

**Steven Schick, Music Director**  
**Ruben Valenzuela, Choral Director**

**Mandeville Auditorium**  
**Saturday, March 14, 2020, 7:30 P.M.**  
**Sunday, March 15, 2020, 2:00 P.M.**

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**BENJAMIN BRITTEN**

**War Requiem, Opus 66**

**I. Requiem aeternam**

Requiem aeternam

*What passing bells for these who die as cattle?*

**II. Dies Irae**

Dies irae, dies illa

*Bugles sang, saddening the evening air*

Liber scriptus proferetur

*Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death*

Recordare, Jesu pie

*Be slowly lifted up*

Dies irae, dies illa

Lacrimosa dies illa

*Move him into the sun*

**III. Offertorium**

Domine Jesu Christe

*So Abram rose, and clave the wood*

**IV. Sanctus**

Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus

*After the blast of lightning from the East*

**V. Agnus Dei**

*One ever hangs where shelled roads part*

**VI. Libera Me**

Libera me, Domine

*It seemed that out of battle I escaped*

*Let us sleep now . . . In paradisum*



## **War Requiem, Opus 66**

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Born November 22, 1913, Lowestoft

Died December 4, 1976, Aldeburgh

On the night of November 14-15, 1940, the Germans bombed the city of Coventry in the midlands of England. That attack, which lasted eleven hours and involved 450 bombers, destroyed the center of Coventry, killed or wounded over a thousand people, and cut every rail line out of the city. Among the structures destroyed was the Cathedral of St. Michael, built in the fourteenth century. Plans to rebuild the cathedral developed slowly after the war, but—under the direction of architect Basil Spence—they took a dramatic turn. Rather than razing the ruins of the ancient cathedral, Spence instead had them stabilized and incorporated them into his striking design for the new cathedral. That new cathedral seems to grow out of the war-shattered remnant of the old, and a visit to the site is a somber and moving experience.

In the fall of 1958, as work proceeded, the Coventry Cathedral Festival's Arts Committee asked Benjamin Britten to compose a work for the consecration of the new cathedral, still four years in the future. This occasion had a strong appeal for Britten, a devout pacifist who had long tried to make that conviction central to his work. While living in the United States in 1940, he had written the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, which he tried to make "as anti-war as possible." After the war, he considered two similar projects: a large-scale work in memory of the victims of Hiroshima and a requiem in memory of Gandhi, who shared his pacifist commitment. Neither was written, but the Coventry commission revived his interest and provided the perfect occasion for such a statement. The commission gave Britten complete freedom of performers and type of music, and for Coventry he conceived a setting of the Latin Mass for the Dead and scored it for very large forces: three soloists, boys choir, adult choir, orchestra, and separate chamber orchestra.

To the text of the Requiem Mass Britten made an important addition, splicing nine poems about war by the English poet Wilfred Owen into the Latin text. Born in 1893, Owen was serving as the commander of a rifle company when he was killed in the trenches of France on November 4, 1918, exactly one week before the armistice. At the time of his death, Owen was almost unknown as a poet—only five of his poems had been published during his lifetime. But the appearance of his *24 Poems* in 1920 began to suggest his achievement. This slim volume—with its eye for ghastly detail, its sense of the poet’s horror at the war even as he participated in it, and its metrical freedom and use of slant rhyme—revealed him as one of the greatest war poets.

Britten began composition in the fall of 1960 and worked on the *War Requiem*, as he named it early in its composition, across all of 1961 (the Berlin Crisis, with its international tensions and reminder of the threat of war, took place as he worked that summer). As he often did, Britten conceived this music for the talents of specific performers, and he planned the three solo vocal parts for singers from the three countries that had suffered most heavily in the European theater of World War II. The tenor part was written for Britten’s lifelong companion Peter Pears; the baritone part was written for Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who had been drafted into the German army during the closing months of the war; and the soprano part was written for Galina Vishnevskaya, who had been a teenager in Russia during the war. Britten finished the draft of the *War Requiem* in December 1961 and had the scoring complete during a holiday in Greece early in the following year.

The premiere took place on May 30, 1962, in the new cathedral, and even this occasion—which should have been a moment of remembrance and healing—was shadowed by tensions between nations. Vishnevskaya had learned the soprano part and was preparing to go to England for the premiere, but at the last minute her participation was blocked by the Russian government. The Soviet minister of culture, Ekaterina Furketeva, called Vishnevskaya into her office and ripped into her: “How can you, a Soviet woman, stand next to a German and an Englishman and perform a political work?” Vishnevskaya was replaced at the premiere by the young English soprano Heather Harper, who had only ten days to learn the part.

