heightens the allure of the syllables in “bela” by allowing the tongue to rebound off the repeated /l/ sound. We are never overtly told that the strawberries poison Aschenbach, but he does complain in the second encounter that they are “soft, musty, overripe,” and the sense is that he catches the cholera from them. But whereas in Mann’s novella, the plague is associated directly with the strawberries, here in the opera Britten
musically displaces the contagion onto the feminine. Like Eve and the apple, it is the woman who presents evil to Aschenbach. The Tony Palmer production makes this even more explicit. In the second encounter, the Strawberry Seller’s costume is covered in red spots – strawberry juice, but perhaps also blood – and she’s obviously ill judging from the dark circles around her eyes and disheveled appearance. Aschenbach, having just been to the barber, is already made up with cosmetics to make himself appear younger, and the red splotches on his cheeks and lips link visually with the strawberries and stains on the woman’s dress. Lipstick and rouge, which are generally thought of as women’s trappings, blur into one association with the contaminated strawberries and the displacement is clear: feminine = evil. This is a particularly dreamlike displacement: when the story is read as realistic, it is the masculine that is perceived as dangerous. As Freud often comments, opposites in dreams reinforce the original concept.

<VIDEO CLIP #4 – Strawberry Seller>

Another factor in the construction of a dream is the fulfillment of repressed wishes. When dreaming, the psychic apparatus changes these wishes, which are unacceptable in waking life, into visual and aural perceptions. A process called secondary revision further disguises the initial impulses by weaving these perceptions into a more or less coherent dream and further revises the dream content during the dreamer’s conscious act of retelling. Zizek, in his discussion of Freudian dream analysis (1991), points out that though secondary revision is very efficient at hiding latent dream thoughts, it never succeeds as a complete cover up:

The basic presupposition of psychoanalytic interpretation …is that every final product of the dream work, every manifest dream content, contains at least one ingredient that functions as a stopgap, as a filler holding the place of what is necessarily lacking in it. (p. 52-53)
A telltale musical interval similarly acts as a “stopgap” in the opera. In the Dream Duet, the Traveler introduces the “Marvels Unfold” motif (heard in sound clip #1). Many commentators have linked the tightly woven motif with Aschenbach’s tight-fisted grip on himself, but as the motive “unfolds,” the Traveler sings its pitch classes in various octaves and the constricted minor seconds become open, but still dissonant, major sevenths. This interval becomes a motif in itself, being foregrounded in a number of ways including The Elderly Fop’s “Conte’s dreaming (B-flat–A), dreaming of love and Serenissima,” Tadzio’s theme (the outer interval is A–G#), the cries of the Revelers in Aschenbach’s nightmare (various sevenths), and his own cries after the dream and at the end of the opera when he calls out Tadzio’s name (both A-G#). The seventh becomes linked with the dangerous marvels the Traveler shows Aschenbach (including Tadzio) and thus represents the object of “deep desire.” The dream-work covers up this desire, but sometimes the interval “sticks out” like Zizek’s stopgap. In one instance, when Aschenbach learns of the threatening plague, he plans to warn Tadzio’s mother away from Venice, thus ending his chance to be near to the boy. <SOUND CLIP #12 – The Warning> At this point, his melody begins confidently and directly, “I must warn her…,” tracing a path from A up to his identity pitch, E, associated with his proud words “I, Aschenbach, famous as a master writer” Here, as Ex. 6 shows, his melodic trajectory bifurcates into two separate melodic streams accompanied in parallel tenths: a descending one, with which he expresses his intentions to warn Tadzio’s mother, and an ascending one that belies his desire to remain in Tadzio’s presence. The descending voice articulates his practice warning phrases beginning “Madame, I will say” — branching downward, losing energy, voicing the word “Madame” on E, E-flat, and D-flat. Meanwhile, the ascending line proceeds upward with increased energy and increasing anxiety through structural pitches E, F, G and A-flat, where Aschenbach enunciates Tadzio’s name: “you
must go too with your daughters, and with (pause) Tadzio, your son.” Deeply conflicted feelings for Tadzio can be heard in the juxtaposition of these goals, which are summed up locally within the name of “Tadzio,” sung on both D-flat and A-flat. The ascending voice, firmly fixated on Tadzio, thus outlines the enharmonic major 7th interval from A to A-flat (the same pitch classes in Tadzio’s Theme). The A-flat is strikingly unsupported by the bass, which in order to continue the sequence of tenths, would have to be F-flat (or E), Aschenbach’s identity pitch, symbolizing the way his fixation has kept him from behaving as he expects himself to.

