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# Program Note: Benjamin Britten, War Requiem

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## Program Note

### Benjamin Britten, *War Requiem*

Boston University Symphony Orchestra & Chorus

David Hoose & Scott Allen Jarrett, conducting

Symphony Hall, Boston University

November 24, 2014

Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* was first performed on May 30, 1962 as part of a festival of the arts marking the consecration of the rebuilt St. Michael's Cathedral in Coventry. The North American premiere took place the next summer at Tanglewood, with Eric Leinsdorf leading the Boston Symphony, the Chorus Pro Musica, and a group of soloists that included the American soprano — and future CFA dean — Phyllis Curtin.

Coventry's medieval cathedral was among the buildings destroyed during a November 1940 German bombing raid that, employing a combination of explosive and incendiary bombs, created a firestorm that devastated most of the city's historic center. Over the next five years the strategy inaugurated at Coventry would be refined and unleashed on cities across Europe, before culminating with the incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The architect Basil Spence's design for the rebuilt cathedral preserved the ruins as a reminder of "the folly and waste of war" and attached a modernist new cathedral to one of the surviving walls of the old one. The result was a structure defined by a tension between old and new. The same could be said about Britten's design for the *War Requiem*.

The juxtaposition of works by the World War I poet Wilfred Owen (who was killed in action a week before the Armistice) and the liturgy of the Latin Mass for the Dead was present from Britten's earliest sketches. Drawing a line down the center of the left-hand pages of his notebook, he copied the text of the Mass in one column and its English translation in the other. On the right pages he wrote out the Owen poems he had selected, indicating the points where the words of the soldier-poet would break into the timeless text of the liturgy. Blinded by hindsight, it is easy to overlook how easily this mélange of Latin ritual and modern poetry could have gone awry. It probably helped that the horrors of the Western Front were matched by the violent imagery of the *Dies Irae* and that the language Owen used to recount them owed much to the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*.

Britten drove home the contrast between old and new by assigning the texts to separate musical forces. Most of the Mass text is sung by the choir and soprano soloist, accompanied by the orchestra. Other passages are chanted by a distant children's choir, supported by an organ. At the front of the stage (or, figuratively, down in the trenches) a tenor and baritone deliver Owen's poems, accompanied by a chamber orchestra. The work begins with the chorus, accompanied by peeling bells, softly singing the opening words of the liturgy only to be cut short by the tenor's plea that those who "die as cattle" at least be spared "the mockery of prayers and bells." And thus the conflict begins.

The tensions that wrack the *War Requiem* — a requiem that sometimes seems to be at

war with itself — are further heightened by Britten's repeated use of the tritone, one of the more unstable intervals in the composer's vocabulary. Dividing the twelve tones of the octave in half, the tritone normally functions as a passing dissonance that can be resolved in a number of different ways. To take one familiar example: the second of the three notes in the song "Maria" from *West Side Story* is a tritone. Leonard Bernstein resolved the momentary tension by moving upwards a half-step for the third syllable of Maria's name (which means that, technically, "the most beautiful sound" Tony has "ever heard" is a perfect fifth). Britten, in contrast, repeatedly leaves his tritones unresolved and the resolutions that do occur — the close of the *Requiem aeternam*, *Dies irae*, and *Libera me* — are notoriously unconvincing. Though the program note for the premiere characterized them as "peaceful", most later commentators have found them somewhat unsettling. As the art historian James D. Herbert suggested in a thoughtful exploration of the parallels between Spence's cathedral and Britten's requiem, listeners find themselves faced with "a declaration of the impossibility ever to resolve."

The resolution of implacable divisions had been central to the postwar mission of St. Michael's Cathedral. Perhaps the most tangible symbol of its efforts at bridging the barriers separating former adversaries was the gift of a replica of the Coventry altar cross — made from the nails that once supported the roof trusses of the old cathedral — to the Berlin *Gedächtnis Kirche*, a cathedral destroyed by Allied bombers in 1943 and, like Coventry, rebuilt according to a design that merged the new church with the ruins of the old. Such gestures could hardly have been lost on Britten. He had been a conscientious objector during World War II and was involved in the movement for nuclear disarmament. His choice of soloists for the work's premiere — the English tenor (and Britten's companion) Peter Pears, the German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, and the Russian soprano Galina Vishnevskaya — expressed more than just his admiration of their artistry. But this gesture of reconciliation would be thwarted by Cold War politics. Alarmed at the prospect of Vishnevskaya's performing what they viewed as a "political work" in a cathedral beside an Englishman and a West German, the Soviet ministry of culture prevented her from participating in the premiere. Britten was, by then, well aware that relations between the United States and Soviet Union were taking a dangerous turn. He began work in earnest on the *War Requiem* on August 9, 1961. Four days later, the Berlin Wall went up. As he labored over the score, incorporating the words of a poet killed in World War I into a composition commissioned by a cathedral destroyed in World War II, he could hear bombers from a nearby airbase flying overhead, prepared to play their part in a third world war.

Britten's notebooks indicate that he had second thoughts about which Owen poem should be paired with the *Agnus Dei*. His initial choice was Owen's "Arms and the Boy," a bitter poem that would have yielded yet another ironic juxtaposition. But he crossed it out and replaced it with "At a Calvary Near the Ancre" — perhaps the most uncompromising expression of Owen's Christian pacifism — and scribbled a Latin phrase from the Common Mass that does not appear in text of the *Agnus Dei* used in the Requiem: *Dona nobis pacem*. Finally, crossing the wall he had erected between male soloists and the choir, he assigned these Latin words to the tenor. That subtle gesture might be heard as an anticipation of the reconciliation between musical forces that would, at long last, be achieved at the close of Owen's poem "Strange Meeting", when soldiers, chorus, and the

distant children's choir finally overcome the divisions that have separated them and sing as one.

But the *War Requiem* does not end with the seamless intertwining of the soldiers' "Let us sleep now" and choirs' *In paradisum deducant te Angeli*. For though the angels may have conducted the soldiers into paradise, those who are left behind have a final portion of the liturgy to perform. The work concludes with the words *Requiescant in pace. Amen* and with yet another unconvincing resolution of that troubling tritone. And this final inflection upwards hangs in the air like an unanswered question ... Amen?

The greatest strength of Britten's audacious composition may rest with its ultimate refusal to reconcile, in art, what remains unreconciled in life. Though *they* may rest in peace, it is painfully evident that *we* do not. If, as the philosopher Theodor Adorno suggested, "Art is magic, freed from the lie of being true," what then are we to make of Britten's strange meeting of ancient liturgy and all-too contemporary poetry? Perhaps this ritual of reconciliation, conscious of its inefficacy, can serve as a reminder that the task of beating swords into plowshares is the responsibility of the citizens of the earthly city. As Owen wrote — and as Britten repeated on the dedication page of *War Requiem* — "All a poet can do today is warn."

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