

## MOVEMENT 4

### Sanctus

Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus

*Holy, holy, holy*

Dominus Deus Sabaoth.

*Lord God of hosts.*

Pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua,

*Heaven and earth are full of your glory*

Hosanna in excelsis.

*Hosanna in the highest*

Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.

*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*

Hosanna in excelsis.

The ringing of bells has long been a tradition in Christian worship and in the liturgy of the Mass, they are first heard at the Sanctus. While the tradition extends back more than 800 years, its roots reach back even further into the scriptures of the Old Testament where their 'joyful noise' had long been used to signify the praise and adoration of the Divine.

*And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, "Holy to the Lord".  
(Zechariah 14:20)*

And, of course, their use features prominently in the well known Psalm 150

*Praise Him with sounding cymbals; praise Him with loud clashing cymbals! Let  
everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!*

So, it is not surprising it is the sound of bells and percussion that we hear at the beginning of the Sanctus movement of the *War Requiem*. However it is not just as a nod to tradition that Britten uses them here, for their significance has more subtle meanings and associations.

In 1956 Britten and Peter Pears made a tour of the Far East that included India, Japan and the Indonesian archipelago. Britten had long been fascinated by and had a special affection for the percussion family and so it was no surprise that the exotic Gamelan orchestras of Java particularly caught his imagination. The sound world of these tuned percussion bands were to have a strong influence on the music that he wrote from this point onwards and his use of it was nearly always associated with the exotic and the mystical. We see the influence almost immediately in his only ballet score, *The Prince of the Pagodas* (1956) but also in the fairies' music in his opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), the three Church Parables (1962-66) and particularly his last opera *Death in Venice* (1970), where the large percussion orchestra was identified with the exoticism of the boy, Tadzio.

Further reading on this can be found in Mervyn Cooke's book: *Britten and the Far East* (ML410.B853 C74 1998)

The opening of the Sanctus movement borrows a notable feature of the gamelan traditions of Indonesia and also that of the court music of Japan – it is the rhythmic but unmeasured acceleration of tuned percussion. This accelerating effect is a prominent feature of the Balinese *kebiar* tradition that Britten would have heard on his travels and was a technique with which he was to become particularly fond. In incorporating its use into his own music, he devised a special symbol that he used for the first time here in the Sanctus.



We see it used again in each of the three Church Parables (*Curlew River*, *The Burning Fiery Furnace* and *The Prodigal Son*, works that were largely influenced by Britten's first hand experience of the Noh theatre of Japan) where it is used as a drumming effect that also recalls the *kakko* figurations of the Japanese Gagaku music he heard when visiting that country.

While the western liturgical tradition celebrates by the ringing of bells at this point, it is certainly not a tradition that is exclusive to western religions. The ringing of bells in worship and religious ceremony can be found in almost all world religions and this global reference is something that Britten underlines in the soprano soloist's brilliant melismatic lines as she intones the Sanctus. These cadenzas gain a universality by containing all twelve notes of the chromatic scale.

The musical score is divided into three systems. The first system shows the Soprano Solo and Orchestral accompaniment for the beginning of the Sanctus. The Soprano Solo part is marked 'Freeley' and includes the lyrics 'San - ctus'. The Orchestral part features a 'gva sempre' (gradual acceleration) and is marked 'pp' (pianissimo) with the instruction '(free trem. with gradual accel.)'. The second system continues the Soprano Solo part with 'brilliant' markings and 'slow dim' (slowly diminishing) dynamics, leading to the lyrics 'San - ctus'. The Orchestral part is marked 'ppp' (pianississimo). The third system shows the Soprano Solo part with the lyrics 'Do - mi - nus De - us Sa - ba - oth.' and the Orchestral part marked 'pp' (pianissimo) with '(accel. sim.)' (accelerando simile).

Such, also anticipates the cosmic praise of creation that the choir will soon intone..... *Pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua (All heaven and earth are full of your glory).*

Their response seems tentative at first with the basses starting their freely chanted text low in their range, as if issuing from the very depths of the earth. But as the other voices join, the emerging tonal cluster, like that of the soprano soloist's invocation, contains all twelve notes of the diatonic scale and soon there is a groundswell of sound joining her invocation to cosmic praise. The voices gather with such intensity and momentum, that they must finally spill over into the brilliant 'Hosanna'.

If there is a well known section in the *War Requiem*, this is it! It has even found its way into popular culture by way of the movie 'Troy', where James Horner's score hardly makes any attempt to disguise Britten's music. However, the fact that he uses it to celebrate the Trojan's war-like nature is an ironic twist on Britten's original motivation, don't you think?

