

**Benjamin Britten**  
**War Requiem**

*A listener's guide*



# Benjamin Britten – War Requiem

A listeners guide

Text from the "Missa pro Defunctis"  
and the poems of Wilfred Owen\*

## 1. REQUIEM AETERNAM

BENJAMIN BRITTEN  
Op. 66

Slow and solemn  $\text{♩} = 42-46$   
(Lento e solenne)

**ORCHESTRA**

Flutes 1.2  
Clarinet 1 in Bb  
Bass Clarinet in Bb  
Bassoons 1.2  
Double Bassoon  
Horns in F 1.2  
3.4  
Trombones 2  
3  
Tuba  
Timpani  
Percussion  
Piano  
Sopranos  
Altos  
Tenors  
Basses

**CHORUS (Seated)**

Requiem, Requiem aeternam,  
Requiem, Requiem aeternam,

Violin I  
Violin II  
Viola  
Cello  
Double Bass

\* The poems of Wilfred Owen are reprinted by permission of Mr. Harold Owen and Chatto & Windus Ltd.

## I - Requiem Aeternam

The work begins with the stroke of a gong and a pedal D which establishes immediately a mood of gloom and foreboding. A bell tolls and at each stroke of the bell the choir intones the words 'requiem...', 'requiem aeternam' using a diminuendo to mimic the dying reverberations of the bell. The strings and wind then start a lurching theme which seems to crawl out of the mud like a worm. The horns and trombones (muted), meanwhile, begin a syncopated chromatic scale which sometimes anticipates, sometimes lags behind the main theme. The rhythm of the theme is notated as a quintuplet, that is to say, a crotchet followed by a semiquaver. The choice is inspired. A quartuplet would sound ordinary; a sextuplet would sound jaunty. The quintuplet rhythm mirrors exactly the lurching gait of a wounded soldier hobbling on a shattered leg.

The bell moves down a tritone and the altos and basses intone their reply; the theme becomes more insistent and the brass more prominent; the bell repeats the tritone interval F# - C - F# - C while the choirs pleas for eternal rest acquire more urgency; the rhythm of the words 'do-na e-is do-mi-ne' is now expanded to a triplet and each syllable is now marked tenuto.

The theme lurches on to a forte entry on the words 'et lux perpetua'; the entries now overlapping each other and the rhythm again extended on the words 'lu-ce-at e-is' into duplets, the bell simultaneously doubling its insistent tolling.

The crescendo continues. At its climax the choir bellows out the words 'requiem aeternam' simultaneously and the full horror of the tritone interval is revealed. There is no peace here, the plea is desperate and the plight of mankind is seen to be uncompromisingly wretched. The next words 'dona eis domine' are marked with a diminuendo emphasizing perhaps the hopelessness of the request and the music subsides into despair.

But the last rising phrase lifts our spirits into sunnier lands and we hear the distant voices of angels (a remote choir of boys voices) singing 'Te decet hymnus, Deus in Sion;' (Hymns of praise are due to thee, O God in Zion). It is worth noting that Mozart too used a solo soprano (or treble) voice at this point for the same reasons. The melody is constructed from two pentatonic phrases: the first contains the notes C-F-E-A-D and the second Bb-Eb-Db-Ab-Cb. The melody ends with an eleventh note: Gb (or F#) which you will notice is an augmented fourth (or tritone) away from the start. It is accompanied by a remarkable series of triads on the organ which move through all twelve possibilities. Although Britten never formally adopted the twelve tone system in his music, there are frequent examples in War Requiem where he comes close without ever losing a fundamental sense of tonality even when, as in this case, the fundamental scale which he is using is the whole tone scale based on the tritone interval. This becomes evident at the end of the melody on the words 'ad te omnis caro veniet' (and all flesh shall come to thee) where the whole tone scale is used explicitly. Throughout the section the orchestral violins keep alternating between F# and C like an aching tooth, as if to remind us that our human plight will not go away just because the angels are singing. In the end, the interval dominates and we return to earth where nothing has changed except that our plight seems more desperate than ever. The phrase 'et lux perpetua' previously so insistent, so hopeful, is now marked *piano diminuendo* as if to say 'what is the point?'; and the heartbreaking final rising phrase, instead of leading to the sunshine only serves to heighten the misery of the chorus who continue to mutter their unresolved plea for rest.

Suddenly the scene cuts to the battlefield. The harp, agitated, tugs at the tritone interval while the lurching theme, quickened and modified, becomes the racing heartbeat of the soldier who is witnessing his comrades dying like cattle around him. Britten uses every artifice at his disposal to portray the horror of warfare in the trenches. The flutes and clarinet depict the wailing of the shells as they pass overhead and the oboe and bassoon the 'stutt'ring rifles rapid rattle'. The tenor soloist mocks the tolling bells by repeating the familiar tritone (Gb-C) on the word 'prayers' (though sadly, Peter Pears in the seminal first recording sings a perfect fourth). The horns play cold and distant bugle calls. The triplet figure which the tenor sings to the words 'sad shires' recalls the heartbreaking phrase at the end of the first section. Owen's poem is bitterly ironic. The angelic



choirs are choirs of wailing shells; the endlessly repeated orisons (prayers) are in fact bursts of small arms fire. Now, in a moment of perfect irony, the oboe takes up the angels theme but accompanied by tremolando violins and stabbing chords from the lower strings, it sounds distorted and macabre. (The notes played by the lower strings are notated with a gracenote played very fast, on the beat – duh-dah, duh-dah). At last the tempo eases; the poet speaks of the aching grief of families back home and of the slow process of closure which accompanies the end of each day and of each life. And with a final reminder of the battlefield, the music skips into oblivion.

