

War Requiem, Op. 66

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

In the November of the centenary of the end of the First World War, what more appropriate piece could there be for our autumn concert than the *War Requiem* of Benjamin Britten? In this work, Britten set the poetry of the man who for many people is synonymous with the First World War, Wilfred Owen, and in combining it with the ancient Latin text of the requiem mass, composed a piece which encompasses all the conflicts of the ages. To encapsulate his intention, Britten took some lines of Owen and placed them as an epigraph on the title page of the score:

My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity ...
All a poet can do today is warn.

Britten had been a pacifist all his life; he said that he believed it stemmed from his outrage at the frequent and severe corporal punishments handed out by the headmaster of his prep school (even though he himself was rarely subjected to them). He also, famously, spent the years 1939 to 1942 in America, though the circumstances of this were more equivocal than many people realise. Britten and his life-long partner Peter Pears sailed to America in April 1939, and both felt the urge to return when war was declared in September. However, when they visited the British embassy in Washington to discuss returning, they were strongly advised to stay in America and become artistic ambassadors in order to persuade influential, cultured Americans to help Britain's war effort. Pears was all for ignoring this advice and returning home, but Britten accepted it and persuaded his partner to stay. In 1942, however, reading Crabbe's poem *The Borough* (which became the basis for his opera *Peter Grimes*), Britten felt such homesickness that he decided he must return, and he and Pears did so in April 1942. Both gained exemption from military service as conscientious objectors. Over the next 20 years, Britten's reputation rose unstoppably, completely eclipsing such previously-established figures as William Walton, and he became unquestionably Britain's most famous composer.

It was, therefore, unsurprising that when the new Coventry cathedral which replaced that destroyed by bombing in 1940 was to be consecrated in 1962, Britten was the obvious choice to compose a dedicatory work. The new cathedral was consciously commissioned to be designed by prominent British artists of the modern school, including its architect Basil Spence and the artist Graham Sutherland, who designed the great tapestry which hangs behind the high altar.

Admirably, the commissioners gave Britten complete freedom in choosing what he would compose, so the striking combination of the ancient Latin mass interspersed with the poems of Wilfred Owen was entirely Britten's idea, and one which mirrors the construction of the cathedral, where the new modernist building is placed next to the bombed ruins of the original mediæval structure. It was also Britten's idea to give the solo parts to a British, a German and a Russian singer (Peter Pears, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Galina Vishnevskaya) as a gesture of reconciliation. Unfortunately, Britten's wonderful gesture was thwarted by Cold War politics. The thaw after the death of Stalin had been reversed, and four days after Britten began writing the work, the Berlin Wall went up. Alarmed at the prospect of Vishnevskaya performing what they viewed as a "political work" in a cathedral beside an Englishman and a West German, the Soviet Ministry of Culture refused to grant her a travel permit. It was hoped that this was merely Soviet brinkmanship, and that the permit would be granted at the last minute, but ten days before the premiere was to take place on 30th May 1962, Britten realised that he could not be sure of Vishnevskaya's presence, so he engaged Heather Harper. The permit was not

granted, and Harper sang in the premiere. Because of a shoulder injury, Britten felt unable to conduct the premiere, so Meredith Davies conducted the main forces with Britten conducting the chamber orchestra. The work was immediately and almost universally heralded as a masterpiece. It was over a year later that Vishnevskaya was finally granted her travel permit, and she sang the *War Requiem* for the first time as part of the famous Decca recording with Pears and Fischer-Dieskau, conducted by Britten, which sold over 200,000 copies in the five months after its release, a reflection of the huge impact that the work had achieved.

The work is scored for soprano, tenor and baritone soloists, chorus, boys' choir, organ, and two orchestras (a full orchestra and a chamber orchestra) and works on three levels. The baritone and tenor soloists accompanied by the chamber orchestra use Owen's poetry to tell of the horror of war, while the soprano soloist, chorus, and large orchestra are used for the Latin sections to represent the ritual invocation of God's mysterious presence. The children's choir and organ represent innocent hope. All the forces are combined in the concluding movement.

The straining, heaving feel of the orchestral introduction to the "Requiem æternam" suggests the malignant movement of some frightful, ancient personification of evil and we hear the interval which recurs constantly throughout the work. This is the "tritone" (the augmented fourth), which was known in mediæval times as "diabolus in musica" (the devil in music) and which represents the negation of all that is holy, as embodied by war. The full choir sings the "requiem æternam" (eternal rest), which the tritone seems to taunt; there is nothing restful about the deaths of the participants in war. The boys' voices sing a line reminiscent of plainsong, hoping for peace, but the return of the orchestral introduction negates such hope. The tenor soloist sings "Anthem for Doomed Youth", the first of the settings of Owen, making specific the dislocation between the prayer for eternal rest and the nature of the deaths of the soldiers who "die as cattle". The movement's closing "Kyrie" is permeated by the tritone until its final, unexpected easing into a radiant F major chord.

