

**The Texts of the *War Requiem***  
**Address by Robert Shaw**  
**Written November 10, 1993**  
**Delivered January 18, 1994 at Carnegie Hall Choral Workshop**

The originality and genius of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* lie in his infusion of Wilfred Owen's World War I poetry into the history-laden Latin Mass for the Dead.

The Requiem Mass, quite apart from its religious significance, is a remarkable poetic and dramatic accomplishment. Its central poem is the *Dies Irae*, attributed to Thomas of Celano in the Thirteenth century, describing with extravagant imagery but terse poetic severity, the "Final Judgement" of Christian tradition.

And the poetry of Wilfred Owen, while tragically limited in total output, is vast in its human concern, and almost certainly without an equal among the English/American "war poets" of this century for invention and individuality.

However, given these two great texts, it still is Britten's own literary sensibilities and dramatic vision which inspire and structure the *War Requiem*. No composer of our time has been so sensitive to the values of words. Certainly no English composer has set so many distinguished English texts, lyric or narrative, and ranging over six or more centuries.

Wilfred Owen was killed in action just seven days before the armistice in November of 1918 – upon his return to the front-line trenches after being wounded and hospitalized. And Britten dedicated his score to the memory of four of his own friends killed in action in the Second World War a quarter of a century later.

But they shared a passionate conviction: that war in their time was an intolerable outrage, and a violation not only of human goodness, but of Christianity itself.

Britten's plan was simple, but remarkably effective. He gave to an adult mixed chorus and soprano soloist, accompanied by a full symphony orchestra, the complete and traditional Latin text of the *Requiem Mass*. At four points in the Mass these adult voices are joined by the voices of boys, singing from a distance (or another area) Latin texts peculiarly appropriate to the innocence of children.

But at nine eloquent moments – philosophically appropriate and profoundly disturbing – Britten interrupts the sequence of the Mass to let Owen's poetry shine through, in its native, living English, as commentary – or even contradiction. These words are given to a tenor and a baritone, accompanied by a chamber orchestra -- and by the end of the work we realize that they also represent an English and a German soldier, and that both are dead.

1. Early in the *Requiem* the choir sings: "Unto thee all flesh shall come." -And the English soldier interrupts: "What bells for these who die as cattle?"
  
2. At the beginning of the Dies Irae the brasses announce the "Day of Judgement." -And the German soldier responds wistfully,
 

"Bugles sang, ... but only bugles answered..."

Voices of boys were by the riverside"...

but "Sleep mothered them."

3. With the *Rex Tremendae* the choir laments its fear of standing at last before the "King of awful majesty." -But the soldiers brag and boast together -- with patently false bravado:

"Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death."

4. With the *Recordare* and the *Confutatis* the chorus pleads, as sheep, not to be numbered among the damned – while Owen's poetry addresses the awesome cannon of World War I: "...May God damn you, and cut you from our soul!"

5. At the *Lacrymosa* the Latin prayer asks that on the day of resurrection... "This newly departed soul 'arise with the saved". -And the English soldier sings haltingly of his comrade, just now killed:

"Move him into the sun... if anything can rouse him... the kind old sun will know."

6. With the *Offertorium* the choir recalls the glorious promises of Jehovah to Abraham that the "souls of the faithful" ... will be led "into the holy light." -And the soldiers join in a bitter, satirical revision of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, in which Abraham ignores Jehovah's command,

"and slays his son, and half the seed of Europe one by one."

7. With the *Sanctus* the orchestra and chorus join in flourishes and shouts of "Hosanna in the highest!" -And at this holiest of moments the composer and poet resign themselves to an inconsolable denial of the Christian theological assurances of immortality.

"Shall life renew these bodies? – When I do ask white Age... he saith not so..."

8. At the *Agnus Dei* the choir chants softly its litany: "O Lamb of God... grant us peace," and the tenor interjects, recalling a roadside crucifix beside a French farm road, in which the Lamb of God has a leg shot off – a victim of the scribes and priests – of the State and the Church – which condone wars.

9. And, finally, in the *Libera Me*, as the choir for the last and most terrifying time pictures the Judgement Day and falls back trembling and silent, the two soldiers meet. Symbolically the place of meeting is a trench, a tunnel, a dugout. The reality is the grave (-or Hell):

"I am the enemy you killed, my friend.

Let us sleep now..."

-----

William Plummer, in the liner notes to Britten's own recording, writes: "There seems to be general agreement that the *War Requiem* is the profoundest work Britten produced. It has been received as a work of vast scope, in which the composer, by giving it all the technical resources and emotional power at his command, so transcends the personal that he seems to gather together the sufferings, and to probe the potential goodness, of all humankind."

A whole flock of recent criticisms attest to the powers of a second or third hearing.

-From the second and third decade of reviews:

"The blazing sincerity of feeling on the part of both Britten and World War I poet Wilfred Owen, whose poetry forms a counterpoint to the Latin Requiem Mass text, is still overpowering... Purely as a document of compassion and protest, this remains a major artistic statement."

Robert Finn, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

[The *Requiem* is] "almost certainly Britten's most profound work... though grandiose in size, deeply reflective and penetrating in expressiveness... The impact is emotional, not cerebral... one of his most original works in actual combination of sounds... a sublime achievement."

Harriett Johnson, *New York Post*

"If among all works of art there is a more eloquent expression of loathing for war than the *War Requiem*, I don't know about it."

George W. Kimball, *Rochester Times Union*

"The most convincing musical sermon yet written on the repulsive futility of human sacrifice."

Stephen Hammer, *Rochester Daily Record*

So, of the major works of music created since World War II, it is doubtful if any has made so profound, immediate and universal an impression.

Audiences have wept, critics in most instances have surrendered to its impact, and the work has been found on the news and editorial pages as well as among the musical reviews.