Once again the bell tolls, and in the words of the Kyrie, the choir try to resolve the paradox of the augmented fourth – the paradox of war and religion. Three times the attempt is made but each time we end up where we started. The first attempt goes nowhere; the second reaches an unsatisfactory climax on a chord of F# minor; only on the third and final attempt is some kind of closure achieved by unexpectedly settling on an all but inaudible but magical chord of F major.

ORCH. Perc. Bells

CHORUS S. *ppp sustained* Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, Chri - ste e -

A. *ppp sustained* Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, Chri - ste e -

T. *ppp sustained* Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, Chri - ste e -

B. *ppp sustained* Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, Chri - ste e -

ORCH. Perc. Bells *ppp* *rall.*

CHORUS S. *ppp dim.* - le - i - son, Ky - rie e - le - i - son.

A. *ppp dim.* - le - i - son, Ky - rie e - le - i - son.

T. *ppp dim.* - le - i - son, Ky - rie e - le - i - son.

B. *ppp dim.* - le - i - son, Ky - rie e - le - i - son.

## 2 – Dies Irae

The day of judgment begins, appropriately enough, with a fanfare; but the second phrase reminds us immediately of the ‘stutt’ring rifles rapid fire’ and the third of the ‘bugles calling from sad shires’. Soon the trombone and tuba lead us down a series of whole tone scales to the basses and tenors entry on the words ‘*Dies irae, dies illa solvet saeculum in favilla*’ (Day of anger, day on which this era will dissolve into ashes). Much has been written about the connections between Britten’s requiem and Verdi’s but I am more inclined to stress here the parallels with Mozart. Apart from the omission of the eighth beat, the rhythm of Britten’s theme is identical to Mozart’s and it is closely related harmonically too. It is also in the same key (D minor). Accompanied by thumping off-beat jabs (marked up-bow) in the cellos and basses, the theme rises to a brief crescendo on the words ‘*Teste David cum Sybilla*’ (as witnessed by David and the Sybil). The fanfares return, more frequent and overlapping and at the next entry ‘*Quantus tremor est futurus*’ (How much quaking there will be) the upper voices and strings take up the violently punctuated melody. At the third fanfare, the full power of the brass section is used – six horns, four trumpets, three trombones and tuba – in colossal, overpowering blocks of sound. In between, crashing peals of thunder are heard from the bass drum and timpani. By the time we reach the words ‘*Tuba mirum*’ (the sound of the trumpet...) the full choir and orchestra are going it hammer and tongs while the fanfares continue building to a climax on the words ‘*Coget omnes ante thronum*’ (drives everyone before the throne). The fanfares gradually subside as a hushed awe descends upon the assembled multitude. Death is stunned and Nature too (*Mors stupebit et natura*) and the music evaporates in contrary scales as each individual seeks his own salvation before God (*Judicanti responsura*).

A mood of tranquility at last settles down on the soldier in the trench as if during a lull in the fighting (*Bugles sang*). The bugle calls are still there but remote and unthreatening. The ‘stutt’ring rifles rapid rattle’ is nothing but the birds twittering in the hawthorn. Slowly the soldiers eyelids close and in a heart-warming, soaring melody, he begins to dream of his childhood, but all the time the distant bugle calls remind him constantly of the ‘shadow of the morrow’ until, at last, he sleeps, resigned, drained, empty, without feeling. He has no need to fear the day of judgment. Tomorrow will be sufficient.

The temporary peace is shattered by the sopranos leaping proclamation of the articles of the law as enshrined in the holy books (*Liber scriptus*). Under her stern and uncompromising supervision, nothing and no-one will remain unpunished (*Nil inultum remanebit*). Our heartbeats pounding away on the timpani, we ask ourselves ‘What can I say? To whom can I turn? Even the just are not secure.’ (*Quid sum miser tunc dicturus? Quem patronem rogaturus? Cum vix justus sit securus?*) The meandering tonalities and overlapping phrases portray exactly the confusion and terror in the minds of those about to be judged. The prophetess reminds us again of the majesty of God (*Rex tremendae*) with the same leaping phrases (inverted now) while we continue to grovel at her feet, pleading for mercy (*Salva me fons pietatis*) using the same meandering phrase (also inverted). The music subsides and ends on a horrific pianissimo discord with the altos singing an Ab against the basses A and the sopranos Db against the tenors D.

War Requiem achieves its shattering emotional effects by exploiting contrasts to the absolute maximum. Whereas previously, the hell of battle was contrasted with the voices of angels, now, compared to the day of judgment, the battlefield is portrayed as a Sunday afternoon picnic. ‘Out there, we’ve walked quite friendly up to Death; sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland,’ The two friends joke together in a jaunty 12/8 rhythm about their brushes with Death. Every detail is reflected in the music: the spilling mess tin, the stinging eyes, the churning stomach, the sounds of bullets and shrapnel, the wailing shells as the two friends shave themselves (with Death’s scythe!) in the dugout. ‘Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!’ they chant (using the *Salva me* phrase from the preceding section). But deep down they know that they are fighting for their own lives – not just for a bloody flag.

# 2. DIES IRAE

20

(Chorus stand)

Quick  $\text{♩} = 160$

(Allegro)

**ORCHESTRA**

Horn 1 in F

Trumpet 1,2 in C

Trombone 1

**ORCHESTRA**

Tr. 1 in C

1,2

Tbne.

