

Doubt and questioning in Britten's War Requiem

Introduction and overview: questioning faith through music

SLIDE 1: EARLY 20th-CENTURY CHRISTIAN MUSIC AND QUESTIONING – quotes from lyrics to Walton: *Belshazzar's Feast*, Part: *Credo* and Bernstein: *Mass*

My PhD deals with how composers can use music to explore theological issues and ask theological questions – mainly addressed through composition. I have also explored prior work on the subject, and this forms the basis for this talk.

Benjamin Britten, while not a Christian himself, often worked on Christian subjects – seldom overtly sceptical, but often exploring several sides of a Christian question, including the outside.

In the context of Britten's corpus of work, the *War Requiem* (1961) is far from alone in setting religious texts in ways which are, while not explicitly subversive, questioning assumptions. In *Noye's Fludde* (1950) the hymn "Lord Jesus, think on me" is "set off kilter by an awkward, dragging rhythm and harmonies stubbornly oblivious to the tune" (Wiebe, 2006). Wiebe also says of the three congregational hymns in *Noye's Fludde* that "if these hymns embody a religious tradition, it exists in unfriendly musical surroundings, offering a rather fragile refuge." *Billy Budd* (1951) contains in Forster's libretto frequent allusions to Christianity, which have been identified by Hindley (1999) as "often ironic". Britten's later works such as *Curlew River*, *The Burning Fiery Furnace* and the *Canticles* all deal with Christianity and set Christian texts, but allow the problems in the texts to come through.

However, the *War Requiem* is the work where Benjamin Britten asks his toughest questions of the Christian faith, setting poems by Wilfred Owen from the First World War against the text of the Latin Requiem. Britten, though a friend of the Christian church, "did not believe in the divinity of Christ" (from his letter supporting his status as a conscientious objector) and Wilfred Owen also grew distant from Christianity before the war, writing to his sister in 1913 that "no religion is worth the having".

The main hypothesis of my talk here is that Britten uses parody, inversion, the augmented fourth motif, and direct and indirect quotation to question the tenets expressed in the Latin Requiem text.

The *War Requiem* is performed by three spatially separated groups: the boys' choir and organ with "the impassive calm of a liturgy that points beyond death" (Evans, 1979); the choir, soprano and main orchestra with "the mingled mourning, supplication and guilty apprehension of humanity"; and the male soloists and chamber orchestra with "the passionate outcry of the doomed victims of war". These three are theologically and thematically at odds with each other, and the texts implicitly question Christian tenets, with Owen's frequent religious references providing a textual counterpoint to the Latin

Requiem Mass: Cooke (1996) describes the work as “attacking both the inhumanity of war and the complacency of conventional religion”.

I shall concentrate on how the musical text of the Owen settings undermines, parodies and questions that of the Latin settings, focusing for this talk on the Offertorium and its relationships to *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*. But first, a brief overview of the whole piece:

EXCERPT 1: Opening (30”) – from CD

In the first movement, Britten questions the final resting-place; “Deus in Sion... in Jerusalem... ad te omnis caro veniet” contrasting with Owen’s assertion that

The pallor of girls’ brows shall be their pall,
Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds.

The tritone is used as a musical link between these, with the tenor soloist parodying the boys’ choir.

SLIDE 2: Text of Requiem Aeternam, translation, and “Anthem for Doomed Youth” (state which part sings which text) with arrows showing links

The choir material in the opening movement contains only the pitches F# and C, to the text “requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis”. This tritone appears throughout the work, in chord movements, phrases, leaps, passing harmonies and more.

“No mockeries for them from prayers or bells” is a prime example:

Fig. 1

The image shows a musical score for a tenor part. The staff is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The lyrics are: "No mockeries for them from prayers or bells". The melody features a tritone leap between G4 and C5. Above the staff, there are markings for dynamics: "cresc." above the first measure, "ten." above the second measure, and "fz" above the final measure. There are also slurs and accents over the notes.

the Gb-C leaping back and forth on “prayers” which have been identified as “mockeries” is the most clearly parodic phrase so far in this movement – parodying the “requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis” sung by the choir (an actual prayer), and also the boys’ “ad te omnis caro veniet”, both of which move between those same two notes, but not back and forth so quickly.