It has not found universal favor however among avant-garde composers or like-minded critics. It has been accused of being "eclectic" – a paste-job of past composers' creativity; of being "contrived" and "formalized" – both as to musical content and calculated effect.

To a certain extent such evaluation is understandable. A great deal of the choral writing shows enormously the influence of the Verdi *Requiem*. Except for the “Lux aeterna,” which Britten saves for a giant coda, the *War Requiem* borrows Verdi's basic textual and formal groupings for its six main movements. In some instances his writing amounts almost to a personal paraphrase.

For example –

The opening *Requiem aeternam* begins with the *pianissimo* unison chanting of the chorus.

The *Dies Irae* has the fanfares which Verdi shared with, or derived from Berlioz, and almost identical splashes of choral/brass rhetoric in a disturbing and animated tempo.

The *Lacrymosa* recalls inevitably, by tempo and by texture, the slow, plaintive lyricism of Verdi's *Lacrymosa*.

The formal similarities continue with:

The *Quam olim Abrahae*: a brisk *fugato*.

The *Agnus Dei*: a slow, simple hymn-like unison tune.

And the *Libera Me*, polyphonic and dramatic, recalling the fanfares of the *Dies Irae* and enclosing a soaring soprano solo.

But Britten never felt obliged – so far as I know – to invent an absolutely novel and solitary musical language. If the Cages and Stockhausens are true prophets of a new musical order, then Britten may be hopelessly lapped and doomed to be forgotten.

It is worth noting in passing, however, that Bach did not invent a new and personal language – nor Haydn, nor Mozart, – nor indeed, almost anyone until the strange psycho-social compulsions of our century: of which Stravinsky writes in his *Poetics of Music*:

"It just so happens that our contemporary epoch offers us the example of a musical culture that is day by day losing the sense of continuity and the taste for a common language.

"Individual caprice and intellectual anarchy, which tend to control the world in which we live, isolate the artist from his fellow-artists and condemn him to appear as a monster in the eyes of the public; a monster of originality, inventor of his own language, of his own vocabulary, and of the apparatus of his art. The use of already employed materials and of established forms is usually forbidden him. So he comes to the point of speaking an idiom without relation to the world that listens to him. His art becomes truly unique, in the sense that it is incommunicable and shut off on every side.

"Times have changed since the day when Bach, Handel and Vivaldi quite evidently spoke the same language which their disciples repeated after them, each one unwittingly transforming this language according to his own personality. The day when Haydn, Mozart and Cimarosa echoed each other in works that served their successors as models, successors such as Rossini, who was fond of repeating in so touching

a way that Mozart had been the delight of his youth, the desperation of his maturity and the consolation of his old age."

I asked Morton Gould some years ago about avant-garde concert life in New York: pianists immobile before a keyboard for 6 minutes of composed silence, cellists hanging from balconies in mini-bikinis, 100 metronomes set at different speeds and simultaneously released -- the last to run down determining the length of the composition: "Robert," he said, "a lot of it goes a little ways." Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge -- asked why she had put on the series of avant-garde concerts in Washington's Art Galleries -- replied, "Young man, I may be deaf, but I'm not blind!"

So the *War Requiem* lies somewhere between Palestrina and Stravinsky, and not far from Bartok in musical language -- but within only two decades, it is less and less difficult for us to perform, and -- more importantly -- for both performer and listener it packs an enormous emotional wallop. It communicates.

-----

It was written for the consecration of the rebuilt Cathedral of St. Michael in Coventry in the spring of 1962.

This, roughly, is its thirty-first Anniversary and for Owen's text, the seventy-fifth Anniversary, and, of course, the eightieth anniversary of the birth of Benjamin Britten, in what begins to emerge as nearly an entire century of uninterrupted war.

-----

The Mass, of course, is a social as well as a religious phenomenon.

The company of believers gathers together to consider and to celebrate the fact of death – which is also to say "the facts of life."

For these are the ultimate questions. In a sense, there are no others.

Anyone who has held the hand of a dying friend – has been lost in the No Man's Land of IS and IS NOT.

And Birth is its own mystery: and a biological/religious/sociological/political/legal conundrum and controversy as well. At what moment does the embryo – or incipient animal – become "a living soul?"

Therefore –

Behind the elaborate and codified petition for the preservation – for the "salvation of the human soul, the Mass is a somewhat grim – though mostly unspoken – celebration of survival: we the "present company" (those worshipping – for the moment) are "excepted."

William Plomer, also a British poet and librettist-collaborator with Britten writes: "Owen was only 25, but his poems were profound, and are profoundly disturbing. They made no appeal to the accepted opinions of his time about poetry or war. They were not about what soldiers gloriously did, but what they

had unforgivably been made to do to others, and to suffer themselves. Owen did not accept what he called 'the old Lie' that it was necessarily glorious – or even fitting – to die for one's own or any other country, or that a country was necessarily or perhaps ever justified in making the kind of war he knew. As he saw and experienced it, war appeared as a hellish outrage on a huge scale against humanity, and a violation of Christianity. He shared the destiny of millions on both sides, but he had the sensibility to see what war now really meant, and the power to explain it.

"I am not concerned with poetry! My subject is War," Owen wrote, "and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity."

Into his poetry went the pity, not of a detached outsider or a sentimentalist, nor simply that of a humane officer for his men whose lives he cannot save and to whom he cannot hold out hope, but the pity of an imaginative man for fellow-sufferers unable to speak for themselves to later generations.

"I suppose I can endure cold and fatigue and face-to-face death as well as another," he wrote to Siegfried Sassoon, his friend and inspiration; "but extra for me there is the universal pervasion of Ugliness. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language, and nothing but foul, even from one's own mouth (for all are devil-ridden) – everything unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dugouts all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most glorious. But to sit with them all day, all night – and a week later to come back and find them still sitting there in motionless groups, THAT is what saps the 'soldierly spirit'."

