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Representative Works of Benjamin Britten's Church Music

Stephanie Turner
Butler University

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS OF

BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S

CHURCH MUSIC

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Stephanie Turner
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Mr. Koehring

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To understand a composer's music, it is wise to study his life, for the music is often a reflection of an event or situation which is important to him. Even more often, it is a mirror of the composer's personal response to that event. This is especially true of Benjamin Britten, and he is the first to admit that he writes for the occasion or for the person. A complete understanding of Britten's music, then, depends upon one's desire to know of and about him. A lack of knowledge, however, in no way prohibits any initial aesthetic response. Britten's life has been one of involvement with people and society. His response to what he has seen and experienced is reflected in his music, and this response, far from being merely a musical diary, speaks to universal issues and concerns.

Benjamin Britten was born in 1913 on the feast day of St. Cecilia, who is the patron saint of all musicians. He later restored the custom, initiated by Purcell and Handel, of writing an ode for the celebration of the November 22 holiday. 1913 was the middle year of World War I and Britten's early childhood in Lowestoft, Suffolk, was colored by the sounds of exploding bombs and North Sea waves. His mother, an amateur musician, gave home musicales and opened their home to visiting professional soloists from London, when they came to sing in productions of Handel's "Messiah" or "Elijah". His father, a respected dental surgeon, was also an avid reader of Charles Dickens. Apparently interested in his four children's creative growth, Mr. Britten forbade the presence of a wireless set or a gramophone, on the premise that it would prevent them from making their own music.

Benjamin, the youngest of the four, began composing at the age of five. He describes his first attempt as follows:

> "I remember the first time I tried, the result looked rather like the Forth Bridge, in other words, hundred's of dots all over the page, connected by long lines all joined together in beautiful curves. I am afraid it was the pattern on the paper which I was interested in and when I asked my mother to play it, her look of horor upset me considerably."[1]

As he grew older, daily events, such as a wreck at sea, or his father's departure, became the basis for Britten's early tone poems. The family spent their summers at a farmhouse near Butley, thirty miles south of Lowestoft, where reeds, curlews, redshanks, and marshes surrounded the beach cottage. This setting, too, had an influence upon his early and later works.

He attended the South Lodge Preparatory School as a 'day-boy', because it was only five minutes from home. Like many good musicians, Britten did well in math: unlike many musicians, he was often concerned about the bullying of the younger boys at school. Adopting the motto "never unprepared", he began taking harmony lessons at age ten and spent hours reading through music. When he graduated from preparatory school at age fourteen, he had written ten piano sonatas, six string quartets, an oratorio, three piano suites, dozens of songs, some of which were used later in his "Simple Symphony". Much of the increased ambition was a direct result of hearing Frank Bridge's suite "The Sea" at the 1924 Norfolk Festival. Britten describes the experience as "being knocked sideways".[2] After he met Mr. Bridge at the 1927 Festival, he began going to London regularly for musical advice.

Bridge's high standards emphasized the necessity for a direct relation between the music in the composer's mind and the music on the page. In order to develop this direct relation, it was necessary to "find yourself and be true to what you find".[3]

He applied to the Royal College of Music, London, in composition, at age sixteen. John Ireland finally convinced the other two committee members, S.P. Waddington and Ralph Vaughan Williams, to give Britten a scholarship. He found the college experience a frustrating one. Not only did he feel that it was elementary, but he had difficulty in getting his works performed. While he was there, he worked under John Ireland in composition and Arthur Benjamin in piano, finding that Mozart and Schubert were influencing his own works. He also became interested in Mahler, Purcell, Stravinsky, Berg (Wozzeck), and Schoenberg.

