

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) War Requiem, Op. 66 (1961)

(Words from the *Missa pro Defunctis* and the poems of Wilfred Owen)

I Requiem aeternam

Requiem aeternam (chorus and girls' choir)

"What passing bells" (tenor solo) from 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'

II Dies irae

Dies irae (chorus)

"Bugles sang" (baritone solo) from 'But I was Looking at the Permanent Stars'

Liber scriptus (soprano and semi-chorus)

"Out there, we walked quite friendly up to death" (tenor and baritone Soli) from 'The Next War'

Recordare (women's chorus)

Confutatis (men's chorus)

"Be slowly lifted up" (baritone solo) from 'Sonnet on Seeing a Piece of our Heavy Artillery Brought into Action'

Reprise of *Dies irae* (chorus)

Lacrimosa (soprano and chorus) interspersed with "Move him, move Him" from 'Futility'

III Offertorium

Domine Jesu Christe (girls' choir)

Quam olim Abrahae (chorus)

Isaac and Abram (tenor and baritone soli) from 'The Parable of The Old Man and the Young'

Hostias et preces tibi (girls' choir)

Reprise of *Quam olim Abrahae* (chorus)

IV Sanctus

Sanctus and *Benedictus* (soprano solo and chorus)

"After the Blast of Lightning" from 'The End'

V Agnus Dei

Agnus Dei (chorus) interspersed with "One ever hangs" (chorus; tenor Solo) from 'At a Calvary near the Ancre'

VI Libera me

Libera Me (soprano solo and chorus)

Strange Meeting ("It seemed that out of battle I escaped") (tenor and Baritone soli) from 'Strange Meeting'

In paradisum (All)

Conclusion – *Requiem aeternam* and *Requiescant in Pace* (organ, girls' choir and mixed chorus)

*My subject is War, and the pity of War,
The poetry is in the pity...
All a poet can do today is warn.*
Wilfred Owen

Britten quotes these lines of Owen on the title page of his *War Requiem*, making clear at the outset his pacifist intentions in a work that Shostakovich described as “one of the great works of the human spirit”. From the 1940’s onwards Britten had nurtured an ambition to contribute a major work to the English choral tradition. One project was conceived with W H Auden in the US in 1942 for a Christmas Oratorio, setting Auden’s *For the Time Being*. Work on this continued intermittently until 1946, when it was abandoned in the face of Auden’s inability to reduce his lengthy text to a manageable size for a choral setting. As a pacifist, Britten wanted to respond to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945 and discussed a proposed oratorio with the librettist Ronald Duncan to be entitled ‘Mea Culpa’, with whom he also considered collaborating, in the mid-1950’s, on an oratorio about the life of St. Peter. Neither project was completed, and a further proposal for a requiem to honour Gandhi’s pacifism, after his assassination in 1948, also remained unrealised. Britten had already completed an orchestral *Sinfonia da Requiem* (Op.20) to a commission from the Japanese government in 1940, but this was rejected and not performed at the time. In 1948-9 he completed his *Spring Symphony* (Op.44), a choral work which, despite its setting of secular, lyrical poetic texts and Mahler-inspired symphonic form, was, a less central contribution to the English tradition than Britten sought. Several of its features did anticipate the *War Requiem*, however: it was scored for three soloists, a large mixed chorus with the addition of a boys’ choir and a large orchestra.

The opportunity finally arrived in 1958, when Britten was invited to compose a piece for performance at an arts festival being planned to mark the re-consecration of Coventry Cathedral, scheduled for May, 1962. The cathedral had been almost destroyed by a Luftwaffe raid (ironically named Operation Moonlight Sonata) in November, 1940 and was to be rebuilt within its remaining shell to a contemporary architectural design by Basil Spence, with decoration and embellishment by eminent contemporary artists. The spirit of the festival was to be one of peace and reconciliation, and Britten proposed a choral work on a grand scale, intending that it should be an act of “reparation”. Clearly aware of the startling effects of combining the hieratic sacredness of ecclesiastical Latin with the vernacular energy of modern English war poetry, he embedded within a setting of the liturgical text of the Requiem Mass, nine poems of Wilfred Owen, who he thought “the greatest of our war poets and one of the most original poets of the 20th century”, and for one of whose poems (The Kind Ghosts) he had already composed a cantata-like setting for solo voice and orchestra (*Nocturne for tenor, strings and seven obbligato instruments*, Op. 60, 1958).

