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The Story of Billy Budd, Sailor

After *Billy Budd* by Benjamin Britten

Ted Huffman / Oliver Leith

Aix-en-Provence Festival 2025 Production

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and tours**

Synopsis

The Story of Billy Budd, Sailor

Ted Huffman and Oliver Leith revisit *Billy Budd* to create an intense, pared-down work of musical theatre.

How does a sailor, admired for his beauty, his goodness and his deep humanity, end up hanged from the mast of his ship ? Inspired by Herman Melville's posthumous short novel, and adapted into an opera by Benjamin Britten in the twentieth century, *The Story of Billy Budd* addresses homosexuality and queer themes ahead of its time.

During the revolutionary conflicts at the end of the eighteenth century, young, innocent and beautiful Billy is forcibly enlisted on board of a British warship, constantly under threat both from enemy attacks and from unrest within its own ranks. He is soon accused of sedition by the master-at-arms John Claggart. Torn by contradictory feelings, Billy becomes the prisoner of a terrible injustice and the victim of ruthless, inexorable military law.

Oliver Leith's musical adaptation, in a surge of vocal and orchestral inventiveness, conveys this struggle between good and evil, the gradual crushing of a soul as splendid as it is innocent, within a world of great harshness.

To reexamine the meaning and form of the original work, to reimagine it in a version that resonates more strongly with our own time.



TED HUFFMAN

Credits and acknowledgements

The Story of Billy Budd, Sailor

by Benjamin Britten / adaptation and direction Ted Huffman

Chamber music theatre by Oliver Leith and Ted Huffman, based on the opera *Billy Budd* by Benjamin Britten in its 1964 two-act version (Boosey & Hawkes, London) and librettists by Edward Morgan Forster and Éric Crozier, from the unfinished novella of Herman Melville *Billy Budd, Sailor (an Inside Narrative)*, 1924 (posthumous).

With

10 performers

including 3 soloists, 3 singers

4 onstage musicians (keyboard, percussions)

casting in progress

—

Stage direction, adaptation, costumes and props **Ted Huffman**

Musical adaptation **Oliver Leith**

Musical director **Romain Louveau**

Light designer **Bertrand Couderc**

Musical director assistant **Richard Gowers**

Staging, costumes and accessories collaborator **Sonoko Kamimura**

Costumes and accessories assistant **Sara Bartesaghi Gallo**

Scenic movement collaborator **Pim Veulings**

—

Premiered on 5 July 2025 at the Théâtre du Jeu de Paume as part of the Aix-en-Provence International Festival of Lyric Art.

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Original production Festival d'Aix-en-Provence

Executive production for re-creation and tour MC2: Maison de la Culture

de Grenoble - Scène nationale

Co-production Les Théâtres - Grand Théâtre de Provence, Aix-en-Provence

With kind permission of Boosey & Hawkes, the Britten Pears Foundation, Durand and Faber.

Schedule

TOUR 24—25

PREMIERE Aix-en-Provence Festival - Théâtre du Jeu de Paume

05—10 July

 **Available from march to december 2028**

Technical and financial conditions : please contact us

Plot summary

The opera is preceded by a **prologue**, in which Captain Vere, as an old man, ponders the significance of events that took place long ago.

Act I.

The main action is set on board the British naval vessel HMS *Indomitable* in 1797. The crew goes about its tasks driven by the brutality of the ship's master-at-arms, John Claggart, who rules by violence. Three new sailors, press-ganged from a passing merchant ship, are brought on board. Two of them are meagre specimens, but the third – Billy Budd – is young, strong and handsome. His goodness wins the hearts of all except Claggart, whose dark world is turned upside down by Billy's beauty and grace, and who determines to destroy him. To this end, he has his sidekick Squeak rifle amongst Billy's belongings and when then the young sailor catches him, the old sea dog Dansker warns Billy that Claggart has it in for him. Claggart then has the Novice – cowed into submission by an earlier beating – try to bribe Billy into supporting mutiny, but to no avail.

Act II.

Claggart takes his complaint about Billy to Vere, but he is interrupted in his accusation by a brief skirmish with a French frigate that ends with the enemy escaping. Claggart then accuses Billy, who is called in by Vere to defend himself. His stammer, however, frustrates his attempts to speak, and he knocks Claggart down with a single blow that strikes him dead. At the court martial Vere fails to speak up for Billy, who is then condemned. He goes to his death.

In the **epilogue**, we return to the aged Vere, who again scrutinises his role in these events.



Overview

At the end of his life, Captain Edward Fairfax Vere recalls the tragic events that occurred aboard the British war-ship he commanded in the late eighteenth century, when England was at war with revolutionary France. At the time, Billy Budd, a young press-ganged sailor — as handsome as he was innocent — was falsely accused of plotting a mutiny by the malevolent master-at-arms John Claggart. Upset to see his visceral nihilism contradicted by this paragon of humanity, Claggart vowed to take Billy down. Billy, unable to defend himself in front of Vere due to a stammer that would surface in moments of distress, inadvertently struck Claggart, who died instantly from the blow. Torn by deep inner turmoil, Vere nevertheless became the quintessential instrument of implacable justice: Billy was condemned and hanged in front of the entire crew.

The enigmatic last will of Herman Melville

Benjamin Britten's *Billy Budd*, to a libretto by Edward Morgan Forster and Éric Crozier, was first premiered in four acts at the Royal Opera House, London, in 1951, and later as a two-act opera in 1960 (concert version) and 1964 (staged version). The composer and librettists based their opera on *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, a novella written by American author Herman Melville (1819–1891) in the final years of his life, after two decades of professional silence. Melville's inspiration came from his own past as a sailor, as well as a real incident witnessed by one of his cousins.

Just like *Moby Dick* (1851) and *Bartleby* (1853), *Billy Budd, Sailor* presents the reader with a mystery : here, it concerns the « mystery of injustice », made all the more incomprehensible given the portrayal of Budd's and Vere's high moral standards versus Claggart's profound malice. Melville continuously highlights the murky obscurity of the story, appears unwilling to take sides, and concludes his tale with an « official » report declaring that an innocent man is guilty.

Left as an unfinished manuscript, *Billy Budd, Sailor* was published posthumously in 1924. The story's simultaneously limpid plot and enigmatic depth, the ambition of its themes — its close examination of the notions of desire, society, justice and transcendence, to form a distilled parable with metaphysical overtones — have gradually given it iconic status, and made it one of the most commented-upon works in American literature.