The "Dies iræ" begins with a series of trumpet calls recalling bugles - this Judgement Day is the battlefield. The disjointed, highly rhythmic (though in a time signature of 7/4) section gives a confused, panicking quality to the chaos of battle, leading to a great climax which is followed by a quiet section reflecting how death and nature are stunned (*Mors stupebit et natura*) by what has happened. The second Owen setting, "Bugles sang", given to the baritone, is a gentle, elegiac piece describing the despairing rest of the soldiers at the end of a day of battle. The soprano soloist then enters commandingly with the "Liber scriptus", telling how the Book of Judgement which contains all the sins of men shall be opened, to which the chorus mutters fearfully "Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?" (What shall a wretch like me say?) and pleads for mercy. The third Owen setting, "The Next War", is a duet for the tenor and baritone. "Out there we've walked quite friendly up to death" shows the braggadocio of soldiers who feel no fear of death and seem to mock it, but in the following "Recordare" for female chorus, the wives and mothers plead with Jesus not to cast their men down into hell on Judgement Day. In a complete change of atmosphere, the male chorus take over with an edgy panic, begging that the evil ones should be confounded and sent to the flames of hell, but that they themselves should be saved. The baritone sings the fourth of the Owen poems "Be slowly lifted up", which seems initially to be a continuation of the choir's supplication, but is in fact a description of the placement of a piece of heavy artillery such as the huge German gun "Big Bertha". The "Dies iræ" returns, as though describing the effects of the great gun, but the movement ends with Owen's poem "Futility," creating an image of all humanity mourning as a soldier longs for the sun's rays to restore life to a fallen comrade, questioning the absurdity of war - "Was it for this the clay grew tall?"

The third movement, "Offertorium", begins with another section reminiscent of plainsong, sung by the boys' voices underscored by chord clusters on the organ. The chorus recalls in a positively rollicking tune God's promise to Abraham that they shall be saved, but this is undercut by the setting for tenor and baritone of Owen's "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young". This recounts the story of Abraham and Isaac but with a terrible twist. In his greed and war-lust, the Old Man refuses to accept God's offer of replacing Isaac with the Ram of Pride, preferring a war in which neither Isaac nor any other son will be spared. The chorus ends the movement with stunned, pianissimo repetitions of the "Quam olim Abrahae" section, as though to say "How could a father do such a thing?"

The "Sanctus" now follows. This is usually a joyous, triumphant hymn of praise, but such an approach would be impossible in this context. The solo soprano calls out the first phrase in a grand but angular melisma reminiscent of the call of an Islamic muezzin. This is followed by a series of overlapping pitch clusters, where every individual choral singer makes up his or her own rhythm for that text, giving the effect of a huge crowd slowly assembling. The pitches get gradually higher, and the section ends loudly and forcefully, but also abruptly. The "Hosanna in excelsis" (Hosanna in the highest) section has the divided soprano, alto, and tenor sections separately sing those words in frantic, fanfare-like rhythms while the basses keep singing just the word "Sanctus," on contrasting material. The solo soprano again begins the "Benedictus" with the choir interjecting repetitions of the word "benedictus" in a sort of mediæval chant in parallel fifths. The soprano and choir come together and the music of the opening "Hosanna" returns in a varied form. This leads into a setting for baritone of Owen's "The End". The battle is over, and a survivor asks the question: "Shall Life renew these bodies?". But both Age and Earth answer that death is all there is and that "scars shall not be glorified, Nor my titanic tears, the sea, be dried". In the fifth movement, "Agnus Dei", Owen's "At a Calvary Near Ancre" is integrated with the mass text rather than set separately. Owen holds in contempt the way in which state and church support the war, equating Christ's crucifixion with the soldiers' deaths. The movement ends with a profoundly moving phrase for the tenor, where he rises slowly up to a pianissimo top F sharp as he begs eternal rest for all who have died.

The final movement, "Libera me", begins with a gradually accelerating march in which the choir sing writhing, chromatically lamenting lines, begging for deliverance from death. This culminates in a frantic, headlong repetition of the "Dies irae" text for the choir and solo soprano which subsides into quiet desperation. The tenor and baritone then sing the final Owen setting, "Strange Meeting", in which the spirits of two enemy soldiers meet and are reconciled - the war is over, it is time to sleep. It is only here, at the end of the work, that all the forces come together, in symbolic unity. The *War Requiem* ends with a setting of "Requiescant in pace. Amen" (Let them rest in peace. Amen), the music reprising what had been sung both in the "Kyrie" at the end of the work's first movement and for the end of the second movement (Dies irae). Its resolution transforms the C/F# tritone to a very quiet F major chord, giving at least some sense of hope.

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November 2018