SLIDE 3: text of “Lacrimosa” and translation, alongside “Futility”

In the second movement “Dies Irae”, the clearest questions are asked in the last section, with “Judicandus homo reus, huic ergo parce deus” alternated with Owen’s lines lamenting that his dead comrade cannot be awakened.

In the Sanctus, Owen’s text “The End” clearly questions the very idea of physical resurrection:

SLIDE 4: “The End”

The fifth movement “Agnus Dei” tells of Christ’s sacrifice through Owen’s text, “At a Calvary near the Ancre” – comparing it to all soldiers in war. The final movement, with Owen’s “Strange Meeting” speaks of reconciliation at the last – but does it take place in Heaven (as the Latin indicates); in Hell – as mentioned in Owen’s poem, although Britten omits the crucial two lines which establish this:

And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,
By that dead smile I knew we stood in Hell...;
or elsewhere?

3. *Quam olim Abrahae promissisti / The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*

Much material here is taken from Britten’s earlier *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*, set to a text from the York Mystery Plays and composed in 1952. The choir sings a free fugue at figure 64 on “Quam olim Abrahae promissisti, et semini ejus”; the opening notes are a transposition of Isaac’s phrase “Father, I am all ready”.

SLIDE 5: figures 8 and 9, and translation of “quam olim Abrahae”

EXCERPT 2: Choir “Quam olim abrahae...” first entry (20”)

Fig. 8

Tenors & basses *f*
Quam - olim A - bra - hae pro - mi - si - sti, et se - mi - ni e - jus.

Isaac (alto) *pp*
Fa - ther, I am all rea - - - - dy.

EXCERPT 3: Isaac, “Father, I am all ready” from A&I (30”)

The link between the two pieces is clearly established.

This section concludes with the basses singing the same theme again – but with sopranos singing its inversion descending from high G, altos a fifth below sopranos, basses ascending from G, and tenors a fifth above the basses. The soprano line contains a C# to ensure that the fifths are exactly parallel, and there are no tritones in any of the chords:

EXCERPT 4: Choir, final “quam olim Abrahae...” of first half (30”)

Fig. 9

68 *ff*

Sopranos
Altos

Quam o-lim A - bra hae pro-mi - si - sti, et se-mi-ni e - jus.

Tenors
Basses

When the fifths are placed in mirror harmony with each other, the effect is disconcertingly artificial and forced.

The soloists then take over and set the scene for the parable. The two soloists sing together for the words spoken by God.

SLIDE 6: full text of “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” (specify singers) and some parts of A&I

The clearest connection between the two works comes at figure 74:

EXCERPT 5: War Requiem, “an angel... instead of him” (2’)

Fig. 12

74 *pp*
Slow, recitative

Tenor

an an - gel called him out of heav'n, Say - ing,

Baritone

When lo!

4

T

Lay not thy hand u - pon the lad, Nei - ther do a - ny - thing to him.

Bar.

6

T

Be - hold, A ram, caught in a thick - et by its horns, O - ffer the Ram of Pride in - stead of him.

75 *ppp*

Bar.

pp *ppp*

Alto *pp* A - bra ham! My servant A - bra - ham! Take I - saac, thy son by name, that thou lo - vest the best of all, —

Tenor *pp*

4 A — And in sa - cri - fice of - fer him to me — U - pon that hill there be - sidest hee.

T

6 A *pp* A - bra - ham, I will that so it be. For aught that may be - fall.

T *pp*

SLIDE 7: God's words in A&I

Contrast end with SLIDE 8: God's words in Parable

An interesting change occurs at the end of each passage. “For aught that may befall” has a descending scale in the lower part, with the upper part alternating falling thirds and rising seconds; “Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him” has an ascending scale in the lower part, with the upper part alternating rising thirds and falling seconds. Every interval in each line has been (diatonically) inverted (although the lines are different intervals apart in the War Requiem, and with more syllables).

This is also seen in the baritone soloist's “and stretched forth the knife to slay his son” which is similarly transformed from Isaac's “Father, do with me as you will”.

