

## **Britten's WAR REQUIEM**

### **General Introduction and Movement 1 ('Requiem')**

The *War Requiem* is a major artistic pacifist statement - a studied and impassioned statement on the futility of war. Britten had long been an advocate for pacifism, a notion that had been instilled in him from his early teens when he studied with the composer, Frank Bridge.

The structure and size of the work is breathtaking with Britten ingeniously melding the sacred and secular by splicing the traditional Latin Mass for the Dead (the 'Missa Profundis' or 'Requiem Mass') with poems by the English poet Wilfred Owen; poems written from the battlefield of the first World War, upon which Owen himself would perish. The merging of these two diverse elements is done with such skill that it is difficult to believe that the two were not originally meant to go together. Hopefully this synergy will become evident as my discussion of the work progresses.

Britten paints on a large canvas. Not only are the required orchestral and choral forces massive but the symbolism is all embracing. Britten divides his forces into three distinct groups. The Latin text of the Missa are shared between a children's choir (accompanied by the chamber organ) and the solo soprano, chorus and full orchestra. The Owen poems are allocated to the tenor and baritone soloists and the chamber orchestra. These three groups do not mingle until the very end of the work and the resulting dramatic tensions reveal, without a doubt, that here is the hand of an experienced opera composer.

Despite the immensity of the work, Britten eschews the elaborate tonal construction that he used for *The Turn of the Screw* (1956) or the complex motivic invention for *Billy Budd* (1951) or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960). While, as we shall see, there is much cross-referencing of melodic and rhythmic material, Britten's musical style in the *War Requiem* is intentionally straightforward, its directness serving the passionate conviction of his theme.

It should be noted from the outset that despite the title, this is not a religious work and the text of the Missa Profundis certainly does not serve any liturgical function. However, an awareness of its liturgical structure is essential for a deeper understanding of the work's nature. It should also be noted that while the text of the Mass is treated with respect, Britten's use of it is from the perspective of the humanist rather than the believer. It is also used as a symbol of the 'establishment', an allegory for those political, military and religious powers (most often from the upper class) who drew the world into conflict and most shamefully, maintained hostilities when a respectable negotiation of peace would have been possible.

#### **Commission of the *War Requiem***

The *War Requiem* was commissioned for the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral in 1962. The industrial city of Coventry was a major target for the Luftwaffe in WW II and on the night of November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1940 in a bombing raid lasting 13hrs, 500 tons of high explosive bombs and 30,000 incendiaries were dropped on the city. By the time the attack was over 75% of its buildings were destroyed including its beloved Cathedral. The city's history and fortunes had long been closely linked with the story of its cathedrals and in many ways was seen by all, believers and otherwise, as a symbol of the town's spirit - a story of death and rebirth.



*The ruins of Coventry Cathedral – November 1940*

So it is not surprising that the decision to rebuild the cathedral was taken the morning after its destruction. But this was to be more than an act of defiance. Led by the then Provost (Dick Howard) the vision that emerged sprang from a spirit of forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. Such ideals became the philosophical cornerstone upon which the new building would be established (a philosophy that continues to be at the heart of the Cathedral's practical ministry today) and was also the theme to be explicit in the building itself, particularly its realisation by the commissioning architect, Sir Basil Spence.

The most immediate symbol of this vision that greets the visitor today, was his decision to graft the new cathedral onto the ruins of the old. This gesture ensures that the past will never be forgotten but more forcefully, celebrates that human nature is at its best as a creative force rather than a destructive one.



*The present cathedral grafted to the ruins of the old*

Basil Spence ensured that such symbolism would be repeated in other aspects of the cathedral's construction by engaging only the very best artists and craftsmen in the country. Graham Sutherland was commissioned to design a magnificent tapestry of the Risen Christ that now adorns the back wall – a symbol of hope that would be appreciated by both believers and non-believers.



*Graham Sutherland's tapestry of 'The Risen Christ'*

John Piper's Baptistry window does the same thing in a more abstract way. The 195 panels are each individually engraved but from a distance the major effect is the brilliant, sun-like centre surrounded by the darker-coloured panes. While this contains rich symbolism to the believer of the essential value of baptism, it also offers to the non-believer a symbol of the vanquished powers of darkness and despair.



*The Baptistry Window designed by John Piper.*

It was in this artistic company and in this spirit that Britten would respond so affirmatively with his composition of the *War Requiem*.

## MOVEMENT 1

### Requiem aeternam (Eternal Rest)

The work begins quietly yet ominously. Each successive phrase of the orchestral theme ('slow and solemn' - a lugubrious and reluctant procession!) grows in length and provides such a compelling opening that it leaves us in no doubt that we are at the beginning of a large scale work.