"Your letter reached me at the exact moment it was most needed -- when we had come far enough out of the line to feel the misery of Rest and Recreation; and I had been seized with writer's cramp after making

out my casualty reports... I cannot say I suffered anything, having let my brain grow dull. That is to say, my nerves are in perfect order.

"It is a strange truth: that your "Counter-Attack" frightened me much more than the real one: though the boy by my side, shot through the head, lay on top of me, soaking my shoulder, for half an hour.

"Catalogue? Photograph? Can you photograph the crimson-hot iron as it cools from the smelting? That is what Jones' blood looked like, and felt like. My senses are charred.

"I shall feel again as soon as I dare, but now I must not. I don't even take the cigarette out of my mouth when I write 'Deceased' over their letters."

"Plomer continues: "War has been the central horror of European history in this century; and Owen, mourning young lives tormented and treated as expendable, was to speak as directly to mourners in 1945 as to those of 1918; furthermore, since the fear of war is now universal, his elegies speak to us directly. They are a warning.

"To nobody grieving for the deaths of friends in the War which broke out again more than twenty years after his death did Owen speak more directly than to Britten. And since there is no motif more predominant and recurrent in Britten's works than that of innocence outraged and ruined, what could be more natural than that Britten, deeply moved by Owen's poetry, should be no less moved by the fate of the man who wrote it, his youth, his promise, his passionate tenderness, his rare talent cut off by the senseless violence of war? Being so moved, Britten's impulse was to set Owen's most memorable poems for singing. It was a sure instinct that prevented him from setting them separately, or as a sequence. Certainly they have a

kind of monumental nobility that enables them to stand alone; but he saw, as nobody else could have seen, that they could stand beside the sacred liturgy of the Mass for the Dead, and, musically, be combined with it."

Let us now turn to Britten's libretto, and examine that combination.

I am going to suggest that all of us read together – in a quiet, collaborative, undemonstrative murmur – the traditional Latin verses... with an occasional glance at the parallel translation.

Then, if I may, I will call your attention to those lines which triggered Britten's selection of Owen's verses. I shall read them aloud... with your silent complicity, and then, simply add those things which occur to me concerning the conjunction and values therein.

### I. Requiem Aeternam

#### CHORUS:

(ALL) Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine  
et lux perpetua luceat eis.

(RS) Grant them eternal rest, O Lord:  
and let everlasting light shine on them.

*(Note the poetic value in having the noun and verb share the same linguistic root - "lux...luceat" vs. "light shine") (Latin & romance vs. English German)*

#### BOY ' S CHOIR :

Te decet hymnus, Deus in Sion;  
et tibi reddetur votum in Jerusalem;  
exaudi orationem meam, ad te omnis caro veniet.

To Thee, O God, praise is meet in Sion,  
and unto Thee shall the vow be performed in Jerusalem.  
Hearken unto my prayer: unto Thee shall all flesh come.

*(Note that the undisturbed purity of Boys allow them to sing this Hymn.)*

## TENOR SOLO:

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 from prayers or 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 their eyes  
 Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.  
 The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;  
 Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds,  
 And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

"... Hearken unto my prayer: unto thee shall all flesh come."

"What passing bells for these who die as cattle?"

In addition to the myriad disturbing fragmentary associations that surround this juxtaposition – cattle-bells, man-made flesh, man-made meat, butcher-boys, boys butchered – in addition to these connotations, here within the first few minutes of this extended work, is squarely placed its rather total argument, titled (by Owen) "Anthem for doomed youth."

Let me call your attention to the verbal elements of assonance, alliteration and the like – those matters of speech which exalt meaning with mystery and music.

Lines three and four bring us not only the alliteration of "rifles' rapid rattle" but, even more importantly, the inner onomatopoeic alliteration of stuttering, rattle, patter."

Lines five and six set forth "no mockeries for them" or "voice of mourning." Obviously, we have the "m" alliterations, though they are reversed. Perhaps more significantly we have a "v" sound poised against a voiced "th" sound. Both of these are voiced consonants and both made at the forward wall of the mouth and teeth. The effect in consonants is similar to Emily Dickinson's "half-rhymes." Repeat a few times, "mockeries for them... voices of mourning." Concentrate upon the alliteration, the half- or false-alliteration, and the reverse orders. These seem to me moments wherein music and mystery enter.

Line twelve brings us a beautiful play upon robbing "pallor" to provide a "pall."

Consider the last few words in each of lines thirteen and fourteen: "tenderness of silent minds... drawing downn of blinds." Note the parallelism of "n" sounds (7 "n" sounds in 8 words). These certainly contribute enormously to the poem's wistful, saddened *diminuendo*.

#### CHORUS:

Kyrie eleison,  
Christe eleison,  
Kyrie eleison.

Lord, have mercy upon us,  
Christ, have mercy upon us,  
Lord, have mercy upon us.

II. Dies Irae

## CHORUS:

(ALL) 1	Dies irae, dies illa, Solvat saeculum in favilla, Teste David cum Sibylla.		The Day of Wrath, that day shall dissolve the world in ashes, as witnesseth David and the Sibyl.
2	Quantus tremor est futurus, Quando iudex est venturus, Cuncta stricte discussurus!		What trembling shall there be when the Judge shall come who shall thresh out all thoroughly!
3	Tuba mirum spargens sonum Per sepulchra regionum Coget omnes ante thronum.	(RS)	The trumpet, scattering a wondrous sound through the tombs of all lands, shall drive all unto the Throne.
4	Mors stupebit et natura, Cum resurget creatura, Judicanti responsura.		Death and Nature shall be astounded when the creature shall rise to answer to the Judge.

## BARITONE SOLO:

Bugles sang, saddening the evening air,  
And bugles answered, sorrowful to hear.

Voices of boys were by the river-side.  
Sleep mothered them; and left the twilight sad.  
The shadow of the morrow weighed on men.