Tuba 3

Piano

Vc.

Db.

**ORCHESTRA**

E.Hn.

Cl. 1,2 in Bp

Cl. in Eb

Essn. 1,2

Tuba

**ORCHESTRATION**

Piano

Chorus

Di - es i - rae, di - es il - la, sol - vet sae - clum in fa - vil - la. Te - ste Da - vid

**ORCHESTRATION**

Piano

Chorus

In a sublimely beautiful movement, the women of the chorus now step in to intercede for the souls of the damned. In the eight bars of the introduction in which the four trumpets and lower strings state the main ideas, the harmony slides down to settle on a lilting accompaniment based on a rocking minor seventh in the key of C minor. The second altos begin the ravishing melody ‘*Recordare, Jesu pie*’ (Recall, kind Jesus) which begins with the notes C Eb F G and ends with four intervals of the whole tone scale. The first altos brighten the mood by beginning the melody on the major third – E G B C (*Quaerens me*) while the seconds sing in counterpoint. The second sopranos enter another third higher – A C D E (*Ingemisco*) all the while the lower strings pound away at the pedal note of C and more and more instruments join in. When the firsts come in at ‘*Qui Mariam*’ they shift the tonality into what is called the Lydian mode which includes the notes C E F# G. This scale was often used by Britten to signify purity and innocence. (It has an important role to play in War Requiem because of the inclusion of the tritone interval C – F#). A bar later the pedal note rises step by step to G, slides down to Gb, rises to G again and slides back a semitone and then proceeds to sink back to the tonic via the familiar whole tone scale of the Lydian mode. The chorus follows suit, but bit by bit and reluctantly until at last all are gathered together again in the fold. The second altos begin the melody again with the words ‘*Inter oves locum praesta*’ (Place me among the sheep (not the goats!)) but the trumpets insist on playing all four notes of the melody at the same time and the lilting sevenths become more urgent. The music rises to a climax at ‘*Statuens in parte dextra*’ (standing at thy right hand) and then subsides again with a sublime sequence of descending chords which is Britten at the height of his genius. The movement ends with the four voices toying with the opening melody in such a way that, like the four trumpets at the beginning, all four parts are singing all four notes C Eb F and G simultaneously all the time.

After a short crescendo on the timpani we are plunged into the Confutatis maledictis. Again one is reminded of Mozart rather than Verdi. The key is again the same (A minor) and the repeated quaver figures in Mozart’s orchestral accompaniment are not a million miles away from Britten’s chorus line. While the basses are consigned to eternal fires, the tenors wail their supplications ‘*Oro supplex et acclinis*’ (I pray, kneeling and suppliant) at first separately, then together. As the music builds it is suddenly and shatteringly interrupted by five pounding strokes on the timpani and an inexorably rising series of triads from the lower strings and wind as, bit by bit, the barrel of the great gun rises to deliver its mighty curse. Meanwhile, the fanfares of the opening return to remind us that judgment is yet to come. Just when the baritone soloists makes his impassioned plea to rid the world of weapons once and for all, the chorus bursts in with a reprise of the cataclysmic Dies Irae as if to say, hang on – we want vengeance too. In time, however, the music subsides and gets slower and slower, at last exhausting itself in a distant bitter fanfare.

Amazingly, the rhythm of the Lacrymosa is exactly the same as that of the Dies Irae and above its gently rocking alternation of tonic and dominant chords, the soprano weaves a fragmentary melody of extraordinary beauty. In it, the interval of the augmented fourth (E natural in the key of Bb minor) plays a crucial role. Here the similarity with Verdi is undeniable. He also uses the key of Bb minor and the augmented fourth is prominent. But I am sure there is a connection with Mozart too in the way the soprano intersperses her two little quavers between the pulses of the beats just as Mozart’s accompaniment does. While the soprano sings “On that day of tears when the sinner shall rise from the ashes to be judged, spare him, O lord” the music first moves into the major key (*Qua resurget*) and then modulates through a remarkable sequence into the remote key of E major (*judicandus*) and back again to Bb minor as the soprano pleads for mercy (*huic ergo parce Deus*).

But her pleas are put on hold for a while as the focus once more shifts to the front line where a soldier is gazing in incomprehension at the body of his friend, killed by a sniper bullet. “Move him, move him into the sun”. Britten instructs the tenor solo here to whisper the words but Peter Pears (I think rightly) ignores this instruction. Why would a soldier in this situation whisper the words? More likely to bellow out a command! It is apparent, however, as the tremolando accompaniment conveys that the soldier is almost out of his mind at the prospect of having lost his comrade.

ORCHESTRA

Tr.in C 1.2 3.4

Vla. 39 *pp* sweetly *low* *div.* *p* (div. sim.) *p* *pp*

Vc. *div.* *p* (div. sim.) *p* *pp*

Db. *pizz. div.* *p* *pp*

40 *With movement* ♩ = 66 *(con moto)*

Bsn. 1.2 *pp* express. and smooth

Tr.in C 1.2 3.4 *pp* sustained

CHORUS

Sopranos I

Sopranos II

Altos I

Altos II *pp*

Re-cor-da - re Je-su pi - e, Quod sum cau - sa

40 *With movement* ♩ = 66 *(con moto)*

Vla. *always pp*

Vc. *always pp*

Db. *always pp*

41 *a2*

Fl. 1.2 3 *pp* express. and smooth

Bsn. 1.2 *pp* express. and smooth

Tr.in C 2 3 *pp* sustained

ORCHESTRA

CHORUS

S. I

S. II

A. I *pp* Querens me, se -

A. II *pp* tu-ae vi - ae: Ne me per - das, ne me per - das il - la di - e. Re-cor-da -

Vla. *pp*

Vc. *pp*

Db. *pp*

With his plea to the Sun for help ringing in our ears, the Lacrymosa takes up exactly where it had left off as if oblivious to the real world beneath.