From Melville to Britten : the confrontation between innocence and perversity

The work attracted strong interest from a circle of writers close to Britten — all homosexual like himself — including the novelist E. M. Forster, with whom Britten was interested in collaborating. It was probably Forster who recommended Melville's novella for adaptation, since he had already studied the work. Forster was assisted by playwright and director Éric Crozier, a long-standing collaborator of the composer.

Together, they devised a powerful transposition for the theatre — applying the classical tragic structure of « exposition–peripeteia–catastrophe–conclusion » — without watering down the symbolic dimension of the text, to which Britten was deeply attached — i.e. the eternal conflict between good and evil, which, in exceptional circumstances, questions the very foundations of human justice. The work also crystallises a theme dear to the composer — that of innocence confronted by experience or even perversity — with, as always, a sympathy for people on the fringe of society.

The setting of the ship, a closed and autonomous world, is a microcosm of human society as a whole, and ideally suited to this sort of metaphysical parable imbued with morality that is the fabric of several of Britten's operas. By changing the names of the ships, the librettists further reinforce the vessels' symbolic value : Billy leaves the « *Rights o'Man* », a name with clear revolutionary overtones, to join the « *Indomitable* », a name that expresses not only British arrogance, but also evokes the force of destructive desire.

A dark and dazzling parable

At the heart of the narrative lies the triangle formed by the three protagonists — Manichaean allegories of Good, Evil and Justice combined with metaphors of shadow and light and infused with biblical references.

Beloved by all, Billy initially appears as an Edenic figure, untouched by original sin or any sense of guilt ; gradually, he takes on Christ-like traits. Conversely, Claggart is the fallen angel — a Schopenhauerian Lucifer, outcast and alone, and likely marked by the « infamous seal of inversion ». A parallel is drawn between the two characters: alike in their beauty, their mysterious pasts,

their physical proximity on the ship, and, ultimately, the violent deaths that return them to the sea.

Alone on the upper decks, Vere towers over his men like their god beneath the starry vault of heaven, crowned with military glory and the refinement of a learned man. Yet his very name — « Fairfax Vere », to act justly — writes for him a different destiny, haunted by an insoluble moral dilemma over the appropriate way to administer justice.

Billy's comet-like arrival disrupts the harmony of Vere's cosmos, established according to secular laws. A disturbing reciprocity arises between the two men, blending intimate understanding with compassion. And although Vere recognises Billy as God's angel, having carried out justice by killing Claggart, he nonetheless feels forced — as the god of a world whose order he must maintain with an iron hand — to enact the implacable justice of men. At the end of the opera, Vere is blessed and redeemed by the very man he has condemned.

Speaking, remaining silent

One motif plays a central role : the circulation of speech — or, to the contrary, of silence — among all the characters. Mutiny rumbles in the chorus before fading away, never reaching the level of actual discourse. Those who speak use their words to destroy — e.g. Claggart, the serpent of temptation — while others remain silent when they should indeed speak — such as Vere, who maintains an inner dialogue with the Ancients, in search of an answer to his moral quandary. At several points, the music takes over where words fail, most notably during the final, and crucial, meeting between Vere and Billy.

And then there is Billy's surprising stammer. His recruiters perceive in this small but significant flaw the eternal scandal posed by the manifestation of original sin within the perfection of divine creation. Yet one might note that the stammer occurs whenever Billy is confronted with evil, the very existence of which fills him with dread : it is perhaps not so much a flaw, but rather the profound reluctance that perfection feels when it comes face to face with its opposite or its negation.

A « queer fog » : metaphysics and the music of desire according to Ted Huffman and Oliver Leith

Eliciting endless versions and interpretations, Melville's unfinished novella has produced a surprising « fog of meaning » that fascinates stage director Ted Huffman and composer Oliver Leith. In the story itself, the mists of war — which literally cloud the North Sea, but also obscure to the point of obliteration the very ideas of law and society in the West — mingle fatally with the nebula of homosexual desire, simultaneously destroying and saving the protagonists, each in his own way.

For these two creators, adapting and condensing Britten's opera by reinterpreting its narrative and sound content for just a few singers and instrumentalists means refocusing their attention on the essential : reconnecting with the story's folk roots, with the eternal sailor's ballad; and questioning the queer fog that floats down from Melville and Britten to us and expands into a political and metaphysical meditation on what constitutes humanity, and on what cements or destroys a community.

Timothée Picard

Dramaturge and artistic advisor of the Aix-en-Provence Festival

Director's note

Herman Melville's unfinished novella, *Billy Budd*, has long produced a fog of meaning. Since its initial publication in 1924, through subsequent revisions and versions, the work's message, even its text, has shifted again and again.

The fog of war within the story – a fog that covers sea but also renders unintelligible accepted ideas of society and law – intermingles crucially and fatally with the force of queer desire. This desire, embodied in the character of Billy Budd, in the self-loathing of Master-at-Arms John Claggart, in the crippling regret of Captain Vere, and in the proto-mutinous outcry of the ship's crew, somehow both destroys and saves the story's characters, and, by extension, the « floating fragment of earth » that is their warship. In this way, Billy Budd proves prophetic, foreshadowing Western civilization's own violent reckoning with laws and codes meant to stifle same-sex desire.

In the intimacy of Aix's Jeu de Paume theatre, we intend to re-configure Britten's extraordinary grand opera into a new, dynamic piece of chamber music-theatre (1 hour 40 minutes) for six singers and four musicians. These ten performers will, together, sing, play, and act the music and text originally assigned to a cast of twenty soloists, chorus, and full orchestra.

Performers will assume multiple roles and functions : a musician might leap into the role of an impressed sailor, a singer might accompany himself on keyboards, the whole cast might sing a sea-shanty together.

We intend this version as a re-telling rather than a reduction, although the reduced size of the company will hopefully make this work accessible to theatres which otherwise wouldn't be able to program Britten's large-scale opera. We imagine a stage with minimal set, where light, costumes, accessories and musical instruments help us to tell the story.

Ted Huffman
director

Composer's note

Musically, rather than this being a reduction or reorchestration, which I think would undermine the score, it is a treatment that reinterprets the sound world of the orchestra. The score would be arranged for three electronic keyboards, allowing for the vast timbral palette of the original to be reimagined for small forces. Using Britten's notes with complete timbral openness we can go about storytelling with sound. A keyboard can play like a fog horn organ. The sound of whistling wind can sing Britten's harmonies. Seagulls can squawk a flute melody.

