

The War Requiem: Britten's Wilfred Owen opera

Gilles Couderc

Title in French

Le *War Requiem* de Britten ou Wilfred Owen, personnage d'opéra.

Biography

Gilles Couderc, Associate Professor at the University of Caen in Normandy, devoted his thesis to Benjamin Britten and has written numerous articles on his operas. He is interested in the relationship between music and literature, particularly concerning the poets of World War I. He continues to explore the musical and literary world of Britten, as well as English musicians of English origin from the 19th and 20th Centuries.

Abstract

The War Requiem is certainly the best-known composition of Benjamin Britten and is his most popular pacifist work. It contributed to the popularity of Wilfred Owen's poetry and transformed the image of the young poet who died shortly before the Armistice of 1918 into one of the persistent mythical figures of the Great War. However, the success of the work and the impact of Britten's music on the larger public have made us forget the ferocious irony and blasphemy of Owen's poems that Britten uses in the greater work organized as an eleventh opera in which Owen is the hero. He explores the larger themes that Britten's operas present. Light is shed here on the intimate relationship that Britten establishes with the poet, and how he transforms the requiem mass into an opera à la Britten, retracing the hero's singular career, while liberating him from "the handcuffs of thought" by giving him an ending "à la Forster," granting redemption to his hero, but refusing forgiveness to the warmongers.

Résumé

Le *War Requiem* est certainement l'œuvre la plus connue de Benjamin Britten et la plus populaire par la force évocatrice de cette fresque pacifiste. Elle a contribué à la popularité de la poésie de Wilfred Owen et à transformer l'image du jeune poète fauché par la mort à la veille de l'Armistice de 1918 en un des mythes de la Grande Guerre. Pourtant le succès de l'œuvre et l'impact de la musique de Britten sur le grand public font oublier l'ironie féroce et le blasphème des poèmes d'Owen que Britten utilise dans cette œuvre qu'il organise comme un onzième opéra dont Owen serait le héros. Il y explore les grands thèmes que ses opéras mettent en scène. On s'attachera ici à mettre en lumière la relation intime que Britten noue avec le poète, comment il transforme sa messe de requiem en opéra à la Britten, qui retrace la carrière d'un héros singulier se libérant des « menottes forgées par la pensée » et comment il le dote d'un dénouement « à la Forster », accordant la rédemption à son héros mais refusant le pardon aux auteurs de guerre.

Keywords

Edward Elgar, Benjamin Britten, Wilfred Owen, World War I, Opera, Opera characters, Coventry, Laurence Binyon, *War Requiem* (1962), *For the Fallen* (1916), *The Spirit of England* (1917), Jacob Epstein, John Piper, Graham Sutherland, *Owen Wingrave* (1971), Dietrich Fisher-Dieskau, Ronald Duncan, Derek Jarman, E.M. Forster, T.S. Eliot, *War Requiem* (1989), Siegfried Sassoon.

Citation *Arts of War and Peace* 1.1. (March 2013) **The Fallen & the Unfallen** <http://www.awpreview.univ-paris-diderot.fr>

The Great War has proved a source of inspiration to two great English composers, Edward Elgar and Benjamin Britten.¹ When, early in 1915, the poet Laurence Binyon published a book of poems called *The Winnowing Fan: Poems on the Great War*, a friend of Elgar's suggested he compose a war requiem based on those poems. Elgar, deeply affected by the suffering caused by the war, selected three of Binyon's poems to compose a cantata for soprano, full choir and orchestra. The second and third part of the cantata, *To Women*, and the climatic *For the Fallen* were first performed in May 1916. The complete work, finally called *The Spirit of England* was performed in October 1917. It demonstrates remarkable restraint in capturing the desolation of war and includes quotations of *The Dream of Gerontius*, Elgar's great oratorio of 1900, but the work never met great success. Yet it was with Elgar's oratorio in mind that in 1958 the Coventry Arts Festival Committee commissioned Britten to compose a great choral piece.² Its libretto might be sacred or profane, in the great tradition of the English oratorio, so as to celebrate the spirit of reconciliation with the former enemy that was to mark the consecration of their new cathedral, after the destruction of the medieval building during the November 1940 blitz, from which the German word "coventriieren" was first coined. The building of the new cathedral was meant as a symbol of rebirth after the conflict of 1939-1945 and the project proved as important as the 1951 Festival of Britain, organised to display Britain's artistic renaissance after the destructions of the war, to which it provided a highly symbolical conclusion. It involved the collaboration of great artists of the time, with the composer Arthur Bliss who offered his *Beatitudes*, the sculptor Jacob Epstein, and such friends of Britten's as the painters John Piper and Graham Sutherland.

As a long-time pacifist, Britten was enthusiastic about the commission. In 1946, the Hiroshima bombings had spurred the composer and his librettist Ronald Duncan to compose a full-scale oratorio for soloists, chorus and orchestra "almost like the *Messe des Morts*" whose meaningful title was to be *Mea Culpa*. (Carpenter 1992, 405). Again, the shock Britten felt at Ghandi's death prompted him to compose in memory of the great pacifist but both projects remained fruitless. Yet again, in 1955 Britten planned to compose *Saint Peter*, a two-part oratorio for York Minster, on a libretto by Ronald Duncan, and in 1957 the choir master of the Leeds Festival, who conducted a performance of Britten's *Spring Symphony* in 1950, asked him for a *Grande Messe* to celebrate the festival's centenary, other still-born attempts. The Coventry commission was to be the golden opportunity for Britten, ever ready to divert an official occasion for questioning the consensus,³ to take up the fighting pacifism of his pre-war years⁴ and to use a commission on a grand scale as a rostrum for the denunciation of the "mind-forged manacles" imposed by King, Country and the Church, to quote from William Blake's "London," which he was to set to music in