Ex. 6: Aschenbach’s dual melodic streams

Ascending tenth sequence

Descending tenth sequence

pizz strgs. and horn

pizz strgs. and horn
In that moment, a number of sonic signals hint that something is amiss. For one thing, the interruption of the woodwind accompaniment and substitution of Tadzio’s vibraphone skew the timbral coherence. This is the first time we hear the vibraphone without Tadzio being present on stage. Secondly, the sudden piano dynamic in the voice and the leap to the unnaturally accented second syllable of Tadzio’s name in a high register further distorts the timbre. Like the Fop who sings the upper note of the seventh “Conte’s dreaming…” in his falsetto range, Aschenbach’s high note sounds like a queer vocal break. Thirdly, hearing Tadzio’s name itself is somehow alarming and incongruous: if Aschenbach were really to speak to the lady, her suspicions would most certainly be aroused by his overly familiar use of her son’s proper name. Finally, the music that sounds this name is heard as an ascending 5th, the inversion of Aschenbach’s “Madame,” which is always a descending 4th. If only Aschenbach could have sung both syllables of Tadzio’s name at or below his own identity pitch E — say on E-flat or D-flat — and in the register in which he sang of Tadzio’s mother and sisters, his wish would have been kept under the wraps of secondary revision. In this analysis, then, relations in musical space, or register, map onto notions of psychic hidden space that structure the cover-up of repressed wishes, musically reinforcing the incomplete repression of Aschenbach’s desire for Tadzio.


With the help of Freud’s model for analyzing fictional characters and with some ideas about the way music amplifies dream patterns I turn to an overall analysis of Aschenbach’s Venice dream using Freud’s process as a model. Just as in his analysis of Jensen’s Gradiva, Freud carefully follows the train of associations in analyzing his own dreams. In one instance, he
(1901, pp. 636-37) records the elements of a dream, and explicates it, taking each element in turn and, through free association, discovers the latent thought content behind the dream. Ex. 7a tabulates the elements in the dream he analyzes with their associated thoughts below, and an

**Ex. 7a: Freud’s Dream**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements in the Manifest Dream</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table d’hôte</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>day before, after dinner, friend paid for cab</td>
<td>eaten at table d’hôte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>remembered taximeter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daughter of debtee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opposite of wife</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wife’s intimate gesture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;... for the sake of your beautiful eyes?&quot;</td>
<td>means having much without paying (but truth is he always pays dearly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eye surgeon friend</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gave bowl with painted eyes to the eye surgeon</td>
<td>gift given to the surgeon in return for debt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recently sent mutual patient to the surgeon for spectacles</td>
<td>enhances association between debtee and debtor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child with beautiful eyes</td>
<td>refused spinach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>told as a child to be glad to be given spinach</td>
<td>enhances association between gift and cost</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among these elements, the gift given to the surgeon in return for spectacles and the child with beautiful eyes refused spinach.

Final analysis: "I wish I might for once experience love that cost me nothing."
analysis of those thoughts in the right hand column. As he translated the images of the dream back into words, one word kept coming to the forefront: “Kosten,” “debt.” This realization helped him expose his repressed selfish regret that he was obligated to spend so much on his family, and led him to realize his wish that prompted his dream: to experience love that cost nothing. The chart reveals the sheer economy of the manifest dream in reinforcing the main idea through a handful of interconnected images.

