

MOVEMENT 3

Offertorium

We have already seen the part that irony plays in the War Requiem, especially in the juxtaposition of the formal elements of the Requiem Mass with the Wilfred Owen poems. The Offertorium is a relatively short movement but this element is particularly potent here. The movement is also of great fascination structurally. In the Offertorium, we probably have the best example in the War Requiem of how Britten uses the tritone to tonally define larger sections of the work.

The movement is laid out as follows:

Children: Chant (*Domine, Jesu..*)

Chorus: Fugue (*Quam olim Abrahae*)

Tenor and Baritone (Owen poem)

Children: Chant (*Hostias et preces..*)

Chorus: Fugue (*Quam olim Abrahae.*)

Almost the entire movement centres about the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac, taking this lead from the Missa text that reads:

*But let the holy standard-bearer Michael lead them into the holy light
as Thou didst promise to Abraham and to his seed.*

It is important to understand its significance, so for those of you who are not familiar with the biblical figure of Abraham, here is a brief background.

The story of Abraham is laid out in the 22nd chapter of the Book of Genesis. He is generally regarded as the father of the Jewish nation and was largely responsible for Judaism becoming a monotheistic religion – until this time the worship of many gods was the norm. One of the most memorable and retold stories involves a test of his devotion to God in the sacrifice of his son Isaac. Here is the story of as it appears in Genesis (22:5)

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

"Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless

you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”

Those of you who are familiar with the basic theological tenets of the Christian religion, will see the resemblance that this story has with the New Testament concept of God the Father who sacrificed his only son, Jesus Christ, for the salvation of mankind. As we will see later, this parallel has a particular significance in the fifth Movement of the work *Agnus Dei*. However, for now let us focus upon the Old Testament story.

This Old Testament story has been used by artists all through history (see some examples below by Rembrandt, Blake etc). Musicians too have taken up the tale and set it to music (Carissimi, Stravinsky etc). Britten too had, some ten years earlier, set the story – not the biblical text as above but that of a Medieval Mystery Play on the subject. Written in 1952, it was the second of five ‘Canticles’ that he wrote for various combinations of voices and instruments between 1947 and 1974 . *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac* is set for Tenor, Boy Treble and Piano. As we shall see, this work was to become a rich musical source in the Offertorium movement of the *War Requiem* written some ten years later.



Caravaggio



Blake



Chagall



Rembrandt

The movement begins with the children's chorus:

Children's Chorus

*Lord Jesus Christ, King of glory,
deliver the souls of the faithful departed
from the pains of hell,
and the bottomless pit:
deliver them from the jaws of the lion, lest hell
engulf them, lest they be plunged into darkness.*

Their declamation has an ecclesiastical aloofness (remember they are positioned geographically remote from the other forces) reminiscent of Gregorian chant and their tonal centre is firmly rooted in C#.

[Composed]

With the lively entrance of the full orchestra, the choir shifts the tonality to the unequivocal key of G. Here we have an excellent example of how Britten uses the juxtaposition of keys based on the tritone to govern larger structural sections in the work.

Chorus

*But let the holy standard-bearer Michael
lead them into the holy light
as Thou didst promise Abraham
and his seed.*

The latter part of this text, recalling the promise to Abraham, is set as an elaborate fugue, the subject of which is drawn directly from his earlier Cantic II: *Abraham and Isaac*.

Cantic II: *Abraham and Isaac*

Fa-ther, I am all rea - - - dy

War Requiem (Offertorium)

Quam o - lim A - bra - hae pro - mi - si - sti et se - mi - ni e - jus.

Not only will this formal device of the fugue serve Britten's intention as a structural frame in the movement but also, by using the form, he aligns himself with a strong tradition of setting this section of the Requiem Mass (see, for example, the Requiem settings by Mozart, Cherubini, Dvorak etc)

The fugue reaches its climax only to have its theme taken over by the Chamber Orchestra as the accompaniment for the next Owen poem (*The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*) that forms the centre piece of the movement. The baritone soloist begins as if telling the traditional biblical tale.