1965.⁵ The Western world was then gripped by the Cold War and the threat of nuclear weapons against the USSR. Britten, a committed CND member, lived in Aldeburgh, less than five miles from a US air base and could hear fighter-bombers training over his house. He was so taken with the Coventry project that he refused three commissions and delayed the composition of *Curlew River*, the first of his *Church Parables*. First conceived like a traditional requiem mass, the Coventry oratorio soon evolved into a work where the requiem's text would alternate with poems by Wilfred Owen. Those soon became so prominent as to lead Britten to call his work his "Owen Mass," in the manner of Handel's "Brockes Passion," before choosing the final title late in 1961 (Cooke, 1996, 24). The *War Requiem* was first performed in May 1962 and proved an international success, which swelled out of proportion by the release of the best-selling Decca recording conducted by Britten in April 1963.

Yet if the immense success of the piece and the legitimate raves at the music have contributed to turning the figure of Wilfred Owen into a myth, and provided inspiration for such works as Susan Hill's 1971 *Strange Meeting* and film director Derek Jarman's 1989 *War Requiem*,⁶ they have also blunted the public's ears both to the asperities and the ironies of Owen's and Britten's work. The words "deeply moving" that deservedly often describe Britten's piece sometimes look like a self-imposed blindfold to avoid fully coming to terms with an intensely personal and disturbing work.⁷ As savage in its ironies as Britten's early song cycle *Our Hunting Fathers* of 1936, as disquieting as the composer's operas, the *War Requiem* is a piece where he once more rehearses his personal preoccupations, the opposition of the individual against the crowd, the moral dichotomies between private anxieties and public responsibilities, his deeply felt and life-long pacifism and his homosexuality. Our aim here is to briefly recall how Britten became so personally involved with his Owen project that he managed to organise and turn Owen's poems into an opera libretto. The work contains numerous musical elements that refer more directly to opera, and especially his own operas, than to oratorio, born at the same time as opera and invented so as to dramatise and set to music religious subjects for the edification of listeners. If one is allowed to play with Wilfred Owen's initials, as well as to anticipate and refer to *Owen Wingrave*, the pacifist opera of the 1970's, which often looks back to the *War Requiem*, this eleventh opera might be called *Wilfred Owen*. To the "Owen Opera" that charts the progress of a young enlisted soldier away from patriotism and the values of established religion towards the discovery of his mission as a poet, the composer gives a strangely Forsterian twist which takes the spectator back to the Epilogue of Britten's *Billy Budd*, the 1951 opera set in time of war.

"I am so involved with him at the moment"

Britten was a war baby. Born in 1913 in Lowestoft, he experienced its destruction when the town was bombarded by German warships in April 1916, destroying two houses close to his home. His feelings about WWI were influenced by his master Frank Bridge who had lost a promising student, Ernest Bristow Farrar, in France. Britten and his companion Pears were fervent poetry readers. Among the War Poets, they had read Brooke, Graves, Rosenberg, Sassoon, as well as their contemporary and sometimes friend, Harold Monro of Poetry Bookshop fame. Owen had a special place in the heart of people of Britten's generation. The figure of the young talented poet killed in battle before the Armistice, his promises yet unfulfilled, made him a hero of the interwar generation, especially of the novelist and dramatist Christopher Isherwood, a great friend of Britten's in the 1930's (Parker, 2004 93, 350-82, 420). Britten owned the 1955 edition of Owen's poetry edited by Edmund Blunden in 1931 as well as Sassoon's 1920 edition of Owen's work. Owen was foremost in Britten's mind

in the late 1950's. In 1958, during a BBC programme in his honour, he asked for Owen's anti-war "Strange Meeting" and "Kind Ghosts" to be read. The same year, he was to set the latter poem to music in his *Nocturne*,⁸ whose imagery and music prefigures the *War Requiem's Strange Meeting*. Moreover, while composing the *War Requiem*, Britten unsuccessfully asked the poet William Plomer, the librettist of his Coronation opera *Gloriana* and his *Church Parables* as well as the writer of the Preface to the 1963 Decca recording, for a photo of Owen, as he found the frontispiece that came with Sassoon's edition of Owen's poems unsatisfactory. It was finally Isherwood, living in far-away California, who provided Britten with a photo of the poet in September 1961. Britten thanked Isherwood in terms that indicate a strange fascination for the poet: "I am delighted to have it--I am so involved with him at the moment and I wanted to see what he looked like: I might have guessed, it's just what I expected really."⁹ While the anecdote recalls Britten's need to see or identify with his characters and the sets of his operas before beginning composition, the words suggest an almost physical intimacy, that of a lover's, with the poet.

Intimacy seems a key word when Owen's photo is printed, along with his Preface to *Disabled & Other Poems*, next to the names of four friends of Britten's youth to whom he dedicates the work, who either died in combat during World War Two, or like the shell-shocked soldiers of WWI, died thereafter. Intimacy with the dead was compounded with Britten's intimacy with the living. The three soloists who were to perform the work first, the tenor Peter Pears, the German baritone Dietrich Fisher-Dieskau and the Russian soprano Galina Vishnevskaya (Cooke 1996, 25), the wife of Mstislav Rostropovich,¹⁰ were musicians and personal friends of the composer's, and were chosen to represent the countries involved in the suffering of WWII. Britten was alive to the ironical overtones of their personal history. Like the dedicatees, his long-time companion, Pears the pacifist, belonged to a family with a military tradition. As a young man, Dietrich Fisher-Dieskau had been conscripted into the *Wermacht* and had suffered during the war years and so had Vishnevskaya in Leningrad.