That premiere was a triumph, and the *War Requiem* had an impact matched by few works in the twentieth century. Fischer-Dieskau, remembering friends he had lost in the war, was

found sobbing in the choir stalls after the performance, unable to control his emotions. The recording, led by the composer in January 1963, quickly sold 200,000 copies, an unheard-of number for a piece of classical music (Vishnevskaya was allowed to travel to England to participate in that recording—the Soviet government had belatedly come to recognize the significance of this music). Over the next few years performances followed in Berlin, Dresden, Vienna, Leningrad, Tokyo, and the United States.

When composing a Requiem, some composers have felt free to amend the text. Brahms is the most radical example—he threw out the entire Latin Mass for the Dead and assembled his own text from Luther’s Bible to make it a distinctly *German Requiem*. Fauré wanted to emphasize salvation rather than damnation, so he eliminated the *Dies Irae* and added a concluding section called *In Paradisum*. Britten’s inclusion of Owen’s war poems gives the *War Requiem* a distinct character and moral stance. Britten may well have borrowed this concept from another anti-war setting by an English composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams’ *Dona Nobis Pacem*, composed in 1936 as war clouds gathered over Europe. Into the Latin text of *Dona Nobis Pacem*, Vaughan Williams had interpolated several other texts, notably three of Walt Whitman’s poems about the American Civil War. Their chiseled images of war—and their awareness of the suffering it involves—brought the sharpest possible accent to Vaughan Williams’ plea for peace, and Britten adopted the same method in the *War Requiem*.

Britten deploys his large forces in quite specific ways, dividing them broadly into three separate groups. The boys choir, accompanied by a small organ, should sound ethereal, as if heard from high and far away. The Latin text of the mass is presented on the main stage by the soprano soloist, chorus, and orchestra (sometimes joined by the boys choir). Owen’s poems are presented by the tenor and baritone soloists accompanied by the chamber orchestra; Britten asks that these be separated physically from the main orchestra and chorus onstage. The result is a performance that impacts both our hearing and our vision: the music moves between these groups of performers as Britten alternates Latin and English texts, and only in the final movement do all these forces perform simultaneously.

Another musical decision that gives the *War Requiem* some of its distinct character is Britten’s use of the tritone. A tritone, the interval formed by three whole steps (in this case the interval between C and F#), was called *diabolus in musica* during the Renaissance and was

forbidden because it seemed a demonic sound, an unsettling interval that would not resolve. Britten incorporates that “diabolic” interval throughout the *War Requiem*: it rings out in the bells in the opening moments of the *Kyrie*, it shapes themes, it sometimes accompanies the boys choir, it rings quietly to punctuate the chorus’ *a capella* settings, and it sounds at many other places. Even when presented very softly, that sound—troubling because of its harmonic instability—is an inescapable part of this music.

The *War Requiem* opens in darkness. The music swells up out of silence on a soft surge of sound from gong, timpani, piano, and tuba, and the *Requiem aeternam* takes the form of a slow march in D minor. The orchestra seems to stumble over its phrases as the chorus intones its opening prayer for rest and for mercy and the bells cut through that sound with their insistent tritone. Relief comes with the silvery sound of the boys choir, floating high above this darkness, but even here the tritone intrudes. The opening march resumes, rising to a great climax, and now the tenor and chamber orchestra enter with the first of Owen’s poems. Here Britten draws the first of many parallels between mass text and war poems: the Latin text prayed for mercy and rest for the dead, but now the tenor wonders if there can be any notice taken of those “who die like cattle” on the battlefield. Britten’s music nicely mirrors Owen’s language of war (“stutt’ring rifles’ rapid rattle,” “wailing shells”). Suddenly the music leaves the battlefield and veers to the memory of these soldiers as boys, and the movement is rounded off by the chorus’ *Kyrie*, sung *pianississimo*.

The *Dies irae* is often the longest section of the requiem mass, and so it is here: Britten weaves four separate Owen poems into this movement. The opportunity to depict God’s wrath and the day of judgment has led some composers (notably Verdi) to create a spectacular vision of damnation. Britten’s vision is just as apocalyptic, but rather than placing damnation in some distant setting, he moves it to the present: Britten’s incarnation of hell is the modern battlefield, and the trumpet that announces the day of doom becomes here the military trumpet sounding its call over the tumult of battle. Those trumpet calls open this vision of damnation, which rises to a climax and then subsides into the first Owen poem, where the baritone’s first words (“Bugles sang”) are set to that same trumpet call. The soprano’s first appearance is dramatic, a strident declamation of the *Liber scriptus*, and this gives way to “Out there,” a jaunty song of comradeship sung in the midst of whistling shrapnel. This song dances its way to the close, and

