

# “War Requiem”—Benjamin Britten (1963)

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Essay by Neil Powell (guest post)\*



In October 1958, Benjamin Britten was invited to compose a substantial work for chorus and orchestra to mark the consecration of Coventry’s new cathedral, designed by Sir Basil Spence and intended to replace the building destroyed by German bombing in 1940. He accepted at once: the commission resonated deeply with Britten, a lifelong pacifist who intended to dedicate it to three friends killed in the Second World War. But by the time he began work on what was to become the “War Requiem,” in the summer of 1960, his interest in the project had been both complicated and deepened by two factors: one was his re-reading of Wilfred Owen’s war poems, which he proposed to interleave with the traditional movements of the Latin Requiem Mass; the other was the suicide of his friend Piers Dunkerley, whom Britten regarded as a delayed casualty of the war and who became the work’s fourth dedicatee. A very public commission had thus acquired a very private subtext. It was surely at this point that Britten began to think of his “War Requiem” as (in his own words) “a kind of reparation.”

At the foreground of the work are an English and a German soldier, intimately accompanied by a chamber orchestra: in keeping with his overarching theme of reconciliation, Britten decided that these two male soloists should be his partner, the tenor Peter Pears, and the German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Beyond them are the performers of the liturgical texts--soprano soloist, chorus, symphony orchestra--and, more distant still, boys’ chorus and organ. Extending his principle of international concord to embrace the Cold War, Britten wanted the Russian soprano Galina Vishnevskaya (whom he had heard perform at his 1961 Aldeburgh Festival) to sing this third solo part; the Soviet Ministry of Culture proved unpersuadable, however, and her place was superbly taken at very short notice by Heather Harper. Nor was that the only problem to affect the premiere on 30 May 1962. Britten, who had been assured of the new cathedral’s magnificence, disliked the building and found its acoustics “lunatic,” while the cathedral authorities’ refusal to allow a stage to be erected in front of the altar meant that a second conductor (Meredith Davies) had to be drafted in. Obstructive to the end, they also insisted the audience should be admitted through only one doorway, delaying the start of the performance: listeners to the BBC’s live relay heard the presenter reach the end of his script and lapse into a long expectant silence, which many found apt for the occasion.

And what an occasion it was. The playwright Peter Shaffer thought it “the most impressive and moving piece of sacred music ever to be composed in this country,” while, for Desmond Shawe-Taylor, writing in the “Sunday Times,” it was “surely a masterpiece of our time.” All the complex elements of the work’s inner life finally come together in the *Libera me*, setting Owen’s “Strange Meeting” as a dialogue for English tenor and German baritone: the poem, which envisages two soldiers from opposing armies meeting after death, ends with the words, “Let us sleep now...” and

leads into the “War Requiem’s” intensely moving invocation of eternal peace. The second part of the poem, which is also the baritone’s last solo, proved too much for Fischer-Dieskau who (Britten reported) “was so upset at the end that Peter couldn’t get him out of the choir-stalls.” “The first performance created an atmosphere of such intensity that I was completely undone,” the singer himself wrote. When, on 1 June, the work received its second performance in Coventry, the conductor Arnold Goldsborough turned to the BBC producer Richard Butt, who was now able to experience it as a member of the audience, and said: “Yes--that’s what Ben had to do.” He would never do anything remotely like it ever again.

Britten’s long-standing relationship with the Decca record label--like Stravinsky’s with Columbia--has supplied posterity with definitive recordings of a kind unimaginable to earlier composers. In fact, Decca had decided to record the “War Requiem” in 1961, even before the work was completed; they had even contemplated doing so at the first performance in Coventry Cathedral. This, as their producer John Culshaw acknowledged, would have been a serious mistake: instead, the sessions took place at Kingsway Hall, London, between 2 and 10 January 1963, with a performance at the Royal Albert Hall on the 8th. Britten had to employ considerable tact and tenacity to negotiate the participation of Fischer-Dieskau, who had an exclusive recording contract with another company, and even of Galina Vishnevskaya. The latter had never previously performed the work and, although she understood her Latin text, she spoke no English. Affronted by being placed on the balcony with the chorus, rather than with the other two soloists, she “lay down on the floor of the vestry ... and shrieked at the top of her voice”; the following morning, after her interpreter had explained the work’s structure to her, she returned and sang magnificently. The sessions were, in fact, completed ahead of schedule. When Britten left Decca, five years later, Culshaw wrote of his recordings with him: “He seems to inspire everyone around him with a different sort of single-mindedness, which is simply that of doing justice...to the music at hand.”

The “War Requiem” was released by Decca in the UK to enormous critical acclaim in May 1963 as two premium-priced LPs contained in an elegantly lettered sombre black box (stereo SET 252-3, mono MET 252-3); to that month’s edition of “The Gramophone,” Alec Robertson contributed a long and detailed review of “this very great work” in “this wonderful recording, for which one is deeply grateful and which fulfils one’s highest expectations.” Within a few months, it had sold 200,000 copies, an extraordinary achievement for an ambitious new work; the 2006 CD transfer in Decca’s “The Originals” series (475 7511) includes, on the second disc, extracts from the recording session rehearsals.

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