Staging the *War Requiem*

Britten was accustomed to both composing for the Church and using church architecture for some of his dramatic work. When the Aldeburgh Jubilee Hall, the venue of his Aldeburgh Festival performances, proved too small to accommodate audiences, some of the churches of Britten's Suffolk were used, especially when Britten revived the medieval tradition of the mystery plays. In 1952, his *Canticle II, Abraham and Isaac*, composed just after the opera *Billy Budd* and taking further the theme of sacrifice and salvation present in the opera, was first performed in Orford Church, like the three *Church Parables* of the 1960's. The following *Chester Mystery Plays* setting, the 1958 *Noye's Fludde*, a humorous retelling of Genesis and the Flood which provides singing for children and for the audience, was also first put on in the Orford church.

The liturgy of the Mass celebrates the memory of Christ's freely accepted self-sacrifice, encapsulated in the *Agnus Dei*. Though it is doubtful whether Britten had read T.S. Eliot's disquisitions on mass (in the introduction to his mother's poem, *Savonarola* 1926; qtd. Ackroyd, 163), liturgy and the ritual of drama or Thomas Mann's essay on Wagner and the Catholic mass on the same lines,¹¹ the composer was alive to the analogies between liturgy and the religious service on the one hand and the theatre and tragedy on the other hand. The *Dies Irae* and *Libera Me* sequences of the Requiem Mass introduce the essentials of Aristotelian tragedy, catharsis, terror and pity. David and the Sybil provide the dramatic spring of prophecy in the *Dies*

Irae while the *Inter oves* introduces the scapegoats that are to be herded separately, “*Et ab haedis me sequestra,*” whose fault or mistake is the root of all tragic action. In the late 1930’s Britten had come to believe in the educating power of art mostly under the influence of his close friend and mentor the poet W. H. Auden. As can clearly be seen from his operatic output, the composer favoured tragedy for its didactic virtues and made his own the aim of the inventors of opera who, with this new artistic genre, wanted to revive Greek tragedy and the music that went with it. The Male and Female Chorus in Britten’s *The Rape of Lucretia*, whose role is modelled after Greek tragedy, guide the audience in their understanding of the opera and in their Epilogue clearly announces the composer’s aim “to harness song to human tragedy”. Peter Grimes, in the Prologue of the 1945 opera, begs for “the pity and the truth,” to which Owen provides an answer in the *Strange Meeting* included by Britten in the *Requiem* with “the truth untold, / The pity of war, the pity war distilled.”

As a requiem mass, the *War Requiem* belongs to the romantic tradition which, with the loss of Christian faith, makes the sacred text a vehicle for the expression of sensibility and the pretext for the musical staging of the romantic hero’s metaphysical anxieties faced with inescapable death. Berlioz’s *Grande Messe des Morts* of 1837 and Verdi’s 1875 *Requiem*, both composed by agnostic musicians, like Britten, are the most eloquent example of that trend and were harshly criticized for their dramatic, theatrical aspect, their display of showmanship and alleged lack of sincerity. Britten greatly admired Verdi, especially his *Aida* and *Falstaff*. It is no wonder that critics have underlined echoes of Verdi’s *Requiem* in Britten’s, especially in his use of the tonality of G minor for the *Dies Irae* sequence, in the way the soprano parts are written in the *Liber scriptus* and *Lacrymosa*, the way the soprano and chorus sing together in the *Agnus Dei* and the way the *Dies Irae* motive is repeated before the *Lacrymosa*. Berlioz always tried to open the mould of classical symphony to drama and his *Grande Messe des Morts* might provide a fitting ending to his *Symphonie fantastique* and *Lélio*, the two *Episodes de la vie d’un artiste*. Britten also requires a large assortment of brass and percussion for his *Tuba Mirum* in a way that recalls Berlioz’s four brass orchestras for the same movement. In May 1961 he decided on having triple woodwinds, six horns, four trumpets and three trombones and tuba,¹² the largest orchestra since *Billy Budd*, a strikingly Berlioz-like or Wagnerian orchestral gesture that is exceptional considering his chamber music idiom and practice. The theatrical aspect of the *War Requiem* is limited to the soprano, chorus and symphony orchestra parts. Though they are very impressive and deeply moving, they sometimes do sound theatrical and operatic, like a parody of liturgy, and provide both a judgment of the expression of the crowd which the chorus represents and a sound picture of the mockeries that Owen describes in *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, the poem that Britten chose to open his work.

The trick of using religious music on stage or of passing judgment through parody is not new in music. If some requiem masses sound like operas, some operas, like Gounod’s *Faust* or Mascagni’s *Cavalleria Rusticana*, stage religious services as a dramatic backcloth and ironical comment to the main plot. Britten’s own *Peter Grimes* stages a Sunday service that serves as a unifying musical link to act II, scene 1, and provides tragic irony, when the parishioners, hardly out of church, behave in the most unchristian way and renounce their vows to the sound of a mocking organ voluntary. The *Introit* section of the *War Requiem* is built like any grand opera opening scene and follows the great *da capo* ABA scheme, a closed form that Britten is so fond of in his operas, for meaningful reasons. It indicates the isolation or solipsism of a character and sometimes shapes whole scenes. Thus the *da capo* scheme governs the construction of *Billy Budd* as Vere is taken through the treadmill

of remembrance and remorse. Here, a faltering funeral march, with a lachrymose ascending theme in Verdian semi tones from the orchestra is cut off sharply by the knoll of passing bells and the sprung rhythm of the chorus echoing Owen's "patter of hasty orisons." Their prayers for eternal rest are contradicted by the repeated use of disquieting augmented fourths, the *diabolus in musica* which Britten always uses to convey anxiety and separateness. The tritone also transcribes the work's oxymoronic title. The boys' choir, high in the organ loft, sings their mostly modal melodies, far removed from the musical language of the chorus in the contrasting middle section. Then the funeral march resumes before the Tenor rises, literally from the grave, for his first aria, *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, in a gesture that recalls Shakespeare's Laertes interrupting Ophelia's funeral rites.

