

A Plea for Peace: Britten's War Requiem

Saturday, December 12, 2026 · 15:30 · Musikverein

Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, conductor · Evelina Dobračeva, soprano · Andrew Staples, tenor · Christian Gerhaher, baritone · Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien, chorus · Wiener Sängerknaben (Vienna Boys Choir), chorus

approximately 85 minutes

Benjamin Britten

1913–1976

War Requiem, Op. 66

THE COMPOSER

Benjamin Britten, born in Lowestoft on the Suffolk coast in 1913, was the most important English composer since Purcell and the figure who, more than any other, restored opera to the centre of British musical life. A precocious talent who studied at the Royal College of Music, he found his early voice in collaboration with the poet W. H. Auden, and a lifelong subject in the loss of innocence. A committed pacifist and conscientious objector, he spent the first years of the Second World War in the United States before returning home in 1942 and seeking recognition as a conscientious objector, which he won on appeal; his convictions run like a thread through his music, from the early settings to the War Requiem. His breakthrough came in 1945 with the opera *Peter Grimes*, whose outsider hero and surging sea interludes made Britten's name overnight and announced a new era for English opera. To stage his subsequent works he and Pears set up what became the English Opera Group, and in 1948, with Pears and Eric Crozier, he founded the Aldeburgh Festival, which turned his small Suffolk town into one of the world's notable musical centres. His partnership with Pears, both personal and artistic and lasting nearly forty years, shaped a vast body of song, opera, and concert music written for that singular voice. In 1976 he became the first composer to be made a life peer, and he died at Aldeburgh that December.

ABOUT THE WORK

The War Requiem was written for a building's resurrection. On the night of 14 November 1940, German bombing reduced the medieval cathedral of Coventry to a roofless shell. Rather than clear the ruins away, the city chose to preserve them and to raise a new cathedral beside the old: a modern building by Basil Spence, consecrated on 25 May 1962 as a deliberate emblem of reconciliation rather than revenge. Britten, the most famous pacifist in English music, was the

85 minutes

natural choice to compose the centrepiece of the festival marking that consecration. He accepted at once, and produced what many regard as his supreme achievement and one of the central works of the twentieth century.

What Britten conceived was not a setting of the Latin Requiem Mass alone, but a confrontation between two worlds. Into the ancient liturgy of the dead he interleaved nine poems by Wilfred Owen, the young English officer killed in action a week before the Armistice of 1918, whose verse stripped away every comforting illusion about war. On the title page Britten placed Owen's own words: 'My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity... All a poet can do today is warn.' The whole work is, in effect, an argument between the Mass's prayers for rest and Owen's unflinching reports from the trenches, between consolation offered and consolation refused.

To dramatise that argument, Britten divided his forces into three distinct planes of sound, each with its own music and its own meaning. A soprano soloist, large mixed chorus, and full orchestra carry the public, ceremonial Latin liturgy. Two male soloists, a tenor and a baritone, accompanied by a separate chamber orchestra, deliver Owen's intimate English poems, as if two soldiers were speaking from within the larger rite. And set apart in the distance, a boys' choir with organ sings fragments of the liturgy with an unearthly, disembodied purity, suspended above the human drama. The boys are meant to sound remote: heaven heard from far off, innocence untouched by the carnage below.

Britten built his soloists as a gesture of reconciliation in themselves, choosing a Russian, a German, and an Englishman to stand together: the soprano Galina Vishnevskaya, the baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, and the tenor Peter Pears, his own partner. Cold War politics intervened: Soviet authorities would not let Vishnevskaya travel to Coventry, so Heather Harper sang the premiere with ten days' notice. The symbolism survived all the same, for Vishnevskaya was later allowed to travel to London, and all three sang on the celebrated 1963 Decca recording the composer conducted.

The first performance, in the new Coventry Cathedral on 30 May 1962, was a triumph, and critics and audiences there, in London and abroad, hailed it as a contemporary masterpiece. Britten had written something that spoke far beyond the occasion: a work that used the most public of forms to make the most personal of pleas. The 1963 recording sold 200,000 copies within five months, and the work's standing has only grown. The War Requiem is at once a Requiem Mass, a war memorial, and a pacifist manifesto, and its power lies in its refus-

al to let any one of those things console us into forgetting the others. It does not end in triumph or even in certainty; it ends, after Owen's vision of two dead enemies meeting in the underworld, in a long, ambiguous farewell that lets the boys' distant voices and the unresolved bells of the orchestra have something close to the last word.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The key to hearing the War Requiem is the interval of the tritone: the restless, unsettled gap between two notes (here C and F-sharp) that medieval theorists nicknamed 'the devil in music.' Britten threads it through the entire work, sounding it in the very first bars as the chorus murmurs 'Requiem aeternam' over tolling bells. It is the sound of unrest, of a peace not yet granted, and you will hear it return at every major seam until, at the close, it is at last allowed to settle. Train your ear on that, and the whole vast structure comes into focus.

