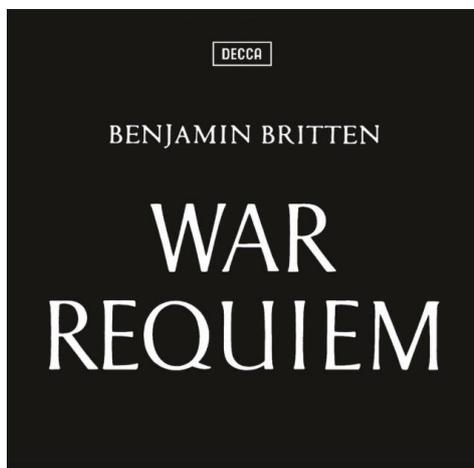


The Pity of War

Peter Bassano's personal experience of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, which he will be conducting on November 17th as the finale of Rochester Cathedral's week-long commemoration of the centenary of the end of World War 1.



My first, unexpected encounter with Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* was when I was eighteen years old, on a lunchtime walk in a City of London street in the Spring of 1963. At that time it was difficult not to notice the distinctive, but unusually austere, black and white case of the double vinyl LPs of the newly released *War Requiem* prominently displayed in every record shop window. Before the end of the year, the recording, conducted by the composer, had sold over 200,000 copies, an unprecedented number for a piece of contemporary classical music. This commercial success was particularly remarkable because the text and mood of the music concerned the most serious of subjects: the appalling waste of life because of war.

In 1963, less than twenty years after the end of World War 2, there was still evidence of bomb damage in many towns and cities and there were few families whose lives hadn't been touched by the death or serious injury of a loved one, so these tragic memories would still have been fresh in many minds.



Prime Minister Winston Churchill visiting the ruins of the old Coventry Cathedral in September 1941

The premiere of the *War Requiem* had been in 1962, a year before the release of the recording. The work was commissioned for the consecration of Sir Basil Spence's newly built Coventry Cathedral, erected alongside the shell of the old 14th century building, irreparably damaged by Luftwaffe bombing in November 1940. The same raid destroyed more than 4,300 homes of city dwellers, killing more than 500 in a single night.

Britten had wished his work to express a spirit of reconciliation and so had invited three soloists from opposing sides in the recently warring nations to sing. They were the English tenor, Peter Pears, the German baritone, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and the Russian soprano, Galina Vishnevskaya. The Soviet authorities refused permission for Vishnevskaya to travel in time for the first performance but capitulated in time for the recording, some months later.

Britten, an ardent pacifist, had from early days been a word-inspired composer and he chose two sets of texts for his setting, the Latin mass for the dead and, a less obvious choice, nine war poems by the, then little known, World War 1 poet, Wilfred Owen. Owen was killed in action on 4th November 1918, exactly one week before the signing of the Armistice. The tone of Owen's poems mirrored Britten's own views on the horror and futility of war. Previously unknown to me, it was Britten's foregrounding of these potent poems which introduced me to the poetry of Wilfred Owen.

In the early 1960s I worked for a firm of London stock brokers and had enough spare time to take trombone lessons, as well as committing to memory all of the Owen poems that Britten had set, as well as listening to Britten's iconic recording many times. It never occurred to me that in five years' time I would participate in a performance in Norwich Cathedral, with the composer conducting, or in fifty five years, conduct the work myself in Rochester Cathedral.

By 1965 I realised that I would be happier pursuing music rather than finance as a career and entered the Royal College of Music where, by my final year, I had established some helpful freelance connections. One of these was the English Chamber Orchestra, whose management were booking instrumentalists for a performance of the *War Requiem* in Norwich Cathedral. This performance was the first of four projects in which I had the good fortune to play with Britten conducting before his death in 1976. All of these occasions were musically memorable because Britten was not only a great composer and musician, but also a highly accomplished conductor with a deep love music of all periods and a renowned interpreter of Bach, Mozart, Schubert and Schumann. A lasting memory was when he conducted a programme of music by Percy Grainger at the Snape Maltings, using some local amateur instrumentalists - fishermen by the look of their Guernsey sweaters - playing concertinas. In the same venue, Britten resurrected Schumann's *Scenes from Goethe's Faust* from obscurity in a celebrated recording. I played with the London Symphony Orchestra in the early 1970s and, on their historic tour to Russia in April 1971, when Britten conducted his Piano Concerto with Sviatoslav Richter, and his 'cello Symphony with Rostropovitch, Sir William and Lady Walton were in the audience.



Recent thoughts about the upcoming performance of Britten's *War Requiem* in Rochester Cathedral and reflecting on Owen's powerful poetry and the significance of the centenary of WW1 has made me think about how my family were affected, a century ago. My mother and her siblings had been devastated by the death of my grandfather in 1917, at the age of 37, on the operating table of a field hospital in Cairo. What should have been a straightforward operation to remove a bullet from his leg ended in an inglorious death, as were so many of them in the Great War. My mother's earliest memory, aged just six, was of her mother distraught after reading the grim contents of the dreaded telegram. Herbert Bezzant left behind six children, of which my mother was the fifth. My grandfather was just one of the 8,500,000 service personnel killed in the 1914/18 conflict. Britten's *War Requiem* - thought by many to be his masterpiece - is the most profound way I can think of to commemorate the ultimate sacrifice of all those young men and women.



Peter Bassano will conduct Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* in Rochester Cathedral on Saturday 17th November 2018 at 7.30pm. In this monumental work, Rochester Choral Society and the City of Rochester Symphony Orchestra will be joined by Rochester Sinfonietta Chamber Soloists and singers from Sutton Valence Choral Society and Thanet Festival Choir.

Vocal soloists will be:
 Soprano – Susan Young
 Tenor – Clifford Lister
 Bass – Colin Campbell

Tickets: £20 (unreserved), £5 (children and students in full-time education).
 Further information and tickets available from <http://www.rochesterchoral.co.uk/concerts>.