This brief description partially mentions how Britten literally stages his *Requiem* and organises the forces at his disposal. The soprano, chorus and symphony orchestra, representing the crowd of anonymous mourners, are in charge of the Requiem text and express the conventional feelings of condolence. The boy's choir and the organ suggest a world far removed from and above the world of men while the chamber orchestra of twelve, recalling Britten's own chamber operas, accompanies the two male soloists (letter 1008 to John Lowe, Reed and Cooke, 2010, 334). The gap between the Home front and the War front, musically implied by the tritone, the *diabolos* which separates, is thus so clearly made visible to all that Galina Vishnevskaya literally had a fit during the first recording session as she could not understand why she was separated from the other soloists. Characterising characters thanks to a special musical language or orchestral colour is old musical hat but Britten uses it consistently and efficiently. Peter Grimes first appears alone in the witness box, accompanied by mysterious strings, while staccato and shrill woodwinds support the chattering crowd he faces. The fairies, the rustics and the lovers in his *Midsummer Night's Dream*, written just before the *War Requiem*, each speak their own musical and orchestral language. Here it is used as a way for Britten to develop the very personal theme of the opposition of the individual against the crowd, first staged in *Peter Grimes* and presented here with a new twist.

The opera's libretto, the music included

The opposition between the Home front and the War front and their total incommunicability is also conveyed by the use of Latin for the crowd and English for the soldiers, a sign the latter's incapacity to convey the truth of war to the former, the mission that Sassoon and Owen took up with the risk of being called traitors, cowards or liars. The use of Latin cuts several ways. Though the poem is not included in Britten's *Requiem*, Owen's "*Dulce et Decorum Est*" recalls that Latin was the language of the Old Lie, i.e., to die for one's country is a fitting and sweet fate. Moreover, as the language of the Primitive Church, Latin calls to mind the treason of such Church Fathers as Augustine who renounced the pacifism of the Sermon on the Mount, set to music in Bliss's *Beatitudes*, for the doctrine of the just war made to achieve peace, preached by the Anglican chaplains to the soldiers, like the Bishop of London in Sassoon's poem *They*. It also reduces Latin to the mumbo-jumbo used by the High Church and recalls the denunciations of the Established Church by Dissenters like George Fox or the Quakers who developed the pacifist tradition in Britain to which Britten was drawn. Finally it echoes Owen's own dissatisfaction with the stultifying rituals of the church he experienced first hand at the Dunsden vicarage.

All those ironies are available to the listener, whom Britten in 1964 still expected to be familiar with the Latin text (see section III of his speech *On Receiving*

the First Aspen Award, 1964, in Kildea 257), and who could read the English translation of the Latin text side by side with English translation in the Coventry festival programme book as well in the recording's booklet.¹³ They may then fathom how cleverly Britten organised his text so that, while keeping in mind formal and musical imperatives, he has shaped his text like a libretto with a meaningful architecture. This is how Owen the poet becomes Britten's Owen, the protagonist of Britten's first anti-war opera. Britten's choice of the poems eliminates Owen's most graphic ones and seems to have been dictated by their ironic inscription within the liturgy, the former counter-pointing the latter, as Britten explains to Fisher-Dieskau: "These magnificent poems, full of the hate of destruction, are a kind of commentary on the Mass" (Letter 1003, Reed and Cooke, 313). Not only does the liturgy provide a familiar framework, but the poems are linked by echoes and symmetries and by the use of foreshadowing, the equivalent of prophecy in tragedy, so that the impression is that of a compact, meaningful libretto, leading to a climax. Seven of the poems describe the reality of the war front and give way to a denunciation of war. Only Owen's *Parable of the Old Man and the Young* in the Offertorium section and *The End* after the Sanctus proceed from Scripture, each with a twist. Britten carefully makes sure the soldiers sing the same amount of music, with three solo arias each, and share three duets, which accentuates their twinship: though enemies the two soldiers share the same thoughts and their final duet is the result of a progression and not a mere coincidence.

The first scene, *Introit and Kyrie* (I), introduces the chorus, as described above, in which Britten inserts *Anthem for Doomed Youth*. Its title, amended by Sassoon much to Owen's pleasure, is an ironic answer to the children *Te decet Hymnus* as well as a reminder of the funeral anthems and the pomp and circumstance of royal obsequies. The poem seems to proceed from the murderous alliterations of "the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle" and the musical setting provides a sound picture of war, complete with the wailing shells and Verey lights painted by its ascending off-key motives. The first gesture of protest of the opera, with its repeated questions and negative or restrictive adverbs, condemns the complexities and emptiness of the rites at home and depicts the lack thereof on the front. To the former it opposes the genuine tears of boys and the tenderness of girls, underlined by the oboe quoting the boys' *Te decet Hymnus*. The *a capella* chorus's prayer for forgiveness in the *Kyrie* that follows suggests despondency and remorse. Its tortuous harmonic progression leads from the disquieting augmented fourth to a perfect major chord, in depressive dynamics, as if forgiveness had been reluctantly granted.

The great *Dies Irae* scene (II) is dispatched in several episodes. The *Tuba Mirum* stanzas introduce the Baritone's "*Bugle Sang*," one of Owen's sketches for *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, thus establishing the kinship between tenor and baritone. Britten expanded the sketch to sizable dimension by the operatic repetition of the words "Bugles sang," allowing us to savour the echoes of Rupert Brooke's 1914 sonnet "*The Dead*," and its rhetoric of the good, bloody, cleansing war. The cellos double the voice of the singer in some elegiac lullaby that looks back on the preceding poem and looks forward to *Strange Meeting*, the final one, while the trombones of the *Tuba Mirum* convey the soldiers' increasing fear.

