

“Dona Nobis Pacem”*: The Ironic Message of Peace in Britten’s *War Requiem

by
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“It is a function of creative men,” says William Plomer, “to perceive the relations between thoughts, or things, or forms of expression that may seem utterly different, and to be able to combine them into some new form.”¹ There can be little doubt that the two great wars of the twentieth century forced new perspectives upon artists, which facilitated the combination of forms and led to the creation of profound works of art. Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem*, as one such work, draws in musical composition, poetry, architecture, and an entire range of social, historical, and religious considerations to express a complex message about war and its legacy. By juxtaposing the anti-war poetry of Wilfred Owen and the Latin text of the *Missa Pro Defunctis*, Britten’s masterpiece establishes an irony which, instead of criticizing traditional forms of memorialization, calls for the rejection of war itself.

To properly understand the message of the *War Requiem*, it is first necessary to discuss the nature and context of its composition. The piece was composed for the dedication of the newly rebuilt Coventry Cathedral and was first performed there on May 30, 1962. The original cathedral – a towering Gothic edifice dating from the fourteenth century – was almost completely destroyed on November 14, 1940 during an air raid by the German Luftwaffe on the Midlands, Britain’s industrial heartland. The ruins of the cathedral and the resolve of its clergy “came to carry great symbolic import for all of the

¹ Quoted by Palmer, Christopher. *Benjamin Britten: War Requiem*. London: The Decca Record Company Limited, 1985., 10

nation,” art historian James D. Herbert explains.² So rather than destroying the remaining structure a decade later, architect Basil Spence retained the ruins of the old cathedral and incorporated them into the designs for his modern church. In this sense, Britten’s composition bears resemblance to the visionary edifice.

Like Spence’s cathedral, the *War Requiem* features a blend of the new and old by showcasing Owen’s twentieth century poetry against the backdrop of the *Missa Pro Defunctis*, the traditional “mass for the dead.” Britten’s requiem is a large-scale production involving three soloists (a male tenor, a male baritone, and a female soprano), two choruses, a boys’ choir, an organ, and two orchestras (one chamber and the other symphonic). As Christopher Palmer tells us, “The performance requirements of the *War Requiem* were full-blown because the occasion, the building, the subject-matter all demanded it.”³ He also tells us that the premiere was an instant critical and popular success, fulfilling – if not exceeding – the expectations for a requiem that would memorialize two world wars. To further understand how this was accomplished, we must look at the ancient form of the requiem itself.

As the liturgical text of the requiem, the *Missa Pro Defunctis* follows a relatively strict series of liturgical recitations designed to lament the dead. Accordingly, there are six parts to Britten’s *War Requiem*, all of them sung in Latin: the *Requiem Aeternam* (from which the “requiem” mass derives its name), the *Dies Irae*, the *Offertorium*, the *Sanctus*, the *Agnus Dei*, and the *Libera Me*. While each of these sections serves a slightly different purpose in the mass, as a collective they generally plea for the salvation of the departed while maintaining the theme of the Last Judgment throughout. As expected, the

² Herbert, James D. “Bad Faith at Coventry: Spence’s Cathedral and Britten’s ‘*War Requiem*’.” *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 25, No. 3. pp. 535-565. Spring, 1999., 537

³ Palmer, 8

traditional requiem is a gravely solemn affair, and Britten's piece fits this tone, even if its untraditional score eschews the legacies of the medieval and classical models that precede it. Yet the *War Requiem*'s progressive score is not primarily what makes it transformative. Rather, it is what disrupts the *Missa Pro Defunctis* – what punctuates and, as we shall see, mocks it – that earns the piece a high place in the memorialization of the great twentieth-century wars.

To this end, it might at first seem odd that Britten includes the decidedly sardonic and disillusioned poetry of Wilfred Owen in a requiem designed to commemorate a country's sacrifice. After all, poems like "Futility" and "The End" are anything but the stuff of consolation. But such choices become more understandable when we learn that Britten was a staunch pacifist and that the *War Requiem* was composed toward the end of his career. "Britten seized a final, momentous opportunity to make a public pronouncement of his passionately held pacifist convictions," says Palmer, and so it "was natural that Britten should turn to Owen."⁴ As a gifted poet cut down in his prime by war, Owen seemed to offer a nearly bottomless source of poignancy in the project of eulogizing fallen soldiers. As poignant as Owen's poems are, however, the gravitas of the *War Requiem* is achieved in a more provocative way that goes beyond the bounds of his words.

