

MOVEMENT 2

Dies Irae (Day of Wrath)

Traditionally one of the most fearsome texts in the religious canon, the *Dies Irae* describes the Day of Judgement when all flesh must account for its actions. The longest movement of the work, the *Dies Irae* has eight sub-sections:

- 1: Dies Irae
- 2: *Bugles Sang*
- 3: Liber scriptus
- 4: *Out there we walked quite friendly up to Death*
- 5: Recordare
- 6: Confutatis maladictus
- 7: *Be slowly lifted up*
- 8: *Lacrimosa / Move him into the sun*

In preparation to discuss this substantial movement in more detail, I would like to briefly return to the central figure of the tritone. We have seen the fairly straightforward and overt presentation of the interval in the first movement. In the *Dies Irae* movement there are opportunities to see how Britten alters the guise of this figure to use it in more subtle ways.

Here are a few examples of how Britten varies the cell both harmonically and melodically:

1. A diminished triad can be formed by coupling the two minor thirds that constitute the tritone.



As you will see, Britten will make consistent use of this guise but a good specific example is his featuring of such triads in the first part of the movement, as a means of destabilising the major triads that characterise the initial brass 'fanfares'. (see below)

2. Reflecting the source of its name, the tritone can also be used as a scale of three whole tone steps, forming half of a complete whole tone scale.



This sequence also forms the first four notes of the Lydian mode, a mode favoured by Britten and one he often associates with Purity or Innocence.

3. One can also draw harmonic reference to the tritone by juxtaposing keys with their roots based on the two notes of the interval. There are good examples of this in the second section of the *Dies Irae* and an even more sustained example in the third movement (*Offertorium*) to which I will draw your attention in the next installment.

SECTION 1: *Dies Irae*

*Day of wrath, O that day
When the world will turn to ashes
As foretold by David and the Sibyl!*

*What fear awaits us,
when the judge will come forth,
to assess us all.*

*The trumpet's wondrous sound
Rings forth over the graves of mankind
and summons all before the throne.*

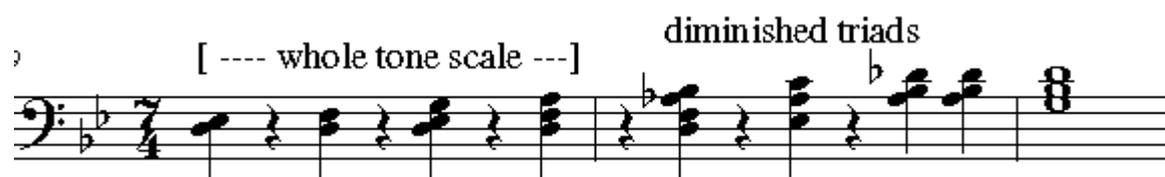
*Death and nature will marvel,
As all creation arises,
to respond to judgement.*

Note that we are in the key of G minor. This is the key that Britten reserves, almost exclusively in the *War Requiem*, to represent the terror and horrors of the battlefield.

The movement starts with a muted fanfare shaped from concordant triads and perfect fourths - is it Gabriel's trumpet or the call to battle?



With hushed awe and in a limping 7/4, the chorus, announce the 'day of wrath'. In their music we see featured the diminished triads (mentioned above) derived from the tritone. Britten uses the dissonance to contrast and destabilise the grandeur and pomp of the brass choir.



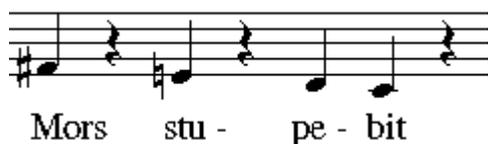
Prominent also, in both voice and instrumental textures, is the whole tone scale that is derived from and that embraces the tritone. This is especially explicit in the brass figures that precede each choral entry.