The Soprano then enters for the *Liber Scriptus* and the prophecies of the Sybil that lead to the descriptive *Rex Tremendae* before the first Tenor-Baritone duet of *The Next War*. The poem, like *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, was sent to Sassoon by Owen for approval of his new style. It is true to the epigraph, an extract from a letter from Sassoon to his then close friend Robert Graves, whose wedding Owen attended, in its graphic description of trench-life. A parodic scherzo in three parts, in the style

of music hall burlesque, as if part of some entertainment for the troops, it echoes the ragtime, the bawdy songs and the songs of protest sung by the soldiers, the musical language of Britten's own *Cabaret Songs* as well that of the Nieces in *Peter Grimes*. It provides an ironic answer to the preceding, solemn *Mors Stupebit*, with its depiction of Death as a malicious comrade, denounces patriotism as the worst of enemies and echoes the Sybil's prophecies of future cataclysms. The union of the two soldiers is made clear when their voices unite in the central section for "We chorused when he sang aloft," as if for some early-war Christmas truce, soon to be discouraged by military authorities.

The next section from the *Recordare* to *Oro Supplex* gives way to the showpiece for the chorus whose entreaties for forgiveness are couched in four-part imitations. The evocation of the damned roasting in Hell of the *Confutatis* is cut off by the quasi Wagnerian imprecation of the Baritone in "Be slowly lifted up" that reduces the sonnet "*On Seeing a Piece of Our Artillery Brought into Action*" to six powerful lines. The anguish-inducing augmented fourth punctuates his condemnation of Pride, the ferment of all tragedies, as the cause of all wars. The image of the canon raising defiantly its black arm towards Heaven recalls Milton's rebellious Satan, and the return of the violent *Dies Irae* indicates that the prophecies of the baritone and the Sybil will be fulfilled.

The *Lacrymosa* movement, with its breaking of syllables in pure Verdian style, is particularly dramatic as the voice of the soprano soars like an arch above the muttering chorus and orchestra, in a style that recalls her first entry. It is particularly moving in its keening-like progression. The contrast with the tenor's *Futility* is all the more striking as he resorts to short, almost *sprechgesang* vocal lines. His initial tenderness for a fallen comrade turns to blasphemy as he questions Genesis and the existence of God in his depiction of creation as a Big-bang-like geological accident and human life as a purely biological process: "Was it for this the clay grew tall?" The repetition of the question stands as a denial of resurrection and life in the ever-after which the chorus posited with "*qua resurget in favilla*" and clearly looks forward to the poem *The End* in the Sanctus. The whole scene closes off with a repeat of the *a capella* chorus but the begged-for everlasting rest seems compromised by the disquieting tritone, rounding off the two movements in one single utterance.

The second act opens with the *Offertorium* (III) and the liturgy of sacrifice which allow Britten once again to display savage irony. His *Canticle II, Abraham and Isaac*, told how the patriarch was ready to sacrifice his son as a sign of allegiance to the God of Israel who promised a long line of descent, as is recalled in the *Quam olim Abrahae*. Owen's own *Parable of the Old Man and the Young* parodies the story in a mock-archaic style. Here Abraham reverts to his original Chaldean name, Abram, "Father of Heights", associated with human sacrifice, long before his alliance with Jehovah. Deaf to the entreaties of the heavenly messenger, Abram sacrifices his son instead of the Ram of Pride. Like the *Introit and Kyrie*, the movement adopts a ternary structure. The boys' choir first sings an archaic melody which gives way to a spectacular fugue whose theme directly derives from *Canticle II* and whose virtuoso treatment echoes the feats of Baroque and Romantic composers and the theatricals of the preceding movements. It leads directly to the *Parable*, narrated by the baritone as Abram, while the Tenor sings Isaac, before their voices unite for the voice of the angel, like in *Canticle II*, in a pure C major passage that is soon polluted by the tritone of Pride. The transgression of the divine order is followed by a repeat of the initial boys' choir whose harmonies are now disrupted by the organ accompaniment and a repeat of the last line of the poem, as if tainted by the sin and the curse of Pride.

The *Sanctus* (IV) opens in a totally different musical climate. The jubilation of the Soprano and her evocation of the Lord of Hosts are accompanied by an oriental gamelan, so far unheard. In Britten's work, the gamelan usually indicates mystical visions or evil spells, a world removed from daily reality, here a God removed from men. It also describes "the blast of lighting from the East" which preludes to Owen's vision of the Second Coming as described in the first quatrain of *The End*. The baroque-like D major call of the trumpets contrasts with the quasi recitative of the baritone that follows. The augmented fourth and the timpani emphasize the poem's questioning of the dogma of resurrection, and turn Doomsday into some geological accident, like the death of a star, in a manner similar to *Futility*, showing once again the soldiers' community of thought. The orchestral postlude suggests the moans and groans that will accompany the final catastrophe, as predicted in T.S. Eliot's *Hollow Men*: "This is how the world will end/Not in a bang but in a whimper."

