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Your guide to Pacific Northwest classical music

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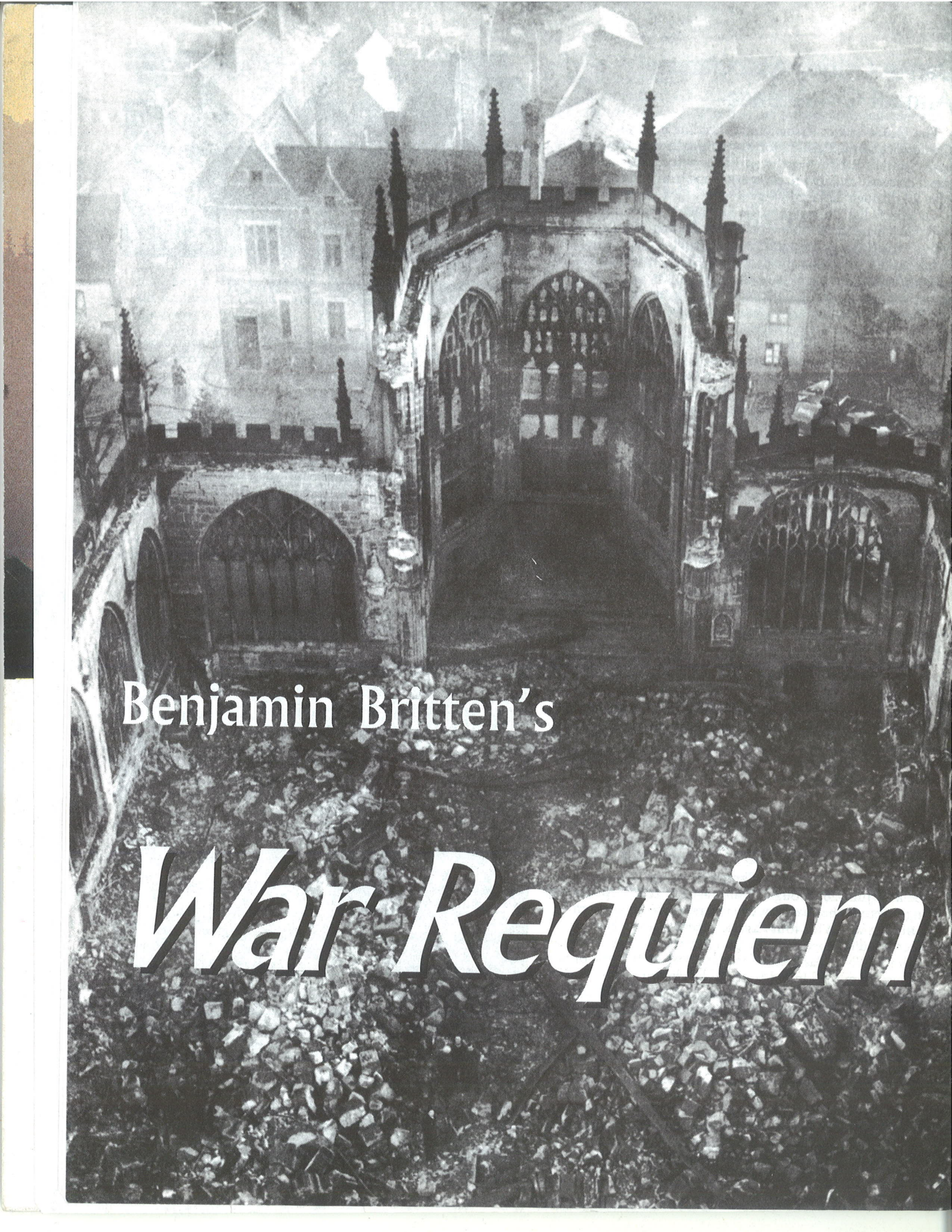
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Benjamin Britten's

War Requiem

Remembrance and Resolution

by Walter Saul

The ancient Coventry Cathedral in England, known originally as St. Michael's and constructed in the late 14th century, was destroyed by a Nazi Luftwaffe air raid in World War II, with only the side walls and the spire left standing.

It was rebuilt in an unusual way: the ruins of the old cathedral were left in place and a markedly modern structure was erected at a right angle alongside them. The rebuilding itself was an act of international reconciliation, as young Germans, among others, contributed to the effort. On the Threshold Stone is engraved part of John 17:11, "...that they all may be one..." and in the old ruins a quote from the prophet Haggai: "The glory of the present house will be greater than the glory of the former house ... and in this place I will grant peace" (2:9).

How fitting, therefore, it was to have Great Britain's greatest 20th century composer, and one of its most prominent pacifists, compose the awe-inspiring *War Requiem* to reconsecrate the new and old Coventry Cathedral in 1962. In this monumental work, to be performed May 18, 19, and 20 by the Oregon Symphony with the Portland Symphonic Choir, Benjamin Britten juxtaposes the new and old cathedrals in his use of new and old elements in the lyrics and music.

For the lyrics, Britten combines the ancient Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead with the poetry of Wilfred Owen, a brilliant British poet whose life was tragically cut short in the battlefields of World War I. In the music, Britten achieves this new/old dualism most noticeably through two separate ensembles. The soprano soloist, large choir, boys choir, organ, and full orchestra unfold the ancient text of the Latin Mass, while the English poetry of Owen is assigned to tenor and baritone soloists accompanied by a nimble chamber orchestra.

The work is cast in the traditional six movements of the Requiem Mass: *Requiem aeternam* and *Kyrie*, *Dies irae*, *Offertorium*, *Sanctus* and *Benedictus*, *Agnus Dei*, and *Libera me*.

Requiem: discord as foundation

In the *Requiem aeternum* ("Eternal rest"), shortly after the funereal rhythm of the opening somber low chords, the chimes strike a tritone — the interval from C to F-sharp — which forms the tonal axis for the entire work. As the most dissonant interval available in the harmonic

structure of Western music, the tritone also reflects the juxtaposition of the old and the new. The large choir is content to chant the ancient text in an ancient way on Cs and F-sharps, further buttressing the role of this tritone.

This dark and sinister funeral procession is interrupted by the bright, cherubic *Te decet hymnus* ("There shall be singing") of the boys choir and small organ, but even they cannot escape the clutches of the tritone: the sopranos end up on the C and the altos on the F-sharp. The tolling chimes reprise the funeral march and the chanting, which leads into the first of the chamber orchestra sections featuring Owen's highly onomatopoeic poetry: "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle? ...

Only the stutt'ring rifle's rapid rattle..." and a cynical mockery of the *Te decet hymnus* just sung.

This section evaporates with a harp glissando into a very simple three-fold *Kyrie eleison* ("Lord have mercy") that finally resolves the tension of the tritone into one of the richest and most peaceful F major chords ever written. Britten must have enjoyed this section, since it is repeated (with different words) at the end of the *Dies irae* and *Libera me* sections.

Dies irae: horrors of war and judgment

The *Dies irae* ("Day of wrath") speaks of the day of judgment from the outset, with multiple fanfares from the brass immediately followed by a lopsided forced march in 7/4 time. The insistent calls from the brass pile high on top of the choir as they describe the terrors of this day of rage and vengeance.

Then the baritone solo and chamber group take us to a sobering battlefield scene with its quiet desolation of young dead soldiers. The choir, soprano soloist and large orchestra respond by a plea for mercy, accompanied by the relentless beat of the timpani and ominous chromatic passages. The chamber orchestra then evokes the macabre terrors of the famous dance of death that closes Berlioz' *Symphonie fantastique*. In this way, alternating between the old Latin and the newer English, the full horror of war and judgment is depicted.

The concluding *Lacrymosa* ("Tearful that day...") section joins another of Owen's poems as the two orchestral forces combine to paint a close-up of the

**Alternating
between the old
Latin and the
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the full horror of
war and judgment
is depicted...**

pictured left: the ruins of St. Michaels (Coventry Cathedral) after the all night bombing of the city by the Nazi Luftwaffe, November 14 - 15, 1940.

(cont'd next page)

WWII photo from the Imperial War Museum, London



The poetry of Wilfred Owen

The poetry of Wilfred Owen (1893 - 1918), some of which was used by Britten in his *War Requiem*, was first collected in 1920 and was again published in 1931. Only five of Owen's poems were published in his short lifetime — he was killed in France during World War I, just a week before the Armistice was signed.

Anthem for Doomed Youth

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries for them; no prayers nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in the eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.



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Britten's *War Requiem* (cont'd)

death of one soldier. A reprise of the music of the *Kyrie* from the first movement pleads to Jesus for eternal rest for the soldiers.

Offertorium: a twist to an ancient story

The *Offertorium* rivets us with its opening boys choir and bright organ accompaniment, as they plead for deliverance from the lake of fire; the full choir then recalls the ancient covenant made to Abraham ("Lead them into the holy light, as you promised Abraham and his seed..."). The chamber group responds with a retelling of the Genesis 22 story of Abraham's offering of his son Isaac by sacrifice, referring to the "Ram of Pride" that starts wars.

But, in a cruel twisting of the ancient Biblical account, Owen's Abraham instead slays his son and "half the seed of Europe." The boys choir floats back in on top of this lament, beseeching the Lord to take them from death into life, oblivious to the hard reality underneath them. This third movement concludes by a memory of the Abrahamic covenant.

Sanctus and *Agnus Dei*: hosannas, grim reality, and crucifixion in the context of modern warfare

The fourth movement is a *Sanctus* that recalls the timelessness of plainchant, both in the melismatic style (many notes to a single syllable) of the opening soprano solo and a free chanting style on held tones by the choir. Accompanied by reverberating percussion and a flurry of a tremolos (successive repetitions of one pitch or note), the music paints a glorious tone picture of God's holiness, and finally bursts forth into triumphant *Hosannas*. The ebullient mood is then shattered by a grim recitative, sung by the solo baritone again with the chamber orchestra, which brings the heavenly music down to earth and the sodden reality of the finality of death.

One of the most poignant moments of the work is the simply spoken, yet elegantly crafted *Agnus Dei* ("Lamb of God"). The now familiar tritone — the C to F-sharp — once again plays a significant role in a movement that is cast in B minor and sounds, on the surface, like a five-finger exercise. The strings go down the B minor scale and up the C major scale, beginning each measure alternatively with F-sharp and C.

This time the tenor soloist with the chamber orchestra takes the lead, with a picture of the crucifixion of Christ in the context of modern warfare. The choir and full orchestra are content to sing the Latin text very simply up and down the five-note scales, making more explicit Owen's link of the ancient Gospel Passion narrative to the scenario of modern warfare.

Libera me: terror and final redemption

The finale, *Libera me* ("Deliver me") starts with a slow march featuring the quintuplet funereal rhythm so prominent in the first movement. The full choir starts with a chromatic pleading in each

part, barely suggesting the G minor tonality. A sustained accelerando leads to the *sum veneris judicare* ("when Thou shall come to judge") section, where the tempo of the orchestra, but not the chorus, doubles, word-painting the word *aeterna* ("eternity") and suggesting the end of Time as we know it.

The different time relationships between the orchestra and the vocalists continue in complexity (with a 3/4 measure and, later a 2/2 measure in the orchestra to each beat of the choir), so the music is going slow and yet getting persistently faster all the time. The brass and choir recall the fanfares and lopsided march of the *Dies irae* in a terrifying tribute to the last day.

The movement's opening plea, *Libera me*, is then plaintively recalled, to build a bridge into the chamber orchestra section. In this closing Owen poem, the poet describes a hideous afterlife experience following the war, and Time, which has been traveling simultaneously at many different speeds up to this point, simply stops, as the music moves into recitative.

Two dead soldiers, once enemies, contemplate together the life that might have been had they not

fought each other in the useless war, and close with "Let us sleep now...." This initiates a very quiet, pandiatonic section suggesting A major, but the music is frozen harmonically, even as it becomes temporally fluid once again as the boys choir with organ floats in with *In paradisum*.

The vastness of heaven's spaces is beautifully portrayed by the elaborate filigree of divided choirs, soloists, orchestras, all playing many different parts together very softly and gently. The boys choir

then recalls the opening *Requiem* with the C to F-sharp tritone, and, for the third time, the choir closes *a cappella* and resolves the tritone to that most gorgeous F major chord, realizing once and for all the peace so highly sought in this monumental opus. *sf*

James DePreist conducts the Oregon Symphony and Portland Symphonic Choir in Britten's War Requiem at Schnitzer Concert Hall in Portland, May 18 - 20. See the Calendar Listings for more details.

Walter Saul is Professor of Music at Warner Pacific College in Portland, where he teaches piano, theory, and composition. He was named "Composer of the Year" in North Carolina in 1986 and in Oregon in 1990, and has earned numerous honors for his compositions. As a pianist he has performed and presented clinics extensively on both the East and West Coast.



Benjamin Britten (1913 - 1976)

J.S. BACH
St. Matthew Passion
Orchestral Suites
Brandenburg Concerto No. 1
Calvier Concerto in F
Magnificat
Peasant Cantata

BACH AND THE ROMANTICS

BEETHOVEN
Missa Solemnis

BRAHMS
German Requiem
Liebeslieder Waltzes

HANDEL
Messiah

MENDELSSOHN
Midsummer Night's Dream
Psalm 42

SCHUBERT
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Mass in G Major
Rosamunde

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