MOVEMENT 5

Agnus Dei

At just over three and a half minutes long, the *Agnus Dei* is the by far the shortest movement in the *War Requiem*. However, it is fair to say that its brevity is inversely proportionate to its importance, for within its brief span Britten states the unequivocal central message of his work.

As we have seen, the juxtaposition of the Latin Mass for the Dead with the Owen poems has formed the sustaining tension in the work to this point. In this movement, those opposing forces form an alliance that, for the moment at least, coexist in seamless simplicity. The large orchestra and choir merge with the chamber orchestra and tenor soloist in sharing the musical material (again through Britten's favoured heterophonic techniques – see notes on Movement 4 "Sanctus") and even shared text.

The text of the Mass at this point is one of the simplest and most beautiful in the Church's liturgy, with the metaphor of the lamb used to describe the gentleness and compassion of Christ.

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona eis requiem.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, give them rest.
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona eis requiem sempiternam.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, give them everlasting rest.

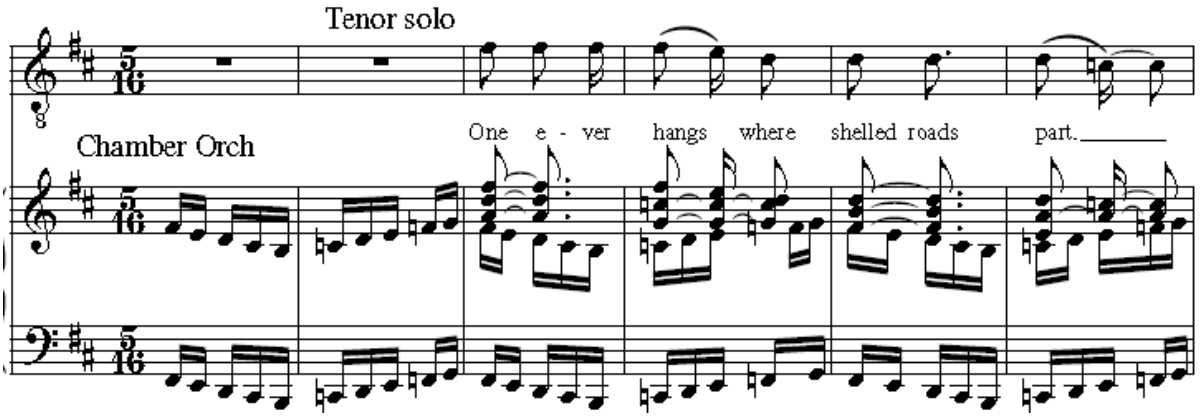
The Owen poem that interfaces with it, also makes direct reference to the sacrifice that Christ, in the theology of the Christian faith, made for mankind and intertwines this sacrifice with that of the soldier.

At a Calvary Near the Ancre

One ever hangs where shelled roads part.
In this war He too lost a limb,
But His disciples hide apart;
And now the Soldiers bear with Him.
Near Golgatha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast
By whom the gentle Christ's denied.
The scribes on all the people shove
and bawl allegiance to the state,
But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate.
Dona nobis pacem.

The analogy of Christ on the battlefield was not an uncommon theme for WW I artists - just as Christ by his sacrifice on the cross (and a victim of violence!) atones for the sins of mankind, so the soldier pays the ultimate price for Humanity's sins of pride, intolerance and aggression.

Britten's choice of musical material for the *Agnus Dei* reflects the directness of the message and, as we expect, the tritone is prominent. In fact, it is the only time in the work that this figure completely permeates the texture and one could say even 'controls' (Evans) the movement. The poles of F# and C are the bookends for the choir's slow-moving rising and falling scale, forming a ground bass that is the very fabric of the movement. High above this, as if suspended, the tenor soloist weaves his plangent line.



If you look carefully at the above example you can see how the tenor's vocal line is the exact replication of the ostinato scale initiated by the chamber orchestra (and later taken up by the choir) but in augmentation and, like that figure, spanning the F#/C tritone. It also illustrates Britten's favoured device of heterophony, mentioned above and discussed in the last issue of these notes. We should also note that Britten places the most expressive words ('hangs', 'disciples', 'love') on suspensions that drop from F# on to C major chords, confirming the pervasiveness of the tritonal motif in this movement.

It is probably worth noting here that Britten's use of antique forms, such as ground bass, derives from his admiration of his baroque predecessor Henry Purcell. The ground bass in Purcell's day was often used as an emotional stimulus that emerged directly from the Doctrine of the Affections – a way of using certain musical devices as a sort of codification or sign post for the listener's emotions. So, as simplistic as it sounds, the *ground* bass as used by Purcell was nearly always associated with the 'earth' or the 'ground'. Some examples in his well known songs are *Music for a While,* in which Oedipus uses the charm of music to call up the ghost of his dead father Laius (from the ground); *An Evening Hymn*, where the singer prays as he lays his head down to sleep (on the ground) and of course the most famous, *Dido's Lament* where the Queen sings of her imminent death and burial ("When I am laid in earth"). I don't think it is beyond reason to suggest that Britten's use of the device here may have similar associations. For, if there is any lasting impression of this extraordinary movement, it is of an ineffable sorrow for those souls who fell on, and became one with, the muddied battlefields of Verdun, Ypres and the Somme.