Voices of old despondency resigned,  
Bowed by the shadow of the morrow, slept.

"BUGLES SANG..."

It is of course a "natural" to couple the *Tuba Mirum*, the "wondrous trumpet," with "Bugles sang."  
But by the extraordinary collaboration of Britten and Owen in one moment we have the "Tuba Mirum"  
calling, even "driving" all unto the Throne; and immediately following bugles are calling, are "singing," but  
only bugles answer, "sorrowful to hear." The voices of boys who used to be by the riverside can never again  
respond.

During the first several readings I found this poem a bit obscure. I could not place the boys "by the riverside" in their time. When were they by the riverside... and what time is now?

The poem is incomplete, probably about half of its intended duration; and some of the subsequent lines, even though incomplete, dispel some of the obscurity. Lines nine and ten read:

"( Blank ) the dying tone  
Of receding voices that will not return."

Almost certainly the poet is recalling the voices of his and others' youth, voices of friends now "mothered" by the sleep of death – "receding voices that will not return." The "voices of old despondency" are those which remain, "bowed by the shadow of the morrow," who are able to sleep only the sleep of fatigue and resignation, knowing that sooner rather than later the more final sleep will also "mother" them (including Owen himself...).

Again, note the beautiful rhymes, "air ... hear, side ... sad." Recall, also, the sensitive contrast between the "wondrous trumpet" of the *Dies Irae* which wakes the dead and this sad song, answered only by further sorrow.

#### SOPRANO SOLO AND CHORUS:

(ALL) 5 Liber scriptus proferetur,  
In quo totum continetur,  
Unde mundus judicetur.

A written book shall be brought forth  
in which shall be contained all for which  
the world shall be judged.

6 Judex ergo cum sedebit,  
Quidquid latet, apparebit:  
Nil inultum remanebit.

And therefore when the Judge shall sit,  
whatsoever is hidden shall be manifest;  
and naught shall remain unavenged.

7 Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?  
Quem patronum rogaturus,  
Cum vix justus sit securus?

(RS) What shall I say in my misery?  
Whom shall I ask to be my advocate,  
when scarcely the righteous may be without fear?

8 Rex tremendae majestatis  
 Qui salvandos salvas gratis,  
 Salva me, fons pietatis.

King of awful majesty,  
 who freely savest the redeemed;  
 save me, O fount of mercy.

TENOR AND BARITONE SOLOS:

Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death;  
 Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland, --  
 Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.  
 We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath, --  
 Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.  
 He's spat at us with bullets and he's coughed  
 Shrapnel. We chorussed when he sang aloft;  
 We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.

Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!  
 We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.  
 No soldier's paid to kick against his powers.  
 We laughed, knowing that better men would come.  
 And greater wars; when each proud fighter brags  
 He wars on Death -- for Life; not men -- for flags.

The essence of this poem and its placement obviously is its bravado – satirical, cynical and – finally – sorrowful. In a Hallmark world, cynicism is not highly rated. But we may need to be reminded that it is not the lack of sensitivity which makes a cynic, but a strong sense of vulnerability.

Lin Yutang wrote in 1935 in *My Country and My People*:

"To learn tolerance, one needs a little sorrow and a little cynicism of the Taoist type. True cynics are often the kindest of people, for they see the hollowness of life, and from the realization of that hollowness is generated a kind of cosmic pity.

"Pacifism, too, is a matter of high human understanding. If man could learn to be a little more cynical, he would also be less inclined toward warfare. That is perhaps why all intelligent men are cowards.

The Chinese are the world's worst fighters because they are an intelligent race, backed and nurtured by Taoist cynicism and the Confucian emphasis on harmony as an ideal of life... An average Chinese child knows that by fighting one gets killed or maimed, whether it be an individual or nation."

It is entirely possible, of course, that the West by now has sufficiently "oriented" the East in the virtues and devices of killing to provide its own destruction.

—Back to Hail fellow - well-met, Hell-fellow, wail-met. Note in lines four, five and six the terms borrowed from the first-hand experience with poison gas: "the thick green odour of his breath ... sniffed ... wept ... spat ... coughed."

Compare, for example, the latter half of his poem entitled "Dulce et Decorum Est."

.....

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling

And floundering like a man in fire or lime. –

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

If, in some smothering dreams, you too could pace

Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,

His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood

Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
 Bitter as the cud  
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, –  
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
 Pro patria mori.

#### I. Anglicize:

.....

My friend, you would not tell in such high mood  
 To youth, susceptible to your effrontery,  
 The old Lie: sweet it is and very good  
 To die for country.

The most pathetic of all in "Out there....," it seems to me, is the line "but our courage didn't writhe;" paralysis, choking and spasm omnipresent, except in our will... or so we brag.

"We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe" -- a bitter turn of metaphor, and certainly intended pun. ("Close-shave" courtesy of the "Grim Reaper")

"We laughed at him, we leagued with him" – a nice parallelism between "laughed" and "leagued," but the line reads more richly if you can point up the disparate "at" and "with" without losing forward motion.

"No soldier's paid to kick against his powers" – of course not, soldiers are paid to greet him "old chum;" soldiers are paid to die.

The last three lines are a bit obscured, I feel, by punctuation:

"We laughed, knowing that better men would come,  
 And greater wars, when each proud fighter (then will) brag  
 He wars on Death – for Life, not men – for flags."