A second time, the Lacrymosa is put on ice while we witness the frantic attempts of our soldier to revive his friend. As he sings “are sides, full-nerved – still warm – too hard to stir?” the harpist strums her strings up and down as if to rub life back into her instrument. Was it for this the clay grew tall?” asks the soldier, ironically mocking the theme of the Lacrymosa. Once again the Lacrymosa takes off but the soprano solo is only allowed a few bars before the soldier insists again “Was it for this the clay grew tall?” and after a few more bars the soldier breaks in again with a final gesture of utter despair.

In a conventional work, the Lacrymosa theme would now be allowed to continue one more time and be permitted to find peace and rest in a suitable hopeful cadence; but Britten is not going to allow us any such luxury. The attempts of the church to save our souls are seen as irrelevant in the light of the attempts of the soldier to save his friend's life and the Lacrymosa is abandoned on the stroke of a bell. Instead, the choir makes another attempt to square the circle and resolve the devil's tritone. As before, the first sequence only leads to trouble. The second attempt leads to the F# minor chord but not all members of the choir reach the chord at the same time leaving us in doubt as to whether the cadence is going to be possible at all. The third go is all confusion but at last the sought for resolution emerges – marked *pppp* this time – and this harrowing movement is finally at an end.

### 3 - Offertorium

With the bitter ironies of the Dies Irae behind us, it might be supposed that the offertorium - the stage in the mass where the penitent soul, having been shocked into submission by the aforementioned vision of hell, rededicates his life to God – might be free of such ironies. Not so. The movement centres on Owen's horrifying tale of Abraham and Isaac. In the biblical story, Abraham is commanded to kill his own son as a test of his faithfulness to God. At the moment when he is about to carry out God's command an angel stays his hand and shows him a lamb, caught in a thicket, which he is to slay instead. In Owen's account, however, Abraham arrogantly refuses the offer of an alternative sacrifice (the lamb also representing Jesus himself – the lamb of God) and goes ahead with the planned felicide, thus ushering two thousand years of indiscriminate slaughter by mankind, climaxing in two appalling wars in which millions of innocent people were killed.

The movement begins in a mood of confident optimism that God will carry out his promise and save the souls of the righteous, bringing them all home to rest in eternal light. First the distant boys choir calls on the Lord to free the souls of all the faithful (*Domine Jesu Christe... libera animas omnium fidelium*) accompanied by little flourishes on the chamber organ. The orchestra crashes in with a very out of tune version of the same flourish. The choir then sing their own version but they don't seem to be able to agree about the pitch and end up singing it in parallel seconds (very difficult actually!) Eventually the orchestra decide on a proper key (G major) and the choir launches into a formal fugue - *Quam olim Abrahae promisisti et semini ejus* (as thou didst promise to Abraham and his seed for ever). Britten's use of a fugue here (like Bach's use of the fugue to the words 'we have a law' in the St. John Passion) emphasizes the inevitability of God's gift – as if somehow it was our right to be saved from damnation. First the gentlemen, then the ladies sing the subject; then the basses sing it inverted and in canon with the sopranos, an idea which is continued by the tenors and altos. The words '*semini ejus*' are pointed with a crescendo as if to remind God that his promise is supposed to last for ever and ever. At last all four parts throw the fugue subject around in close canon, finally coming together in synchronism and contrary motion to make absolutely sure that God remembers his promise to mankind.

The fugue subject is taken up by the chamber orchestra as Abraham and his son set out as if for a picnic. They gather wood and prepare the altar and the innocent Isaac asks his father “where is the lamb for this burnt offering?”. Suddenly the skies darken; we hear ominous sounds of distant heavy gunfire, the Dies Irae fanfares and the sounds of wailing shells as Abraham builds ‘parapets and



CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

Ob. *pp*

Cl. in A *pp cresc. (marked but sust.)*

Bsn. *p*

Hn. in F *pp* *(cresc.)* *(p)*

Perc. Gong *pp* Cymb. *pp* (hard stick) *(p)*

BARITONE SOLO *cresc.*

Via. *pizz.*

Vc. *cresc.* *pp heavy cresc.*

Db. *cresc.*

Then A-bram bound the youth with belts and straps,

CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

Fl. *f*

Ob. *p* *mf* *f*

Cl. in A *mf* *f*

Bsn. *mf* *f*

Hn. in F *mp (no dim.)* *mf*

Perc. Gong *p* B.D. *pp* Cymb. *mp* *mf*

Bar. Solo *mp* *mf*

VI. I *pizz.* *mf heavy* *f*

VI. II *mf heavy* *f*

Via. *pp* *mf* *f*

Vc. *pp* *mf* *f*

Db. *mf* *f*

And builded pa-ra-pets and trenches there,

trenches there'. But just as he stretches forth his knife to slay his son – in a moment of pure theatre and with inspired use of the low registers on the harp and string harmonics playing a pure, open, wide-spaced chord of C major, the angel appears to stay Abraham's hand. The bass and baritone soloists sing with other-worldly detachment until the words 'Behold a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns' where the strings, now joined by some wind, are instructed to play with vibrato. Then, in a magical rising phrase the angel instructs Abraham to swallow his pride and accept God's gift. It is not to be. The orchestra picks a mocking parody of the fugue subject while Abraham callously kills his son 'and half the seed of Europe, one by one'.

But as the story comes to an abrupt halt we become aware of the chamber organ playing a remote rocking chord in the distance which is the prelude to the boys singing the Hostias (*Hostias et preces tibi* – Sacrifices and prayers we offer to thee O Lord). Oblivious of the horror of Abraham's deed, they blithely continue with their prayers, totally remote and unfeeling. From time to time, the bass and tenor soloists interrupt as if the slaughter of half the seed of Europe was some huge joke but the boys are unmoved, out of tune, out of time and out of touch with reality. Gradually the joke wears thin and the sounds of the boys die away.

Once again the fugue subject appears, inverted, muted and uncertain. The chorus is hushed. It is as if they are turning to each other and saying: "What happened? What went wrong? What about God's promise? Are we going to be saved or not?" Instead of the confident crescendos, the music dies away and disintegrates into nothing.

#### 4 - Sanctus

If it were not for Owen's haunting poem 'The End' which concludes this movement, the Sanctus, Hosanna and Benedictus could be seen as a triumphant affirmation of God's glory. So let us pretend, for a moment, that all is well in Heaven and Earth and wallow in the great washes of glorious sound which Britten produces from his orchestra. First we hear the sound of cymbals and bells approaching like a Chinese procession. (The sounds were inspired by Britten's visit to Indonesia where he was captivated by the sound of the Gamelan orchestra.) In a brilliant extended cadenza-like passage the soprano proclaims the word *Sanctus* ending on the note F#. The bells begin again, this time on a C (the tritone again), and the sopranos' reply lifts us back to the high F#. Now there occurs one of the most extraordinary passages in all of classical music. The chorus, divided into eight parts, chant freely, in whatever tempo they like, over and over again, the words *pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua* (Heaven and Earth are full of thy glory). It is as if the soprano's clarion call has summoned all the peoples of the world to come together; first the basses arrive and one by one more voices join in. At first the tonality centres around F# but when the tenors come in at the eighth bar, they add notes from the key of C. The notes pile on, more and more, higher and higher, a D# appears, muddying the texture still further until finally the whole chorus, and orchestra too are shouting fit to burst in a massive wall of sound. Suddenly, the sound is cut off and as the echoes are still dying away the trumpets burst in with a triumphal D major scale and the chorus launch into an ecstatic cry – '*Hosanna in excelsis*!' Each time the word Hosanna explodes from a unison note into a brilliant major triad. First D major, then G, then C, then E, then D# major (!) - each one winding up the fever by venturing into more and more outlandish keys – at one point the altos sing a chord of A# major, a key whose key signature would have no less than 10 sharps in it!!! all the time the basses hang on to the tonic D going '*Sanctus, Sanctus*' hammer and tongs. Eventually the bass's insistence prevails and the rest of the chorus content themselves with D major. Bit by bit the fever dies down, the hosannas recede and merge into the Benedictus.

If anyone was ever in any doubt about Britten's ability to write a good tune, surely this movement must dispel it. It is a ravishing melody and when the chorus get the chance to sing it the soprano soars above in a wonderful descant line.

As is the usual custom, the Hosanna returns after the Benedictus in a shortened but still brilliant version which, curiously ends with the chorus shouting the syllable 'sis' a beat after the orchestra



# 4. SANCTUS

Freeley  
(Liberamente)  
Vibraphone (without fans)

ORCHESTRA

Percussion

Glockenspiel

\*Antique Cymbals

Bells (2 metal beaters)

Piano

SOPRANO SOLO

San - - ctus, San - - ctus,

(♩ = 108)

ORCHESTRA

Perc.

Vibr.

Glock.

Ant. Cymb.

Bells.

Piano

S. Solo

f brilliant

San - - ctus,

84

ORCHESTRA

Perc.

Vibr.

Glock.

Ant. Cymb.

Bells.

Piano

S. Solo

Do-mi-nus De-us Sa - ba-oth, Do-mi-nus De-us Sa - - ba-oth,

⊕ free trem. with gradual accel.

\* If Antique Cymbals are not available - use untuned pair of small cymbals (clashed) instead.

has finished. The echoes finally die away to reveal a low pedal D on the horn and low strings and the baritone begins Owen's bleakest poem 'After the blast of lightning from the East' (a premonition of Hiroshima, perhaps?). We hear the 'drums of time' and the long retreat. In a more agitated mood, the poet asks whether God's promise of eternal life is really true; but accompanied by despairing empty chords on wind and pizzicato strings, Age and Earth reply enigmatically, offering neither hope nor solace. The movement winds its way down to a conclusion on a low F# as we prepare for the hauntingly beautiful -

## 5 - Agnus Dei

- which many see as being the emotional heart of the work. Here for the first time, the chorus and main orchestra alternate with the soloist and the chamber ensemble in a seamless rocking ground bass. If they agree about nothing else, the priest and the soldier can at least both identify with and draw comfort from the image of Christ and the way he suffered on behalf of all mankind.