The Tenor solo initiates the *Agnus Dei* (V), imposing for once his voice and choice to the crowd with *At a Calvary near the Ancre* which depicts the very common picture in War poetry and iconography of a calvary at a crossroads, standing among the ruins. For a unique moment in the *Requiem*, Owen and liturgy as well as the symphony and the chamber orchestra agree, as both play a regularly ascending and descending ground within an augmented fourth, meaning that what separates can also unite. This section, which precedes Communion and recalls Christ's sacrifice, the sacrifice of the Lamb and Isaac is recalled by the presence of the scribes and priests of the Old Testament. Branded with the seal of Pride and of the Beast, they stand for political power, the church and the Old Lie. The image of crucified Christ reminds the crowd of their responsibility in his death as well as in the soldiers'. Owen's gospel of love, "But they who love the greater love/Lay down their life. They do not hate," is isolated to be given full emphasis. The theme of the disciples in hiding announces *Strange Meeting*. The Tenor concludes the piece with a response that is foreign to the liturgy "*Dona nobis pacem*" (the usual response is "*Dona eis pacem*") which clearly sets the two soldiers apart, presumably with the sheep and the lambs, while the crowd is rejected in everlasting darkness along with the goats and the damned, giving the prophecy of the *Inter Oves* an ironic twist.

A Forsterian Epilogue

The gap between the soldiers and the crowd yawns forever unbridgeable like an open grave in the last scene, the *Libera Me* movement (VI) that takes place in the graveyard before the burial of the dead. Like a long coda to the whole work, and the longest of the piece, like *Der Abschied* in Mahler's *Lied von der Erde*, it recapitulates some of the former movements. Like the *Introit and Kyrie* scene (I) it opens with a funeral march, which harks back to the hanging scene in Britten's *Billy Budd*. The nightmare of the battlefield and Doomsday is recreated by musical echoes of *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, the return of the *Dies Irae* motive, while the broken syllables of the soprano take us back to the *Lacrymosa*. The vocal and orchestral counterpoint acquires a density never felt before in the *Requiem* and builds up a climax that erupts with the unexpected entry of the full organ in a musical picture of the final cataclysm prophesied by the Sybil and the Baritone in *The End*. Its long Verdian G minor chord dies away to nothing in a long diminuendo: the scene is set for the final scene of *Strange Meeting*, the longest of the Owen settings.

Britten chose this long piece for several reasons. The poem constitutes Owen's *ars poetica* and echoes Owen's Preface "My subject is War...All a poet can do today is warn" which defines his newly-found mission as a war poet as well as his new aesthetics. This is the part of the *Requiem* where Britten's identification with Owen,

helped by Isherwood's present, is total. For Britten, Owen's words must have echoed the lesson of education through art which he had learnt from W. H. Auden, "parable art, that art that must teach men to unlearn hatred and learn love" (Auden 1935, qtd. Mitchell 1981), which Britten the rebel and the educator made his throughout his work. Here Britten assumes the mantle of combating prophet that fell from Owen's shoulders and the stance of fighting pacifist, which the hero of his 1971 pacifist opera, *Owen Wingrave*, will in turn assume.

The scene takes place after the final cataclysm, depicted in the *Libera Me*, in some tunnel dating from the age of the Titans evoked in *Futility* and *The End*, the world of Chthonian divinities but also of Elysium, long before the appearance of the Christian God. Britten has carefully removed the few verses that would allow to identify the place as the Christian Hell evoked in the *Libera Me* where those that deserve neither the Christian Paradise nor the Heavenly Jerusalem described by *In Paradisum* are cast. The tunnel also reminds us of Sassoon's *Rear Guard* of 1917 while the title echoes Harold Monro's *Strange Meeting* that Owen bought at the Devonshire Street Poetry Bookshop. For opera-goers, considering the numerous allusions to Verdi before, the presence of two people in an underground place will call to mind the last scene of *Aida*, when Radamès and Aida die buried alive in each other's arms while above them Amnérís and the chorus mourn the deaths for which they are responsible. The hushed chamber orchestra discreetly incorporates an augmented fourth when the tenor tries to rouse one of the sleepers, which reminds us of the lesson suggested in the *Agnus Dei*: what separates can also unite and the foe can become a friend. In the self-portrait the Baritone paints we can recognise Owen's own portrait, influenced by Keats, Gautier and the Decadents, but also the portrait of his friend and poetic mentor, Sassoon. Before the enemy soldier reveals his identity, Britten removes three lines of the poem that were inspired by the Gospel of Luke, and the bloody sweat of Christ in agony is replaced by the most sweet waters of a pristine world, evoking Owen's and Sassoon's tenderness for their men.

When the Baritone reveals his identity, a pentatonic lullaby in the form of a duet indicates the reconciliation of the soldiers, wrapped in the same happy sleep. As if to bless their happiness, the boys' choir then the mixed chorus sing *In Paradisum*, soon to be rudely interrupted by the passing bells and their augmented fourth. The children take up the *Requiem aeternam*, thus curtailing the efforts of the chorus to join in the soldiers' lullaby, whose sweet sleep is underlined by the melancholy cor anglais that recalls the *Kind Ghosts* of the *Nocturne*. The chorus repeats the *a capella* motive that concluded the *Kyrie* and the *Lacrymosa*, as if they had not obtained the soldiers' forgiveness. This stark finale recalls the last scene of *Peter Grimes* where life resumes in the village as if nothing had happened and nothing had been learnt from the tragic events of the night, as well as the last scene of *The Turn of the Screw*, when the Governess realises her guilt in the death of Miles, the little soldier.