SLIDE 9: relationships between “Parable” and A&I text (inversions, quotes, parodies)

In each case, the power relationship has been changed. Isaac's consent in A&I contrasts with his father's dominance and knife-wielding in the War Requiem. Similarly, whereas “to fulfil my bidding” is God's commandment, it could be suggested that “offer the Ram of Pride” is more of a plea to Abraham, to which he can consent or not.

Play end of Excerpt 5 (1')

After the soloists finish the Parable, the distant organ and boys' choir re-enter at figure 77, metrically unsynchronised with the soloists and their chamber orchestra. The boys sing “hostias et preces tibi...” to what appears to be a plainchant melody in C, over a discordant C#/D ostinato organ figure, while the tenor and bass repeatedly sing “half the seed of Europe, one by one” using the “quam olim Abrahae” motif, with a consistent, jaunty E major feel. The “remoteness and historical inappropriateness” identified by Cooke are expressed far more clearly by this polytonality and unrelated tempi than by the

use of pseudo-medieval harmonies. The Christian words fail to provide consolation or hope in the face of the barbarity of war.

The choir follows this with a repetition of “quam olim Abrahæ...” but much quieter, and with every single passage inverted; soprano and bass parts are exchanged, as are tenor and alto. The final homophonic choir passage bears closer examination:

SLIDE 10: figures 9 and 14 together

Fig. 14

83

pppp

Sopranos & Altos I

Altos II & Tenors I

Tenors II & Basses I

Basses II

Quam o-lim A - bra hae pro - mi - si - sti, et se - mi - ni e - jus.

EXCERPT 6: choir, final “quam olim Abrahæ” (30”)

Compare this to the parallel fifths at figure 68 (quoted earlier); the mode is minor rather than major, the dynamic *pppp* rather than *ff*, the ranges much lower. But the most interesting change is in the strictness of the parallels. At 68, we see a C# introduced to the soprano line to maintain an exact parallel fifth with the alto line; at 83, the Cs in the later (very low) soprano line stay natural, inserting a C-F# tritone into what were previously strict parallel mirror harmonies (the same tritone occurs in the bass and tenor lines, which had also been in strict fifths beforehand, due to the transposition to a minor key). When heard directly, the tritone makes a clear difference, even more so because it occurs on three of the last four chords. The harmony is muddled, low, and distorted.

I would suggest that this complete inversion represents also a complete inversion of meaning; the promise that was once unquestionable is now unfulfillable.

A change has been brought about; what was previously ‘promised to Abraham and his seed’ is no longer what it was. Herbert (1999) suggests that this text “recasts the Great War as justifiable grounds for the breaking of that promise by God to humanity, since Abraham in his recent incarnation ignores the angelic staying hand and instead chooses to slaughter his son and ‘half the seed of Europe, one by one.’” I would suggest further that Britten is implying here that war is the choice of humanity, and God has no power to prevent that choice being made.

The change in power relationship here is a reflection of the times. The First World War which inspired Owen's poetry was the widest-ranging man-made event that had ever occurred, changing every country in the world and killing millions of people. This resulted in a questioning of faith of previously unforeseen magnitude. Previously only God had the power to create such disaster; following the war, Man also has this power and is not afraid to use it (to say nothing of Hiroshima, which Britten had seen but Owen had not). The world wars and the twentieth century as a whole signalled a power transfer from divinity to humanity. Perhaps this is why the protagonist of Owen's poem is capable of refusing God's command, or even not listening at all (there is no mention in Owen's text of God's initial command to Abraham; it begins with Abraham taking Isaac to be sacrificed). The new-found power of humanity has led to doubt or outright dismissal of divine power.

Conclusion

Britten's use of Owen's text questions the basic assertions on which the Requiem is built, and this is brought to fruition by his use of parody, quotation, inversion, repetition and manipulation in the music. There is a clear anti-war message in the work, but underlying that is also a message that divine powers and empty religious words can offer little succour or salvation in the face of war.

It is uncertain whether Britten means to directly attack the tenets of Christianity. Given Britten's strong association with Christianity and his frequent use of Christian motifs and stories without any attempt to undermine them, it seems like that Britten's intent here (alongside his avowed pacifism) is to question Christianity without destroying it – as in Hebrews 12:27, “the removing of those things that are shaken... that those things which cannot be shaken may remain”.

SLIDE 11: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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