now Britten divides his chorus: the women sing the imploring *Recordare*, while the men respond with the threatening *Confutatis maledictis*. This rushes directly into the baritone's "Be slowly lifted up," about a piece of artillery. The setting, accompanied by trumpets from the orchestra, salutes the strength of the cannon, then calls down a curse that unleashes music from the opening *Dies irae*. The soprano's plea for mercy, *Lacrimosa dies illa*, leads directly into one of the most moving of the Owen poems, "Move him," in which a dying soldier is moved one last time into warm sunlight. Britten interweaves lines from the *Lacrimosa* and from this poem as it moves to its painful final lines. The chorus returns to close out this movement with its prayer for eternal rest, a prayer that is now directed at the young soldier lying in the sunlight as his life bleeds away.

We are lifted far above the battlefield at the beginning of the *Offertorium*, with the boys' *Domine Jesu* floating high overhead. Into this ethereal world, the *Sed signifer sanctus* arrives with a thump (Britten marks this entrance "Lively"), and the music soon launches into an exuberant fugue on the words *Quam olim Abrahae*. The Owen poem that breaks into this contrapuntal texture bears directly on the Latin text. Tenor and baritone offer a savagely ironic retelling of the story of Abraham and Isaac—this one ends with Abraham slaying his son, which becomes a metaphor for the slaying of all Europe's sons in World War I. Britten drills the climactic line "half the seed of Europe, one by one" into our consciousness, and then the fugue resumes, though its exuberance is now tempered by what has gone before. That fugue grows quiet, dissolves into fragments, and mutters its way into silence.

The *Sanctus*—a sequence of praise—opens with some extraordinary sounds: vibraphone, glockenspiel, antique cymbals, bells, and piano set up a shimmering, ringing wall of sound over which the soprano sounds out the *Sanctus*. The chorus enters, freely chanting *Pleni sunt coeli*, and this builds to a shining eruption of orchestral sound, full of blazing fanfares from the brass. The soprano's consoling *Benedictus* threads its way into this celebration, which again builds to a great shout of triumph on *Hosanna in excelsis*. This feels as if it *should* be the end of the movement—but it is not. Out of that shout, the baritone's "After the blast of lightning" takes us back to the battlefield and ruminates moodily over the carnage. With the ringing praise of the *Sanctus* still echoing around us in the hall, Owen wonders if there can be any hope at all, and Britten's setting sinks into nihilistic darkness.

Shortest of the movements, the *Agnus Dei* is also one of the most moving. It sets two texts: the *Agnus Dei*, with its prayer to take away the sins of mankind, and Owen's "At a Calvary near the Ancre," which has at its last lines what may well be Britten's central message in the *War Requiem*: "But they who love the greater love Lay down their life; they do not hate." This setting alternates the principal ensembles: chorus and orchestra present the *Agnus Dei*, tenor and chamber orchestra the Owen text. The music, built on simple falling and rising phrases, rides quietly along its asymmetric 5/16 meter, and at the end the tenor concludes—all alone—with *Dona nobis pacem*.

The *Libera Me* recalls music from earlier movements as it makes its desperate plea for deliverance. It begins, like the first movement, with a slow march, and along the way listeners will hear fragments of the *Dies irae* and other settings. This gradually fades away, and Britten offers the main part of this movement, a setting of Owen's "Strange Meeting." This is a surrealistic poem, and it receives an icy setting with the tenor's frightening lines almost spoken over held chords. The poem tells of a soldier's sinking into "a profound dull tunnel" where he encounters another soldier, the soldier he had killed the previous day. And in that moment of recognition—the recognition not just of each other but of blocked hopes and blocked life—the soldiers resolve "Let us sleep now," and the final section comes to life. Here for the first time Britten combines all his performers: as the soldiers sink into sleep, the chorus sings a setting of *In paradisum*, interrupted by the boys' *Requiem aeternam*. At the end, the chorus is left to sing the concluding *Amen*. The tritone is still present, but the *War Requiem* comes to its conclusion on a quiet F-major chord.

It is not a conclusion that brings relief or even much hope. The *War Requiem* is at its strongest in its fusion of the mass text with Owen's stunning poetry—that is a combination that illuminates even as it unsettles. But this music provides no solution to the issues it raises, and it does little to ease the pain it evokes. Perhaps that was never Britten's intention. Writing to his sister just after the premiere, Britten said of this music: "I hope it'll make people think abit." On the title page of the score he quoted Wilfred Owen:

My subject is War, and the pity of War.  
The Poetry is in the pity . . .  
All a poet can do today is warn.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger