Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

And I can find... nothing wrong with offering to my fellow-men music which may inspire them, which may touch them or entertain them, even educate them—directly and with intention. On the contrary, it is the composer's duty, as a member of society, to speak to or for his fellow beings.[1]

Britten's childhood home, Lowestoft, in Suffolk, England, on the North Sea coast with its sounds of seabirds, wind, and waves, would be a lifelong influence on his music. His parents, Edith and Robert, provided musical inspiration, opening their home for evening musicales with talented musicians that included Edith singing arias and songs by classical composers. She recognized and encouraged her son's talent when he began composing at the age of five, and their love for music forged a special bond between them. Britten also shared his mother's dedication to the evangelical Low Church in Lowestoft, where he played his arrangements of music by Tchaikovsky, Mozart, and Frank Bridge.

Britten heard *The Sea* by Bridge at age 10, and he was "knocked sideways." When Britten found his education at the Royal College of Music unsatisfying, Bridge became a beloved mentor, both in music composition and life philosophy; for many decades thereafter, he provided advice about musical technique. During Britten's regular visits to Bridge's weekend cottage, he absorbed how an artist lived and thought. Bridge's articulate pacifism struck a sympathetic chord in him, and Britten would later write to a friend, "the early Church *was* pacifist."[2] His coming of age was spurred by the realization that Establishment religion did not voice any protest to the "growing dangers of political extremism which menaced society." He distanced himself from the church of his childhood and developed his own deeply held belief in *caritas* (unlimited loving-kindness). His life partner, Peter Pears, would describe Britten as "an agnostic with a great love for Jesus Christ."[3]

Pears, one of the 20th century's greatest English tenors, was also Britten's musical partner. Their relationship lasted nearly 40 years, until Britten's death from heart failure in Pears's arms. As a foremost interpreter of Britten's music, Pears revealed that "the key to his music lies in his moral point of view combined with his craving for lost innocence brought on by his increasing disillusionment with man." Both men committed their lives to pacifism. After formally becoming conscientious objectors during World War II, they gave countless concerts under the auspices of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts. These modest venues attracted small but enthusiastic audiences. Britten and Pears also toured major cities and performed for audiences of hundreds. After living for several years with one of Britten's sisters, the two bought a home in Aldeburgh near the North Sea coast, reminescent of the sandy beaches and open sea of Britten's childhood.[4] Together they instituted the Aldeburgh Festival especially for the community, which thrives to this day. They formed the English Opera Group (1951–1980), to premiere new operas, and the Britten-Pears School for Advanced Musical Studies (now the Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme).

In the 32 years since Britten's death, media coverage of well-known people has shifted tone dramatically. The media left Britten's private life largely unnoted during his lifetime; but in the face of the 1970s' civil rights movements, his homosexuality became the prism through which

his music was too often viewed. Yet the inner life expressed in his music transcends his sexual orientation and reveals a complex personality anchored in spiritual depth.

Britten's complexity was shaped by world events. The economic depression in Britain and increasing tensions in Europe caused several discontented intellectuals to emigrate. W.H. Auden, with whom Britten had collaborated on film music, moved to Brooklyn Heights in New York City in January 1939. Auden encouraged Britten and Pears to join his household, which they did for a few months until finding their own apartment. They spent the years from 1939 to 1942 giving concerts in several major cities in the United States.

During his years in the United States, Britten composed the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, a precursor to the *War Requiem*. A few of his other major compositions during World War II (1939–1945) were the operas *Paul Bunyan* and *Peter Grimes* and the choral masterpieces *Hymn to St. Cecilia, Ceremony of Carols,* and *Rejoice in the Lamb.* True to his self-definition as a working composer, Britten accompanied Yehudi Menuhin on a recital tour of German concentration camps in 1945. Playing to audiences of recently freed prisoners, Britten saw the wrenching effects of the privation they had endured. Immediately upon his return home to New York, he wrote the *Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, "setting nine poems in which death and repentance are recurring themes."[5]

