

# Math, Music and Identity, MONT 107Q

## Notes on Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*

1. **Background:** The *War Requiem* was written by British composer Benjamin Britten (1913-1976), completed in 1962, and is generally regarded as a masterpiece, one of Britten's most well-known works. The piece was commissioned for a ceremony honoring the opening of the new Coventry Cathedral, which had been destroyed in WWII.

Britten was a lifelong pacifist. Rather than glorify war or wave the banner of British patriotism, the piece is intended as an anti-war statement. A *requiem* is typically a mass for the dead, so the *War Requiem* can be construed not just as a mass honoring fallen soldiers, but also as a mass for the end of war itself.

The piece was dedicated to four of Britten's friends, three of whom died in World War II. The fourth, Piers Dunkerley, survived the war but later committed suicide in 1959, three years before the premiere of the work in Coventry.

2. **Text:** The text for the *War Requiem* was atypical, combining the usual Latin text for a mass (e.g., "Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine; et lux perpetua luceat eis,") with the stunning WWI poetry of Wilfrid Owen (1893-1918). Owen was a British poet and soldier who died fighting in World War I, just a week before the signing of the Armistice. Many of his best-known poems, such as *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, *Futility*, and *Strange Meeting*, were used by Britten in the *War Requiem*. These were written while Owen was a soldier and tend to be critical of war. Overall, nine of Owen's poems are featured in the *War Requiem*. The choice of poems, and who sings them, are critical to understanding the meaning of the piece. They act as a sort of commentary on the traditional Latin text, shaping its meaning towards a decidedly harsh critique of war. On the title page of the score, Britten quotes Owen directly: "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity ... All a poet can do today is warn."
3. **Structure:** The piece is structured into six movements, with four of the nine Owen poems found in the second and longest section, "Dies Irae." The music itself is a massive undertaking, written for three soloists (a tenor, baritone, and soprano), a chamber orchestra, a full choir and main orchestra, and a boys choir and organ.

The performers are divided into three distinct groups, usually physically separated. The tenor and baritone soloists are grouped with the chamber orchestra and portray the victims of war. The tenor and baritone, representing an English and a German soldier, sing Owen's poetry (Britten wrote the original parts for an English and a German soloist, each of whom appeared in the premiere at Coventry Cathedral). The second grouping is the orchestra, main chorus, and soprano soloist, singing the Latin text of the mass. They represent a formal, liturgical mourning. The third and final group is the boys choir and organ, intended to produce a remote and haunting sound (also singing the Latin text). In order to create this eerie effect, Britten recommended that the boys choir and organ be placed at a substantial distance from the main orchestra (e.g., in the balcony). The entire piece is about 90 minutes in length.

4. **Musical Aspects:** The instruments in the *War Requiem* often reflect Owen's text directly. For instance, there are several instances of "bugles calling" via the trumpets and brass of the full orchestra. A more subtle use of musical imagery is the clever march in the "Dies Irae," written in the asymmetrical meter  $\frac{7}{4}$  (seven quarter-note beats per measure). The oft-kilter pulse helps create a "crippled march." Britten was a great admirer of Stravinsky, so he may have been inspired by the jarring and unpredictable rhythms of the *Rite of Spring*. The crippled march returns at key moments of the piece for added dramatic effect (e.g., after the poignant line "cut thee from our soul!").

Not surprisingly, one of the key intervals of the piece is the tritone (specifically  $F^\sharp - C$ ), a dissonant and restless interval. Ironically, it typically occurs in places of "rest" in the music and text. The bells rung in various movements usually occur a tritone apart. A notable use of the tritone occurs at the very end of Britten's setting of Owen's poem *Futility*, on the words "at all." Although typically dissonant, the tritone is part of the dominant seventh chord that resolves to the tonic, so it can also work toward reconciliation in a musical sense. This takes place in the "Agnus Dei" section, where the tenor soloist sings above a soft hummed chord sustained by the chorus. The final words sung by the tenor are "Dona nobis pacem" (Grant us peace).

#### References:

1. *Benjamin Britten* (specifically *War Requiem*), Cyrus Behroozi and Thomas Niday, <http://www.its.caltech.edu/~tan/Britten/.index.html> (accessed April 19, 2015).
2. *Benjamin Britten: War Requiem*, Christopher Palmer, liner notes for "Benjamin Britten, War Requiem," London Symphony Orchestra, The Decca Record Company Limited, London, 1963.