In his *War Requiem*, Britten establishes a dialogue of point-counterpoint between Owen's poetry and the text of the *Missa Pro Defunctis* that is painfully ironic. The poems (sung by the tenor and baritone) are interspersed throughout the requiem, weaving between the lines of the traditional text (sung in various combinations by the rest of the vocal ensemble). All too frequently, at the critical juncture where the two texts meet,

⁴ Palmer, 8, 10

Owen's words rebut or satirize the words of the *Missa*. In the *Requiem Aeternam* section, for instance, the chorus sings, "Et lux perpetua luceat eis."⁵ But the tenor retorts, "And each slow dusk a drawing-dawn of blinds." In the *Dies Irae*, the chorus sings, "Oro supplex et acclinis."⁶ But the baritone fires back, "Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm ... about to curse." At every turn, Owen's words seem to satirize and negate the words of the *Missa*. Perhaps the most striking example of this biting dialogue, however, occurs in the *Offertorium* with the appearance of "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young." Here, the shocking punch-line of the poem is amplified by combining with the traditional text of the *Missa* to horrific effect. The baritone declares that Abram "slew his son, -/ And half the seed of Europe, one by one." To this the *boys'* choir, faithfully following the religious text, responds, "Hostias ... tibi Domine/ laudis offerimus ... Quam olim Abrahae promisisti et semini eius."⁷ The interposition of the poem perverts the words of the *Missa*, twisting them into callous and insulting indifference. This kind of interplay so abounds in Britten's piece that one actually begins wondering whether Owen prophetically foresaw the project of the *War Requiem* and wrote his poems to fit accordingly. Line by line, it seems that the poetry "mocks the rituals – prayers and bells, candles and flowers – of religious mourning," creating an extreme sense of unease throughout the composition.⁸ To add to this effect, the score itself participates in the tension.

The very music of the *War Requiem* helps to deepen its irony through a series of inappropriate musical gestures. One such gesture – the use of the tritone interval from C

⁵ "... And let perpetual light shine upon them."

⁶ "Bowed down in supplication I beg Thee"

⁷ "Lord, in praise we offer to Thee/ sacrifices ...As Thou didst promise Abraham and his seed."

⁸ Herbert, 542

to F# – is often singled out by musicologists as being of special interest because of its harsh discord. As Herbert explains, the tritone creates such dissonance that for centuries of Church history it was forbidden from use and was referred to as “the ‘devil’s interval’.”⁹ If this is the case, we must of course ask what Britten could mean by making an aural pun the single unifying theme of his composition. Herbert offers his own interpretation, saying there is no “harmonic repose here for those souls whose salvation the choir pleads.”¹⁰ But as with the other provocative moments of Britten’s composition, such an uncomplicated answer is unlikely to be the right one. Palmer, on the other hand, seems to strike closer to what is really occurring here. By featuring the tritone in the requiem, he argues, the composer is again creating irony, “and the irony ... is that the idea of ‘rest’ is consistently linked to a symbol of musical *un-rest*.”¹¹ In this sense, Britten’s score does battle with the words of the *Missa* in much the same way that Owen’s poetry does. The score, the poetry, and the *Missa Pro Defunctis* thus seem severely mismatched in this piece. But the clash is not merely an internal one.

In fact, the requiem itself – as a form of mourning – seems to be a mismatch for the whole occasion at Coventry. After all, a new cathedral was being opened, an old one was receiving new life, and the long-beleaguered city was at last being made whole again. On all accounts, the consecration of Coventry Cathedral demanded the joyous music of rebirth, not the haunting funeral service that Britten composed. Thus, because of its inappropriateness, the entire *War Requiem* can be seen as one large-scale ironic work. In acknowledging the unmistakable irony surrounding the piece, we must ask why

⁹ Herbert, 540

¹⁰ Ibid., 540

¹¹ Palmer, 13

Britten has gone to such lengths to include it. Answering this question requires a larger understanding of how irony can operate in the memorialization of wars.

In part, irony facilitates the formation of memory by magnifying the senselessness or absurdity of a given situation. To this end, Paul Fussell argues that irony is the hallmark of the memories of World War I, and he cites a story from Gunner Charles Bricknall to demonstrate his point. The veteran soldier speaks of a disaster that could have been avoided if only the officers had gone into action the way he and his unit had advised. The resulting slaughter “was something I shall never forget,” he says in his memoirs.¹² In his analysis, Fussell claims that it is the *if only* – i.e., the knowledge that the disaster could have been avoided – that cements this memory in Bricknall’s mind, not the actual slaughter. “A slaughter by itself is too commonplace for notice,” he says, but “when it makes an ironic point it becomes memorable.”¹³ Thus in Fussell’s assessment, irony sustains memory, ingraining it more permanently in the psyche. Perhaps this is the effect that Britten seeks to produce by making the *War Requiem* ironic. After all, what better way to commemorate fallen soldiers than to infuse their commemoration with the ingredient that best ensures their memory? This might very well be why we find irony in general throughout the requiem, but such an explanation seems to do little to account for the specific *nature* of that irony.

To this end, we must further recognize that irony is essentially mocking – that is, it derives its power from turning what would normally be a grave moment into farce. Bricknall’s story, for example, is ironic because the slaughter could easily have been

¹² Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. New York: Oxford UP, 1975., 35

¹³ *Ibid.*, 31

prevented if the officers had not foolishly rushed their men down the main road. Yet if it is true that irony mocks, then what exactly is the target of mockery in Britten's composition? It seems it cannot be the memory of the fallen soldiers itself, for we have just seen that irony helps to reinforce that memory. Perhaps a different explanation can be offered.

In his analysis, Herbert argues that Britten's requiem is a deliberate affront to triumphalism as exhibited by what he sees as the superior Christian and patriotic attitudes embodied in the new cathedral. Herbert believes that in retaining the ruins, Spence's church is a standing reminder of sinful German aggression and the vanquishing of the foe. "No forgiveness of Germans at Coventry in 1962," he says, "without the memory of incendiary bombs dropping in November 1940."¹⁴ The memory of past wrongs, in other words, is integral to the memorialization at Coventry Cathedral. Britten's requiem, in contrast, cuts this triumphalism down to size. The "*War Requiem* remains blessedly free of this sort of bad faith," Herbert argues. "With the constant mutual inflection between its various voices, the piece frustrates the construction of any such higher platform for the unilateral dispensation of absolution."¹⁵ The composition rejects the kind of pride so often denounced in Owen's poetry, and surely this is the object of the disruptive irony in Britten's composition, as Herbert sees it. While there might be some truth (indeed, a large kernel of it) in Herbert's assessment, it again appears too simplistic for the complexity we find in the *War Requiem*. This is especially true when we consider more deeply Owen's own views and the context in which they are presented.

¹⁴ Herbert, 559

¹⁵ Ibid.

It seems unlikely that the *War Requiem* has Christian or patriotic triumphalism as its main concern. Though Owen undoubtedly disdains such pride, he seems to be implying something quite different in the way he satirizes Christianity and patriotism in his poems. In “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” for instance, it is not the church’s “passing-bells” that constitute the mockery; it is the fact that those for whom they toll “die as cattle.” It is not an ecclesiastical choir, but the “demented choirs of wailing shells” that are the source of bitterness. In each instance, the sin is not committed *by* Christianity – with its intent to memorialize and transcend – but *against* it. “Owen, imbued with ideas of pity and reconciliation ... shows himself essentially Christian,” says Plomer. “He makes quite clear his disillusionment with the failure of a Christian civilisation to practice what it professes.”¹⁶ The irony in Owen’s poetry, therefore, stems not from the attitudes of faith or patriotism themselves, but from the duplicitousness with which these are hijacked by those who would make war. Similarly, the mockery of the *Missa Pro Defunctis* in Britten’s requiem is not an affront to the text itself, but rather an indictment of the wars that mock it. An honest look at the original effect of the piece will help to clarify this point.

The *War Requiem* would have seemed like a gross imposition on the cathedral to the audience listening to its debut. We must imagine what it would have been like as a listener, surrounded by the soft grandeur of the new church – the light filtering through large stained-glass windows, the magnificent tapestry of Christ hanging behind the altar, the relative silence of a hushed congregation – to have suddenly heard the disturbing disharmony, chanting, and wailing of Britten’s composition peal out through the rafters. The performance would probably have made the audience wish that they could return to

¹⁶ quoted by Palmer, 11

the time, just moments ago, when everything was right with the scene in front of them. This desire is in some sense the same kind of motivation that Fussell sees behind Bricknall's memory. That is, the composition invites us to recognize that *if only* men could keep from senselessly waging war against each other, then thousands would still be alive, the original cathedral would never have been destroyed, and this haunting requiem would never have been written. Britten encourages his audience to see his jarring requiem and war itself as cysts – foreign bodies that have no natural place in a church or any other part of human society. Thus it is quite true, as Herbert says, that “Britten's requiem allowed the ashes of war to issue out again from the new cathedral.”¹⁷ But the primary objective of the piece, rather than the mere dredging up of painful memories of the past, is to arouse in its audience the desire to sweep the ashes out again, forever. Britten makes this point more explicit later in his requiem.