World War II has gone down in history as the first war to extensively use mechanized destruction.[6] Combined with the death toll of World War I, two generations of young adults were destroyed. England's recovery from economic ruin would take decades.[7] In this difficult period, Britten's output of operas, choral works, and instrumental music secured his position as one of England's greatest composers. But the world stage was tilting alarmingly—the competitive East-West Cold War escalated to the brink of nuclear war, commenced by the Korean War (1950–1953); the Vietnam War began (1959);[8] the Berlin Wall went up to divide families and depress the East German economy; and the Bay of Pigs conflict erupted in Cuba (both in 1961).

In 1961, Britten was asked to create a large choral work for the consecration of the new St. Michael's Cathedral (also known as Coventry Cathedral), which sits near the ruins of the bombed-out original in Coventry, England. He chose excerpts from poems by Wilfred Owen, who served in World War I, to set alongside the Latin text of the Mass for the Dead. The new cathedral offered awesome acoustics and a dramatic setting. Architect Basil Spence had designed it to stand near the ruins of its medieval counterpart,[9] a juxtaposition of devastation and reconciliation that inspired Britten's deep outrage and compassion as he created the *War Requiem*. At the May 1962 premiere, the soloists were soprano Heather Harper (the replacement for famed Russian soprano Galina Vishnevskya, who was not allowed to leave Russia), the great German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, and Peter Pears—each intended to represent a nation most affected by World War II. On the podiums were Meredith Davis and Britten himself. Britten dedicated the choral masterpiece to four of his friends killed in the conflict.

"Already I have comprehended a light which never will filter into the dogma of any national church; namely, that one of Christ's essential commands was: Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms." These words are by poet Wilfred Owen, who

viewed war as "a crime against nature, a crime against humanity's potential for good, a crime against creation itself." [10] He served on the front lines, where he won a Military Cross, was hospitalized with shell shock, and returned to the front "because he felt there he would be in a stronger position to cry out as a poet against the war and to speak for his dying comrades." [11] At the age of 25, he was killed in action one week before World War I ended.

The *War Requiem*

Britten prefaced the score of the *War Requiem* with a quote from the preface that Owen wrote for his book of poetry (published posthumously): "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity. All a poet can do is to warn." [12] In this thought-provoking work, composer and poet challenge us to comprehend the consequences of "the barbarism more or less awake in mankind" [13] and to mobilize our better selves.

The *War Requiem,* a monument to both world wars, is constructed on three levels: (1) baritone and tenor soloists, and small orchestra to represent piercing irony; (2) soprano soloist, chorus, and large orchestra to represent the ritual invocation of God's mysterious presence; and (3) children and organ to represent innocent hope. Overall, the work represents the search for "a vision of eternal peace which warring man cannot, of himself, achieve." [14]

The opening movement, "*Requiem aeternam*," begins with an urgent choral prayer for peace, issuing from a desolate landscape in which bells repeatedly sound an unsettling C–F# tritone. [15] Ethereal children's voices sing phrases that begin and end with one or the other tritone note, but perfect fourths carry the text, transforming their song into one of hope for peace. The choral prayer returns, darker-sounding this time. Childhood innocence is lost.

The tenor soloist asks, "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?"—lines from Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth." The poem portrays boys among the slaughtered in whose eyes "shine the holy glimmers of good-byes." In the portrayal of "wailing shells" with flute and clarinet, we hear one of many examples of Britten's use of onomatopoeia in the *War Requiem*. The "*Kyrie eleison*" returns, permeated by the tritone, which unsettles the movement's final F-major chord.

