MOVEMENT 6

Libera me.

From a liturgical point of view, the *Libera me* does not belong to the Mass for the Dead but to the Burial Service that follows it. While the text of the *Dies Irae* was menacing enough, the *Libera me,* with its reference to comic conflagration and 'eternal death', seems more threatening still. Britten sets the first part of the movement as a huge accelerando and so skilfully does he elicit the mounting terror that we need little reminding that we are in the hands of an experienced opera composer.

Chorus	**Chorus**
Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna,	Deliver me, O Lord, from eternal death
in die illa tremenda:	in that awful day
Quando coeli movendi sunt et terra:	when the heavens and earth shall be shaken
Dum veneris judicare saeculum per ignem.	when Thou shalt come to judge the world by fire

If we are in any doubt, the key signature of G minor confirms that we are back on the battlefield and so we prepare ourselves for the terrors to follow!

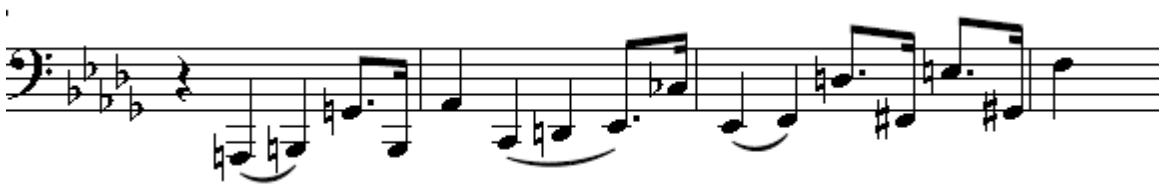
There are six distinct yet fluid stages in the first part of this movement that build inexorably to its shattering climax. I have given score references for those who might have access to the music.

1. (March)

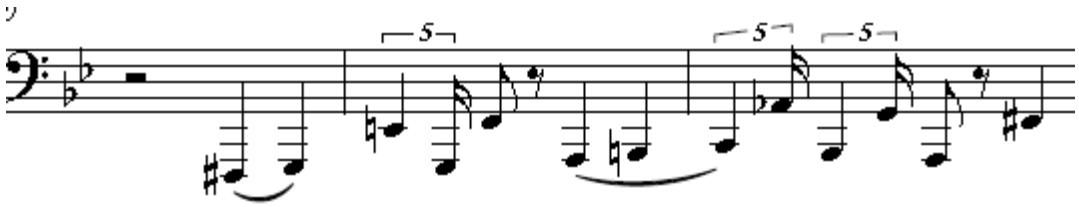
The movement begins imperceptibly; it is a march, approaching from afar, the snare drum tapping out its now familiar connotations. We are reminded of the work's opening in the slow, lugubrious and halting footfall. This is no victory march, the limping pattern tapped out by the percussion reveals only the ranks of the broken and the maimed.

The lower strings soon assign pitches to the snare drum's ominous rhythm and we notice that, while its lethargic gait presents it in considerable augmentation to its first appearance, it is without doubt that militaristic figure used to introduce the first of the Owen poems - the cycle repeats itself.

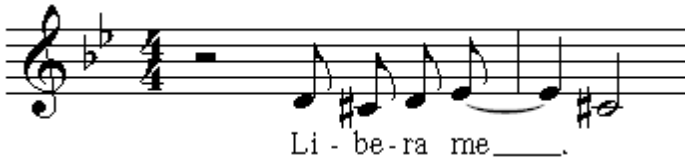
Ex 1: Bass figure in 'Anthem for doomed Youth': *What passing bells for these who die as cattle...*



Ex 2: Bass figure in 'Libera me'



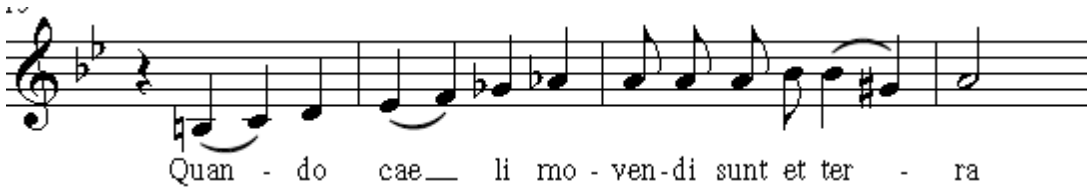
Emerging from this orchestral texture, we hear the first lamenting pleas from the chorus ("Free me, Lord"). The musical figure that Britten gives them is apt and ironic.