Listen, too, for the three planes of sound and how Britten keeps them apart. The Latin Mass arrives in great public blocks: the terrifying brass and battering chorus of the 'Dies irae,' the day of wrath, which storms back several times like a recurring nightmare; the soprano riding high and fierce above the orchestra. Against this, the tenor and baritone enter quietly with Owen's English poems, accompanied only by the chamber orchestra, a sudden shift to chamber-scale intimacy that feels like stepping from a cathedral nave into a muddy dugout. Notice how Owen's words answer and undercut the Latin: after the 'Dies irae' trumpets, the baritone sings 'Bugles sang, saddening the evening air'; and in the opening movement the tenor's 'What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?' turns the funeral liturgy into bitter accusation.

Above and behind it all, listen for the boys' choir, placed at a distance with chamber organ, whose cool, sexless lines float in from another acoustic world, as if untouched by what is happening below. Their remoteness is the point.

Two moments repay special attention. In the 'Offertorium,' as the chorus prays the old promise made to Abraham and his seed, the two men retell the story of Abraham and Isaac, but in Owen's savage rewriting the angel's voice goes unheeded, and the old man slays his son 'and half the seed of Europe, one by one.' The boys' choir keeps singing the liturgy's promise of deliverance, serene and oblivious, while below them the killing re-

peats. And at the very end, the tenor and baritone, enemies in life, meet as the dead in Owen's 'Strange Meeting,' singing together 'Let us sleep now...' Their voices interweave and gradually still, the boys and chorus draw the whole work toward the radiant 'In paradisum,' and then the tolling tritone returns one final time, only now resolving at last into a quiet, hard-won chord. Whether that resolution is peace or merely exhaustion, Britten leaves for you to decide.

Tonight's artists

Evelina Dobračeva *soprano*

Evelina Dobračeva is a Russian soprano admired for the warmth, agility, and dramatic intensity of a voice equally suited to opera and the concert platform. Trained at the Hanns Eisler Music College in Berlin, where she worked with Julia Varady and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, she sings a repertoire ranging from Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov to Verdi and Puccini, and she has performed the War Requiem with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and the BBC Philharmonic. In the War Requiem she takes the soprano part Britten wrote for a Russian voice: the high, exposed, often vehement line that rides the Latin Mass, from the soaring 'Lacrimosa' to the pleading 'Libera me.'

Andrew Staples *tenor*

Andrew Staples is an English tenor, a former chorister of St Paul's Cathedral who went on to King's College, Cambridge, and became the first holder of the Peter Pears Scholarship at the Royal College of Music. His repertoire runs from Handel and Mozart to Britten, whose operas he sang as a student in the college's Benjamin Britten International Opera School. His clear, flexible, finely articulated tenor, heir to a distinctly English tradition, suits the role Britten conceived for Peter Pears, voicing Wilfred Owen's poems with the chamber orchestra in dialogue with the baritone.

Christian Gerhaher *baritone*

Christian Gerhaher is a German baritone regarded as one of the supreme song interpreters of his generation, celebrated above all in Schubert and Schumann with his longtime pianist Gerold Huber, and equally distinguished on the opera stage. Trained in Munich (he also studied medicine), he is prized for the searching intelligence and tonal beauty he brings to text. In the War Requiem he joins the tenor for Owen's English poems set against the chamber orchestra, duets in which two soldiers' voices, German and English, recall the carnage and finally, as the dead, reconcile in 'Strange Meeting.'

Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien *chorus*

The principal large mixed chorus of Vienna's Musikverein, founded in 1858, here carries the great public blocks of the Latin Requiem Mass alongside the soprano and full orchestra.

Wiener Sängerknaben (Vienna Boys Choir) *chorus*

Placed at a distance with chamber organ, the historic Vienna Boys Choir supplies the remote, disembodied treble lines Britten suspends above the human drama: innocence heard as if from another acoustic world.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century**

Paul Kildea, Allen Lane 2013

A modern life of Britten that gives full weight to his pacifism and to the War Requiem, written for the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral in 1962.

ACCESSIBLE **War Poems of Wilfred Owen**

Wilfred Owen, Vintage Classics 2019

The poems by Wilfred Owen that Britten set in the War Requiem, well worth reading before hearing them sung between the Latin texts of the Mass.

DEEPER **Britten: War Requiem**

Mervyn Cooke, Cambridge University Press 1996

A Cambridge Music Handbook on the War Requiem, covering its commission, its use of Owen's poetry and a guide to the music.

SOURCES

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CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2026-12-12-grazinyte-tyla>

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