The initially timid statements by the choir are answered by ever more forceful fanfares from the brass choir. These in turn seem to instill dread, intensifying the singers' declamations. Together, both forces grow to a terrifying climax as the choir sings:

*The trumpet's wondrous sound
Rings forth over the graves of mankind
and summons all before the throne.*

... then, for the time being, subsides. The last verse of this section (*Mors stupebit..*) is sung *sotto voce*, using almost exclusively the descending version of the whole tone scale



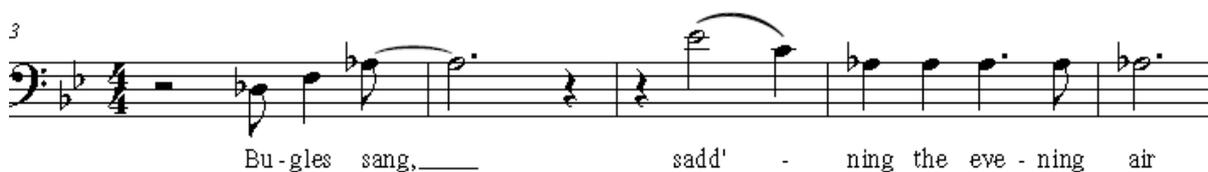
This easing of tension sets the tone for the next Owen Poem.

SECTION 2: *Bugles sang*

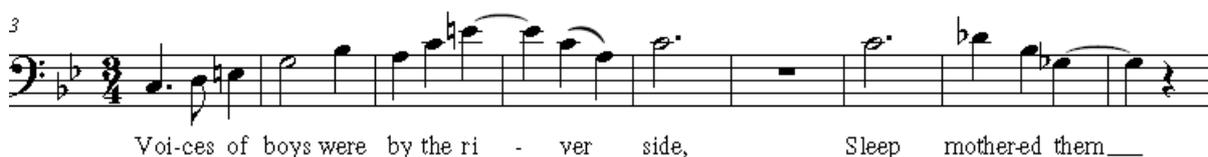
As the dust settles, the last vestiges of the brass fanfare are taken over by the chamber orchestra. “Bugles sang”, for the baritone soloist, is constructed almost entirely of thematic fragments from the previous section but now, seemingly stripped of their ‘glory’, they are laboured and weary.

*Bugles sang, saddening the evening air;
 And bugles answered, sorrowful to hear.
 Voices of boys were by the river-side.
 Sleep mothered them; and left the twilight sad.
 The shadow of the morrow weighed on men.
 Voices of old despondency resigned,
 Bowed by the shadow of the morrow, slept.*

Such weariness and the overwhelming weight of key words such as ‘saddening’ and ‘sorrowful’ contrasts markedly with the previous section but the two are so obviously linked by similar material that we are left in no doubt as to their relationship. So skilfully does Britten utilise the thematic gestures of the fanfares, that the source of this overwhelming sadness is never in question and using intentionally weak reflections of the fanfare material, Britten paints a telling portrait of ‘the shadow of the morrow’.



It is here too that we see a good example of how the juxtaposition of keys is used as yet another variation of the tritone figure.



You will notice that the first five bars are clearly in C major, while the answering phrase is in Gb major (enharmonic equivalent of F#). I don’t think it is mere chance that Britten uses this device with this particular text. The association of the C-F# figure with the word ‘Requiem’ in the first movement (Rest) still has currency here and “Sleep mothered them” seem to evoke a similar tonal response from the composer.

Towards the end of the setting, the horn (the only brass instrument in the chamber orchestra) wearily articulates the descending whole tone scale used in the brass fanfares.



The baritone answers with an inversion of the same figure, his voice now gaining in intensity and vigour as his vocal line forms a distorted mirror image for his text that ends ‘... the shadow of the morrow.’

Musical notation for baritone voice in bass clef, showing a vocal line with lyrics and triplets.

Voi - ces — of — old des - pon - den - cy — re - signed re - signed, Bowed — by the

shad - ow, shad - ow — of the mor - row, —

If it wasn't already obvious, it now becomes clear that Britten's preoccupation in this movement is less about the horrors of the Day of Judgement as prescribed by God, than the Man-made horrors of war - which are of no less consequence! As Peter Evans says in his detailed analysis of the work, "... if (Britten) refuses to portray a God of wrath, his man-made *Dies Irae* must appear the more terrible a denial of the God of pity, so sublimely invoked elsewhere."

SECTION 3: Liber scriptus

*The book in which all is contained
lies open and by its contents
the world shall be judged.*

*The Judge will come to his seat
and that which is hidden will be revealed:
nothing will go unnoticed.*

*What am I, wretched man, then to say?
Who will speak on my behalf,
when the just are in need of support?*

*King of tremendous majesty,
Fount of Salvation,
save me, O source of pity.*

We now return to the liturgical text and for the first time in the work we hear the soprano soloist. The *Liber scriptus* is a good example of how Britten maintains the dramatic flow of the work without sacrificing the essentially diverse natures of his two elements - the secular world of the Owen poems and the formal, ritualistic nature of the Latin Mass.

While not eschewing dramatic effect, the soprano's portentous flourishes are constructed in a fairly rigid series of extensions and inversions



Li-ber scrip - tus pro-fe-re - tur,



un-de mun - dus ju - di-ce - tur

The ensuing 'Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?' (*What am I, wretched man, then to say?*) sung by the chorus, is no less 'prescribed' with each voice uttering its terse, chromatic cell in close canon. (It should be noted here that such chromaticism will often be associated with the wretched of mankind - this will be particularly appropriate when we look at the final *Libera me* movement). This 'formality' serves to reflect the ritualistic nature of the Mass text while at the same time maintaining the work's dramatic arc.



Quid sum mi - ser tunc ___ di - ctu-rus?

Under the chromaticism of the choir's vocal lines, a persistent E natural pedal point acts as a dominant that finally draws the tonality to A major, in which key the soprano soloist reprises her flourishes with the 'Rex tremendae'. This key goes on to serve as the departure point for the next Owen poem – a duet for both male soloists.

SECTION 4: *The Next War*

*Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death:
Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland,-
Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.
We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath,-
Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.
He's spat at us with bullets and he's coughed
Shrapnel. We chorused when he sang aloft;
We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.
Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.
No soldier's paid to kick against his powers.
We laughed, knowing that better men would come,
And greater wars; when each proud fighter brags
He wars on Death - for Life; not men - for flags.*

The setting could well be called a 'scherzo'. The jaunty character of the writing and the mock bravura of the Tenor and Baritone's phrases perfectly capture the poem's irony. However, it is not difficult to see through the veneer to the despair and fear that it masks. A few examples of Britten's skill in achieving this subtext will suffice:

1. Almost every instrumental cadence heralds a new vocal entry and the bi-tonality at work throughout, is particularly fierce at these moments. This has the effect of subverting the 'heroic' brashness of the dominant texture.

Out there, ——— we've walk'd quite friend - ly up to death.

Out there, ——— Sat down —
Fast and gay

- The woodwind's shrill whistling is not only an evocation of the 'wailing shells' to which the two soldiers join in chorus ..

We chorused when he sang aloft;

We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe

.. but is also a reference to the chromaticism of the preceding "quid sum miser..." As has been pointed out, such chromaticism is used by Britten to identifying with the wretchedness of mankind.

- While the horn call that features in the later section of the setting sounds appropriately militaristic and indeed can be linked with the fanfare figures heard at the beginning of the movement, we should also note that the motif (Ex 1 below) has its origins in the horn theme used in the first of the Owen poems, *Anthem for Doomed Youth*. You may remember how it was used there to draw the doomed soldier back to thoughts of home and "sad shires.." (Ex 2 below)

Ex 1

Ex 2

SECTION 5: Recordare

*Remember, merciful Jesus,
that I am the reason for your incarnation:
Let me not be lost thou on that day.*

*You have sought me
and redeemed me by your suffering on the
cross
let this labor not be in vain.*

I am guilty of many things,

*I confess them
Hear my suppliant moans*

*You who absolved Mary Magdalene,
and forgave the dying thief,
give hope to me, too.*

*Grant me a place among your sheep,
and let me not be set among the goats,
set me at your right hand.*

In the *Recordare* and the following *Confutatis maladictus*, Britten divides his choral forces; the women featured in the first, the men in the second.

The orchestra's pulsing major seconds, that provide the introduction to the *Recordare*, are unmistakably Britten (see *Sechs Hölderin Fragmente*, Oberon's music in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *A Charm of Lullabies* etc) and are a tonal device often associated with sleep, dreams or a longing for this idyllic state. Whatever his reasoning it certainly imbues the section with a suppliant yearning. Over this pulsing accompaniment, each of the four-part women's chorus enters imitatively, singing their pliant invocation. Each statement also finishes with a descending whole tone scale, the final entry (*You who absolved Mary Magdalene...*) ushering in the Lydian mode – see above for the references to this mode and its association for Britten with Purity and Innocence.