Notice how its twisted contour tries in vain to take wings and escape from its own shape, only to turn back on itself. It seems quite extraordinary to me that with this simple series of notes, Britten perfectly conjures the impotence of mankind to rid itself of the scourge of war.

2. (Figure 103)

The procession get closer and the pleas all the more urgent. A new motif now emerges, assigned to the new text "Quando coeli movendi sunt et terra:" (*... when the heavens and earth shall be shaken.*) It too rises hopefully only to fall, finally culminating in a brief but now unified 'forte' reiteration of the "Libera me"

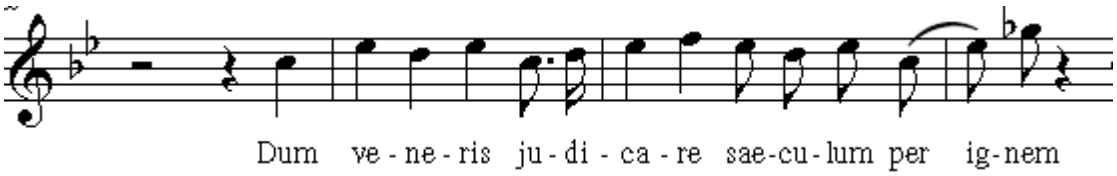


3. (Figure 105)

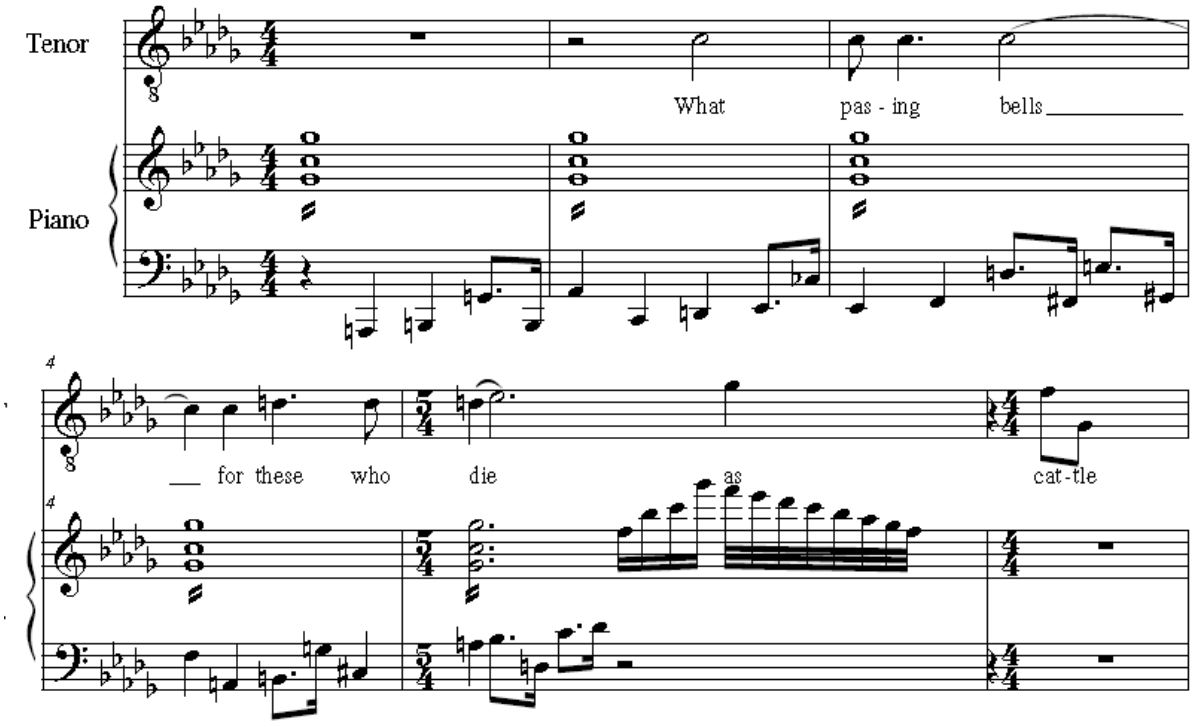
The orchestral tempo now doubles in speed, generating great momentum, and if we hadn't noticed it before, the orchestral motive underpinning the chorus's 'Libera me'(derived from the earlier "Anthem for Doomed Youth") is now unmistakable. Above it, a third theme emerges in the choral texture assigned to the text -