As we have seen, the interval of the tritone or augmented fourth, permeates every page of the score. Here the dominant tonality is B minor but the descending scale which the tenor sings begins with three whole tones and the two scales which make up the ground bass (B minor and C major) begin with F# and C natural respectively. Throughout the work, this interval represents the impossibility of reconciling the views of the established church with the realities of events during wartime. It is significant therefore that in this movement, which is the closest the work gets to a moment of reconciliation, the F# and the C natural alternate and are never sounded together – just as the chorus and soloist alternate their own special pleas to the one whose act of selfless sacrifice earned him the title the Lamb of God.

### 5. AGNUS DEI

The musical score for '5. AGNUS DEI' is presented in a standard orchestral format. It features a chamber orchestra section on the left, including Oboe, Clarinet in A, Bassoon, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Doublebass. A Tenor Soloist part is also included, with the lyrics: "One e - ver hangs \_ where shelled roads part." The score is marked "Slow (Lento)" with a tempo of 80. The key signature is B minor (two sharps) and the time signature is 5/16. The chamber orchestra parts are marked "pp smooth". The Tenor Soloist part is marked "pp" and "express.".

As the chorus hum the final, magical chord, the soloist leaves us with a haunting plea for peace on a rising whole tone scale which floats heavenward to settle finally on a high pianissimo F#. – *Dona nobis pacem.*

## 6 - Libera Me

It is the day of judgment. Our soldier lies fatally wounded on the battlefield. In heaven, the souls of the living and the damned await their fate also. Gradually, the double basses crawl out of the darkness with the lurching theme of the first movement and the chorus begin their desperate pleas for salvation 'Libera me' (free me, Lord, from eternal death). They sing three notes – (D C# D Eb C#) so close together it sounds more like a moan than a melody.

### 6. LIBERA ME

(Chorus stand)  
 March - starting slowly (♩ = approx. 63) with gradual accelerando until **115**  
 (Marcia)

**ORCHESTRA**

Flute 2 *p*

Clarinet 1 in Bb *p*

Bassoon 1 *p*

Percussion  
 B.D. Solo *ppp*  
 Ten. Dr. Solo *ppp marked*  
*cresc.*  
 Cymb. *susp.*  
*p*

**ORCHESTRA**

Fl. 2

Cl. 1 in Bb *pp always sust.*

Bsn. 1 *pp always sust.*

Perc.  
 B.D. (always Solo) *pp*  
 Ten. Dr. *pp (always Solo)*  
 Cymb.

**CHORUS (standing)**

SOPRANOS *pp lamenting*  
 Li-be-ra me,

ALTOS *pp lamenting*  
 Li-be-ra me, Do-mi-ne,

Vc. *ppp*

Db. *pp* (heavily) *sim.*

The score is divided into three main sections: the first for the initial orchestral introduction, the second for sustained woodwind and percussion accompaniment, and the third for the vocal entry. The chorus consists of Sopranos and Altos. The double bass part is particularly prominent, starting with a heavy, lurching theme. The percussion includes a solo for the bass drum and tenor drum, with a cymbal suspended. The woodwinds (Flute 2, Clarinet 1, Bassoon 1) play a soft, sustained accompaniment. The vocal parts enter with a lamenting melody, with the lyrics 'Li-be-ra me, Do-mi-ne,'.

Ever so gradually, the heavy, lurching bass line gathers strength and the chorus get more agitated. At the words '*Quando caeli movendi sunt*' (When the skies and ground shall quake) a new theme emerges which is made of two rising four note minor scales, the second of which starts a tritone above the first. At length the chorus revert to the *Libera Me* theme, always with a diminuendo though, as if they already know their case is hopeless. Suddenly the tempo quickens with the words *Dum veneris judicare saeculum per ignem* (When thou comest to judge our generation through fire) and we hear the flames of hell crackling at our feet in the side-drum and whip.

The link with Verdi at the soprano entry – *Tremens factus sum ego et timeo* (I am made to tremble and am afraid) – is unmistakable. Her fractured gasps on the words *Tremens* and *factus* contrast with her wails of desperation as she sings of her fear - *timeo*. Meanwhile, the chorus take on the role of the Devil's advocate, goading and taunting her with heavy emphasized descriptions of the fate in store for her – *dum discussio venerti* (when the trial shall commence) *atque ventura ira* (and the day of anger arrive. As her wails turn into terrified screams the Dies Irae fanfares break out and we know that judgment is imminent. Our hearts racing, the chorus again plea for deliverance but the fanfares keep coming, louder and louder; and then in a terrifying slow crescendo we build up to an almighty climax as the Judge Himself arrives. The audience prostrate themselves in terror as the brass thump out the judgment theme. But if you thought that the music could not get any louder or more terrifying, you have another think coming. Once again, there is a brief diminuendo before the build up to what must be the most cataclysmic climax in all of written music as God stretches forth his hand to pronounce judgment. Above the monolithic wall of G minor sound produced by the brass, five percussionists hammering away and now also, full organ, the sopranos shrieks of terror are barely audible. The side drum roll seems to buzz inside our skulls making rational thought impossible and the lurching double basses sound like hobgoblins leering at us in gleeful anticipation.

Gradually, ever so gradually, the sounds die as the chorus and orchestra slink away, one by one, their pathetic pleas getting fainter and fainter, until all we are left with is an almost inaudible sustained humming sound (actually a first inversion G minor chord from the chamber orchestra) against which the tenor soloist begins the last of Owen's poem, 'Strange meeting'. "It seemed that out of battle I escaped down some profound tunnel..."

The sleeve notes which came with the original recording claimed that 'neither the poem nor its setting need any comment.' I cannot agree. Apart from the obvious narrative which it contains, the setting is so sparse and the poem, whose meaning is frequently obscure, is so long (almost 10 minutes) that it is probably the most difficult part of the Requiem to get to understand at first hearing. Much of this difficulty stems from the fact that there is no melody as such – indeed the soloist seems to go out of his way to sing a series of completely unrelated notes which are as far as possible from the underlying tonality of the chamber orchestra. And yet, close attention to the text and Britten's orchestration will reveal the masterful way in which every nuance of the poem is picked up and illuminated by the instrumental accompaniment. There are the stabbing crescendo chords from the strings as our soldier, in his journey to the underworld, probes the sleeping forms of other souls killed in battle before him; then there is the weird memory of the lurching bass theme as the soldier briefly recalls the sound of battle; note the rising C F# tritone on the phrase "Strange friend" – perhaps recalling the fact that they were on opposite sides of the conflict – and the falling whole tone scale on "here is no cause to mourn". As the baritone soloist answers, the oboe recalls the rising phrase which the tenor sings at the end of the Agnus Dei; then it is the turn of the bassoon to bring to mind the shimmering cymbals at the start of the Sanctus. As the soldier recounts his unfulfilled dreams of youth and happiness, the harp foreshadows his doom with fragments of fanfares which become explicit as we reach the words which Owen used to describe his poetry – the Pity of War. After a bitter moment of regret the timpanist breaks in with an offstage martial beat

**116** Very broad, as at the start  
(molto largamente, come sopra)

*d. = ♩ = 63*

ORCHESTRA

Fl. 1, 2  
Picc.  
Ob. 1, 2  
E. Hn.  
Cl. 1, 2 in Bb  
Cl. 3 in Eb  
Bsn. 1, 2  
D. Bsn.  
Hn. in F 1, 2, 3, 4  
Tn. in C 1, 2, 3, 4  
Tb. 1, 2, 3  
Tuba  
Timp.  
Tri. 4  
Cym. 4  
S.D. 4  
Ten. Dr. 4  
B.D. 4  
Gong 4  
Piano  
Organ ad lib.  
S. solo  
CHORUS S.  
CHORUS A.

Li-be-ra me,  
Li-be-ra me,  
Li-be-ra me,

**116** Very broad, as at the start  
(molto largamente, come sopra)

*d. = ♩ = 63*

VI. I  
VI. II  
VI. C  
VI. C

which leads us into a brief marching theme at the words “miss we the march of this retreating world” at the conclusion of which the horn, and then the harp plays a retreating fanfare which remind us of the poem ‘Bugles sang’. Then a moment of sublime repose beside ‘the sweetest wells that ever were’. Finally, the chamber orchestra falls silent as the soldier, quietly and simply, recalls the final moments of his Earthly life, punctuated by four thrusts of the bayonet, and at last the two soldiers are reconciled in sleep.

As the rocking harp strains of the final chorus get under way, the boys choir, still remote, untouchable, begins the In Paradisum (May the Angels lead you into paradise). The two groups alternate for a while, neither competing nor quite complementing each other either. The boys sing in A major in long arching plainsong phrases while the two soldiers sing a pentatonic scale based on D major with gently syncopated rhythms in an independent time as if in another world.

Presently the chorus, now divided into eight parts enters with the In Paradisum theme together with more and more members of the main orchestra. The boys now sing *Chorus Angelorum... aeternam habes requiem* (With choirs of angels may you have eternal rest) and at length the soprano soloist can be heard soaring up above this wonderful dense matrix of sound which seems to embrace and enfold the whole universe in peace and reconciliation. If this work was about peace and reconciliation, Britten would have composed a magnificent crescendo and ended on a blazing D major chord and sent us all home feeling happy. But this work is not about peace and reconciliation; it is about war and conflict and about the irrelevance of the Established Church and its inability, in Britten’s eyes, to resolve the contradictions which are embodied in the whole concept of a ‘just’ war. The strains of the In Paradisum are interrupted by a stroke on the tubular bells and the sounds of the boys singing *Requiem aeternam dona eis* eerily in the distance. The In Paradisum begins again, but a little subdued and it is once again interrupted by a stroke on the bell and the boys unsettling chant. A third time the In Paradisum starts, pianissimo now and a third time it is stopped by this irreconcilable interval, the tritone, on the bells. With the orchestra and soloists silent now, it falls to the chorus to attempt once again to square the circle. This they do with great difficulty, resolving at last on heartbreaking chord of F major which dies away from *pppp* into oblivion.

Thus ends the greatest choral work which has ever been written.

Although this is a personal opinion, it is shared by many and it is not difficult to see why. The stunned silence which usually follows the final notes after a live performance is testament enough to its overwhelming emotional power. It is quite impossible to put a recording of War Requiem on as background music to some other chore. It absolutely demands your attention at every level and with every particle of your intellect and humanity. You cannot just ‘like’ War Requiem. And then there is the total mastery with which Britten utilizes the different sounds of the orchestra and other different groups of instrumentalists and soloists, not to mention the sensitive way in which every word of Owen’s incomparable poems are set and the stroke of genius which conceived the idea of contrasting Owen’s poems with the liturgical texts in the first place.. No – it is difficult even to think of a couple of works which can stand any meaningful comparison. War Requiem is the greatest choral work ever written. What a tragedy for the world that its message is still largely unheeded.