Ex. 7b tabulates the elements in Aschenbach’s Venice dream with their associated thoughts in a similar manner to Ex. 7a. Aschenbach’s “dream” is much more image-rich than Freud’s short dream, so I have chosen seven of the most central dream images. I will describe the associations sparked by these seven images along with an analysis, starting with the first row and proceeding down the chart. At the end of his “Dream” aria, the Foreign Traveler directs Aschenbach to travel to the south (Venice), a place associated with limitless creative freedom. In Venice, Aschenbach finds Tadzio, who is both associated with creative inspiration, as well as the output of creativity: his name condenses aspects of Aschenbach’s novels about saints (agios) such as Thaddeus (a version of Tadzio). Images of water and flowing sand reinforce the notion of creative flow. Aschenbach’s self-disciplined writing reminds him of the hardness of Greek statues, which adorn many of Venice’s buildings and which also bring to mind Tadzio’s classic beauty and movements, which are rarefied in ballet punctuated by hard metallic sounds echoing as if in the distance. The notion of physical restraint contrasts with its opposite, physical abandon, associated with music and writing. As mentioned above, Freud posits that opposites appear in dreams to reinforce the underlying idea. Both the flow of ink from a pen in writing and the excessive sensuality of music (as well as the intense sounds of Venice), spark associations with the exoticism of gamelan music, which Aschenbach may have heard at the Paris world’s
fair in 1889 (or at least as a well-traveled, famous artist, he may have heard about it). The opera’s most effusive musical moments – the ecstatic setting of Tadzio’s Theme when Aschenbach finally writes his one-and-a-half pages of prose and the expansive Ocean View Theme first heard when the Hotel Manager shows Aschenbach the view – further underscore the notion of “letting go”.

For Aschenbach, though, letting go is not without danger. He cannot release his tight-fisted grip on his writing lest dangerous passions overtake him. The sense of peril finds resonance in the Traveler’s unctuous “Marvels Unfold” leitmotif, Venice’s ambiguous seedy side, the stagnant lagoon, and the stale sirocco. This risk is so ominous that Aschenbach’s dream dramatizes it as a deathly threat. The Old Gondolier disobeys his instructions and rows him as if down the River Styx. Aschenbach stays in Venice even though the plague threatens and time – symbolized by the hourglass – runs out. In order to avoid death, Aschenbach chooses youth by focusing on the youngest of the three Polish children (Tadzio, not his older sisters). Freud (1913) addresses such choices as a trope in literature, in which choosing the youngest and frailest of three choices represents turning the necessity of death into a choice of love. As mentioned, the tainted strawberries associated with the feminine, reinforce the dangerous choice of masculine. Like the Young-Old Fop, Aschenbach allows the Barber to make him up with cosmetics to appear younger in order to attract Tadzio. The attraction for youth becomes mixed with erotic attraction for a particular youth, as Aschenbach admits his love for Tadzio and stalks him through the canals of Venice. In spite of his embarrassment over his ridiculous appearance and behavior, and mocked by the Leader’s laughing song, he eventually indulges in dangerous passion. He gives in to Dionysus and the orgy in his dream-within-a-dream, and eventually succumbs to the plague and death.
Ex. 7b: The Dream of Gustav von Aschenbach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Bass-Baritone</th>
<th>Venice</th>
<th>Ocean / Canals</th>
<th>Plague/ Berries</th>
<th>Hourglass</th>
<th>Tadzio</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>flow of creativity and words</td>
<td>Traveler: &quot;Go to the South...&quot;</td>
<td>creative freedom &amp; inspiration (Platen)</td>
<td>flow of water</td>
<td>flow of sand</td>
<td>inspires writing</td>
<td>creative flow</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. liberates the &quot;marble mass of language&quot;</td>
<td>Greek statues</td>
<td>Venice is more sonorous than Munich</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>music / writing = symbols of sexuality</td>
<td>&quot;Conte's dreaming&quot; Maj. 7th</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writer's block lifted - A. writes 1-1/2 pages</td>
<td>Hotel Manager: &quot;Look, Signore, the view&quot;</td>
<td>limitless ocean View Theme</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-passionate writing</td>
<td>Traveler: &quot;Marvels unfold&quot; leitmotif</td>
<td>Venice has ambiguous, seedy side</td>
<td>stagnant lagoon as source of contagion</td>
<td>plague leitmotiv</td>
<td>forbidden desire</td>
<td>danger of letting go</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Old Gondolier = Charon figure</td>
<td>St. Mark's Cathedral = mortuary chapel</td>
<td>A. Stays in Venice too long -- tainted berries</td>
<td>time is running out</td>
<td>&quot;aou!&quot; Gondolier warning calls</td>
<td>threat of death</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Barber makes up A. with Cosmetics like Fop</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>youngest of 3 children. A. tries to attract him</td>
<td>avoid death by choosing (masculine) youth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. sings &quot;Eros is in the word&quot; Maj. 7th</td>
<td>A. stalks Tadzio through canals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Tadziu&quot; Maj. 7th &quot;I love you&quot;</td>
<td>erotic attraction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader’s laughing song &quot;ha ho&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leader ridicules A. for loving a youth</td>
<td>embarrassed by love &amp; obsession for T.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dionysus: leads A. to orgiastic ritual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>homoerotic dream within a dream</td>
<td>sexual abandon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interpreting Aschenbach’s Dream

