

“War Requiem”--Benjamin Britten, conductor (1963)

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Essay by Paul Jessop (guest post)*



Benjamin Britten

Like many in the 20th century, Benjamin Britten's life was defined by war even though war itself affected him little. At the entry of Britain into what became global conflict in the 1939, Britten was in the US. As a pacifist he found the atmosphere at home uncomfortable and the press reciprocated with unfavorable reviews of his work. He was initially advised to stay in the US to support British culture but later returned--registering as a conscientious objector--finally being exempted from military service. Remoteness from the war did not however spare him the impact of its consequences. With violinist Yehudi Menuhin he played concerts for concentration camp survivors. What he saw and learned affected the rest of his life.

The medieval cathedral in Coventry had been destroyed in November 1940 in a bombing raid codenamed “Moonlight Sonata,” as mere tolerance of collateral damage gave way to total war. Post-war efforts focused on housing and it was not until 1956 that work started on a new cathedral. The new construction incorporated the roofless shell of the ancient building as a garden of remembrance. Britten was commissioned to create a piece to celebrate its 1962 completion and the premiere was just days after the consecration.

Britten chose a Mass for the dead for what has become the keystone supporting his musical reputation: the War Requiem. Within the Latin liturgy, he interpolated poems by Wilfred Owen --a poet who had died in battle just before the end of the Great War and who had, in death, been recognized as documenting the human loss from conflict and tragically exemplifying it. Britten united his technical skill with his heart-felt convictions to adapt the traditional requiem form in a work that combines remembrance, regret and resentment of the cost of war. Dedicated to friends who had perished in, or consequent on, the war, it was not the first work to ring changes on the Mass for the dead. Brahms had started that movement with his German Requiem and others had included more or less humanist (and political) elements, but Britten was the first to do so with such scale and intensity.

The soloists at the premiere were selected to represent the main belligerents in the war and in a spirit of reconciliation were to include the English tenor (and partner of the composer) Peter Pears; the German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, and Russian soprano Galina Vishnevskaya. At the height of the Cold War, the Soviet administration refused Vishnevskaya a visa and her place was taken by Heather Harper. The performance was well received in spite of some pretty serious technical shortcomings--and the work was immediately recognized as one of the most important of the century.

Happily, plans to issue a recording of the premiere had been abandoned long before its imperfections had become apparent (though that BBC recording is now available). Rather,

Decca scheduled a studio recording for early in 1963 and the Soviet authorities relented to allow Vishnevskaya to participate. Britten himself conducted.

The release quickly sold in unprecedented (for a “classical” release) six-figure numbers to a public glad to be putting the war firmly behind them.

The recording was made in the old Kingsway Hall in London with its fabulous acoustics but infuriating proximity to London’s underground railway--which periodically added the infamous “Kingsway Rumble” to masters. The engineers, led by the legendary Kenneth Wilkinson, evidently avoided the worst of the influences of public transportation but these were also the early days of stereo. Marshalling such large forces into a space so that a “live” recording with enormous dynamics could be made while creating a credible stereo image with a sense of space was quite a challenge--but one that Britten embraced with the recording team, led as for most of Britten’s recordings by the pioneering John Culshaw.

The original release was on vinyl of course and the CD version has been a staple since becoming available. New high-resolution transfers have now been made and the recordings are available as downloads and Blu-ray audio discs. These are accompanied by tapes of the rehearsals for the recording recorded by Culshaw without the composer’s knowledge and presented to a reluctant Britten on his 50th birthday. Britten did not rate his own skill as a conductor but he can be heard here relentlessly teasing the sound he wanted out of the performers. “Don’t make it sound nice: it’s horrid, it’s modern music,” he tells the boys of the Highgate School Choir. And after demanding an undocumented crescendo during a quiet passage, he tells the chorus, “I have to admit the composer was right--mezzo forte is too much.” That perhaps sums up this extraordinary recording: Britten was twice right.

Recording personnel:

Galina Vishnevskaya (soprano)

Peter Pears (tenor)

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (baritone)

The Bach Choir

Highgate School Choir

London Symphony Chorus

Simon Preston (organ)

Melos Ensemble

London Symphony Orchestra

Benjamin Britten (conductor)

John Culshaw (producer)

Kenneth Wilkinson (sound engineer)

A member of the Library of Congress’s National Recording Preservation Board, Paul Jessop is a UK-based technology consultant to the music industry. As well as trying to improve classical music metadata, he takes an interest in choral music in general and the English repertoire in particular. He doesn’t sing himself but supports the English choral tradition by selling tickets in drafty churches when his wife’s choirs perform.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.