Benjamin Britten – War Requiem (1963)

Disc: 1
1. Requiem aeternam
2. Requiem aeternam. What passing
3. Dies irae. Dies irae
4. Dies irae. Bugles sang
5. Dies irae. Liber scriptus
6. Dies irae. Out there,
7. Dies irae. Recordate Jesu Pie
8. Dies irae. Be slowly lifted up
9. Dies irae. Dies irae
10. Dies irae. Lacrimosa dies illa
11. Dies irae. Move him into the sun
12. Offertorium. Domine Jesu
13. Offertorium. So Abram rose

Disc: 2
1. Sanctus. Sanctus, sanctus
2. Sanctus. After the blast
3. Agnus Dei. One ever hangs
4. Libera me. Libera me
5. Libera me. It seemed that out of battle
6. Libera me. Let us sleep now …in Paradisum

Soprano Vocals - Galina Vishnevskaya
Tenor Vocals - Peter Pears
Baritone Vocals - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
Organ - Simon Preston

Choir - Bach Choir, The , Highgate School Choir
Chorus - London Symphony Orchestra Chorus

Lyrics By [Poems] - Wilfred Owen

London Symphony Orchestra, Melos Ensemble

Benjamin Britten – conductor

The War Requiem was written for the reconsecration of Coventry Cathedral (the old cathedral is pictured at left), and was first performed there 30 May 1962. Coventry Cathedral had been destroyed during the Battle of Britain in World War II. Britten was commissioned to write a piece for the ceremony marking the completion of a new cathedral, designed by Basil Spence, built along side the the ruins of the original millenium-old structure. Since the work was to be performed inside the new cathedral, it was a good acoustic challenge for Britten. The ceremony was comprised of several works, including Tippett's opera King Priam.

The War Requiem was not meant to be a pro-British piece or a glorification of British soldiers, but a public statement of Britten's anti-war convictions. It was a denunciation of the wickedness of war, not of other men. The fact that Britten wrote the piece for three specific soloists -- a German baritone (Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau), a Russian soprano (Galina Vishnevskaya), and a British tenor (Peter Pears) -- demonstrated that he had more than the losses of his own country in mind, and symbolized the importance of reconciliation. (Unfortunately Vishnevskaya was not available for the first performance, and had to be replaced by Heather Harper). The piece was also meant to be a warning to future generations of the senselessness of taking up arms against fellow men.

For the text of the War Requiem, Britten interspersed the Latin Mass for the Dead with nine poems written by Wilfred Owen (pictured at left), a World War I footsoldier who was killed a week before the Armistice. In total contrast to The Spirit of England, written by Britten's compatriot Edward Elgar, the War Requiem was a decidedly antiwar piece. The Spirit of England was also an epic work in which poetry was set to music, but it brought forth quite a different message.

The Requiem is truly a large-scale work, calling for huge musical forces. It is scored for three soloists, a chamber orchestra, a full choir and main orchestra, and a boys choir and organ. The performers are divided into three distinct planes, often physically separated. Closest are the tenor and baritone soloists and the chamber orchestra. They portray the victims of war. The soloists sing the Owen poetry and communicate in the most personal manner of the three groups. One level removed is the orchestra and chorus, portraying the mass. The soprano soloist adds color to the voices in the chorus, but their Latin singing is less personal than that of the male soloists. Finally, the boys choir and organ present a sound that is almost inhuman.

Britten recommended that a small organ be placed in the wings with the boys choir, to create a more distant sound.

For the first performance, and the recording that we have used, the main orchestra and choir was conducted by Meredith Davies, while the chamber orchestra was conducted by Britten. ---its.caltech.edu

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