### CHORUS:

(ALL) 9 Recordare Jesu pie, Quod sum causa tuae viae: Ne me perdas illa die.	Remember, merciful Jesu, that I am the cause of Thy journey, lest Thou lose me in that day.
10 Quaerens me: sedisti lassus: Redemisti crucem passus: Tantus labor non sit cassus.	Seeking me didst Thou sit weary: Thou didst redeem me, suffering the cross: let not such labor be frustrated.
11 (Verse omitted)	
12 Ingemisco, tanquam reus: Culpa rubet vultus meus: Supplicanti parce Deus.	I groan as one guilty; my face flushes at my sin. Spare, O God, me, Thy supplicant.
13 Qui Mariam absolvisti, Et latronem exaudisti, Mihi quoque spem dedisti.	Thou who didst absolve Mary, and didst hear the thief's prayer, hast given hope to me also.
14 Inter oves locum praesta, Et ab haedis me sequestra, Statuens in parte dextra.	Give me place among Thy sheep and put me apart from the goats, setting me on the right hand.
15 Confutatis maledictis, Flammis acribus addictis, Voca me cum benedictis.	(RS) When the damned are confounded and devoted to sharp flames, call Thou me with the blessed.
16 Oro supplex et acclinis, Cor contritum quasi cinis Gere curam mei finis.	I pray, kneeling in supplication, a heart contrite as ashes, take Thou mine end into thy care.

## BARITONE SOLO:

(read twice: 1st - Six lines; 2nd - Complete)

\* Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm,

\* Great gun towering toward Heaven, about to curse;

3 Sway steep against them, and for years rehearse

4 Huge imprecations like a blasting charm!

\* Reach at that arrogance which needs thy harm,

\* And beat it down before its sins grow worse;

7 Spend our resentment, cannon, yea, disburse

8 Our gold in shapes of flame, our breaths in storm.

9 Yet, for men's sakes, whom thy vast malison

10 Must wither innocent of enmity,

11 Be not withdrawn, dark arm, thy spoilure done,

12 Safe to the bosom of our prosperity.

\* But when thy spell be cast complete and whole,

\* May God curse thee, and cut thee from our soul!

(\*B.B.: lines 1, 2, 5, 6, 13, 14)

The chief relationship between the Latin and Owen here is Britten's sensibility to the imagery of "cursing." Obviously, it is the center of Owen's poem: "Great gun... about to curse!" However for the moment you appear necessary, once your malignancy is accomplished, "May God damn you! and cut you from our soul!"

The association with the Latin is made clearer by a better translation of "Confutatis maledictis." "Male-diction" ill - to speak; to curse. Therefore, "When the accursed are confounded and adjudged to sharp flames..."

Notice, also, the parallel imagery between the Latin "flammis acribus" -- sharp flames -- and Owen's "shapes of flame" in line eight.

I find lines nine and ten provocative for two reasons: first, the use of the word "malison." We are well acquainted with the word "benison," from the Latin "bene" – well; (bene-diction: to say well); therefore, a blessing. The suffix "son" is both Middle English and Old French in different spellings. It might well come from roots which give us words like sound and sonar. If so, then as "benison" is a blessing, "malison" is a cursing.

The second interest for me in these lines is that this "blasting, storming, flaming, cursing" must ultimately "wither" (burn) the enmity out of all men, spoiler as well as spoiled.

This is only one of Owen's poems – to my knowledge – which implies a partisan "right or wrong" to that war. In the main his subject, as he states over and over again, is "war and the pity of war, the pity war distills." It is all wrong. There is no right.

But in this poem, in lines five and six, he says to the "great gun... about to curse," "Reach at that arrogance which sorely needs thy harm, and beat it down before its sins grow worse..." Taken in its entire context, one can only assume, I think, that the "arrogance" which he had in mind, for the moment, at least, was Prussian. It could be a partisan line.

I'm not really sure of this. Lines seven and eight are so utterly cynical, and lines thirteen and fourteen so impassioned, that it's possible that he may have been totally satirical throughout; that is, he feeds us a crumb of political expediency, leads us to the brink of a justification for war, only so that it may crumble beneath the weight of our own arrogance.

For Britten – and this is the stinger – gives the entire poem to the baritone soloist who, in the great final "Strange Meeting," turns out to be the German soldier!

-----

SOPRANO SOLO AND CHORUS: (Returns and concludes the *Dies Irae*)

(ALL) 17	Dies irae, dies illa, Solvat saeculum in favilla, Teste David cum Sibylla.	(RS)	The Day of Wrath, that day shall dissolve the world in ashes, as witnesseth David and the Sibyl.
18	Quantus tremor est futurus, Quando iudex est venturus, Cuncta stricte discussurus!		What trembling shall there be when the Judge shall come who shall thresh out all thoroughly!
19	Lacrimosa dies illa, Qua resurget ex favilla, Judicandus homo reus, Huic ergo parce Deus.		Lamentable is that day on which guilty man shall arise from the ashes to be judged. Spare then this one, O God.

## TENOR SOLO:

Move him into the sun --  
 Gently its touch awoke him once,  
 At home, whispering of fields unsown.  
 Always it woke him, even in France,  
 Until this morning and this snow.  
 If anything might rouse him now  
 The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds, --  
 Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.  
 Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,  
 Full-nerved -- still warm -- too hard to stir?  
 Was it for this the clay grew tall?  
 --O what made fatuous sunbeams toil  
 To break earth's sleep at all?

"MOVE HIM INTO THE SUN..." surely is one of the most beautiful and touching of Owen's lyrics.

Its linking with the *Missa de Profunctis* is at two points. Immediately preceding the poem are the final couplets of the *Dies Irae* (notable also because the entire *Dies Irae* with the exception of these concluding four lines has been in three-line verses; the two couplets bring a severity and finality to the whole poem). "Lacrimosa dies illa..." – "lamentable is the day on which guilty man shall rise from the ashes... Spare then this one, O God."

The first point is that resurrection, a reawakening, is the common theme. On the one hand "man shall rise...;" on the other, "If anything might rouse him now, the kind old sun will know ... was it for this the clay grew tall... broke the earth's sleep?"

The second point is that the Latin speaks very specifically, "Spare then this one...;" and, similarly, the poet also takes as his point of departure a very specific occurrence, this here-now boy, just-now dead.