The second movement, "*Dies irae*," portrays human pride disguised in magisterial robes. Owen's poetry uncloaks pride to reveal man-made hell, and bugles fill the air with sadness. Boys are turned prematurely into men, walking "quite friendly up to Death" (from the poem "The Next War"), followed by a tender setting of "*Recordare Jesu pie,*" in which flutes evoke a parting dance of childhood. In an ironic juxtaposition of a weapon's awful force with the Day of Judgment, the poem "Sonnet: On Seeing a Piece of Our Heavy Artillery Brought into Action" is sung by the baritone soloist representing a German soldier. The "long black arm" was Germany's mobile howitzer Big Bertha, capable of firing a 2,200-pound shell more than nine miles. Britten intersperses the Latin text with Owen's poem "Futility," creating an image of all humanity mourning as a soldier longs for the sun's rays to restore life to a fallen comrade. The movement ends in a whispered prayer for pity.

The third movement, "*Offertorium*," begins with the children singing in the style of medieval plainsong, supported by hypnotic organ cluster-chords—sounds that revive a distant glimmer of hope. The chorus enthusiastically recalls God's promise to Abraham to spare his son, yet the reference to the standard-bearer Saint Michael evokes images of soldiers bearing national flags in war.[16] Owen's poem "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" recounts the story of Abraham and Isaac with a wrenching twist: no son will be spared. Britten uses musical structures from his *Canticle II* (1952), in which he was sympathetic to Abraham's plight under God's demand to sacrifice "beauty, youth, and the future."[17] In the *War Requiem*, Britten sets Owen's poem in which Abraham defies God and kills his son Isaac rather than the ram, taking Isaac's side in a call to end sacrifice. The chorus concludes this movement with a barely audible chant, humanity's optimism deflated. "Here is one of the strongest revelations of the spiritual heart of the *War Requiem* parable: God offers salvation, but Man has free will to reject His salvation and to bring about all the evil consequences of such rejection."[18]

In the fourth movement, "*Sanctus*," the C–F# tritone shimmers. Church bells seem to conflate with Owen's "passing bells" from the first movement to create a more ceremonial tone in the percussion instrument parts and the soprano solo. The Eastern temple sounds that Britten used to suggest the remoteness of peace reflect his study of Indonesian gamelan music. But the aftermath of war weighs this movement down, lifted only with effort in the chorus's fierce chant, "*Pleni sunt coeli et terra*." In Owen's poem "The End," Earth speaks the bleak phrase, "It is death." The out-of-sync orchestra and chorus tell us the devastating truth of war: no blazing hosannas can glorify scars, assuage tears, renew life, or annul death.

In the fifth movement, "*Agnus Dei*," the consoling Latin prayer integrates with Owen's poem "At a Calvary Near Ancre,"[19] in which the church and state promotion of violence meets resistance. The resistor is one of millions of World War I soldiers who initially believed that war "brought them into a special relationship with Christ,"[20] who represented for them the homeland and its values. The tenor's repeated "*Dona nobis pacem*" and the chorus's plea for eternal peace are bound together with a melodic ostinato expressing the longing for forgiveness and peace.

The sixth movement, "*Libera me*," begins with a tortured lament and accelerates to a fiery "*Dies irae*." A long diminuendo then sets the mood for the momentous poem "Strange Meeting,"[21] sung by the tenor and baritone soloists. Their words, accompanied by chilling chords in the strings, enact a poignant exchange between two dead soldiers from opposite sides in the war, one who has killed the other, but both felled by "the truth untold—the pity of war." Their resigned spirits repeat the trance-like phrase "Let us sleep now," while the children, chorus, and soprano soloist invoke a Biblical image of paradise, where angels receive our fallen soldiers and lay them to rest. The tritone returns, and nothing feels secure. Yet Britten gives us an intensely moving soundscape of reconciliation, as he joins all three soloists, the children's and adult choruses, and the two orchestras in the final movement.

The *War Requiem* is for those who survive. Owen did not expect his poetry to console his own generation. Forty-four years after Owen's death, Britten composed the music for maximum effect. Its greatness—musical onomatopoeia, arresting truths, and the irreconcilable pairing of ageless faith with humankind's soul-destroying acts—builds monumentally to the question:

Howcanneighborsandnationsredeemtheirhumanity ,honorthosesacrificedtowar,andlivein peace?