With this wide background, he graduated and found a job composing incidental music for the G.P.O. Film Unit in 1936. He was required to imitate everyday sounds, such as a telephone, train, or weather condition, using six or seven instruments. His success in this specialized field opened up new opportunities in theatre and radio incidental music jobs. Asked to compose music for sixteen documentaries, he quickly developed a reputation as a good businessman, able to use a few resources to their best potential, and able to compose in his mind and then to write it down at high speed some time later. A mutual interest in the film communication industry brought W.H. Auden and Britten together. Auden, also a member of the G.P.O. Film Unit, and author of "Poems", which is considered to be a landmark in modern poetry, became interested in the political situation.

In response to the Fascist movement, he began writing social and political charades for the stage and screen as a personal warning. He and Britten collaborated to produce "Coal Face", which made use of a spoken voice reciting official reports of mine disasters in rhythm with percussion, and "Night Mail", which used a reversed soundtrack of a cymbal for a train going into and emerging from a tunnel.

When Britten was commissioned to write something for the 1936 Norfolk Triennial Festival, he asked Auden to write the libretto. The result, Britten's first song cycle, was entitled "On This Island", and used Auden's poems. Still a strong influence, Frank Bridge criticized the works, and Britten consequently rewrote them. Auden can be credited with making Britten more aware of the problems of any alliance of music and words. He also introduced him to the poetry of Donne and Rimbaud, which Britten used as librettos in later works. Auden had a death fixation or obsession that illness and the death of an individual symbolized the decay and dissolution of a class.. There was a direct relationship between one's physical well-being and the state of one's mind and one's society. As will be shown, Britten was influenced by this philosophy.

Britten's own increasing concern about the European political situation resulted in his composing "Pacifist March" in 1937 to the words of a poem by Ronald Duncan, which were also used in the Peace Pledge Union. As a final result of the mounting tension and his inability to get work, Britten decided to leave England.

His decision was influenced by Auden, who became a United States citizen, and who had a philosophy that "roots should be in ideas and people, not places or environment".[4] Britten, in an interview with Musical America, said that he "needed to get away to see if (he) did have roots there".[5] He and Peter Pears, a professional singer and friend, both came to the United States and at first stayed with friends in Long Island, New York.

Britten was well-received in the United States, but one of the most important events during this time was a request from the British Council, asking him to compose a work for a festival honoring Japan. "Sinfonia da Requiem", written for the occasion, was permeated with a sense of horror and the ghastliness of war. It was rejected by Japan, in light of the ensuing Japan-Sino conflict, though there are reports that the work was being rehearsed. Shortly afterwards, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and the piece was shelved, though it was later performed in New York City. From this experience stems Britten's earliest interest in oriental music, and his later work recording Balinese music.

When it became possible for Britten to become a United States citizen in 1939, he again found himself torn between the United States and England. He had been sick with a streptococcal infection, which Auden saw as a manifestation of Britten's indicision. He wanted to help England in a non-combative role and he missed Suffolk and the sea. The deciding experience is said to have occurred when Britten picked up an article describing the poetry of the Crabbe area, which is very close to Lowestoft. He was to follow-up this discovery with an investigation.

After he and Peter Pears had waited nearly six months to get passage back to England across the war zones, they were allowed to board a Swedish cargo. While traveling, Britten completed his own "Hymn to St. Cecilia", and a "Ceremony of Carols", based on a group of medieval carols. His new works quickly gained acceptance in war-time England. Exempted from the service as a conscientious objector, he then began appearing as a pianist for the "Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts". During this time, Britten wrote "Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo", important in that it dates the start of the permanent tenor/pianist partnership between Britten and Pears, as the work was written for Pears. During the early forties, there was an increase in church patronage of the arts. Some of Britten's most important contributions to church music were written during this period, and will be discussed in some detail later.

He still remained active in his war involvement. Britten and a friend, whoe was the musical director of Morley College, Lambeth, and also a conscientious objector, sent a work by microfilm letter to some prison-of-war camp friends in Germany. Britten, himself, gave many war-time concerts, travelling to small villages and prisons, where the audiences might be as small as twenty. The English Opera Group also toured the German concentration camps. Britten's response to the experience of seeing so many people near death was to use the "Holy Sonnets of John Donne", introduced to him by Auden, and set them to music. He also used another Duncan poem as the basis for "This Way to the Tomb", which marks his earliest usages of liturgical chants.