Note the poet's equation of sunlight with life. -And how succinctly documented by evolutionary recall in the second stanza. (I'm trying for the moment to remember my "beginnings of life" lessons. Was it that the "star" finally cooled enough to support life, or was it that the sun "woke, once, the clays of a cold star?") Whatever the evolutionary sequence, it was certainly not for a moment such as this that the "clay grew tall," that mud became man.

"O what made fatuous sunbeams toil

To break earth's sleep at all?"

Note the wonderful rhymes: Sun, sown, once, France  
snow, now, know

Seeds, sides, star, stir  
tall, toil, all

(Repeat poem) Yes

We conclude together:

**CHORUS:**

Pie Jesu Domine,  
Dona eis requiem. Amen.

Merciful Lord Jesu:  
give them peace. Amen.

III. Offertorium

## BOYS' CHOIR:

(ALL) Domine Jesu Christe, Rex gloriae, (RS)  
 libera animas omnium fidelium  
 defunctorum de poenis inferni,  
 et de profundo lacu:  
 libera eas de ore leonis,  
 ne absorbeat eas tartarus,  
 ne cadant in obscurum.

O Lord Jesus Christ, King of Glory,  
 deliver the souls of all the faithful departed  
 from the pains of hell  
 and from the depths of the pit:  
 deliver them from the lion's mouth,  
 that hell devour them not,  
 that they fall not into darkness.

## CHORUS:

Sed signifer sanctus Michael  
 repraesentet eas in lucem sanctam:  
 quam olim Abrahae promisisti,  
 et semini ejus

But let the standard-bearer Saint Michael  
 bring them into the holy light:  
 which, of old, Thou didst promise unto Abraham  
 and his seed.

## BARITONE AND TENOR SOLOS:

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,  
 And took the fire with him, and a knife.  
 And as they sojourned both of them together,  
 Isaac the first-born spake and said, My father,  
 Behold the preparations, fire and iron,  
 But where the lamb for this burnt offering?  
 Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,  
 8 - And builded parapets and trenches there,  
 And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.  
 When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,  
 Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,  
 Neither do anything to him. Behold,  
 A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;  
 Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.

(- WAIT -)

But the old man would not so, and slew his son,--  
 And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

And then it goes on:

**BOYS' CHOIR:**

Hostias et preces tibi  
Domine laudis offerimus:  
tu suscipe pro animabus illis,  
quarum hodie memoriam facimus:  
fac eas, Domine,  
de morte transire ad vitam.

We offer unto Thee, O Lord,  
sacrifices of prayer and praise:  
do Thou receive them for the souls of those  
whose memory we this day recall:  
make them, O Lord,  
to pass from death unto life.

**CHORUS:**

Quam olim Abrahae promisisti,  
et semini ejus.

Which of old Thou didst promise unto Abraham  
and his seed.

This, of course, is the most "natural" of all the linkings: "As once thou promised to Abraham and to his seed" to "So Abram rose... " and disposed of his own as well as "half the seed of Europe, one by one." -But even this is not the entire linking; for it is immediately followed by "Hostias et preces tibi...", we offer unto Thee sacrifices with prayer. Note that these sacrifices are also "animal" -- human animal, humanimal.

The obvious linking is a natural verbal and narrative association, contrived between liturgy and poet by the composer: the story of Abraham and Isaac. The deeper linking somehow includes all of us as participants in that "sacrifice." What began as a parable, with the *Hostias* now infuses the liturgical service with "offerings, sacrifices and prayers;" and however "concert" versus "worship" our participation may be, we are present at the shedding of today's blood.

Britten makes it doubly sure that we understand. After the parable of "the old men and the young" (Owen's title) and after the *Hostias* (sung in our behalf by more innocent voices) – after the parable has been

completely turned upside down from its original Biblical telling – we are once again allotted the music for "Quam olim Abrahae" (note well!) completely upside down, melody inverted, dynamics reversed!

Involvement and responsibility are the price of understanding. It's easier to seek an addiction which obliterates, booze or main-line. Owen carries us even one step beyond Britten's involvement with Abram. Line eight has those who understand building their own "parapets and trenches;" for narrative purposes -- to catch Isaac's blood; but for Owen's purposes – whole dugouts full. Pick a war from I to X.

#### IV. Sanctus

##### SOPRANO SOLO AND CHORUS:

<p>(ALL) Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus          Dominus Deus Sabaoth.          Pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua          Hosanna in excelsis.</p> <p>Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domine.          Hosanna in excelsis.</p>	<p>(RS) Holy, holy, holy          Lord God of Sabaoth.          Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory.          Hosanna in the highest.</p> <p>Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.          Hosanna in the highest.</p>
---	---

##### BARITONE SOLO:

After the blast of lightning from the East.  
 The flourish of loud clouds, the Chariot Throne;  
 After the drums of Time have rolled and ceased,  
 And by the bronze west long retreat is blown,

Shall life renew these bodies? Of a truth  
 All death will He annul, all tears assuage?--  
 Fill the void veins of Life again with youth,  
 And wash, with an immortal water, Age?

When I do ask white Age he saith not so:  
 "My head hangs weighed with snow."  
 And when I hearken to the Earth, she saith:  
 "My fiery heart shrinks, aching. It is death.  
 Mine ancient scars shall not be glorified,  
 Nor my titanic tears, the sea, be dried."

This is the most dense and grave of the poems in the *War Requiem*. Alongside the lyric fluency of "Move him into the sun," it is lumpy and knotted. Alongside "Out there we've walked quite friendly up to Death..." and "So Abram rose..." it has not even the laughter of cynicism or satire. After its matted, unrubbed honesty, "One ever hangs..." comes like Lenten doggerel.

Its apparent link is the visual ecstasy of "Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus – the sublime eruption of heavenly light – with "the blast of lightning from the East." I say apparent because, though Britten has taken the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* very seriously musically, and developed them at some length with flashes of brilliance and shadows of tenderness, what has happened textually is that he has linked the *Sanctus* imagery to the first line of Owen's poem in order to introduce a most uncompromising, unpalatable (to Christian traditionalism) and hope-forsaken sermon on Life and Death.