Oliver Linton

10 Feb 2006



Bsn. 1.2  
Oboe

**ORCHESTRA**

Fl. 1.2  
Ob. 1.2  
E. Hn.  
Cl. in A 1.2  
Bsn. 1.2  
Hn. in F 1.2  
Tr. in C 1.2  
Tbn. 1.2  
Tuba 3  
Timp.  
Cym.  
Perc.  
Bells

**SOLO**  
S. Solo  
I.  
II.  
A.  
I.  
II.  
B.  
I.  
II.  
Solo  
VI. I the rest  
VI. II  
Via.  
Vc.  
Cb.

du - cant te in san - ctam Je - ru - sa - lem.  
 Cho - rus An - ge - lo - rum te sus - ci - pi - at, Cho - rus An - ge - lo - rum  
 Cho - rus An - ge - lo - rum te sus - ci - pi - at, Cho - rus An - ge - lo - rum te sus - ci - pi - at.  
 ae - ter - nam ha - be - as re - qui - em. In pa - ra - di - sum, de - du - cant te An - ge - li.  
 ha - be - as re - qui - em. In pa - ra - di - sum, de - du - cant te An - ge - li.  
 et cum La - za - ro quondam pau - pe - re ae - ter - nam ha - be - as re - qui - em. In pa - ra - di - sum.  
 La - za - ro quondam pau - pe - re ae - ter - nam ha - be - as re - qui - em. In pa - ra - di - sum.  
 di - sum, de - du - cant te An - ge - li, Cho - rus An - ge - lo - rum.  
 pa - ra - di - sum, de - du - cant te An - ge - li, Cho - rus An - ge - lo - rum.

**CHAMBER ORCHESTRA**

Fl.  
E. Hn.  
Cl. in A  
Bsn.  
Hn. in F  
Timp.  
Harp.  
T. Solo  
Bar Solo  
VI. I  
VI. II  
Via.  
Vc.  
Cb.

sleep - now, sleep, sleep, sleep, now,  
 let us sleep, sleep, sleep, now,  
 arco pizz.

135

**ORCHESTRA**

Boys: Do - mi - ne, et lux per-pe-tu-a

Organ

1.2 Fl. *p dim.*

3 *p dim.*

Ob. 1.2 *p dim.*

E. Hn. *p dim.*

Cl. in A 1.2 *p dim.*

3 *p dim.*

Bsn. 1.2 *p dim.*

2 *p dim.*

Hn. in F 4 *p dim.*

Tr. 1, 2 in C *p dim.*

1.2 Tbn. *p*

3 *p*

Timp. *p*

Perc. *ppp* *poco* Bells *mf*

S. Solo *mf marked* Cho - rus An - ge - lo - - rum te sus - ci - pi - at,

I *p dim.* In pa - ra - di - sum: de - du - cant te An - ge - li.

S. II *p dim.* In pa - ra - di - sum: de - du - cant te An - ge - li.

A. I *p dim.* In pa - ra - di - sum: de - du - cant te An - ge - li.

II *p dim.* In pa - ra - di - sum: de - du - cant te An - ge - li.

CHORUS

I *p marked* In pa - ra - di - sum: de - du - cant.

T. I *p marked* et - cum La - za - ro quondam pau - pe - re aë - ter - nam ha - be - as re - qui - em.

II *p marked* et - cum La - za - ro quondam pau - pe - re aë - ter - nam ha - be - as re - qui - em.

I *p dim.* In pa - ra - di - sum: de - du - cant te An - ge - li.

B. II *p dim.* In pa - ra - di - sum: de - du - cant te An - ge - li.

VI. I all unis.

VI. II *p dim.* unis.

Va. *p dim.*

Vc. *p dim.*

**CHAMBER ORCHESTRA**

Fl. *p cresc.*

E. Hn. *mf*

Cl. in A *mf*

Bsn. *p*

Hn. in F *p cresc.*

Harp *p cresc.* *dim.*

T. Solo *p* let us sleep, sleep now.

Bar. Solo *p* let us sleep, sleep now.

VI. I muted *p cresc.*

VI. II muted *p cresc.*

Vla. muted *p cresc.*

Vc. muted *p cresc.*

--- *p arco*

136



Orchestra Score

**ORCHESTRA**

Fl. 1

E. Hn.

Cl. 1 in A

Bsn. 1

Hn. 1 & 2 in F

Perc.

S. Solo

S.

A.

T.

B.

CHORUS

VI. I

VI. II

Vla.

Vc.

Cl. in A

Bsn.

Harp

T. Solo

Bar. Solo

Vla.

Vc.

Db.

Chamber Orchestra Score

**CHAMBER ORCHESTRA**

Cl. in A

Bsn.

Harp

T. Solo

Bar. Solo

Vla.

Vc.

Db.

Lyrics:

u - ce - a - i - i - s.

et cum La - za - ro quondam pau - pe - re a - ter - nam ha - be - as re - qui - em.

let us sleep now, now, now.

let us sleep now, sleep now.

137

**ORCH.**

**CHORUS**

Very slow (molto lento)      Bells      rall.

Perc.

S.

A.

T.

B.

Lyrics:

Re - qui - e - scant in pa - - ce.      A - men, A - - - - - men.

Re - qui - e - scant in pa - - ce.      A - men, A - - - - - men.

Re - qui - e - scant in pa - - ce.      A - men, A - - - - - men.

Re - qui - e - scant in pa - - ce.      A - men, A - - - - - men.