I believe Britten would have been into this more radical approach and that he would have been extremely excited about the invention of the Fairlight machine (the original sampler keyboard 1979). He was forever experimental in his use of form and instrumentation. Rather than this feeling like a lesser version it should feel like something new, the way we would present the music would unlock a cinematic quality to the work. The « instruments » and « orchestra » are instead sounds of the dramatic environment, recognisable and alien at the same time.

The temptation of these sort of treatments is to pursue « poor theatre » aesthetics instrumentally, making it « folksy », using very homely instruments - harmonicas, banjos etc. I think it is much more interesting to explore the piece in an expansive way, the sounds completely emancipated and generous.

Of course, some of this would mean a degree of reduction/editing of notes, much like a piano score, but the complexity and nuance are not lost through the rich

potential of electronic sound worlds. There will obviously be abridged patches of music too, given that the piece is being shortened and I imagine a degree of flexibility in tempos etc.

These keyboard players would also play small simple percussion instruments, perform foley, providing textural detail. Taking what could be described as an epic and presenting it as something more interior and domestic when it is required. The cast and musicians will also hum or whistle important parts. This is about creating as dynamic a version as possible with small resources, storytelling with every possibility.

Oliver Leith
composer



Interview with Oliver Leith and Ted Huffman

Could you each tell us the story behind your relationship with *Billy Budd* and, more broadly, with the composer Benjamin Britten ?

Ted Huffman : As a child, I sang in a church choir where we performed lots of Britten's work—his sacred music, his folk songs, and so on. We did not sing only Britten, but also works by this whole group of composers who mainly wrote sacred music, such as Charles Villiers Stanford, Ralph Vaughan Williams and others. Among this genealogy there is a kind of singular harmonic world not really shared by their continental counterparts : it is like an island of works apart that shaped my ear and is still very present in the way I listen today. A bit later on, I got very involved in theatre and, when I was 12 or 13, I participated in a production of *Billy Budd*. I played the role of the Cabin Boy, a speaking part. But even though I appeared in only a few scenes, I had to attend a lot of rehearsals, and so I became familiar with the entire opera ; it left a strong impression on me. It was an old production by John Dexter, which, as it happens, I had the opportunity to revive 15 years later. So, I grew up with this work ; it's never been very distant : I've always had it inside me. But unlike the other operas I discovered when I was young — and even though, in the given form, it was a bit grand opera-like — there was always something beneath the surface that I loved and felt intimately connected to.

Oliver Leith : My relationship to the original opera, and to Britten himself, is somewhat more distant. Being a composer of my generation who works extensively in opera without ever meeting Britten is interesting, especially since almost all my older peers have had dealings with him : he's a ubiquitous figure in British music, and yet for me, he's completely elusive — as is his music. There's something about it that has gradually diverged from the way a certain British musical language has evolved : something very distinct, and yet very experimental at the same time. That's precisely what interests me: no matter how works appear to us when they're first starting out, it's about how they transform as they become an integral part of the canon. Britten is one of the most fascinating illustrations of that transformation.

And looking further back, before Britten, what was your relationship like with Melville, with his writing and his personality ? I believe that, too, was a key reason you became interested in this project.

Ted Huffman : I discovered Melville's novels and short stories when I was at school, and what I immediately noticed was the way he experiments as a writer, with both language and content. The worlds he describes have an astonishing psychological and political complexity ; he manages to offer brilliant illustrations of the mechanisms that govern social cohesion. It's particularly evident in the metaphor of the ship : the way individuals and groups interact, the power dynamics that emerge between them. He makes it all extraordinarily vivid, and crafts compelling, lifelike characters. You also sense a broader goal : his voice as an author is strong but not moralising ; it subtly guides us towards a deep understanding, with extremely beautiful language...

That it's an unfinished book raises many questions. There's been much speculation about Melville's possible homosexuality, the relationship he probably had with Nathaniel Hawthorne, and whether the novella should be read as a queer work. I think it's hard not to. The text definitely demonstrates a very clear knowledge of male sexuality aboard ships and an understanding that, in such isolated environments, sexuality takes on different meanings and dynamics. It's something we see wherever the sexes are segregated, whether in schools or prisons: human sexuality is quite malleable in that respect. It's interesting how ships became a queer cliché, after *Querelle*¹ and all those works that talk about gay sailors. But the fact is, if you put a group of young men on a boat, things are bound to happen !

Oliver Leith : It's strange, but you can't really say any of this is properly taught in England. Of course, *Moby Dick* is discussed, but it's very much a part of American heritage. There's a brilliant scene in *The Sopranos* that touches on the speculation around Melville's homosexuality. During a family dinner, the son mentions that he received a poor mark on an essay about *Billy Budd*, and says, « Apparently it's a gay novel » — a suggestion the mother flatly rejects, furious at the idea that schools would imply homosexuality even existed in the nineteenth century.

1. *Querelle de Brest* (1947), a novel by Jean Genet adapted for the screen by Rainer Werner Fassbinder (*Querelle*, 1982).

But the older daughter, who's been to university, jumps in : « Of course it deals with homosexual themes ! ». And then they all launch into a hilariously confused debate full of contradictory interpretations. That scene shows just how much the work has become a cultural touchstone on the subject.

On another level, the sea emerges as a mysterious thread running through the various elements of the opera ; in a way, it becomes a set in its own right. It's one of the only places where you're completely cut off, where everything around you is extreme: you're stuck on a massive chunk of wood, and the only other background is the weather, or war. That's an incredibly powerful dramatic premise.

What made you want to create a Peter Brook-like adaptation of *Billy Budd* ? I'm thinking of his *La Tragédie de Carmen*, based on Bizet's opera, as the model for this genre, which has since caught on. In your view, what are the specific advantages of such an approach, and what obstacles must be overcome for it to succeed ?

Ted Huffman : Those who've seen some of my previous productions won't be surprised : two parameters I especially like to focus on are psychological precision and, quite often, the elimination of any superfluous elements.

Peter Brook is obviously one of my heroes, someone whose work and writings I admire deeply. The operas he adapted — *Carmen*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *The Magic Flute* — all have something essential at their core ; but in the sometimes grandiose ways they are staged, they can lose that vital connection to this profound necessity. I think that's what Peter Brook worked so hard to restore. Our approach isn't very far removed from that : we've tried to reach the bare bones of *Billy Budd*, to strip away the frills and any external grandiloquence ; but neither Oliver nor I are trying to create a replacement for Britten's original opera. What we're offering is an alternative, an opportunity to bring the opera to new audiences and to venues that might not have the possibility to present it otherwise. On a more fundamental level, it's a chance for us to re-examine the meaning and form of the original work, and reimagine it in a version that resonates more with our time.

