

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

85 minutes

War Requiem, Op. 66

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 repeats. 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.



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