If you want to hear it for yourself, have a listen to this youtube clip at 1.14 and following!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGRBtbI9mY0&feature=relmfu>

(By the way, Britten was not the only composer to have his music 'appropriated' in this film. Parts of Holst's "Planets" suite are also discernible as well works by other composers such as Vaughan Williams and Rachmaninov. In his defence, it seems that Horner had only one month to compose the score for the film following the sacking of the original composer Gabriel Yared, who had worked on the film for over a year!)

While sidetracked by this point, it is worth musing on this point of popularity, for I don't think that it is completely accidental that Britten's music here, and generally in the *War Requiem*, is so accessible - even 'catchy'! I hope that by now, we would all be convinced of Britten's passionate pacifist sentiments. His desire to disseminate such convictions to as wide an audience as possible sees him use a musical language that could be easily understood yet that would not compromise his artistic integrity. In his liner notes to the Britten recording of the work, Christopher Palmer puts it well when he says:

*The musical language is easy to understand; yet avoids the commonplace – or perhaps it would be truer to say it lifts the commonplace into the rare, reinstates the cliché as a meaningful statement in a way consistently characteristic of Britten.*

Let us return to the Hosanna proper.

You will notice that orchestra & chorus are slightly 'out of phase' - the orchestral figure just ahead of the voices.

15 Brilliant

*f* Ho san - na in ex - cel-sis

This musical feature is known as *heterophony* and can be found in several of Britten's compositions that followed his 1956 tour of Asia (most ostensibly in his three Church Parables). Its use in the Hosanna is unambiguous and totally in keeping with the eastern influences that act as a thread throughout this movement, for heterophony is a characteristic feature of several eastern musical traditions including Japanese Gagaku, as well as the Gamelan music of Indonesia.

The oriental reference also acts as a double entendre, a musical pun if you like, subtly forming a link to the Owen poem that now emerges from the pomp. Note the first line -

*AFTER the blast of lightning from the East,  
 The flourish of loud clouds, the Chariot throne,  
 After the drums of time have rolled and ceased  
 And from the bronze west long retreat is blown,  
 Shall Life renew these bodies? Of a truth  
 All death will he annul, all tears assuage?  
 Or fill these void veins full again with youth  
 And wash with an immortal water age?  
 When I do ask white Age, he saith not so, --  
 "My head hangs weighed with snow."  
 And when I hearken to the Earth she saith  
 My fiery heart sinks aching. It is death.  
 Mine ancient scars shall not be glorified  
 Nor my titanic tears the seas be dried."*

The baritone soloist immediately eschews the triumphalism of the Hosanna's D major by introducing an insistent F natural.

In the flute, clarinet and harp arpeggios that interject his text, we can make out the remnants of that triumphalism (... the clarinet even remains solidly within D major) but now they are remote and ephemeral.

Af-ter the blast of light-ning from the East

Fl

Cl

As the soloist asks the hopeless questions ("Shall life renew these bodies.." etc ), the strings take over these arpeggiated figures and in doing so impose upon them a new, more urgent meaning consistent with the growing agitation of the text.

Shall life re - new these bo - dies?

pp

Strings

Horn

The questions, of course, are rhetorical and the response from 'White Age' is predictably bleak - a bleakness that is accentuated by Britten's use of sparse two part writing in the orchestra , one part in D the other in Ab ... another example of Britten's exploitation of the tritone juxtaposition.

When I do ask white Age he saith not so:

Strings & Ob

Db & Timp

Perhaps we can link its use here to its initial alignment with the word 'Requiem' ('rest' ... or, as has been suggested, 'unrest'!?) in the very first movement. For, we know that these bodies will never be renewed, tears will not be assuaged and the veins of Life never again filled with youth!

In the final lines of the poem, the poet addresses the Earth, with the response again accompanied by two part writing in the chamber orchestra - but now that writing is weary and barely has the strength to raise its head. In fact, it seems to completely unravel itself and, in the final bars, dismantles into the twelve separate tones of the chromatic scale. At one and the same time, this is both a depressingly deconstructive musical gesture and also – as we have previously seen in Britten's musical language – one that underlines the 'global' implications of the response.

27 Nor my ti-tanic tears, the sea, be dried." —

This is the first time in the work that one of the Owen poems has ended the movement and while the low F# that concludes it prepares us tonally for the next movement (Agnus Dei), we have arrived here by a tonally elusive pathway. The bleakness of the text has leached the gold from the 'Hosannas' and while there is a brief return to the D major towards the end of the poem, all the fanfare has been sucked from its tonality and the sparse textures of the Chamber Orchestra have strayed a world from its burnished exultation. The only discernible link with the opening of the movement is the exposure of the twelve tones, just as the soprano did in her first melismas. The cosmic praise of God has a counterpart in the universal sadness of the world's 'titanic tears'.