Harold Owen, Wilfred's brother, wrote a life of his brother called *Journey from Obscurity*.¹⁴ In the *War Requiem* Britten has managed to stage Owen's progress away from the pieties of the Dunsden vicarage, away from the pieties of patriotism and hate for the Germans under the influence of Sassoon, towards his mission as a poet, with the different poems as the necessary dialogue between *ego* and *id* in the quest for self-realisation. This is also the quest of Albert Herring, the hero of Britten's 1947 opera, who gradually rejects the authority of his mother, of the church and of Lady Billows, the local potentate, to discover life outside his village and his own true self. Several elements do suggest that the *War Requiem*, like most of Britten's operas, explore his characters' acceptance or denial of their homosexuality. The theme of the individual against the crowd derives from Britten's own experience

as a pacifist in war-time Britain and as a homosexual in a post-Wildian society. Michael Kennedy mentions that some people shied away from the *War Requiem* because of Owen's alleged homosexuality. This has been well documented by Dominic Hibberd, whose biographies of Owen and Monro have shed light on this part of Owen's life. Jean Moorcroft Wilson's biography of Sassoon delves with his fear that the true nature of Owen's feeling for him might be exposed. Britten's strange fascination for Owen's portrait and his words are those of a potential lover and Owen, in the picture that is printed in the Decca recording, looks like young Wulff Scherchen, a close friend of Britten's in the 1940's. The lesson of the greatest love in *At a Calvary* sounds like the "love that passes understanding" that finally unites Billy Budd, a baritone, and Captain Vere, a tenor, in that opera's epilogue. The baritone's blessing in *Strange Meeting* reminds us of Billy blessing Captain Vere even though he condemns him to death. The pentatonic lullaby of the soldiers, with its echoing complementary ascending and descending motives, is written like a love duet, the love that transcends social barriers and allows the able seaman to love the ship captain, or Alec the game-keeper to love Maurice the city gentleman, if one is to believe the original Epilogue to E.M. Forster's *Maurice*, Britten's librettist for *Billy Budd*, who exerted a lasting influence on the composer. The love duet might be between Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, for whom the former had developed a notable crush, whose ghostly presence is felt in at least four of the *War Requiem* poems. The final reconciliation and, possibly the consummation of love or at least the "sacrament," if we are to borrow Melville's words for the closeted interview in his or Britten's *Billy Budd*, takes place away from the real world of the priests and the scribes, and one may wish to add the Pharisees, in an unknown world like the unknown island where Billy and Vere finally land.

This sweetly sentimental duet, whose ethos recalls the final chorus of Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*, has unfortunately been responsible for the ambiguities around Britten's *War Requiem* and Owen's pacifism. Many critics have seen it as the final absolution and consolation granted to the crowd. They have overlooked the bleak harmonic progression of the *a capella* chorus that paints a picture of the derelict Hebrews wandering in the wilderness. Reconciliation, forgiveness or redemption through love is granted to the two enemy soldiers, on a purely personal basis, which excludes the warmongers that both Owen and Sassoon denounced. But it is finally so welcome after the nightmare of the *Libera Me*, so descriptive of Owen's "Sweet waters" that, combined with the spectacular staging of the rejection of war, Britten's image of Owen, the opera protagonist, has obscured Owen the poet, and that Owen the poet has inherited Britten's pacifism, for which Owen had no patience. Neither Owen nor "Mad Jack" Sassoon were pacifists or "shirkers," the word of the period for "conchies", like Britten and Pears later on. They felt their duty was to go back to the front to testify of their soldiers' intense suffering and to partake of it. But they hated the inefficient, self-satisfied military as well as the politicians who saw the continuation of war as their advantage. The tenderness they felt as officers for their men, conveyed in their poems, is similar to the love of the Sermon on the Mount, the gospel of pacifists. In a way if Britten's *War Requiem* has led to a better appreciation of Owen, it has also done Owen some harm, the same harm that Brooke's patriotic sonnets have done him. But Britten has been faithful to Owen's mission, to warn and testify and his music has recreated the horror experienced by the soldiers to which the Home front turned a deaf ear. While composing his *Requiem*, Britten saw Owen as an opera character so as to make him alive to the audience. The success of his work is a proof he has convinced them beyond all his hopes.

Appendix:
The War Requiem's architecture at a glance
with Owen's poems as they are inserted in the work

Act I.

I. Introit & Requiem aeternam:

Chorus: *Requiem aeternam*
Boys' choir: *Te decet hymnus*
Chorus: *Requiem aeternam*
Tenor solo 1: "Anthem for Doomed Youth"
Chorus *a capella* 1: *Kyrie*

II. Dies Irae:

Chorus: *Dies Irae, Tuba Mirum,*
Baritone solo 1: "Bugles Sang"
Soprano and chorus: *Liber scriptus, Judex ergo, Quid sum miser & Rex Tremendae*
Tenor and Baritone Duet 1: "The Next War"
Chorus: *Recordare, Quaerens Me* etc, to *Oro supplex*
Baritone solo 2: "Be slowly lifted"
Chorus: *Dies Irae 2*
Chorus and Soprano Solo: *Lacrymosa* + Tenor solo 2: "Futility"
Chorus *a capella* 2: *Pie Jesu*

Act II

III. Offertorium :

Boys' choir: *Domine Jesu Christe*
Chorus: *Sed Signifer & Quam Olim Abrahae* Fugue
Tenor & Baritone Duet 2: "Parable of the Old Man & the Young"
Boys' choir: *Hostias et preces*
Chorus: *Quam Olim Abrahae* Fugue

IV. Sanctus:

Soprano Solo & Chorus: *Sanctus, Benedictus & Hosanna*
Baritone Solo 3: "The End"

V. Agnus Dei:

Tenor Solo 2: "At a Calvary" + Chorus: *Agnus Dei*
Tenor Solo: *Dona nobis pacem* (not in the Requiem liturgy)

Epilogue

VI. Libera me:

Chorus & Soprano Solo: *Libera me*
Tenor Solo 3 and Baritone Solo 3: "Strange meeting"
Tenor and Baritone Duet 3: "Let us Sleep"
Boys' choir, Chorus & Soprano: *In Paradisum*
Boys' choir: *Requiem aeternam*
Chorus *a capella* 3: *Requiescant in pace*