Britten was at the height of his powers when he undertook the commission and it enabled him not only to compose a major choral work but one which might contribute also to the pacifist cause he had so long supported and that would continue to be an important theme of his later work. The scale of the work is underlined by its requirement of three sets of performers: a chorus and three soloists; a symphony orchestra alongside a chamber orchestra, and a boys’ choir. The physical location of each of them for the performance gives a dramatic spatial dimension to the sound of

the work, much as Berlioz's distribution of forces had done for his *Grande messe des morts (Requiem)* and Verdi's for his *Requiem*. Britten placed the chorus behind the orchestra, with the soprano soloist – who sings only words from the liturgical text – placed amidst them. Tenor and baritone soloists are placed alongside one another in front of the orchestra and sing only words from Owen's poems, accompanied by the chamber orchestra, which is associated throughout his work with Britten's personal voice. The boys' choir were placed to one side of the orchestra.

Britten involved himself actively in decisions about who should perform the premiere of his requiem. He decided to divide the conductor's role: the chorus master, Meredith Davies, would conduct the choir and soprano, while he conducted the chamber orchestra, tenor and baritone himself. His partner, Peter Pears, was to be the tenor soloist – he had helped Britten choose which of Owen's poems were to be set - and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau was invited to be the baritone soloist. He was known to Pears and both considered it important that he was German, since Britten intended that the soloists should represent the three nations that had suffered most from the war. Thus, the Russian Galina Vishnevskaya, married to Britten's friend, the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, was invited to be the solo soprano. In the event, the Soviet government refused permission for her to sing at the first performance and she was substituted at the last moment by Heather Harper.

The *War Requiem* was hailed immediately as a masterpiece, with several further performances in quick succession in Europe, North America and New Zealand. As well as reinforcing the themes of peace and reconciliation for the festival of reconsecration, it fitted very effectively with the contemporary Zeitgeist of the cold war and the looming Cuban missile crisis. It was first recorded in 1963, conducted by Britten and with Vishnevskaya, at last, as soprano soloist.

The opening of the *War Requiem* indicates the directions in which Britten's later work would go. From the outset, it reflects the musical influences he absorbed on a six months' trip with Pears to the Far East, during which they visited Bali and heard gamelan orchestras. The gong strokes that open and recur throughout the Requiem aeternam show this, as does the Balinese ensemble sound of the orchestra at the opening of the Sanctus. On the same trip, Britten and Pears also visited Japan and heard performances of Japanese Court orchestral music, the influence of which is heard in the organ passages and the singing of the boys' choir at the opening of the Offertorium. Later in the same movement, Balinese influences recur in the metronomic non-alignment between organ and chamber orchestra, figures similar to which Britten went on to develop in his church canticles of the later 1960's.

Britten's seriousness in engaging consciously with the western tradition of settings of the mass is marked especially in his musical references to Verdi and Mozart – Britten responded to criticism that his requiem resembled Verdi's by insisting that it was not possible to write a requiem without echoing those of Mozart, Verdi, Dvořák and others. Verdi's influence is particularly clear in the deliberate tonal references of the Dies Irae, with the use of accidentals above marching orchestral rhythms. The opening and recurring fanfare, reinforced by drums, is very close to Verdi and is for Britten invariably a signification of the battlefield. Mozart's influence is seen especially in the Lacrimosa – though, like Verdi, Britten sets it in B flat minor and replaces Mozart's poignant legato rhythms with a more arresting staccato - and the

Requiem Aeternam, which, like Mozart, he begins in D minor. A further structural influence comes from Bach's two settings of the passion, whose combination of text with commentary is echoed in the complementary roles of chorus and soloists and the articulation of narrative through changes of musical texture and dynamics.

Again engaging with tradition, Britten introduces the difficult, so-called devilish tritone interval early in the opening movement and again in the Kyrie that closes it, failing to resolve on an F major chord. The mediaeval prohibition against using this interval in sacred music, because it was believed to represent evil, may have been used deliberately by Britten to imply that, in war, the Kyrie's plea for mercy goes unheard and that the dead may not be granted eternal rest in perpetual light. In the seemingly weightless, ethereal *Te decet* hymnus, which follows, the boys' choir divides into two parts, each of which inverts the other's singing in a common pattern throughout, utilising all twelve tones of the scale, while the orchestra sustains a recurring sequence of pedal notes (C>F#>C etc), echoing the earlier bell notes. This simple musical structure is characteristic of Britten and is invariably effective, as here, because it has been so carefully worked out, demonstrating a major strength of his operatic and choral work in general: his ability to find apt, simple and memorable musical phrases to express clearly his intended interpretative meanings.