I'm equally interested in music and theatre, and I find it's impossible to say where one ends and the other begins ; they're completely inseparable. One doesn't wait for the other : they push each other forward. In *Billy Budd*, singing comes very close to speech ; it particularly interests me for that very reason. Reducing the orchestra and chorus to a much more intimate scale, within a smaller space, brings us closer to the idea that opera may be a sort of extension of speech and theatre : all of that matters to me a lot.

Oliver Leith : I find this kind of transformation particularly fascinating, because it involves treating *Billy Budd* more as a play than as a mere libretto, and using the music to carry out that shift in scale: modulating the nuances, the intonations, the way individuals press themselves. In the original opera, you're dealing with a monumental orchestra and chorus ; just the sheer vocal projection required from the singers creates something colossal. What really interested me was precisely this question : can we make it tighter ? Can we reintroduce a more intimate, more restrained form of tragedy ? In a sense, the idea was to offer a crystal-clear version of Melville's work.

Ted : what made Oliver seem like the ideal partner for such a project ? And Oliver, what convinced you to embrace this challenge ?

Ted Huffman : I had the chance, over time, to discover several of Oliver's works. I think the first was a piece in which a harpist was constantly tuning and untuning her harp, which created a wonderful play of textures, shapes and melodies. Afterwards, the other pieces I heard shared that same playful quality, which I find very theatrical. I'm particularly fond of a piece called *Honey Siren* [2019], which he wrote for string orchestra, as well as his opera *Last Days*² [2022], in which he draws from different realms of sound, combining classical music with a vibrant electronic universe, in a Nicolas Jaar kind of way : you could see the music being created before your very eyes, which resonated deeply with me — it was very much the opposite of that nineteenth century convention of relegating musicians to the pit. The act of playing seems essential in Oliver's music, just as it is for me ; and the act of singing, too. That's why I asked him if he'd be interested in this project.



Oliver Leith : Ted has worked on some of the most distinctive pieces in the repertoire, and his productions are among the most exciting I've seen in opera — although of course, I haven't seen them all ! But the intense simplicity of his language fits very closely with the idea I have of instrumental performance, as he described it. Right from the beginning, we discussed the idea of having the performers on stage, and that immediately

felt very natural to me. There's also something in the texture of the visual image that Ted's particularly sensitive to, and that really matches the way I think about sound. At first, the idea of adapting *Billy Budd* struck me as the most farfetched proposition I'd ever received ! But I must say, Ted presented the project in a very unusual way that, combined with the stimulating context of the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, immediately made me confident about our ability to invent ; it was such a strange proposition that I thought, « Let's see where it leads! ».

**What governing principles shaped this adaptation ?
And in practical terms, how did you proceed ?**

Ted Huffman : We first approached the project in broad terms, thinking together about the guiding principles. The first principle was that we would have ten people on stage, who would play all the instruments, perform all the roles, and handle everything else. We looked at different ways of mixing and matching these functions. So, we'll have musicians taking on roles and performers playing instruments. It'll be a horizontal approach to storytelling, where each person on stage is, in a sense, also a narrator. That was our starting point. Then, dramatically speaking, it was important for me to fully explore the meaning of the work, without shying away from the queer dimension. I'm sure we're not the first to address that aspect, whether through aesthetic choices or the storyline, but here we had the opportunity to restructure the work to make it more explicit. We wanted the central conflict and dramatic tension to be even more present — whereas the original work featured a large subplot about life on the ship. So we chose to refocus the story on the main conflict.

Oliver Leith : It was important for us to remain faithful to a certain type of storytelling, one that forms the framework for Melville's novella and Britten's opera and was something we'd discussed from the outset : the sailor's ballad, the troubadour style, treated « in the style of ». We could've chosen to work with acoustic instruments, but that probably would've been limiting : for an operatic work of this scale, restricting ourselves to that sort of palette — with just a few instruments standing in for a large orchestra, one instrument per section, for example — would've been very constraining. Therefore, the music had to be very distant from the original score and from the way it was conceived. I chose to work with three keyboards and a fairly large range of percussion. The keyboards allow me to explore sounds like foghorns, basses, whistles, or even sounds that remind us of whales underwater ! It's not essential for the audience to recognise them, but it was crucial for me to create a sound palette completely distinct from the original, one that doesn't sound like a traditional orchestra.

I did employ certain familiar references — such as timpani at moments of dramatic tension — but I presented them in a more subdued form. Although it was sometimes necessary to adapt the original material very slightly, often I tried to alter it, to subvert it. There are passages where the music introduces completely new material, but it also works heavily with repetition and the layering of elements: it's a way of making the material more malleable. In addition, I wanted to highlight certain sequences from the original score ; at times I found myself thinking, « This music is truly beautiful » or « Something really special is happening here ». When a particular passage stood out to me, even if it was only two bars, I'd occasionally choose to expand it or rework it differently.

To be clear : Billy Budd's music sometimes feels as though it's unfolding in a different language from the one that I speak. It's almost like watching the BBC's adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* ! Everything seems slightly shifted — not just because of the strange accents, but also because the text is so stylised and theatrical that it becomes almost unreal. This shift is fascinating, and I found it very interesting to try and counteract it at times — for instance, by altering certain pitches, almost as if I was modifying an accent or turning a statement into a question. I worked a lot on that idea. Because Britten's original score is « large-scale », it often relies on distinct intervals that shape the harmony and allow motifs to clearly emerge from the musical texture; but we didn't necessarily need to bring out these effects with the same force. I wanted a more melifluous musical language : the idea was for the characters to evolve in a kind of ambient sound fluid, a strange world, yes, but one where Britten's techniques would not stand out so abruptly.

I'll give you a concrete example : at the moment when Billy is hanged, Britten's music falls into a rather striking mickey-mousing effect, typical of the period when it was composed, and widely used in cinema as well: as the character climbs the ladder, the music accompanies his movement with an ascending chromatic motif. It's an effective device, but very rooted in its era ; and it seemed at odds with the kind of subtlety we were trying to achieve. So I had to strip away certain elements, lay them out differently, find them a new momentum.

The same goes for the cannon shots heard in the opera, often rendered with actual pyrotechnic effects. Personally, I wanted to create a more immersive sensation, like the persistent ringing in your ears after an explosion. So the performers will use ultrasonic whistles and modulate their pitches, creating a psychoacoustic phenomenon to make it feel as though something's brushing past you. That's the sort of idea that interested me: making sound choices that, at the time, may have seemed completely mad, but that Britten would probably have found fascinating. I'm

convinced, for instance, that if he had lived long enough, Britten would've used the Fairlight CMI, one of the first samplers, to create all sorts of sounds.

For this project to go ahead, you got the agreement of the Britten-Pears Foundation and the publisher Boosey & Hawkes, who hold the rights to the work. Would you say that, by modifying the « letter » of Britten, in a way you're fulfilling his spirit ?

Ted Huffman : In a way, it's a small miracle, and we're going to try to make the most of it ! As it happens, the first institution that hired me as a director in the United Kingdom was the Aldeburgh Festival³; it was to stage Britten's own reduction of Poulenc's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*. It was also the first production I presented at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, as a revival. Hence, Britten himself was involved and interested in the exercise of reinventing works for specific contexts. He didn't have the resources or the space to stage Poulenc's opera in its original orchestration, so he thought of a way to adapt it for Jubilee Hall, a tiny venue in the heart of a fishing village. What we're proposing here is perfectly in keeping with his vision of what music and theatre can achieve together when faced with constraints, by modifying, transforming and reinterpreting the works. Designing an artistic project within a constrained framework can be a very interesting challenge ; it forces you to ask, « What's essential to the storytelling? How can we make the maximum impact with our limited means ? ». This question happens to lie at the heart of my work ; so I'm very much at home with the idea of rising to the challenge — which also involves reusing existing material, applying the very « ecofriendly » philosophy of collage. The term « homage » might not be the most appropriate ; but the fact remains that our work is born out of a deep love for the works of Melville and Britten, and a shared spirit with the way Britten and Brook conceived of adaptation.

Oliver Leith : It's about preserving something of the original work : not treating it with absolute reverence, but respecting what it's meant to be. I've thought, from the beginning, that Britten would look upon this approach very favourably. As a composer, he constantly showed an extraordinary ability to adapt: there are at least two versions of *Billy Budd*, as well as many revisions of his other works. And much of his activity as a musical

director demonstrates the same characteristics: the desire to express the essence of a work by any means necessary, while accepting that you won't always have a 160-piece orchestra at your disposal, and adapting accordingly.

The difficulty lies in that, for much of the time, adapting this work runs counter to my own musical language. Harmonically, the two are so close that it actually makes changes almost impossible. It feels as though I've taken



fragments of my own music, and someone has added notes pulling in the opposite direction, making synthesis sometimes difficult ! With *The Story of Billy Budd, Sailor*, I'm presenting Britten's work, but with my name attached to his ! This type of exercise is nearly impossible, yet it's refreshing to do ; and in any event, it's very exciting.

Finally, what are the deeper issues in this work that you wanted to share with today's audiences, and why ?

Oliver Leith : I would like us to move away from an overly reverent approach to the repertoire, to show that it is relevant to perform this kind of operation on existing works, that it does not weaken them ; on the contrary, it transforms them and may even reveal them in a certain way. I truly hope the central tragic core will thus come out more strongly, more tightly focused — reminding the audience, in so doing, that the original work already contains all that potential.

Ted Huffman : What I would like to emphasize, for my part, is that the stage history of Britten's *Billy Budd* is probably one of long-standing misunderstanding. For a great many spectators, the true meaning of the work remains elusive. It is written in coded language, intended for those who know how to decipher it. Most people who have discovered it since its creation must think it is about the opposition between good and evil

or something of that sort. But that broad and general interpretation seems to me less interesting than the real questions at stake in Melville. This project gives us the opportunity to approach them more subtly. Our societies, in the way they deal with sexuality in general and queer sexuality in particular, have been shaped in a profoundly reductive and counterproductive way. Melville had perceived this and sought to dismantle it. As long as we do not confront this framework of thought, and dismantle it, we will continue to suffer from it.

Interview by Timothée Picard on 31 March 2025, with the collaboration of Anne Le Berre, as part as the Aix-en-Provence Festival.



What does *Billy Budd* stand for ?

It may take more than, or something other than, saga-city properly to understand a character such as Billy Budd¹.

Herman Melville

With *The Story of Billy Budd, Sailor*, director Ted Huffman and composer Oliver Leith offer their adaptation of Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd*, itself a transposition of Herman Melville's novella of the same name. A persistent enigma accompanies the fascination inspired by the meteoric destiny of this now cult character, as though every work derived from him were trying to penetrate his mysterious substance. Two years before Britten, a first opera had already been devoted to the young sailor, while cinema and rock music would later take an interest in him as well. What is it that so fascinates about this archetype whose nature nevertheless remains indefinable ? If Melville's novel is, as has often been said, the site of a confrontation between good and evil, the writer, through his poetic power, cultivated an ambiguity within his text, leaving its interpretation open : « Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet ends and the orange begins ? We clearly see the difference between the colors, but where exactly does one begin to merge with the other ?² ».

Let us go back over the facts as related by Melville. The story takes place in the last decade of the eighteenth century, when Europe is plunged into a climate of upheaval and war. France, freed from the reign of privilege, seeks to impose revolutionary ideals across the continent. A coalition of monarchies resists its assaults. At sea, where the risk of mutiny is high, agitators are executed on the spot to discourage libertarian fervor. It is in this context that Billy Budd appears, a twenty-one-year-old sailor serving aboard a merchant ship named the *Rights-of-Man*. The young man belongs to the category of the « handsome sailors », distinguished by their natural charm in which strength and beauty are combined. In these troubled times, the shortage of men in the military fleet makes impressment necessary. Billy's remarkable physique causes him to be forcibly enlisted on a British warship. On board, his angelic appearance immediately charms the entire crew, with the exception of master-at-arms John Claggart, who has sworn to destroy him. To that end, he accuses the young man of preparing a mutiny.

In his perfection, Billy has an Achilles heel : the emotion he feels in the face of injustice makes him stammer. Unable to defend himself with words, he strikes the master-at-arms, who dies on the spot. Under martial law, Captain Vere, who witnessed the scene, cannot evade his duty to condemn the young sailor to hanging despite the compassion he feels for him. Before dying, Billy, filled with grace, cries out : « God bless Captain Vere !³ ».

WHERE DOES THE ENIGMA COME FROM ?

How are we to understand such a plot ? Our contemporary reason is, to say the least, bewildered : it accepts Billy's fate poorly and struggles to admit that an injustice might be salutary. Why on earth does Billy Budd accept his sentence without rebelling ? After all, he was plotting no mutiny, and the strike against Claggart was not intended to kill. His punishment is disproportionate ! The logic that governs Billy's acceptance escapes us just as much as the sentence pronounced by Captain Vere, who, in order to maintain order, resolves to sacrifice him despite the circumstances that argue in his favor. What kind of justice values such an injustice ? That of a higher law, unintelligible to the individuals we have become ? That of a demon demanding its due in blood ? Or is it simply the reflection of a truth we no longer know how to admit : that the imperfection to which we are condemned mingles good and bad in the effects of our actions ? Faced with the author's apparent neutrality, we resent him for making no gesture to save the young sailor when Billy ends up blessing the judge who is causing him to lose his life on the threshold of existence. What does this strange tragedy contain, which shocks us and yet speaks to us ? Melville, who says he is as lost as the reader, willingly plays on the incomprehensibility of the facts : « There is no one here who can shed even an indirect light [...] on what remains mysterious in this affair⁴ ». Of the young sailor and the captain, he says that they possess such rare human qualities « that they would seem incredible to average minds, even very cultivated ones⁵ ». As for the true motive of Claggart's wickedness, it is declared « impenetrable⁶ ». Melville, who always liked to blur the tracks, pretends to be himself overwhelmed by his own fable, while trying to make us believe that it is not one.

1. Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, marin*, translated from American English by Pierre Leyris, Paris, Gallimard, « L'Imaginaire », 2002, p. 101.
2. Ibid., p. 121.

3. Ibid., p. 151.
4. Ibid., p. 128, 129.
5. Ibid., p. 138.
6. Ibid., p. 127.

Billy Budd, Sailor occupies a special place in Herman Melville's body of work (1819–1891). In 1851, the publication of his masterpiece *Moby Dick*, when he was only thirty-two, marked the beginning of his downfall. After the success of his first books recounting his maritime adventures (*Typee*, 1846, *Omoo*, 1847), Melville, an ardent reader of the Bible, aspired to write great allegorical texts. Though he displayed a prodigious gift for transforming intimacy into epic and for creating mythical figures such as the venomous Captain Ahab, his genius frightened the public of his time to such an extent that he had to end his career as a novelist as early as 1857. In 1866, he obtained a post at the New York Customs House and fell into oblivion. In his anonymity, he did not give up writing, devoting himself with moving discipline to poetry. Only after his retirement, in 1886, did he begin secretly to write *Billy Budd*. The text, discovered after his death, was not published until 1924.

This destiny cannot be ignored when approaching a story in which personal implications are numerous. Nostalgia for the sea, with which Melville now had contact only from dry land, permeates the narrative. « The execution in 1842 of a midshipman and two sailors aboard an American frigate⁷ » had been reported to him by a cousin who had witnessed it. Mentioned in the novel, it certainly nourished its conception, all the more so since, in the real case, the young sailor cried out before being hanged : « God bless this flag !⁸ ». Billy Budd's acceptance of his fate seems, at this point in the writer's career, to echo the mourning of the glory to which he had aspired. Through the wisdom of his young character, he acknowledges a difficult consent to his own tragedy. In 1853, under the blow of his failure, he had Bartleby, the negative figure of resignation, repeat the sad formula : « I would prefer not to. » Some thirty years later, Billy Budd succeeds in illuminating renunciation. In the exaltation of the « handsome sailor », the Christ-like reference is obvious. The redemptive dimension of his death is underscored to the very end : « a piece of the yardarm from which Billy was hanged became for the crew like a relic of the Cross⁹ ».

FORBIDDEN DESIRE

Sensitivity to male beauty is a constant in Melville's work. At a time when it was still unthinkable to name such an attraction, the naval world was more forthright in this regard. Melville knew profiles like Billy Budd when he sailed the seas before becoming a writer. He in fact dedicates his text to one of them. Although homoerotic allusions are already very present in *Moby Dick*, *Billy Budd* goes a step further by placing this desire at the center of the narrative mechanism. The character's sexual charge is evoked quite openly : this « fine specimen of the

genus homo who, naked, might have posed for a statue of young Adam before the Fall¹⁰ » gives rise among men to an « ambiguous smile¹¹ ». Fascinated by Billy, Captain Vere briefly thinks of promoting him to a position where he could observe him more closely. Claggart himself, the author specifies, « could have loved Billy had it not been for fate's prohibition¹² ». Britten's opera delves more deeply into the tortuous psyche of the master-at-arms, which lies at the origin of the repression of such desire and the destruction of its object : « O beauty, O handsomeness, goodness ! Would that I had never encountered you !¹³ » he exclaims, thinking of the young sailor. Behind homosexual desire lies a subversive force that escapes productivity-driven injunctions : it responds only to the gratuitous call of beauty. Through his ability to dazzle other men, Billy represents a threat to the established order on the ship during this time of war, when every effort must be concentrated on combat. Since he exists, the angel who awakens temptation must be hanged. Not for what he has done but for what he is. In order to preserve the unity of the ship, Vere must remove the danger from every man's heart. For Melville, rather than representing an enchantment that would lead one off the right path, sensitivity to beauty is the mark of an authenticity that he associates with the « essential innocence¹⁴ » of primitive peoples condemned to disappear in the modern world. Billy Budd is a being untouched by malice, whereas Claggart is its vehicle. In nineteenth-century books, homosexuality manifests itself only through the disturbance it causes. Beauty has that metaphysical virtue of signaling a hidden harmony behind chaos. It is to that spiritual aspiration contained within desire, that movement toward a horizon beyond our finitude, that the writer attaches himself through the figure of Billy Budd.

THE BIRTH OF A POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

From this point of view, the operatic adaptation marks a development in relation to Melville. It must be said that, in the meantime, the context had changed. From the end of the nineteenth century onward, a consciousness was born regarding the right to difference in sexual orientation. Benjamin Britten's profile — openly homosexual and pacifist — induces a new reading of this story of male desire within a warship. Nevertheless, although the composer made no secret of his relationship with the singer Peter Pears, who would create the role of Captain Vere, homosexuality remained a crime in England at the time of the opera's creation in 1951. It would not be decriminalized until 1967 (in France, 1982), which is why E. M. Forster, who co-signed the libretto, remained discreet about this aspect of his life — written in 1913, his novel *Maurice*, dealing with a passion between men, would not be published until 1971, a year after his death. We are therefore in a period of tension in which

7 Ibid., p. 136.

8 Ibid., quoted in Pierre Legris's preface, p. 11.

9 Ibid., p. 164.

10 Ibid., p. 108.

11 Ibid., p. 40.

12 Ibid., p. 98.

13 Benjamin Britten, *Billy Budd*, two-acts opera (E.M. Forster / Éric Crozier), Act I, Scene 3.

14 Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, marin*, op. cit., p. 149.

affirmation comes up against condemnation. Although relatively faithful to the original plot, the opera softens its spiritual and metaphysical dimension in order to focus on the humanity of the tragedy, giving the characters accents of truth. Where Melville raised them to the level of demi-gods, Britten brings them back down to earth, where their aspirations are bound up with their flaws. A foundling child, Billy appears in the vulnerability of his bond to the world. His innocence is rooted in the misfortune of his path. Deprived of the prudence an education might have given him, he is subjected to the good and bad will of others. The trust he grants spontaneously and the sympathy he receives in return awaken the prohibitions of the environment in which he has been placed. His inability to defend himself, formalized by his theatrical stammer, makes him an ideal prey in a society hungry for persecution. Barely a few years after the Second World War, the shadow of the deportation of homosexuals by the Nazis is still very present. It is no longer a matter of making Billy a necessary martyr. His death has become scandalous. Everything in the opera's construction signals this.

First, Captain Vere's regret, on which the lyric structure is built. Instead of seeing him die in combat, as in Melville, we find the character at the end of his life, remembering this painful episode : « I could have saved him... O what have I done ?¹⁵ » If, in the novel, Billy's hanging provokes a gloomy acceptance on the part of the crew (« an inarticulate murmur of dubious meaning¹⁶ »), the feeling of injustice is more pronounced in the opera, where solidarity manifests itself toward the young sailor : « Some have thoughts of saving you, Billy Budd... They've sworn you'll not swing from the yardarm !¹⁷ ». The ship's name is not the same, moreover : *The Bellipotent* ("master of war") has become *The Indomitable*, a more equivocal term that may refer to the ship's military power, the insubordination of its crew, or the turbulence caused by desire.

Finally, Billy himself no longer presents an ecstatic face in response to his condemnation. During his trial he goes so far as to exclaim : « Captain Vere, save me !¹⁸ ». And in his final monologue, he symbolically sends a second farewell to the old *Rights-of-Man*, his former ship, before adding : « Farewell to ye, old Rights o' Man ; and ye too, farewell to ye, old world — farewell to ye, old world, farewell !¹⁹ ». Britten is less fatalistic than Melville: confronted with the grip of evil, he admits insubordination and sketches, behind wounded humanity, a political hope.

The driving force of a fable lies in the undiminished strength of its power to challenge. The title of Ted Huffman and Oliver Leith's adaptation, *The Story of Billy Budd, Sailor*, removes the character from his purely archetypal dimension and gives his story the substance of a real life that has somehow reached us. We are no longer in Melville's ideal world. Ted Huffman's productions seek to bring into opera questions deeply rooted in reality. Born in a country that saw the birth of

the LGBTQ+ movement, the director knows that the rights acquired by sexual minorities in democracies are fragile. They were granted only at the cost of ceaseless struggle against conservative and obscurantist currents, which have not said their last word. In all totalitarian regimes, homosexuality remains considered a grave disturbance of order. Around ten countries punish it by death. Billy's hanging is not just an image : it is a reality that is still contemporary.

Text by Stéphane Lambert

The writer has published various books on artists (Goya, Klee, Monet, Rothko, Staël, etc.), which earned him the André Malraux Prize and recognition from the Académie française. In 2018, he devoted an essay to the friendship between Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne (*Fraternelle mélancolie*, Arléa), a subject he later revisited in a fiction piece for France Culture.

15 Benjamin Britten, *Billy Budd*, op. cit., Epilogue.

16 Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, marin*, op. cit., p. 155.

17 Benjamin Britten, *Billy Budd*, op. cit., Act II, Scene 3.

18 Ibid., Act II, Scene 2.

19 Ibid., Act II, Scene 4.



Biographies

Ted Huffman

stage direction, adaptation,
costumes and props

New York-born stage director and writer Ted Huffman studied Humanities at Yale University and then apprenticed at San Francisco's Merola Opera Program. He is a MacDowell Fellow in 2017. His productions have earned numerous awards and nominations, including ones for the Olivier Awards, the International Opera Awards, the Opernwelt Awards, the Royal Philharmonic Society Awards, the UK Theatre Awards, the South Bank Sky Arts Awards and the Ivor Novello Awards.

His recent operatic work as librettist and/or director include *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, Versailles, Cologne, Rennes and Toulon), Philip Venables' *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* (the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, the Holland Festival, the Ruhrtriennale, Manchester, the Southbank Centre and Bregenz), Kurt Weill's *Street Scene* (Opéra national de Paris), and Venables' *Denis & Katya* (Philadelphia, Amsterdam, Montpellier, Hanover and Music Theatre Wales).

He stands out in Philip Venables' productions with *4.48 Psychosis*, *My Favourite Piece is the Goldberg Variations*, *Answer Machine Tape, 1987*, as well as *Alice* and the children's opera *The Big History of Little England*. His other notable productions include *The Time of Our Singing* (Kris Defoort), *Svadba* (Ana Sokolovič), *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, *Roméo et Juliette*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (Stefan Wirth), *Rinaldo*, *The Magic Flute*, *Orlando*, *Salome*, *Le Premier Meurtre* (Arthur Lavandier), *Trouble in Tahiti* (Bernstein), *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Il trionfo del tempo e del disinganno*, *Die Vögel* (Walter Braunfels) and *Macbeth*.

During the 2024–2025 season, Huffman presented a new production of Eugene Onegin at the Royal Opera House in London and, at Dutch National Opera, wrote and directed the world premiere of Philip Venables' *We Are the Lucky Ones*, which is being presented at the Ruhrtriennale this summer. He will also return to La Monnaie in Brussels for a revival of *The Time of Our Singing* and to the Nederlandse Reisopera for *L'incoronazione di Poppea*.

During the 2025–2026 season, he is directing new productions at the Berlin Staatsoper with *The Cunning Little Vixen*, the Opéra-Comique with *Werther*, the Opéra national du Rhin, the Glyndebourne Festival and the Tiroler Festspiele ; and a revival of *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* at New York's Park Avenue Armory.

Oliver Leith

musical adaptation

A native of Enfield, near London, composer Oliver Leith studied at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama (2009–2015), where his teachers included Julian Philips and Paul Newland. He won a Royal Philharmonic Society Composition prize in 2014, a British Composer Award in 2016, and an Ivor Novello Award in 2020. He was a composer-in-residence at the Royal Opera House from 2019 to 2022.