(Tenor and Baritone)

*So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?*

But then the traditional story takes on a new twist

*Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.*

In response to the references to the paraphernalia of war, Britten superimposes fragments of the fanfares from the early *Dies Irae* movement. These are interwoven with the instrumental textures that still quote generously from his *Canticle II*.

Then A - bram bound the youth with belts and straps

25
And builded pa - ra - pets and trenches there,

Then as in the traditional tale, as the father is about to slay his son, God’s angel appears to stay his hand.

*When lo! and angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.*

This moment of serene stillness also has its origins in the earlier *Canticle II*, with Britten combining the two voices to portray the celestial messenger. We are now in C major, and with its Lydian inflections here again symbolises purity, just as it did in the ‘Recordare’ section of the previous *Dies Irae*. Luminous strings and harp envelop the voices but there is a canker in this perfection. With the mention of the ‘Ram of Pride’, Britten subtly inflects the line to include the *C/F# diabolus in musica*, tainting the purity of the angelic voice.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for Tenor (T) and Baritone (B) voices. The first system is in 4/4 time and contains the lyrics: "Be - hold a ram caught in a thick - et by its horns." The second system is in 12/8 time and contains the lyrics: "Of - fer the Ram of Pride in - stead of him." The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp* and *ppp*, and a fermata over the final note of the second system.

As with the original biblical story we anticipate and welcome the staying hand of God’s angel. But it is not to be – in a moment of true horror, God’s intervention is rejected.

*But the old man would not so,
but slew his son, -
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.*

Owen and Britten’s accusation is unambiguous. Those in the establishment could stop the killing but patently refuse to do so. Instead of offering up the “Ram of Pride” provided by God as a substitute for Abraham’s proposed sacrifice of his firstborn son, Owen’s version has Abraham deliberately spurn the substitution and instead carry through with the original plan. Thus, God’s promise to Abraham (*Quam olim Abraham promisisti ...*) that his seed (*semini eius*) will be brought “from death into life” (*de morte transire ad vitam*), is annulled and Isaac’s death, like the death of the countless millions subsequently killed in the world’s many wars, becomes a consequence of the all too familiar ‘sin of pride’ that humankind, like Owen’s Abraham, has been unwilling or unable to cleanse itself.

Britten's score represents this broken promise in several ways. Firstly the fugue itself, bearing the text of the 'promise', is literally torn in two by the Owen poem and as we shall see, its recapitulation, following Abraham's refusal to be appeased, is dynamically weakened and is literally a shadow (mirror) of the original. But the most compelling element in the musical setting is the coda to the Owen poem as sung by the two male soloists. Following the horrific revelation, they repeat the dire climax of the poem ("half the seed of Europe, one by one") again and again, their repetitions falling into increasingly fragmented forms. Above this fracturing texture, the children's choir, with all the innocence of youth, sings the text of the Hostias: the Mass text version of the very same promise that has ruptured the soloists' temporal world.

<i>Hostias et preces tibi Domine</i>	Sacrifices and prayers of praise
<i>Laudis offerimus</i>	We offer to you, Lord
<i>Tu suscipe pro animabus illis</i>	Receive them for those souls
<i>Quarum hodie memoriam facimus</i>	That we commemorate today,
<i>Fac eas, Domine, de morte transire ad vitam</i>	Make them, Lord, to pass from death to life
<i>Quam olim Abrahae promisisti et semini ejus</i>	As promised to Abraham and his seed.

Their freely chanting line recalls the opening of the movement but the chamber organ's accompaniment is now bereft of the exultation that heralded that text. Rather, its incessant, rhythmic oscillation – a compound of the two main (tritone) keys of the movement - is strangely unsettling and time seems to stand still under its spell.

The world has been turned on its head and so now is the fugue.

As Thou didst promise Abraham and his seed.

The larger choir reprises the hope of 'promise' but now the fugal subject is inverted and sung 'pp' to 'pppp' throughout, ascribing little confidence in the earlier assurance of 'holy light'.



The dying embers of the fugue collapse into oblivion and like them, we find ourselves cold and spent. However, we are just at the halfway point in the Requiem and the next movement, Sanctus, is traditionally one of the most celebratory and exuberant in all ecclesiastical liturgy.