In the *Agnus Dei* – arguably the most redemptive section of the *War Requiem* – the irony of the point-counterpoint dialogue between Owen's poetry and the *Missa* at last subsides. The section features “At a Calvary Near the Ancre,” a poem that recasts the Passion by comparing the leaders who sent England's youth to the frontlines to those who handed Christ over to be killed. The tenor tries several times to assert the sardonic qualities of the poetry, singing:

“Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast
By whom the gentle Christ's denied.”

There is pain in his voice, and he makes a last attempt to cling to his cynicism, wailing:

¹⁷ Herbert, 543

“The scribes on all the people shove
and bawl allegiance to the state”

But the chorus, which has persistently interrupted the poem several times in this section with its mantra, again swells forth to sing its soothing words, “Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi ...”¹⁸ The tenor can no longer resist. At this latest entreaty, the biting sarcasm and bitterness of the poem finally relent, and its message changes abruptly and dramatically:

“But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate.”

In response, the chorus now washes over the tenor with “Dona eis requiem sempiternam,” and it is precisely at this moment that we are given unprecedented proof of a real change in the piece.¹⁹ For the first and only time in the *War Requiem*, the tenor then takes on the Latin of the *Missa*, uttering what can be considered the central plea of Britten’s entire work: “*Dona nobis pacem.*”²⁰ The two texts – which until now have literally been speaking different languages – finally unite. Palmer explains the significance of this moment. “The true reconciliation, the true turning point ... is to be found in the simple and melodious *Agnus Dei*,” he says, “for here Owen and the Liturgy are affectingly one in stating a – *the* – fundamental tenet of Christianity, namely *Caritas.*”²¹ For the rest of the requiem, Owen’s poetry and the *Missa Pro Defunctis* harmonize in their cause of clearing away the ashes and delivering the crucial message of

¹⁸ “Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world...”

¹⁹ “Grant them eternal rest.”

²⁰ “Grant us peace.”

²¹ Palmer, 11

peace. The *War Requiem*, as a didactic work of art, has drawn to its conclusion, but there is still one outstanding issue left to analyze.

It should be a point of more than passing interest that Palmer and Herbert – and indeed the requiem itself – say very little about World War II directly. Palmer only briefly mentions in his introduction that there have been “two world wars” and later claims that Britten’s pacifism is probably traceable to the 1930s when he “grew into political awareness” of the darkness into which Europe was descending.²² After this, however, he drops the subject of World War II in favor of discussing Owen and the music of the requiem. In a similar fashion, Herbert is relatively mute on the subject, apart from repeated references to German aggression and war guilt which could just as easily apply to the first world war as to the second (and indeed, it seems he often exploits this ambiguity). In acknowledging these facts, we must wonder why any specific discussion of World War II appears so peripheral to the analyses of the *War Requiem*. Turning again to Fussell, we begin to realize that Britten’s statement encompasses much more than just the one war that destroyed Coventry Cathedral. “Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected,” Fussell says; every war exacts a toll that no society can ever be prepared to pay.²³ Perhaps, then, so little is said directly about World War II because what applied to the Great War applies to every war. The need for peace is universal; there is nothing left to say. The requiem’s first audience seemed to understand this in 1962. As Palmer reports, the performance seemed to give people who

²² Palmer, 7, 10

²³ Fussell, 7

were exhausted from years of warfare “something they wanted and *needed* to hear.”²⁴
The *War Requiem*’s message of peace was apparently readily welcomed.

In the final analysis, we have seen how Britten’s composition transforms the traditional requiem. We have seen how biting irony arises in the point-counterpoint dialogue between Wilfred Owen’s poetry and the *Missa Pro Defunctis*, and how it is finally relieved in the work’s closing sections. And most importantly, we have seen how it is not the traditional memorialization, but rather war itself, that is the target of Britten’s masterpiece. Early in the twentieth century, Owen – abundantly aware that his poems would likely be of little consolation to his own generation – ominously declared that they “may be [of consolation] to the next. All a poet can do today is warn.”²⁵ Indeed, his poetry has done exactly that for decades now, and Britten’s *War Requiem* shares in his project. It will continue to warn generations, as much as it delights them, for some time to come.

²⁴ Palmer, 7

²⁵ Ibid.

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