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[1] *BenjaminBritten:TheSpiritualDimension* ,byGrahamElliott,OxfordUniversityPress,2006.
[2]Elliott.
[3]Elliott.
[4] *BenjaminBritten:PicturesfromaLife1913-1976,* compiledbyDonaldMitchellandJohnEvans,Charles Scribner'sSons,1978.
[5] *MasterMusicians:Britten,* byMichaelKennedy,OxfordUniversityPress,1993.
[6]WorldWarIIresultedinmorethan70milliondocumenteddeaths,mostlycivilians,andcostonetrillion1944U.S. dollars.Someofthemassivelydestructiveinventionsincludedjetaerialbombs,chemicalandatomic weapons, ballisticmissiles,heavyartillery,andarmoredtanks.
[7]Lowestoft,Britten'schildhoodhome,wasthemost heavilybombedtownintheUnitedKingdombasedon population,becauseGermanbombersuseditasnavigationpoint.
[8]TheKoreanWar(alsoknownas"theforgottenwar") resultedinatleast54,000U.S.casualtiesandcost $50billion.The16-yearVietnamWarwouldclaimthelivesofnearly9millionU.S.servicepersonnel.
[9]Inan11-hourfirestormofbombsonNovember14,1940,Germanplanesdestroyed60,000buildingsinthecityof Coventryandleftthe14th-centurycathedralapile ofrubble,becausethetownhadchangeditsmanufacturing outputfrombikesandautostomunitions.
[10] *RequiemforWar:TheLifeofWilfredOwen,* byArthurOrrmont,FourWindsPress,N.Y.,1967.
[11]Orrmont.
[12] *Britten,*byChristopherHeadington,Holmes&MeierPublishers,N.Y.,1981.
[13]FromtheBritten-PearsFoundationwebsite http://www.brittenpears.org/?page=britten/works/commentary.html.
[14]Elliott.
[15]Thetritoneisanintervalofthreewholetones(anaugmentedfourth).Themedievalchurchforbadeitsusein plainsongandearlypolyphonicmusic,callingit"thedevilinmusic."
[16]"[Saint]Michaelisalsoareminderofthefirstandarguablymostimportantactofforceinhumanhistory;itwas hisswordthatexpelledAdamandEvefromParadise." *BloodyGood:Chivalry,SacrificeandtheGreatWar,* by AllenJ.Frantzen,UniversityofChicagoPress,2004.
[17]"TearsforAbraham:TheChesterPlayofAbrahamandIsaacandAntisacrificeinWorksbyWilfredOwen, BenjaminBritten,andDerekJarman,"byAllenJ.Frantzen,in *JournalofMedievalandEarlyModernStudies* #31, DukeUniversityPress,Durham,N.C.,2001.
[18] AttheWestminsterAbbeyservicefollowingBritten'sdeath,PearsreadfromtheAnglo-Saxonpoemknown as "Genesis22,"thestoryofAbrahamandIsaac,foritsrelevancetotheirsharedbeliefthatsonsshouldbesparedfrom thepatriarchalfervorforwar.
[19]TheBattleoftheAncrewasthelastactoftheBattleoftheSomme(JulytoNovember1916),oneofthelargest andbloodiestrecorded,withmorethan1.5million casualties.AtthepointwhenthebattleoftheAncrecouldhave beenconsideredanAlliedvictory,apoliticallymotivatedlieutenantgeneraldrovehistroopstomake furtherattacks, whichwereunsuccessful.OwenfoughtneartheAncreRiverduringtheyearinwhichhewrotethispoem.
[20] *BloodyGood,* byFrantzen.
[21]"StrangeMeeting"wasfoundinmorethanoneversionamongOwen'spapers,classifiedunderthetheme "FoolishnessofWar."Brittenusedtheversionpublishedtheyearafterthepoet'sdeathin *Wheels:AnAnthologyof Poetry*(4thcycle).

–CarolTalbeck