On two occasions the tenor attempts to assert a sardonic tone, something we have come to expect as the Owen texts clash with the theology of the Missa. In a tone of bitterness and contempt, he sings:

Near Golgatha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast
By whom the gentle Christ's denied.

This first accusation, thrust at those who would sacrifice youth for a 'cause', is gently washed over by the ebb and flow of the choir's 'Agnus Dei..'. He makes another, more animated attempt :

The scribes on all the people shove
And bawl allegiance to the state,

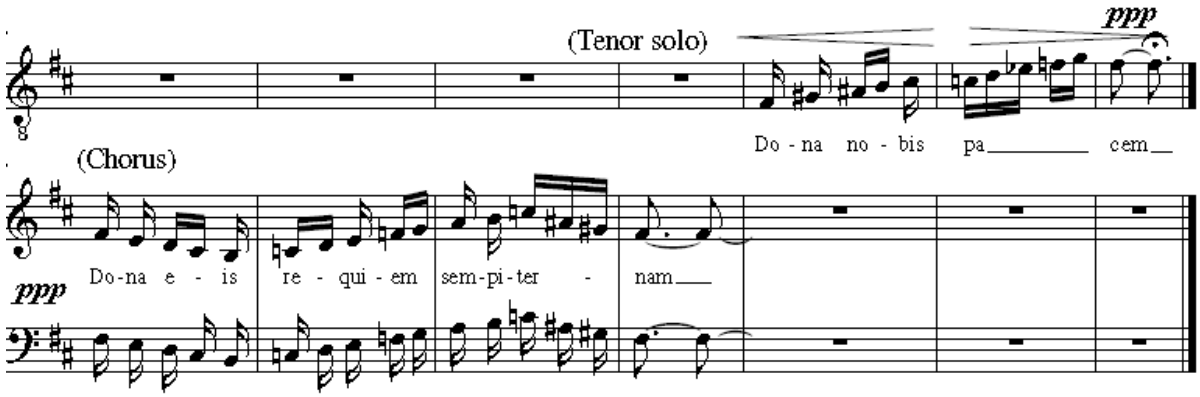
.. and again the choir repeat their insistent, yet subdued mantra.

(I should point out here yet another example of Britten's scrupulous attention to detail. Accompanying the tenor's indictment is a side drum - the only use of percussion in the movement. The instrument has already been featured at crucial times in the work to represent the stuttering of the machine gun, most illustratively in the first and second of the Owen poems: *"Only the monstrous anger of the guns, Only the stutt'ring rifles' rapid rattle"* and *"Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death... He's spat at us with bullets .."* Recalling it here in the *Agnus Dei* is surely a reminder of the weapons that will be used by the state to enforce its dogma. Further to this, in the addendum at the end of this essay I have inserted a generous quotation from Donald Mitchell in his chapter on Britten's pacifism ('Violent Climates') in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*. It highlights the courageous political stance that Britten took in this and other pacifist works.)

This time the tenor yields and laying aside the bitterness of the poem, returns to his original suspended melody aligning the soldiers' sacrifice with that of Christ.

But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate.

Then a remarkable thing happens and if we were ever in doubt as to the redemptive qualities of this movement those doubts are now surely confounded. In response to the chorus's final invocation "Dona eis requiem sempiternam," (Give them eternal rest), the tenor soloist, for the first and only time in the work, takes to the Latin of the Missa, uttering what is surely the central plea of Britten's work: "Dona nobis pacem." (Give us peace).



While such score study reveals the elegance of Britten's craft and intent, the real effect of this movement can only be expressed by experiencing it. Like so many great works of art, it defies analysis. It all looks so straightforward, so simple but it is this very simplicity wherein lies its genius. Here, Britten cuts away all excess and with such restraint and tonal control, illuminates a profound truth.

> "The singular economy of gesture in this movement is not simplistic: the tone of noble sorrow it engenders is the most subtly interfused mood of the *War Requiem*, and one of Britten's supreme achievements" (Evans)

It also shows the hand of the experienced opera composer, whose timing was rarely off; for as well as containing the work's central message, its beauty and warmth also gives us a moment to catch our breath before the horrors that lie ahead in the next and final movement ('Libera me').

Addendum

Mitchell, Donald, 'Violent Climates', *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten,* ed Mervyn Cooke, Cambridge. 1999.

There is no question in my mind that one should be shocked, brought up short, by the (righteous) anger that erupts in the 'Agnus Dei'. Furthermore, the objects of that anger were to attract Britten's indictment again in the future. The choice of the parable of the Good Samaritan as text for the *Cantata Misericordium* of 1963, written to mark the occasion of the centenary of the International Red Cross, speaks for itself: it is the representatives of established religion who pass by on the other side. While in *Owen Wingrave*, years later, it is lines by Shelley that Owen reads over to himself as he sits in Hyde Park. They begin:

> *War is the statesman's game, the priest's delight,*
> *The lawyer's jest....*

And end:

> *Look to thyself , priest, conqueror or prince!*
> *Whether thy trade is falsehood ...*

That 'falsehood' (clearly, as these citations suggest, a prime concern of Britten's) has often been disguised by – indeed, expressed in terms of (the state has seen to that!) – ceremony and ritual; and I believe the tension that, in *War Requiem*, is consciously generated by the juxtaposition of ritual and *actualité*, finds expression at its most economical and most searing in the 'Agnus Dei'