



INDIANAPOLIS  
SYMPHONIC  
C H O I R

4600 SUNSET AVENUE  
INDIANAPOLIS, IN 46208  
PH: 317.940.9057  
FAX: 317.940.9058  
INDYCHOIR.ORG

ERIC STARK  
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

MICHAEL PETTRY  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

## **War Requiem**

**Benjamin Britten**

By: Dennis Shrock | Scholar In Residence

Britten began thinking about composing the *War Requiem* in October 1958, when he was approached by a committee from Coventry Cathedral to write a major choral/orchestral work for the dedication of the new cathedral—the old one having been demolished during the Battle of Britain in November 1940. The commission became official in November 1960, and the work was completed a year later, in December 1961. The premiere, which was broadcast live over the BBC network, took place May 30, 1962.

The recognition that Britten had created a masterpiece was immediate and profound. Mary Cotton, one of the orchestral players in the premiere, commented that “at the end [of the performance] there was a deathly silence . . . people were in tears . . . it was so moving,” and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, the baritone soloist in the premiere, wrote in his autobiography, “The first performance created an atmosphere of such intensity that by the end I was completely undone; I did not know where to hide my face.” William Mann, writing a review of the premiere in the *Times*, called the Requiem “so superbly proportioned and calculated, so humiliating and disturbing in effect, in fact, so tremendous,” and sculptor Barbara Hepworth, who listened to the live broadcast of the premiere, wrote a letter to Britten stating, “I was profoundly moved this evening as I listened to the *War Requiem*. I felt it to be a truly magnificent work, and of tremendous importance. The visionary quality . . . seems to me sublime.” Additionally, a review in the San Francisco *Chronicle* of a 1964 performance in Redwood, California, stated, “Virtually any performance of the *War Requiem* would be a moving experience. . . . It is a better than even chance that most of the two or three thousand listeners who packed the Redwood Auditorium to the rafters will demand a second hearing. I can think of no better idea under the sun, except possibly to form an international committee to present the work in every language, in every country of the world.”

Interest in the *War Requiem* was so great that the recording made a year after the premiere sold an unprecedented 200,000 copies in five months, and performances were scheduled across the globe—most notably in Wellington, New Zealand, and Tanglewood, Massachusetts, on the same day (July 27, 1963). A film has even been made of the work. Simply entitled “War Requiem,” it was produced in 1988 using the original Britten 1963 recording as its soundtrack and featuring the actors Nathaniel Parker, who portrayed the poet Wilfred Owen, and Laurence Olivier in his last public role before his death in July 1989.



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The idea of composing a work about and against war was not new to Britten. He, along with his partner Peter Pears, had joined the Peace Pledge Union in 1937 and swore to its cause: “I renounce war, and am therefore determined not to support any kind of war. I am also determined to work for the removal of all causes of war.” And several years later, while living in the United States to avoid the war in Europe, Britten composed *Sinfonia da Requiem*, a three-movement instrumental work premiered in Carnegie Hall by the New York Philharmonic in March 1941. About this work, Britten wrote, “I’m making it just as anti-war as possible. . . . I don’t believe you can express social or political or economic theories in music, but . . . all I’m sure of is my own anti-war conviction as I write it.”

After returning to England in 1942 and registering as a conscientious objector, Britten focused his compositional activity on music for the stage, writing ten operas in the next fifteen years—none on the subject of war. But with the Coventry commission and its bombing association, Britten had motivation to return to his old passion. For the text of his new work he chose the traditional Latin portions of the Requiem Mass and combined these with poetry of Wilfred Owen, who was, and still is, widely recognized as one of the most significant war poets of the twentieth century. Owen had been a soldier in World War I and had been enthusiastic about the war when he enlisted at age 22 in 1915. However, after witnessing the war’s horrors firsthand, he turned critical of it and wrote more than fifty antipathetic poems before he was killed in action at age 25—on November 4, 1918, one week to the hour before the armistice.

Britten utilized nine Owen poems, assigning them to tenor and baritone soloists accompanied by a chamber orchestra. To make manifest the reality of the poems, Britten set them for specific singers—a British tenor (Peter Pears) and a German baritone (Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau), thus representing actual soldiers who had fought each other in the war. The narrative of the poems even contains dialogue between the soldiers—the most poignant of these being “I am the enemy you killed, my friend,” which Britten uses at the very end of the *War Requiem*. Britten also used a portion of Owen’s *Preface* as a subtitle of the *Requiem* and as a statement of the *Requiem*’s purpose: “My subject is War, and the Pity of War. The poetry is in the pity. . . . All a poet can do today is warn.”

The Latin texts are set for a mixed choir, full orchestra, and a soprano soloist representing Russia (intended for Galina Vishnevskaya, the wife of cellist Mstislav Rostropovich) along with a boys’ choir accompanied by organ. The three performing groups were spatially separated in Coventry



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Cathedral—the choir, soprano soloist, and orchestra in the center; the tenor and baritone soloists with the chamber orchestra (and their own conductor) to the listeners' right, and the boys and organ on the left. This spatial separation reinforces the interplay between the performing forces and their textual functions, especially the striking relationship between the Latin texts and Owen poetry, the poetry often reinforcing the message of the Latin and making it tangible. For instance, "*Tuba mirum*" is in sequence with "Bugles sang" and "*Requiescant in pace*" is sung at the same time as "Let us sleep now."

As other examples of the concinnity between Latin and English texts, Britten combines the Offertory text "*Quam olim Abrahae promisisti, et semini ejus*" ("which was once promised to Abraham and to his seed") with Owen's paraphrase of Abraham and Isaac from Genesis 22:1–19 ("So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went . . . and slew his son, and half the seed of Europe, one by one"). Even more poignant, Britten juxtaposes "*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi*" ("Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world") with Owen's poem "At a Calvary near Ancre", which begins, "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."

The music of the *Requiem* underscores Britten's enmity by being focused on the interval of a tritone, which is used throughout the work and which, through its dissonance, suggests strife and dissension. The pitches of the tritone are often used to build tension, being separated at the beginning of a movement or section of music and gradually being put closer and closer together until they sound simultaneously. This is demonstrated clearly by both the mixed and boys' choirs in the *Requiem's* first movement. The F-sharp of the choral sopranos and tenors is in dialogue with the C-natural of the choral altos and basses, the dialogue compressed in proximity as the movement progresses. Later in the movement the boy trebles and altos are in dialogue, the trebles singing a melody beginning on C-natural and ending on F-sharp, the boy altos imitating this in retrograde, beginning their melody on F-sharp and ending it on C-natural. As an additional examples, the initial tenor phrase in the *Agnus Dei* begins on F-sharp and ends on C-natural, while the choir answers with scalar passages in inversion on the same two pitches, and throughout the *Requiem* tubular chimes frequently strike C-natural and F-sharp.

Other dissonant intervals are also used. Sevenths pervade the *Dies Irae* and seconds are prominent throughout the *Offertorium*, each interval being used in various permutations to accentuate the discord of war. The overall harmonic language, however, is not dissonant per se, and none of



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it seems atonal. Britten manages the dissonance with relatively traditional harmonies, achieving a sense of accessibility with the seconds, sevenths, and tritones, and managing them over long spans of time to create a cogent and visceral desire for consonance. This consonance occurs only three times in the entire work: at the end of the first movement, at the end of the *Dies Irae* (approximately in the middle of the *Requiem*), and at the very end of the work—all three times with the same music and the same F-major resolution chord sung a cappella by the mixed choir. Perhaps this represents hope.