Dum veneris judicare saeculum per ignem

... when Thou shalt come to judge the world by fire.



This theme also forms a link with the first work's first movement in tracing the exact same vocal span of *Anthem for Doomed Youth,* the extremities of both forming the tritone.



1. **(Figure 108)**

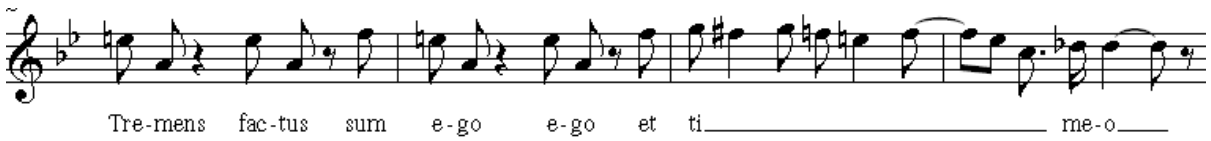
In broken phrases, the soprano soloist utters what we all feel.

Tremens factus sum ergo et timeo

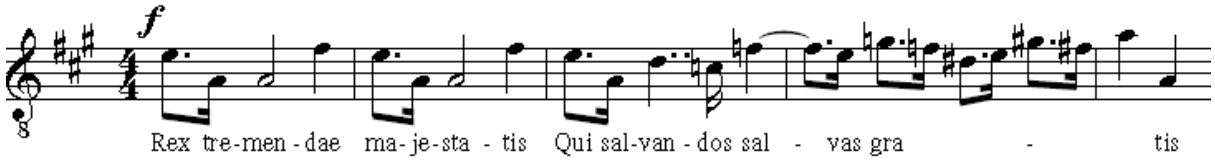
... I tremble and am fearful

This draws on the same musical material that she used in the 'Liber scriptus' in the *Dies Irae* movement, in particular the "Rex tremendae.." section, that translates *"King of tremendous majesty, who gives salvation freely, save me, O source of pity"*. However the nobility of that former tone is here replaced by terror.

Soprano solo in 'Libera me'



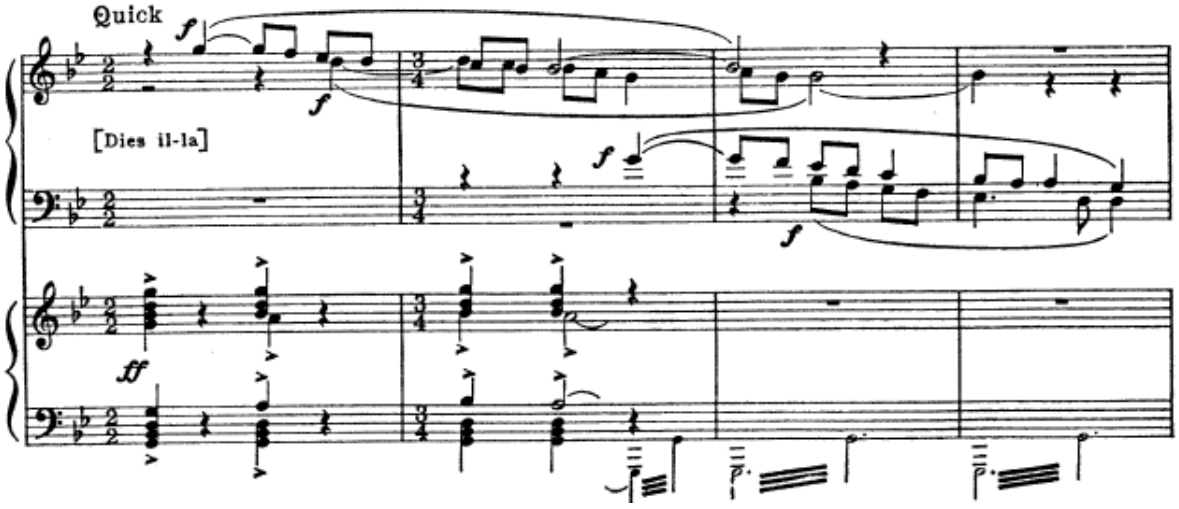
Soprano solo in 'Liber scriptus' (Mvt II)