This is a brave despair to raise in the holiest moment of Christian liturgy. And the lines betray this weight. The poem rather lurches along. Neither in word nor rhythm is it fluent. Almost all the lines are loaded with thick nouns and gigantic verbs. Out of one hundred fourteen words, ninety-four are words of one syllable. This in itself need not yield gnarled density if the poet were content to waste a few of them (as in "One ever hangs...")

Certainly in terms of theological argument this poem would find its proper environment at a point of denial of one of the "resurrection" references. That in the *Dies Irae*, however, was beautifully handled by "Move him gently..." Moreover, it was too early for this summation. And, once one has begun the "In paradisum..." it is much too late. Were one to consider putting this poem as epilogue -- one could not have

written the mass at all. Actually, the *Hostias* offers the most direct confrontation: "Make them, Lord, to change from death into life" with "It is death! Mine ancient scars shall not be glorified." And Britten has Owen say it just as soon after that as he can.

It had to be said, if Owen was to be a part of the *War Requiem*; and "I am the enemy you killed, my friend... " had to be saved to the last. Perhaps there is some significance in saying, "It is death," at this holiest and most mystical moment. Certainly there is no equivocation. Neither Age nor Earth, "snow" nor "fiery heart" credits immortality. "Some say the world will end with fire... some with ice... " For Owen, too, "either would suffice."

(Repeat poem) Yes

#### V. Agnus Dei

TENOR SOLO:

(RS) One ever hangs where shelled roads part.  
       In this war He too lost a limb,  
 But His disciples hide apart;  
       And now the soldiers bear with Him.

(ALL) CHORUS:

Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi,  
 dona eis requiem.

Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world,  
 grant them rest.

(RS) Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,  
       And in their faces there is pride  
 That they were flesh-marked by the Beast  
       By whom the gentle Christ's denied.

(ALL) CHORUS:

Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi,  
 dona eis requiem.

Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world,  
 grant them rest.

(RS) The scribes on all the people shove  
 And bawl allegiance to the state,  
 But they who love the greater love  
 Lay down their life; they do not hate.

(ALL) CHORUS:

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,  
 dona eis requiem sempiternam.

Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world,  
 grant them rest eternal.

Dona nobis pacem.

Grant us peace.

This is a logical, "occasional" choice for linkage with the *Agnus Dei*. It appears to have been written for an actual roadside crucifix near Ancre ("At a calvary near Ancre" is the title in his book of published poems). Undoubtedly the Jesus figure on the cross had lost a leg in action.

The metaphor sounds as though the poem came quickly; the priests and the scribes, church and state -- ever enemies of the Lamb of God; peace, to be found only in self-sacrifice.

One of Owen's letters from the hospital on the Somme (before his convalescence in England and final return to the Front) can be quoted at this point:

"Already I have comprehended a light which never will filter into the dogma of any national church; namely, that one of Christ's essential commands was: Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonor and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be killed; but do not kill. It may be a chimerical and ignominious principle, but there it is. It can only be ignored; and I think pulpit professionals are ignoring it very skillfully and successfully indeed... Am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience? (In War himself).

... Christ is literally in "no man's land." There men often hear his voice: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for a friend." Is it spoken in English only and French? I do not believe so. Thus you see how pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism."

I find this more concentrated, intense and moving than the verses which Britten selected; but the others make their point, and a natural three-part form as well -- and perhaps the most tear-provoking moment in the entire work.

### VI. Libera Me (final movement)

#### SOPRANO SOLO AND CHORUS:

<p>(ALL) Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna in die illa tremenda: Quando coeli movendi sunt et terra: Dum veneris judicare saeculum per ignem. Tremens factus sum ego, et timeo, dum discussio venerit, atque ventura ira. Quando coeli movendi sunt et terra.</p> <p>Dies illa, dies irae, calamitatis et miseriae, dies magna et amara valde. Libera me, Domine...</p>	<p>(RS) Deliver me, O Lord, from death eternal in that fearful day: When the heavens and the earth shall be shaken: When Thou shalt come to judge the world by fire. I am in fear and trembling till the sifting be upon us, and the wrath to come. When the heavens and the earth shall be shaken.</p> <p>O that day, that day of wrath, of calamity and misery, a great day and exceeding bitter. Deliver me, O lord...</p>
---	---

#### TENOR SOLO:

- 1 It seemed that out of battle I escaped  
2 Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped  
3 Through granites which titanic wars had groined.  
4 Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,  
5 Too fast in thought (or death) to be bestirred.  
6 Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared  
7 With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,  
8 Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.  
9 And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.  
10 "Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn."

## BARITONE SOLO:

- 11 "None," said the other, "save the undone years,  
 - 12 The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,  
 13 Was my life also; I went hunting wild  
 14 After the wildest beauty in the world.
- 15 For by my glee might many men have laughed,  
 16 And of my weeping something had been left,  
 17 Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,  
 - 18 The pity of war, the pity war distilled.  
 19 Now men will go content with what we spoiled.  
 20 Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.  
 - 21 They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,  
 - 22 None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.  
 23 Miss we the march of this retreating world  
 24 Into vain citadels that are not walled.  
 25 Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels  
 26 I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,  
 27 Even from the wells we sunk too deep for war,  
 28 Even the sweetest wells that ever were.
- 29 I am the enemy you killed, my friend.  
 30 I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned  
 31 Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.  
 32 I parried; but my hands were loath and cold."

## BOTH:

- 33 "Let us sleep now..."