By reversing secondary process through analysis, it becomes clear that the elements of Aschenbach’s Venice dream all have one thing in common, the release of boundaries and limitless flow, whether it be related to sexuality, creativity, or youthful vigor and life. With this analysis in mind, we might try to ascertain the wish underlying Aschenbach’s Venice dream.

One may accept the consensus held by commentators that Aschenbach represses his latent homosexuality and this leads to his writer’s block and his susceptibility to fetishize Tadzio. In this sense, his unacceptable wish is as simple as desiring to have sexual relations with another man, or in this case, a youth. Philip Brett (1993, p. 279) poses that “Death in Venice is a personal ‘coming out’ drama, constructed around the aging writer’s abandoning himself to a vision of beauty embodied in the adolescent male whose attraction he has never allowed himself to recognize, let alone enjoy.” With regard to the homoerotic element, many critics turn to biographical comparisons between main character and composer. As Cazan (2004) writes,

Benjamin Britten had so much in common with Mann and, consequently, the main character of Aschenbach in Death in Venice, that it is amazing he waited until shortly before his own death to begin writing the opera. Or perhaps writing this very personal piece had to wait until shortly before his death in order for Britten not to care about any public or critical reaction (with which he was obsessed his entire career).

Of particular controversy, understandably, is the fact that Tadzio is a youth. Claire Seymour (2004, p. 299) writes, “Britten’s Death in Venice is virtually a monologue for Gustave von Aschenbach. In this role, Pears was forced to become the public voice of Britten’s private, possibly pederastic passions.” Britten’s fondness for boys has been written about extensively, but
the consensus is that he never actually acted on those feelings. Performing the role of Aschenbach this year with the English National Opera, Ian Bostridge has put a lot of thought into these issues. In a 2007 interview in he states,

One thing has become clear to me, and needs emphasising in view of contemporary preoccupations: neither the book, nor the opera is about a paedophile - for that, you need to look at Nabokov's Lolita, a highly wrought literary artefact that cries out not to be made into an opera (or a film). Yes, Britten was notoriously attracted to adolescent boys; they inspired him, interested him and, as John Bridcut has characterised it in his excellent book and documentary, *Britten's Children*, he partly thought of himself as a 13-year-old. This is a curious thought but then, as Aschenbach says in the opera, "Who really understands the workings of the creative mind?" However, it's equally clear that for all the interest and anxiety, nothing much happened; Britten was not an abuser. The late David Hemmings, upon whom he had an almighty crush during the creation of *The Turn of the Screw* in Venice in 1954, resolutely cleared him of any wrongdoing.

While I defer to Bridcut and Hemmings with regard to Britten’s own practice, surely the narrative’s portrayal of the ideal beauty of an adolescent boy would have appealed to Britten, as would many of the themes of *Death in Venice* beyond the homoerotic (or pederastic) such as those of creative struggle, aging, and self-analysis.

Moving beyond biographical speculation though, certainly libidinal implications are present in the opera and Aschenbach’s sexual energies find their greatest moment of tension in the climactic music of the Scene 13 nightmare. There he dreams about Dionysus and a pagan orgiastic ritual full of a plethora of phallic images. Aschenbach’s tensions then find release in the form of the opera’s many water images and the final euphoric waves of ocean music. If we can
indeed hear the opera as Aschenbach’s dream, it is most certainly a “wet” one. The “little death” of the opera’s nightmare — an overwhelmingly intense setting of Tadzio’s Theme — leads naturally to the Wagnerian “love-death” of the opera’s last scene on the beach. Here, Tadzio wades into the sea — dissolves into the immeasurable — while his theme expands and resolves into empty pitch space almost beyond our hearing.

