

WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

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

85 minutes

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 natural choice to compose the centrepiece of the festival marking that consecra-

tion. He accepted at once, and produced what many regard as his supreme achievement and one of the central works of the twentieth century.

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

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