The boys' chorus is followed by a compressed restatement of the opening *Requiem aeternam*, preparing for the first solo from the tenor, which further undermines, in an anthem for doomed youth, the hope implied by the *Requiem aeternam* - the opening line recalling the tolling bells: "What passing bells for these who die as cattle?". The rhythmic figures for the accompanying strings are marked quick and agitated (a marking which recurs later in the final movement, *Libera me*), quoting ironically the tune of the boys' *Te decet*.

The next Owen setting, the second section of the *Dies irae*, is accompanied by a sorrowful sorrowful and ironic quotation by strings and muted brass of the fanfares of the opening section of the movement. A similar use of musical irony later, in the *Offertorium*, chillingly quotes the almost cheerful opening of the movement to accompany tenor and baritone soloists as they recount the cruel and tragic metaphor of Owen's version of the sacrifice of Isaac, in which Abraham ignores the Angel's intercession and murders his son. The dramatic intensity made possible by setting Owen's verse in juxtaposition to the liturgical text is especially clear in this movement, placed as it is in the liturgical sequence - a further irony - immediately before the *Sanctus*. Here, the grandiloquent sonority of the soprano's declaration of *Sanctus, Deus Dominus Sabaoth* contrasts starkly, at first, with the soft, slow, free chanting of *Pleni sunt coeli et terra* by the chorus, gradually building, layer upon layer, to a brilliant, sustained explosion of *Hosanna in excelsis*. This is interrupted by a quiet *Benedictus* with the soprano before returning briefly until the chamber orchestra intervenes to accompany the baritone solo from Owen's 'The End', as the earth protests: "Mine ancient scars shall not be glorified/Nor my titanic tears, the sea, be dried".

The *Agnus Dei* opens with the tenor soloist singing, to a hushed accompaniment, lines from Owen's 'At a Calvary near the Ancre'. Echoing the same tune, the chorus intersperses its plea for rest (*Dona eis requiem*) that brings to an end the ordinary of the mass, until the tenor breaks the tense convention which Britten has established by

confining the poetry to the soloists and the liturgy to the chorus, closing with the quiet liturgical call: *Dona nobis pacem*.

This prefigures Britten's lengthy formulation of the closing movement, *Libera me*, which differentiates the Requiem from the ordinary setting of the mass. After the martial opening of the drums, the double basses play a variant of the music that accompanied "What passing bells..." in the Requiem aeternam, as the chorus raises tempo and dynamic to the climactic invocations of *Dum veneris judicare saeculum per ignem*, incorporating the soprano's *Tremens factus sum ego*, until the final Owen setting, of the poem 'Strange Meeting' of two dead soldiers - a sung dialogue between tenor and baritone soloists, the latter singing in perfect 4ths, as if he has come to accept his tragic fate ("I am the enemy you killed, my friend./I knew you in this dark ;...as you jabbed and killed."). However, Britten omits the crucial words of Owen that make clear the soldiers are meeting in hell. This may have been because of the ambiguity that seems to have characterised Britten's Christianity. Whilst a conventional Anglican observance was a routine feature of his upbringing and adult social milieu, he nevertheless explicitly disavowed Christ's divinity in the statement of conscientious objection to military service that he made on his return to England from the United States in 1940. He may also have sought, in the *War Requiem*, to address an issue that arose from his pacifism, that Christianity was one, even if imperfect, way of confronting the horror of war, and worth exploring further for that reason – perhaps following Owen, for whom "one of Christ's essential commands was: passivity, at any price!...never resort to arms...do not kill." To acknowledge that the two soldiers end in hell may have seemed, to Britten's underlying Christian sensibility, an irony too bitter in negating the liturgical aim of the requiem, condemning them to perpetual fire rather than the mercy of redemptive light. As the dead soldiers interweave their final words, "Let us sleep now", the boys' choir softly sing the closing words found in Fauré's Requiem: *In paradisum deducant te Angeli*, taken up in a final plea by soprano and chorus of *Requiescant in pace*. A closing, perhaps, but as Peter Pears observed: "It isn't the end, we haven't escaped, we must still think about it, we are not allowed to end in a peaceful dream" – a clear elaboration of what Britten wanted to achieve with his Requiem – "that it would make people think a bit".

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October 2013