This interpretation resonates with the 2004 Chicago Opera Theater staging of Death in Venice, which emphasized the homoerotic nature of Aschenbach’s imaginative perceptions of Tadzio. Faced with the challenge of how to portray a youth with a dancer who possesses the athleticism necessary for the role, COT cast an older, more developed adult. In the last scene just described, Aschenbach looks on from his beach chair as a jealous companion beats Tadzio, strips him naked and leaves him for dead to roll among the ocean waves, beautifully simulated by undulating strips of blue silk. The athletic muscled dancer, more man than boy, makes explicit the sense of Wagnerian liebestod that befits an erotic dream or fantasy, thus emphasizing the libidinal wish that underlies it. When coupled with the violent treatment at the hands of the friend, it resembles a kind of rape fantasy.

In a critique of Mann’s novella, Leah Davidson (1976) asserts a different repressed idea underlies Aschenbach’s dilemma. “Even the work inhibition is a cover up for the fact that the writer realizes that he is getting old and is paralyzed with fright at the prospect of death” (p. 210). In other words, perhaps Aschenbach merely wishes to be young again. In view of the many regressions in the novella, this is not an unreasonable suggestion. Davidson outlines twelve “regressive maneuvers” in which Aschenbach transforms himself from aging novelist into the young-old man, including the way he identifies with Tadzio as a narcissistic extension of himself, focuses on the boy’s youth in contradistinction to his own advanced age, allows the
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barber to make him up with cosmetics to appear younger, and finally dies. While death-as-regression seems a bit oversimplified in Davidson’s reading of the novella, it highlights a tension that exists both in Freudian theory and in Britten’s opera: the confluence of life and death wishes and the (con)fusing of Eros (libidinal wishes) and Thanatos (death wishes). This tension is implicit in the aural connection between Aschenbach’s erotic abandon in Scene 13 and his abandonment in death in the final scene. Aschenbach, in seeking erotic fulfillment, ends up committing a type of suicide.

All of these interpretations — that Aschenbach wishes for both erotic union, and abandon, but also wishes to be young again while risking death — seem to be expressions of an underlying ur-wish. The homoeroticism, the desire for youth, and the desire to let go all serve a more immediate wish, phrased something like “I wish I was full of youthful virile energy and creativity so effusive it freely flows out of me without my control in beautiful sensuous prose.” The wish springs from Aschenbach’s last thought before falling asleep: “would that the light of inspiration had not left me.” This interpretation would also explain why Aschenbach’s psyche creates a dream about a place such as Venice. The Old Fop hints at the romanticism of the city when he sings so accusingly, “the Conte is dreaming! Dreaming of love and Serenissima [Venice].” Tony Tanner, author of Venice Desired (as cited in Said, p. 271), situates Venice as the heart of nineteenth-century imagination for authors like Byron, Ruskin, Henry James, Melville, and Proust. He cites Byron, who called Venice “the greenest island of my imagination.” Aschenbach responds to his writer’s block by seeking creative freedom and finds it in dreams of Venice and love for a comely youth.