The fragmentation of this material is the beginning of a universal disintegration as the music plummets to its climax.

2. (Figure 113)

The texture now grows with menacing speed and the battlefield fanfares from the earlier movement add to the growing sense of chaos. With the inevitable reprise of the 'Dies Irae' (with its 7/4 rhythm now hammered out in consecutive bars of 2/2 & 3/4), the disintegration is complete and the voices collapse in a series of downward spiralling passages.

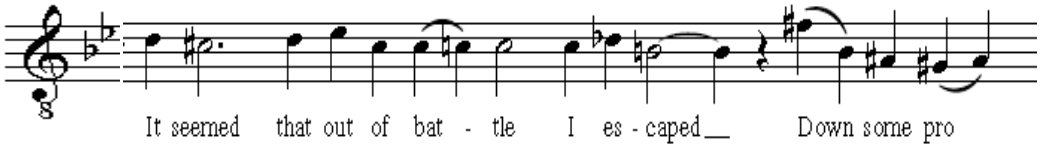


6. (Figure 116)

The tension builds to an extraordinary climax in the home key of G minor. The effect is as if the very fabric of the earth has been torn apart, swallowing the protagonists who fling back their impotent invocations.

Strange Meeting

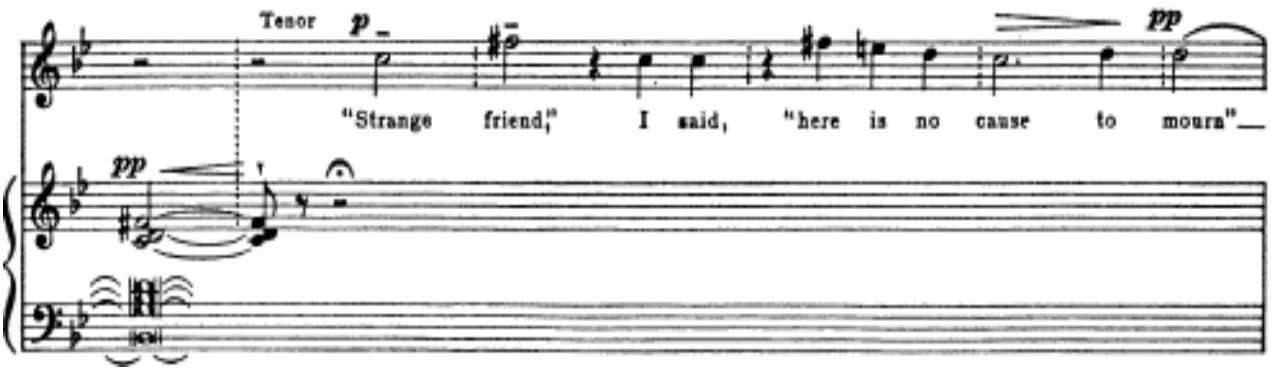
We then are transported to that subterranean abyss, where in ghostly stillness we witness the meeting of two enemy soldiers. The first soldier (tenor) begins what is perhaps Owen's most recognisable poem. In a free recitative sung over a barely audible G minor chord - a distant reminder of the battlefield – his soliloquy begins by tracing the tortured line of the 'Libera me' motif, except that in death, the soldier is now able to free himself from its constrictive bonds.



etc

It seemed that out of the battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which Titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
"Strange, friend," I said, "Here is no cause to mourn."

Various tritonal shapes are hinted at but when the soldier prods a lifeless corpse that he encounters, it springs up to a diminished string chord containing the C/F# interval. Then as he addresses his former adversary, he does so with an explicit use of the interval.



The tonality finally shifts from G minor and with greater warmth and vigour in the vocal line and assisted by motifs from earlier movements in the Chamber Orchestra, the baritone soloist responds. In lamenting the waste and futility of war, he finally reveals himself as the enemy killed by the other.

"None," said the other, "Save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something has been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now . . ."

Reconciled, the two enemies weave a lullaby with reiterations of their final text "Let us sleep now...", while the children's chorus begin the 'In paradisum'. Traditionally, this part of the burial ritual accompanies the coffin to the grave and so, the work ends as it has begun – with a procession. Gradually they are joined by the larger chorus, orchestra and the soprano soloist until all participants are combined in a huge polyphonic canvas (arching over 40 staves of full score). While the key signature would seem to designate a tonality of A major, we are really pitched in D major, which with its G# inflected by the key signature, illuminates the now familiar Lydian mode (with all its former implications) and emphasises the tritone, that for a while seems to share the purity associated with that mode and realigns itself with its original association - 'Requiem'(Rest).

It is important to note that the soothing balm of this music is specifically for the combatants – those two of "Strange Meeting" and indeed all the victims of violence and war. It is certainly not a consolation for the audience; remember, this work is not intended to comfort the living. To emphasise this, Britten twice halts the proceedings with the distant, yet clear, strike of the C/F# interval on the bells, immediately confirmed by the children's chorus ("Requiem aeternam".)

Donald Mitchell puts it more eloquently;

> *Britten, for sure, would have hoped that the combatants in 'Strange Meeting' would have found peace, or at least the peace he imagined for them, in the slumber song that concludes the setting; for the composer, as we know, sleep and death were often inextricably compounded. But he was certainly not in the business of making Peace with War. It is the tritone indeed that is tolled again by the bells, albeit for the last time, in the seven- bar coda that brings War Requiem to an end; and it is that chilly 'momento mori' that we should take with us as we leave the church or concert hall, not the act of conciliation implicit in the lullaby, which belongs to the combatants, the victims of war, and is addressed to them, not to us.*

CONCLUSION:

Throughout these series of six essays, I have tried to provide an insight into this compelling work so that as you begin to prepare for the performances next year, you will have a canvas on which to paint your own response to the challenges it presents.

It is a privilege to experience the *War Requiem*; it is an even greater privilege to perform it. The performer's responsibility demands a point of view that aligns itself with the composer's intent – and this in turn, like the creation of the work itself, demands study, reflection and then, application. It is my earnest hope that in some way these essays have provided a stimulus for you to develop such insights.

I hope also that in a broader context the experience of the *War Requiem* will demonstrate that while music can soothe, entertain and divert us, in its most sublime and enduring form, it is capable of revealing profound insights into our own nature and our place in the cosmos. Such revelations, however, are proportional to the work that we are prepared to invest in the process - as practitioners, it is absolutely incumbent upon us to do so! I am sure you would agree that too often we use music as a vehicle for our own expression. If we turned that around and, through study and reflection, allowed ourselves to be the servants of the music, I believe that this noble art offers us and our audiences more enduring experiences still.

Graham Johnson, that wonderful pianist and erudite writer on music, was closely associated with Britten and in particular Peter Pears - Britten's lifelong partner and foremost interpreter. He wrote about the singer, in terms that the rest of us can only aspire to.

> "It is given to very few singers to forget themselves so entirely, to immerse themselves in the music with such selflessness, that they make us believe that they stand for an entire faith, that they mourn on behalf of an entire generation. Yet this was Pears's achievement in the *War Requiem*, as the Evangelist in the Bach Passions, as Elgar's Gerontius and in *Still falls the Rain*."