Now the men take over and the basses lead in declaiming the *Confutatis maladictus*.

SECTION 6: Confutatis maladictus

*When the wicked are confounded,
sentenced to the fiery pit:
Call me to be with the blessed ones.*

*I call to you humbly on bended knee
See my contrite heart
Help me in this my last hour.*

Their lines are heavy and syllabic, almost primal, appropriate to those whose souls have been assigned to the 'fiery pit'.



The tenors' response is more plaintive. Theirs are the voices of those left on earth, awaiting judgement and pleading for mercy and deliverance.



In a gesture typical of his style, Britten superimposes one utterance upon the other and so the primitive thumping of one is married to the wailing character of the other.

The intertwined supplications from both earth and hell grow in intensity, gaining a momentum that suddenly reaches a climax in the announcement of the next Owen poem, *On seeing a Piece of Our Artillery Brought into Action*

SECTION 7: *On seeing a Piece of Our Artillery Brought into Action*

*Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm,
Great gun towering toward Heaven, about to curse;
Reach at that arrogance which needs thy harm,
And beat it down before its sins grow worse;
But when thy spell be cast complete and whole,
May God curse thee, and cut thee from our soul!*

The basses' 'thumping' motif is immediately taken over by the timpani of the chamber orchestra

While the tempo marking is 'Very broad' and the baritone's lines move in solemn minims, there is no loss of momentum or intensity. We are just moments away from the biggest climax in the movement and in the hands of a lesser composer it might seem risky to slacken the pace at this time. However, Britten's setting is remarkable in this way, maintaining the element of expectancy by other means. Firstly the transfer of the basses' "confutatis maledictus" motif to the timpani is immediately arresting and full of dread. Then, the rising root position triads that accompany each statement move with such unstoppable awe towards their various climaxes, that they seem to fracture the tonal fabric, spilling forth unwelcome fragments of the brass fanfares from the large orchestra (The first time in the work that the two have mixed). Four times, the horror of the 'Dies Irae' tries to reassert itself, its potency growing with each interpolation. It is clear that the flood will

not be held back. And so it is, as the baritone reaches his massive climax, all hell is let loose and the 'Day of Wrath' - now back to G minor, of course - reasserts itself with new ferocity.

As the horrific vision again subsides, the chorus - maintaining the 7/4 time signature of the 'Dies Irae' - 'limps' into the final section of the movement. So intimately does the text of the 'Lacrimosa' entwine with that of the next chosen Owen poem (*Futility*), it is not surprising that Britten binds the two.

SECTION 8: Lacrimosa / Futility

Soprano and Chorus

Oh this day full of tears
When from the ashes arises
Guilty man, to be judged:
Oh Lord, have mercy upon him

Tenor

*Move him into the sun -
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.*

Soprano and Chorus

Oh this day full of tears...

Tenor

Think how it wakes the seeds -

*Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved - still warm - too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?*

Soprano and Chorus

When from the ashes arises...

Tenor

Was it for this the clay grew tall?

Soprano and Chorus

..Guilty man, to be judged

Tenor

*- O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?*

Chorus

Gentle Lord Jesus, grant them rest
Amen.

Now transformed into Bb minor but maintaining the outline of the 'Dies Irae', the choir provides a sobbing accompaniment to the soprano soloist's plangent lines. The employment of rests, dissonances and false relations adds to the pathos and prepares for the entry of the tenor soloist.

Britten's setting of this poem is remarkably bare - little more than free recitative above a sustained, almost inaudible tremolando. Each of the singer's notes, however, is painstakingly penned and the phrases are perfectly contoured in order to signify the grief of the soldier who, in vain, tries to revive his dead companion. Each of the singer's interjections finishes with a melodic figure shaped from the soprano's 'Lacrimosa', which in turn seems to beckon her empathetic response.

Tenor
Soprano

The kind old sun will know.
La - cri - mo - - sa

The tenor's very last utterance seems bereft of hope and almost peters out, alighting pathetically onto the pure version of the tritone

To break earth's sleep _____
at all?

This sets up the tonality for the concluding *Pie Jesu*, sung to the same harmonic progression that drew the first movement to a close.