Albert Sonnefeld (1999) traces the relation between creativity and youth in Mann’s development of the Kunstlerroman genre. He writes, “in a brilliant shift of cadence, Art itself
becomes the figural representation of sexuality, and more often than not that art is music” (pp. 139-155). In particular, he suggests that Mann portrays art as a “genius of adolescence,” for it is in puberty that imagination flowers in sexual “image-making”. He describes the jungle landscape of Aschenbach’s “hallucination” as an image of complex canals of desire surging in a “physical or spiritual in-flow.” This connection between youth and creativity finds even greater resonance in Britten’s opera. From Aschenbach’s childish sing-song observation about Tadzio “you notice when you’re noticed” in Scene 5 to his adolescent-like vocal break when uttering Tadzio’s name in Scene 12, the opera reinforces Sonnefeld’s suggestion that Aschenbach regresses to an adolescent stage, rediscovering his sexual potential for image-making. As such, Sonnefeld proposes that Aschenbach’s love for Tadzio is less about homosexuality than it is about the pure sexual desire of one youth for another. He further writes that “music as the metaphoric expression of sexuality can inspire a birth or rebirth of adolescent erotic vision-making which can take the form of music itself or reflexive writing” (p. 149). The opera has both forms of erotic vision-making: Tadzio’s music and Aschenbach’s own writing. When his writer’s block finally eases, Tadzio’s music becomes Aschenbach’s own as he sings, “Eros is in the word.” His youthful image/music-making creates the character Tadzio as an icon of inspiration, full of energy, beauty, strength, sexual attraction, and exotic appeal.

At the very least the wish that inspires Aschenbach’s dream might be to have the pleasure of regression, whether as erotic abandon, worry-free leisure, pleasurable sounds, or the lyric outpouring of youthful image-making. Ultimately, we experience this wish in the opera’s regressions: from spoken language to physical gesture in dance, from the complex morphemes of “Tadzio” to the mere vowels of the nightmare’s “aa-oo,” from twelve-tone to whole-tone scales, from experienced maturity to made-up buffoon, even from self-reflective waking to ambiguous
dream images. Each of these regressions enhance Aschenbach’s tale, whether this tale is ultimately a dream or daydream, delusion or erotic fantasy.

Freud believed that creative writers use writing as a kind of therapy, sublimating troublesome desires and tensions in fiction. Britten, too, tended to believe that what he must repress in public (his open secret with Pears, etc.) could be given more license in music. But when Aschenbach fails to be able to write, he tries to analyze himself, and ultimately cannot. It falls, then, to us as his audience to perform that analysis. In Britten’s opera, music and movement, motive and meaning resonate with the metaphorical underpinnings evident in notions of the flow of creativity, sexuality, language, and music. Hallucination, dream or daydream, “novelist speculations” or sexual fantasy, the multivalent condensations of Death in Venice make space for the opera producers mentioned above (and this music theorist), to craft differing interpretations of the “dream” of Gustav von Aschenbach.
References


Peter Pears sings Aschenbach and John Shirley-Quirk sings the Traveler on this 1973 English Chamber Orchestra recording.

This is not the first time Britten musically signifies slumber. Philip Brett (1993) suggests that “as the curtain rises on Britten’s opera [Midsummer Night’s Dream]…it is almost impossible to resist the association with breathing and sleep, or at least with the wood as a primeval force, that is so powerfully suggested by the eerie sound of the portamenti strings. We open at once into a world of dreams...” (pp. 268-69)

Britten would of course have been aware of Mann’s later (1947) book and its suggestion that the 12-tone technique was antithetical to love and human emotion. Of course, in Britten’s hands, a 12-tone row could be very expressive, as it is here. On a side note, Golo Mann, recalls his father’s remarks “that, if asked, the composer he would have chosen to “realize” the imaginary music of Leverkühn in Doktor Faustus would have been Britten”. Golo Mann reported this conversation to Donald Mitchell, who reproduces it in the introduction to Vol. 3 of Letters from a Life (Mitchell, 2004).

Capital letters signify a conceptual metaphor (as opposed to a linguistic metaphor) after the convention developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 6). Lakoff and Turner (1989, p. 7) discuss the specific conceptual metaphor STATES ARE LOCATIONS in connection with the notion of death as a final destination.

Robert Gard sings Aschenbach and John Shirley-Quirk sings the Traveler in this 1981 Tony Palmer Film.

Robert Tear sings Aschenbach and Alan Opie sings the Traveler in this 1990 Glyndebourne touring Opera production.

Compare this with Robert Hatten’s work on musical tropes, a “process by which new meaning emerges from atypical or even contradictory associations between more established meanings.” For example, he suggests that the dialectical encounter between unusually juxtaposed genres (dance and drama) in Schubert’s Piano Sonata in E-flat, D. 567 generates emergent meaning for sophisticated listeners (Hatten, 2004, pp. 2, 16-18).