

MUSICAL EXPRESSION IN SELECTED TEXTS FROM BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S WAR REQUIEM

Ruth Ballenger

Historical Background

Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* was commissioned for the reconstruction of St. Michael's Cathedral, Coventry, which was destroyed during the Battle of Britain in World War II. The work was first performed in May 1962 at the rebuilt Cathedral which stands beside the ruins of the medieval structure.

In the late 30's, Europe's increasingly somber political picture had quite an effect on Britten, who composed several pieces specifically for use in peaceful endeavors. By 1939, the political climate had become so uncomfortable for Britten that he finally left Britain for America, intending to become a citizen (1, 36-7). That same year, Britten dedicated *The Ballad of Heroes* to the memories of the British Battalion, International Brigade, who had died in Spain (2, 25), foreshadowing the dedication of the War Requiem. His Sinfonia da Requiem, too, is infused with a sense of the "terror and ghastliness of war" (2, 33).

Britten's lifelong pacifism is evident in his response to the commission for the Coventry Cathedral. Knowing that his work would be heard by many people, Britten created a work for the occasion that would express in a new way the futility and senselessness of war, while conveying his "deep sympathy with man's self-inflicted suffering" (3, 123), a sympathy Britten had long felt. He achieved this with "a stroke of imaginative genius" (3, 123), by placing texts from the traditional Latin "Mass for the Dead along side the bitter poetry of Wilfred Owen, a World War I soldier who was killed one week before the Armistice. On the frontispiece of the score, Britten quotes Owen: "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity . . . All a poet can do today is warn" (4, Score). Britten dedicated the work to four friends who had been killed in World War II.

From the first performance, the work was critically acclaimed as a masterpiece, as described by Christopher Headington:

As with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, critical opinion of the *War Requiem* was unanimous. "A major masterpiece," was Frank Howes' simple phrase, while in the view of Percy Young the composer here achieved "a breadth of expression that puts the work among the major achievements of religious art." The Master of the Queen's Music, Sir Arthur Bliss, not long after this and in my hearing, described Britten as England's greatest composer. (3, 123)

Britten also conceived of the *War Requiem* as a healing work, deliberately choosing soloists from countries involved in the war, the solo parts were specifically for soloists of British, German, and Russian ancestry; they were Peter Pears, Dietrich Fischer-Diskau, and Galina Vishnevskaya, respectively.

Overall Structure

The overall structure of the *War Requiem* is clearly stated in Britten's score, and is an integral part of the work's message. By using three distinct ensembles, Britten conveys the text on several different planes, highlighting the irony of the juxtaposed lyrics. Each subgroup of performers represents a different level of expression within the work: the ritualized liturgy of grief, the angry irony

The large orchestra and chorus, with soprano soloist, are traditional celebrants of the Mass and present the formal, ritualized expression of mourning using the ancient liturgy from the *Missa pro Defunctis*. The tenor and baritone soloists portray British and German soldiers, respectively, and are supported by a smaller chamber orchestra. Their text is Owen's insightful, poignant poetry. The last group is a chorus of boy's voices with organ accompaniment; their portrayal of innocence and hope remains curiously devoid of human emotion, adding to the pain and detachment war creates. They interject with words of inspiration and solace, but their physical placement and the intense irony of the text that make up the bulk of the work overpowers their words of comfort.

Britten indicates that the three subgroups of musicians are to be placed physically separate from each other in performance; ideally, the boy's choir and organ are to be the furthest removed from the rest of the performers. The physical arrangement that results is one of mutual indifference, so it seems the individual ensembles are unaware of each other. This effect underscores a terrible irony of war -- that the warring entities, even among themselves, are unwilling to listen to each other.

This physical arrangement is concisely stated and interpreted in Lemond's' 1967 article:

The work is conceived upon three planes or levels of expression, each fulfilling a need in the total expression of the pity of war. The first might be called the life of the here and now, one in which there is death and loss of talent and potentialities through the grief and emotions brought about by war. The shame of the common cause of destruction and man's inhumanity epitomized by war becomes the agonized cry of the victims and those left behind to mourn. This musical plane is achieved through the poetry of Owen with the tenor soloist representing the English soldier and the baritone soloists