

The Poetry is in the Pity

BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S WAR REQUIEM



AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW CREATED FOR THE PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA BY MICHAEL M. CONE

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The Poetry is in the Pity — Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*

Tracks and clips

1. Introduction

3:18

- a. Benjamin Britten (BB), *Owen Wingrave*, Op. 85, BB, English Chamber Orchestra (ECO), Decca 475 6020 recorded 12/1/1970.
- b. Henry Purcell, *Dido & Aeneas*, Z. 626, Andrew Parrott, The Taverner Players, Chandos CHAN 8306, released 1981.
- c. BB, *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, Op. 34, BB, London Symphony Orchestra (LSO), London 417509-2 LH recorded 5/27/1963.
- d. BB, *War Requiem* (WR), Op. 66, Galina Vishnevskaya (GV), Peter Pears (PP), Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (FD), The Bach Choir, The Highgate School Boys' Choir, The Melos Ensemble, BB, LSO, London OSA 1255 recorded 1/2/1963 (WWBR).

2. Benjamin Britten & the War Requiem

16:07

- a. BB, *Cello Sonata*, Op. 65, Mstislav Rostropovich (MR), BB, Decca 4218592 recorded 7/19/1961.*
- b. BB, *Gloriana*, Op. 53, Charles Mackerras, Welsh National Opera, Decca 475 6029 recorded 10/26/1992.
- c. BB, *Serenade for Tenor Horn & Strings*, Op. 31, PP, Barry Tuckwell, BB, LSO, London CS 6398, recorded 5/27/1963.
- d. BB, *Sechs Hölderlin Fragmente*, Op. 61, PP, BB, Decca 4782345 recorded 11/6/1961.*
- e. Aaron Copland, *Old American Songs, Set 1*, PP, BB, EMI RLS 748 recorded 9/30/1950.
- f. Franz Schubert, *Die Winterreise*, D. 911, PP, BB, Decca E4663822 recorded 6/14/1963.*
- g. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (WM), *Sonata for Piano Four-hands in c*, K. 521, Sviatoslav Richter, BB, Decca 4668212 recorded 6/19/1967.*
- h. Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky, *Variations on a Rococo Theme*, Op. 33, MR, BB, ECO, ICA ICAD 5025 recorded 6/16/1968.

- i. Johann Sebastian Bach (JB), *Cantata Christ lag in Todesbanden*, BWV 4, FD, Fritz Lehmann, Orchester des Bachfestes Göttingen, Archiv 3063 recorded 7/31/1950.
- j. Sergey Prokofiev, *The Ugly Duckling*, Op. 18, GV, Alexander Dedyukhib, RCA Victor LSC-2497 recorded 2/8/1960.
- k. BB, WR, Heather Harper, Richard Hickox, LSO, Chandos CHAN 8983 recorded 2002, gcCxVy8J77o&t=862s.†

3. The War Requiem, Introit

5:09

- a. BB, Interview on CBC, recorded 1968, 41uBCBzsz2U&t=73s.†
- b-e. BBWR.

4. The War Requiem, Dies irae

17:25

- a. Giuseppe Verdi, *Requiem*, Eugene Ormandy, Westminster Choir, Philadelphia Orchestra, Columbia M2S 707 recorded 5/14/1964 (VR).
- b. BBWR.
- c. François-Joseph Gossec, *Messe des morts*, Diego Fasolis, Orchestra dell Svizzera Italiana, Naxos 8.554750/1 recorded 4/10/1998.*
- d. VR.
- e. BBWR.
- f. Claudio Monteverdi, *Vespro della Beata Virgine, Dixit Dominus*, Masaaki Suzuki, Bach Collegium Japan, BIS BIS-CD-1071/72 released 2001.
- g. BB, *Symphony for Cello & Orchestra*, Op. 68, MR, BB, ECO, Decca E4251002 recorded 7/16/1964.*
- h-n. BBWR.

5. The War Requiem, Offertory

6:19

- a. BB, *Canticle II: Abraham & Isaac*, Op. 51, PP, John Hahessy, BB, London 425 716 recorded 1/13/1961.
- b-d. BBWR.

6. The War Requiem, Sanctus

9:11

- a. JB, *Mass in b*, BWV 232, Otto Klemperer, Philharmonia Orchestra & Chorus, Testament SBT 1138 recorded 4/12/1961.

- b. WM, *Requiem*, K. 626, Hans Gillesberger, Hofmusikapelle Wien, RCA 6535-2-RG released 1987.
- c. BBWR.
- d. *Balinese Gamelan Tradition*, ethnomusicology recordings made by Ruby Ornstein in the 1960's, Lyrichord LYRCD 7179.*
- e. BB, *The Prince of the Pagodas*, Op. 57, BB, Royal Opera House Orchestra, Covent Garden, London 458 856/7 recorded 2/13/1957.
- f. BBWR.
- g. Gustav Holst, *The Hymn of Jesus*, Op. 37, Adrian Boult, BBC Chorus, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Decca 4481702 recorded 3/12/1962.*
- h-j. BBWR.