Punctuating this theme, a solitary bell-strike confirms that we are in mourning. I am always drawn to the verse from A.E. Housman's poem *Bredon Hill* when I hear this –

*They tolled the one bell only,  
Groom there was none to see,  
The mourners followed after,  
And so to church went she,  
And would not wait for me.*

Now, as the chorus softly intones its prayer for eternal rest and light to be granted to the souls of the departed, we hear for the first time the intervallic motif that will pervade the work – C/F#, the tritone (three, whole-tone steps). It is the interval that exactly divides the diatonic scale. In the Middle Ages its dissonance was abjured and denounced as the 'diabolicus in musica' (the devil's interval.) and there is a certain irony in the fact that Britten here associates its disquiet with the word 'Requiem'(Rest). Britten will develop his huge canvas from virtually this one cell.

Then, as if from aloft (.. above the battle field?) we hear a chorus of children's voices singing the "Te decet hymnus.."

*You are praised, God, in Zion,  
and homage will be paid to You in Jerusalem.  
Hear my prayer,  
to You all flesh will come.*

Throughout the work the children's chorus could be said to represent the voice of innocence. They are set apart from the action geographically and in the sort of music Britten gives them. Here, their accompaniment uses all twelve tones of the chromatic scale - this tonal 'universality' was a common device used by Britten's and is often associated with his recurring theme of innocence. (See also *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Billy Budd* etc).

Te de - cet hy - rnmus      hy - rnmus,      De - us in —      Si - on; —

Under this 'celestial' chorus, the orchestra in long sustained octaves alternates between the two notes of the tritone with such quiet insistence that the children's voices must also finally resign to its influence.

We now encounter the first of the Owen poems: *Anthem for doomed Youth*

*What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
 Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
 Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
 Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
 No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,  
 Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, -  
 The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
 And bugles calling for them from sad shires.  
 What candles may be held to speed them all?  
 Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes  
 Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.  
 The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;  
 Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds,  
 And each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds.*

Liturgically the Introit and Kyrie should be joined but Britten splits them with this poem. However by using musical material from both he provides a matrix that unifies the movement.

With the harp of the chamber orchestra taking over the tritone figure from the bells and a 'militant' bass motif derived from the symphony orchestra's material, the tenor soloist, in a vocal line replete with the tritone, declaims the Owen poem. The poem - and its setting - carries with it a certain censure and recrimination and its references to religious symbolism, such as 'prayers or bells', show bold and explicit use of the tritone figure - an unsettling allocation given its initial association.

Tenor

Piano

What pas - ing bells

— for these who die cat-tle

The poem's references to religious ritual and symbols ('prayers', 'candles', 'choirs') not only provide a strange juxtaposition to symbols of the battlefield ('stuttering rifles', 'wailing shells') but also an appropriate irony to the emerging context of the work. Such irony will be a recurring feature of the Owen poems selected by Britten and will become more potent as the work progresses. It will have its most damning voice in the Offertorium in the poem "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young."

While *Anthem for doomed Youth* seems to mock the rituals of the Mass, we should not mistake Britten's intentions. The juxtaposition of the Owen poems with the text of the Requiem Mass is not meant as an affront nor as a criticism of attitudes of faith or patriotism. Rather, his intention is to expose the duplicitousness of those who would hijack such attitudes in order to wage war.

Now, as the soldier's mind switches from the battlefield to the 'sad shires' of home, Britten recalls the theme sung by the children's chorus in the 'Te decet hymnus'. This association with innocence lost is all the more poignant when placed in the context of the battlefield.

sad shires.

*Not in the hands of boys* elicits an even fuller version of the children's music with the final poetic phrase, .. and each slow dusk the drawing down of blinds, being set to their exact theme in augmentation. (Note again, the representation of all twelve tones in the underlying harmonic texture.)

And each slow dusk a draw-ing\_ down of\_ blinds.

The movement closes with what seems to be an attempted resolution of the tritonal disturbance. We will hear this attempt twice more – at the end of the next movement (*Dies irae*) and at the very end of the work. With the unaccompanied choir moving through a complex web of harmonic textures towards a concordant F major, it is tempting to suggest that a resolution is Britten's intention. You might like to offer your own thoughts on this but I would urge caution in assuming what might seem the obvious. I would suggest that it should be thought of as a point of rest rather than resolution. (Indeed a true 'tonal' resolution from the C-F# cell would be either to Gmajor or Dbmajor, would it not?). Anyway, the *War Requiem* is certainly not meant to bring comfort!