(ALL CONTINUE)

## BOY'S CHOIR, CHORUS AND SOPRANO SOLO:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>(ALL) In paradisum deducant te Angeli:<br/>         in tuo adventu<br/>         suscipiant te Martyres,<br/>         et perducant te<br/>         in civitatem sanctam Jerusalem.<br/>         Chorus Angelorum te suscipiat,<br/>         et cum Lazaro quondam paupere<br/>         aeternam habeas requiem.<br/>         Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine;<br/>         et lux perpetua luceat eis.<br/>         Requiescant in pace. Amen.</p> | <p>In paradise may the angels lead thee;<br/>         at thy coming<br/>         may the martyrs receive thee,<br/>         and bring thee<br/>         into the holy city Jerusalem.<br/>         May the Choir of angels receive thee,<br/>         and with Lazarus, once poor,<br/>         mayest thou have eternal rest.<br/>         Rest eternal grant unto them, O lord;<br/>         and let light eternal shine upon them.<br/>         May they rest in peace. Amen.</p> |
|--|--|

"Strange meeting" is Owen's title for this poem. Unfinished, it is the most haunted and haunting of his war-poetry. It is undated, but it is surmised to have been written in the last few months of his life. The editor of his poems, Edmund Blunden, reports that it was written in ink with corrections in pencil.

First- I would call your attention (for a last time) to the uniquely sensitive rhymes. They almost make a poem themselves:

"scaped ... scooped

groined ... groaned

'stirred ... stared

eyes ... blessed

"moaned ... mourn

years ... yours

wild ... world

laughed ... left

told ... 'tilled

spoiled ... spilled

tigress ... progress

world ... walled

wheels ... wells

war ... were

"friend ... frowned

killed ... cold"

Second, it is interesting to note that Britten has edited the poem in one significant passage. (Eleven lines are omitted in Britten's setting – two or three of them, I feel, of real value; and two lines are added from a series of couplets which closely parallel this poem and may have been sketches towards its final form.)

-But, as regards the "significant" omission: Between lines eight and nine of the *War Requiem* text, Owen had written –

(Back to p. 35)

"And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,  
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.  
With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;  
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,"

Now, certainly the last of these lines joins nicely to "And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan;" but the presence of the first two of them would do gross injury to the final great moments of the *War Requiem* (as, I think also, they harm Owen's poem). The necessary dramatic point is to maintain the obscurity, mystery and place of this "strange meeting" until the final "I am the enemy you killed, my friend." One must not know until this moment that both are dead. Or if one surmises it, he must not be told.

Here is Britten's great sense of poetry and drama helping the poet to complete his "unfinished" work, with an eraser.

Bernard Rogers -- in a class at Juilliard -- when asked

"How do you compose?" responded "Start with a blank piece of paper and an eraser – when I've erased everything unnecessary... I have a piece of music."

Of interest to me are the following discarded readings:

Line 1: "It seemed to me that from my dugout I escaped"  
 (for: "out of battle.")

How greatly that sheds light on lines two, three, four and five: so much more based now in experience, than imagination.)

Line 12: "The unachieved" (for: hopelessness)

Line 18: "The pity of war, the one thing war distilled."  
 (for: "the pity of war, the pity war distilled.")

Line 29: "I was a German conscript, and your friend."

Or:

"I am the German whom you killed, my friend."  
 (for: "I am the enemy you killed, my friend.")

Compare a few parallel lines from the groups of couplets:

Lines 19 - 22:

21 - "Be we not swift with swiftness of the tigress.

22 - "Let us break ranks, and we will trek from progress.

Let us forgo men's minds that are brutes' natures.

Let us not sup the blood which some say nurtures."

Lines 27 - 28:

(for: "Even the sweetest wells that ever were." --

these are not in "Strange Meeting;" Britten added them from the couplets. They might have been followed or preceded by:)

"For now we sink from men as pitchers falling,

But men shall raise us up to be their filling."

"Finally," remarks Blunden, "widely as the setting and substance of "Strange Meeting" are felt and apprehended, it is peculiarly a poem of the Western Front of 1918; it is a dream only a stage further on than the actuality of the tunnelled dug-outs with their muffled security, their smoky dimness, their rows of soldiers painfully sleeping, their officers and sergeants and corporals attempting to awaken those for duty, and the sense presently of "going up" the ugly stairway to do someone (in the uglier mud above) a good turn. Out of these and similar materials Owen's transforming spirit has readily created his wonderful phantasma." (Repeat poem)

What is the final poetic and dramatic result of Britten's "fabrication?" Certainly, in the first place, we have an enormous humanizing and contemporizing of an ancient and remote liturgy of remembrance. The wars of this century are our wars; Owen's death, his pity at the death of others are remote neither from our memories nor our premonitions. -And so the ancient words are fused with the immediacy – of tomorrow.

Second, and conversely, Owen's words gain a catholicity, a dignity of historical association. His "pity" becomes somewhat grander by the setting of his parable of Abram and Isaac in a centuries-old matrix. All of his poetry gain stature.

But what of the final philosophic confrontation:

"Shall life renew these bodies? Of a truth  
All death will He annul, all tears assuage?"

I suppose most of us will call it as we've learned it. Certainly for Owen, Age and Earth answered a resounding "No!"

It is interesting to note, it seems to me, that in terms of text alone (setting aside, for the moment, the accretions of tradition) the *Missa* is entirely a petition: "Make them, Lord, to change from death to life ... Deliver me, Lord, from death eternal ... In paradise may the angels lead you ... May eternal light shine on them ... May they rest in peace." Some, undoubtedly, could recite this in full confidence that it already had been achieved. With others, even of similar religious tradition, it might be murmured "bowed and kneeling" with "heart contrite as ashes." – And uncertain – insecure.

For still others it might suffice that after all, there is still in our being – and our un-being – a mystery into which none of the statistical forms of man's intelligence can carry him. That it involves a life beyond the present most men have hoped and few gainsaid.

For me, it is wonder enough that Owen's words and Britten's vision are a part of the life-force in the man-thing. Whether any one of us "make it" in a hereafter I find somehow less important than the presence of humanity such as this.