7. The War Requiem, Agnus Dei

5:14

a-c. BBWR.

8. The War Requiem, Libera me

16:49

- a. BBWR.
- b. BB, *Billy Budd*, Op. 50, BB, LSO, Decca 475 6020 recorded 12/7/1957.
- c-i. BBWR.
- j. Gabriel Fauré, *Requiem*, Op. 48, André Cluytens, Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, EMI 47836 released 1962.
- k-m. BBWR.

Some recordings are available as paid downloads: * PrestoClassical.co.uk; and free from †youtube.com (add the listed text to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=> to get the URL).

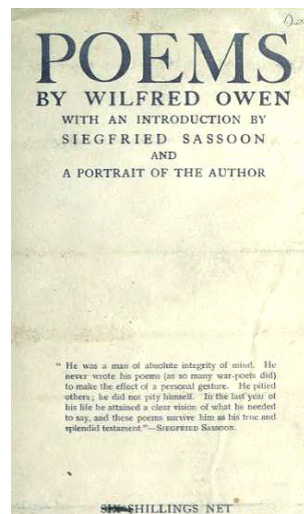
Thanks, Bibliography, Comments

This would have been impossible without help. I don't read poetry well at all and I had a lot of it to read. Gregg Whiteside, a classical DJ whom I've admired for years, agreed to read the Owen poems. My relief is only exceeded by my gratitude. I find the *War Requiem* so upsetting that I cannot trust my judgement. My review board, Sue, Al and Stan, helped, as they always do. I am particularly grateful to Al. If you

need a recording, he's got it, or knows where to find it; therefore, I only have to know him. Connie serves as my listener of first resort. Too often, it's impossible to know whether something is there because it can be heard, or only because I know it is. It's fruitless to point out very many of the second sort, this is not a class in score analysis. Conversely, it's stupid not to bring to everyone's attention something that affects the hearing and that can be discerned by those operating without a score. Connie is an excellent guide to this and, besides, I would have no graphics were it not for her.

Paul Kildea's recent biography, *Benjamin Britten, A Life in the Twentieth Century*, Allen Lane, London, 2013, gave me valuable background on this monumental piece and its brilliant composer. My copy of Mervyn Cooke's *Britten: War Requiem*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, is now heavily annotated, cross-indexed, dog-eared and otherwise mistreated. Moreover, it was fun to read — unusual in this kind of text. My copy of the *War Requiem* score was that printed in the Boosey & Hawkes Masterwork Series. It's unusually clearly printed for a study score, although it does get a mite hard to make out when towards the end there are forty-four staves on a twelve-inch sheet! I cannot manage without *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Stanley Sadie, ed., MacMillan, New York, 1980. And if I have to tell you how important Wikipedia is, you're not living in the twenty-first century.

I am proud to be a musical that music is completely musical meaning; that it acts because of physiology. To some above all, is slightly modified of text. But the *War Requiem* is only absolute music. It is the written. The famous set of string *Last Words of Christ*, sound like a The more one studies it, the Britten intended it to be so, I am



absolutist. We absolutists know abstract and has no extra-directly upon the emotions only extent our viewpoint, logic when dealing with the setting impossible to view as being most distressing piece ever quartets by Haydn, *The Seven* series of polkas by comparison. more upsetting it becomes. certain.

Guernica and the *War Requiem*, the horrors of war and, in the case of the Britten, a powerful anti-establishment statement against those seen as the perpetrators of war. I have always teetered on the edge of pacifism; I agree with Owen: but every time I listen to this I am no longer able to teeter. The Latin text has multiple resonances for me because of its musical and literary background, the poetry throws that text into a strong light and consolation is not the usual outcome. Britten's music supports this cognitive juxtaposition and strengthens it with every note. It may be the most effective setting of text in the history of music. There's not much more to add.

Important musical compositions usually have no import beyond art. Oh, one reads of *Finlandia* provoking anti-Russian demonstrations and a few other instances, but abetting something is different than causing it. A performance of the *War Requiem* changed my life. I purchased the famous premiere recording when it hit the shelves. I listened to it right away and then put it back on the shelf — 'way too depressing. It got two more auditions in the next thirty years and then a fourth a few weeks before an October, 1993, performance. Each time I would remark on its power. Wolfgang Sawallisch conducted The Philadelphia Orchestra in that performance. We lived in Wilmington, DE, and I — proper husband that I am — almost always drove home. Connie, forever considerate, would always offer and I would always politely refuse. That night, when the music was over, I turned to her, shaking and weeping, and said: "You have to drive home!" That's not all: it upset me, but it changed her art. When one is married to a working artist, the nature of her art affects one's life. The *War Requiem* changed my life. But it wasn't just the *War Requiem*, it was also the masterful performance and consummate musicianship of The Philadelphia Orchestra musicians that brought about that change. That's why this discussion is dedicated to them.

Mike Cone