

BILLY BUDD

Benjamin Britten

Prologue: Captain Vere, as an old man, looks back on his life at sea and the mysterious workings of good and evil. In memory he evokes...

Act I: ...the H.M.S. Indomitable during the French Wars of 1797. Early in the morning, the crew goes about its work. A cutter dispatched to board a passing merchantman returns with three impressed sailors. One of these is Billy Budd, a handsome, open-hearted young man whose only failing is a stammer in moments of stress. Shouting a farewell to his old ship, Rights of Man, Billy is misunderstood by the officers, who instruct Claggart, the Master-at-arms, to see that an eye is kept on the new recruit. Claggart orders his corporal, Squeak, to provoke Billy. The old seaman Dansker warns Billy about Claggart, but the innocent boy can see no evil in him. In Vere's cabin a week later, the officers discuss recent mutinies at Spithead and the Nore and agree that extra vigilance must be maintained.

That same evening, the men sing chanties on the berth-deck. Billy discovers Squeak rummaging through his things and attacks him. Claggart, seeing his agitator has bungled things, has him clapped in irons and gagged, but once the men are asleep he seeks Billy's destruction. He gets the Novice, whose spirit has been broken by a flogging, to try to bribe Billy to lead a mutiny. The Novice's efforts only rouse Billy's ire. Their scuffle awakens Dansker, who again warns Billy to beware of Claggart.

Act II: Some days later, the officers and crew are impatient to come to grips with the enemy, but the ship is becalmed and shrouded in thick mist. Claggart starts to put to Vere his case against Billy as a mutineer, but a French sail is sighted and the air begins to clear. Vere issues orders to give chase, and the men eagerly prepare for battle. A shot is tried but falls short; the wind drops, and the mist returns to put an end to the pursuit. Claggart approaches Vere once more with his complaint against Billy. Vere refuses to believe him and sends for Billy to confront his accuser. Vere, in his cabin, is sure of Billy's innocence, but when Claggart repeats his charges in front of Billy, the boy becomes so upset that his stammer chokes him and he strikes out at Claggart, killing him on the spot. Vere, shaken, summons his officers. As he waits for them, he realizes that though Billy is innocent of murderous intent, an indictment will have to be made. When the other officers arrive, a drumhead court is constituted. Frustrated by Vere's refusal to influence the verdict one way or another, and realizing that naval law requires hanging as the penalty for striking and killing a superior, the officers reluctantly condemn Billy.

Shortly before dawn the following morning, Billy, in irons, accepts his fate and refuses to encourage Dansker, who reports a threatened mutiny.

Shortly thereafter, before the entire company, Billy is sentenced. He blesses Vere and is hanged.

Epilogue: Vere, again as an old man, remembers Billy's blessing and is comforted.