Bibliography

- Ackroyd, Peter. *T.S. Eliot*. London: Hamish Hamilton, Cardinal Books, 1984.
- Britten, Benjamin. *The War Requiem, full orchestral score*. London : Boosey & Hawkes, 1977.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *Benjamin Britten, a Biography*. London: Faber, 1992.
- Cooke, Mervyn. *Britten, War Requiem*. Cambridge Music Handbooks. Cambridge: CUP, 1996.
- Eliot, T.S. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber, 1974.
- Hibberd, Dominic. *Harold Monro, Poet of the New Age*. London: Palgrave, 2001.
- . *Wilfred Owen, a new biography*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2002, Phoenix Paperbacks, 2003.
- Kildea, Paul (ed.). *Britten on Music*. Oxford: OUP, 2001.
- Reed, Philip and Cooke, Mervyn (eds). *Letters from a Life, the Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten, Volume Five, 1958-1965*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press/The Britten-Pears Foundation, 2010.
- Mitchell, Donald. *Britten and Auden in the Thirties*. London: Faber, 1981.
- Moorcroft Wilson, Jean. *Siegfried Sassoon, the Making of a War Poet, 1886-1918*. London: Gerald Duckworth, 1998, Duckbacks, 2002.
- . *Siegfried Sassoon, The Journey from the Trenches, 1918-1967*. London: Duckworth, 2004.
- Owen, Wilfred. *The War Poems*, ed. Jon Stallworthy. London : Chatto & Windus, 1994.
- Parker, Peter. *Isherwood*. London: Picador, 2004.

¹ Elgar, the red-hot patriot, also produced such works as *Carillon*, for reciter and
² Britten overcame his reluctance to conduct music by Elgar and finally recorded the oratorio in 1971. On the other hand, he had a particular fondness for *For the Fallen* which he conducted at the 1969 Aldeburgh Festival and for which he wrote the Introductory Notes: “*For the Fallen* has always seemed to me to have in its opening bars a personal tenderness and grief, in the grotesque march an agony of distortion, and in the final sequences a ring of genuine splendour.” (Kildea, 2001, 399).

³ As he was wont to do and had done with his 1936 *Our Hunting Fathers*, a plea against cruelty to animals with political overtones and the portrait of a doting, aging queen in *Gloriana*, his 1953 Coronation opera.

⁴ In 1936 Britten composed music for a 3-minute documentary film by Paul Rotha for Strand Film, *Peace of Britain*, commissioned by the Trades Union Congress and the League of Nations Union, a *Pacifist March* for Peace Pledge Union concert and the cantata *Advance Democracy* in 1938, *Ballad of Heroes*, op. 14, to honour the dead of the Spanish Civil War in 1939 and his “anti-war” *Sinfonia da Requiem*, op. 20 in 1940.

⁵ Britten and Pear devised a song cycle called *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*, op. 74, incorporating some of Blake’s most famous *Songs of Experience* poems, “The Rose,” “The Chimney Sweeper,” “London,” “The Tyger,” as a present for the great German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, one of the soloists of the *War Requiem* and of the 1963 *Cantata Misericordium*, an epilogue and companion piece to the *War Requiem* that dramatizes the Good Samaritan parable.

⁶ Susan Hill’s narrative was written in Britten’s Aldeburgh and published the same year as *Owen Wingrave*, Britten’s television opera, first broadcast on BBC2 on May 16, 1971. Loosely based on Wilfred Owen’s life Jarman’s film, dramatizes Britten’s *Requiem* and gives it an openly gay activist and pacifist slant as it underlines the homoerotic elements of military camaraderie in Owen’s poetry and his aestheticization of trench warfare. It includes footage from documentaries, films and newsreels about both World Wars and the Vietnam War. Its cast of ten includes Nathaniel Parker as Owen himself and stars Laurence Olivier as an Old Soldier, one of his last film appearances before his death.

⁷ In Letter 1036 to William Plomer Britten mentions “really Trollopian clerical battles”. The vast audience was admitted into the cathedral through a single doorway, which caused the beginning of the performance to be delayed (Reed and Cooke, 2010, 401-3).

⁸ It is the sixth piece in the *Nocturne for tenor, 7 obligato instruments and strings* op. 60, with the cor anglais as the solo instrument.

⁹ See Letter 1015 to Christopher Isherwood in *Letters from a Life, Volume Five*, 349.

¹⁰ Though she later recorded the work for Decca, she was ultimately prevented to perform by her government who objected to a Russian citizen singing with a German one and the young Heather Harper stood in for her at very short notice.

¹¹ *The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner*, the English title of Mann’s 1933 University of Munich commemorative lecture on Wagner in which Mann claims Wagner for literature as a great novelist.

¹² “The orchestra will be big, however, as I am planning for certainly triple woodwind and a nice assortment of brass for the *Tuba mirum* (possibly as many as fourteen).” See Letter 1008 to John Lowe (Reed and Cooke 2010, 334).

¹³ Alec Roberstson’s notes in the Coventry Festival programme book, reproduced in *Letters from a Life* (Reed and Cooke 2010, 399), gave them significant background to do so. Britten’s own libretto, written out by the composer, shows the words of the Requiem Mass in Latin and translated into English, and how Owen’s poems are inserted in the text (Reed and Cooke 2010, 315-321).

¹⁴ Britten and Plomer contemplated visiting Harold Owen then at work on his brother’s biography, free of any allusion to Wilfrid’s sexual proclivities. Harold, deeply moved by *Strange Meeting* wrote Britten a letter of thanks after the performance and eventually sent him a photo of his brother and a manuscript draft of *Anthem for Doomed Youth*. (Reed and Cooke 2010, 342, 413).