His works have been performed worldwide, and are regularly presented in London at such venues as the Royal Festival Hall, Barbican Centre, Wigmore Hall, the BBC Proms, Kings Place, and the Southbank Centre. His music has also featured at the Tanglewood Music Festival, Transit Festival in Antwerp, the Darmstädter Ferienkurse, and the Heidelberger Frühling. His opera *Last Days*, created in collaboration with librettist Matt Copson, premiered at the Royal Opera House in 2022. It was later revived at Disney Hall by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, led by Thomas Adès, a recording was made in 2024 by the 12 Ensemble and GBSR Duo, conducted by Jack Sheen ; and a film adaptation is currently in production with MUBI.

He also creates sound installations, which have featured at the Aspen ArtWeek, at Station Gallery Australia and in Venice ; his latest installation accompanied the exhibition *Flowers of Romance*, presented by the Lodovico Corsini gallery in Brussels. Among his recent compositions is *Eeyore*, written for horn player Ben Goldscheider ; the work made its world debut in 2024, and was performed on tour in California with Camerata Pacifica in April 2025.

The composer has also written a large-scale processional piece for *Bold Tendencies*, to be premiered in late summer 2025. A former member of the Académie du Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, Oliver Leith has composed several works commissioned by the Festival, including a collaboration with Matthew Herbert.

Romain Louveau

musical director

Romain Louveau is a pianist and vocal coach. Since 2016, he has served as artistic director of Miroirs Étendus, alongside Fiona Monbet and Othman Louati, in residence at the Opéra de Rouen–Normandie, the Orchestre National de Lille, and the Atelier Lyrique de Tourcoing. He is also the co-founder of the La Brèche Festival in Savoie.

His discography includes the complete vocal works of Rita Strohl, recorded with Elsa Dreisig and Stéphane Degout (BBC Music Awards, Choc Classica, FFFF Téléràma, 5 Diapasons). In 2024, he recorded Schubert's *Winterreise* with Victoire Bunel and Jean-Christophe Lanièce.

The first album by Miroirs Étendus, released in 2021, brought together a new piano work by Othman Louati and Debussy's *Chansons de Bilitis* with Marie-Laure Garnier (Révélation at the 2021 Victoires de la Musique). The recording was widely acclaimed by critics (4 Diapasons).

A laureate of the Académie Orsay–Royaumont in 2018, he won the piano chamber music prize at the ISA of the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna in 2016 with Fiona Monbet. He trained with Hervé Billaut at the CRR in Lyon and later joined Jeff Cohen's Lied and Mélodie class at the CNSMDP.

He collaborates with leading vocal artists such as Elsa Dreisig, Stéphane Degout, Marianne Croux, Adèle Charvet, and Eva Zaïcik. He has performed in recital in major European venues, including Wigmore Hall in London, La Monnaie in Brussels, and the Lied Festival Victoria in Barcelona, as well as in France at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, the Auditorium of the Musée d'Orsay, Maison de la Radio, MC2 Grenoble, the Opéra de Lille, the Opéra de Rouen, and the Théâtre Impérial de Compiègne.

He has also worked with the Agate Quartet, pianists Susan Manoff and Jean-Sébastien Dureau, cellists Michèle Pierre, Valérie Aimard, and Marie Bitloch, violinist Hélène Maréchaux, clarinetist Bertrand Laude, and flutist Mathilde Caldérini.

Bertrand Couderc

lighting design

A graduate of the École nationale supérieure des arts et techniques du théâtre (ENSATT), Bertrand Couderc was awarded the Institut français's « Hors-les-murs » grant in 2017 for his project *L'Esprit du vide* in Japan.

He collaborated with Patrice Chéreau on several productions : *Così fan tutte* at the Opéra national de Paris ; *Tristan und Isolde* at La Scala in Milan ; *From the House of the Dead* in Vienna, at La Scala, at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and at the Opéra national de Paris ; and Bernard-Marie Koltès's *La Nuit juste avant les forêts*. He also designed the lighting for Luc Bondy's last two productions, *Charlotte Salomon* at the Salzburg Festival in 2014 and *Ivanov* at the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe in 2015. He went on to work with Bartabas and the Académie Équestre de Versailles on *Davide penitente* and on Mozart's *Requiem* in Salzburg, and, more recently, on *The Rite of Spring* at La Seine Musicale.

He has also collaborated with Éric Ruf on *Romeo and Juliet*, *Life of Galileo*, *Bajazet* and *The Satin Slipper* at the Comédie-Française ; *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées ; *Romeo and Juliet* at the Opéra-Comique and with Philippe Torreton on *Le Funambule* during the 2024-2025 season.

For Ted Huffman, he has designed the lighting for *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* at the Manchester International Festival, Street Scene at the Opéra national de Paris, and *We Are the Lucky Ones* at the Dutch National Opera in Amsterdam. Upcoming projects will take him to the Comédie-Française, the Opéra national du Rhin, the Salzburg Festival, the Opéra-Comique, Notre-Dame de Paris and the Wiener Concert-Verein.

Sonoko Kamimura

staging, costumes and props collaborator

Originally from Gifu, Japan, Sonoko Kamimura trained in classical ballet at Reiko Matsuoka Ballet Studio in Nagoya before earning her bachelor's degree in contemporary dance at Codarts, University of the Arts in Rotterdam.

After dancing professionally with Scapino Ballet Rotterdam and as a guest with The Forsythe Company, she transitioned into a career as a movement director and creative collaborator for opera. She has worked closely with director Ted Huffman on numerous productions, including *Madama Butterfly* at Opernhaus Zürich, *Il trionfo del tempo e del disinganno* at Royal Danish Opera and Opéra national de Montpellier, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* at Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia, *Die Vögel* at Opéra national du Rhin, and *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* at Opernhaus Zürich. Additional work includes *Madama Butterfly* with R.B. Schlather at Oper Frankfurt, Mexico Aura : *The Myth of possession* with Christopher Roman at Neuköllner Oper Berlin, and movement consulting for *Madama Butterfly* at The Royal Opera House, London.

In 2023, she collaborated on *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* by composer Philip Venables and director Ted Huffman, produced by Factory International for the Manchester International Festival and co-commissioned with Festival d'Aix-en-Provence. She has also debuted as a costume designer in the 2025 world premiere of *We Are the Lucky Ones* by Venables, Huffman, and Nina Segal at Dutch National Opera.

Her upcoming projects include further collaborations with Ted Huffman on new opera productions in Europe.

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