In 1947 Britten moved to Aldeburgh, living on the previously-mentionned Crabbe Street near the sea. At home in the Crag House, he wrote his first opera, "Noye's Fludde", based on the Biblical characters in the Genesis story. Not only was "Noye's Fludde" Britten's first opera, it was also the beginning of a new type of music drama--that of the modern Chester miracle play. The new version of the medieval mystery drama includes a combination of mysticism, medieval liturgy, and Biblical basis, with comedy, congregational participation, and a number of child actors. Where was such a production to be performed? The church. Similarly, his group of three chruch parables, written later, are composed of the above elements, plus an oriental harmonic structure and a return to the original chamber orchestra, with the conductor being the keyboard player. The oriental influence, traceable to Britten's earlier "Sinfonia da Requiem", was further encouraged by his visit to Japan in 1956. At that time, he saw two performances of the famous Noh (or No) plays, which are based on ancient Japanese mythology. Britten's interest in the importance of rituals stems from his own religious affiliation, the Church of England, and an interest in medieval liturgy. The Noh play, besides being extremely ritualistic, was also elaborate in costume and language. These characteristics influenced Britten's later works, as will be explained.

In 1957 Britten received an honorary membership to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Although this was an important tribute to what he had accomplished, it was even more significant in that the honor came from the United States. Thus, even though Britten had

elected England, his musical merit was acknowledged here.

Britten's "Missa Brevis" in D is evidence of his increasing interest in good music for the church, particularly for the Catholic Church. He presented it to George Malcolm, the retiring organist at Westminster Cathedral, as a gift, after he had completed it in 1959. Mr. Malcolm, known as an excellent trainer of boys' voices and as an opponent to the artificial and unnatural sound known as the "Cathedral Tone", believed in using the natural tone and voice of young boys. Britten's part-writing, known for its abundant use of male voices, has no doubt been influenced by Malcolm's school of thought.

The most representative composition of Britten's cumulative musical growth and societal involvement is his "Missa pro Defunctis" or "War Requiem", commissioned for a festival celebrating the restoration of the Coventry Cathedral, which was bombed out in World War II. It will be discussed in detail later.

Britton still lives in his native Suffolk, close to the area that has inspired so much of his music. Why does he write music? "I certainly write music for human beings....directly and deliberately....offering to my fellow man music which may inspire them or comfort them.....touch them, or entertain them: even educate them.....directly and with intention."[5a] Why does he compose? "Composing is like driving down a foggy road toward a house. Slowly you see more details of the house....and the color of the slates and the bricks, the shape of the windows. The notes are the bricks and the mortar of the house."[5b] Many feel grateful that he has chosen to take the 'journey to the house'. I am one of those people.

The following works are considered to be 'church music' for various reasons. The most important, of course, is that Benjamin Britten has labeled them as 'church music'. Another consideration is where the work is to be performed to its best advantage. And the third factor involves the thematic base of the work. Is it appropriate for use in the church?

I have chosen the following representative works with all three of these considerations in mind. I was somewhat limited by the availability of resources. The amount of information given for the different compositions reflects this.

"Hymn to St. Cecilia"

As previously mentionned, this composition was written to restore the old custom of celebrating November 22, the feast day of St. Cecilia, who is the patron saint of music. Britten wrote the work on his voyage home from America to England in 1942, and it greatly increased his reputation as a master of the English song.

The work, based on W.H. Auden's poem, lasts ten mintes. The central invocation, shown below, is interrupted by two contrasting movements.

> "Blessed Cecilia, appear in visions
> To all musicians, appear and inspire;
> Translated Daughter, come down and startle
> Composing mortals with immortal fire."[6]

The first, a scherzo, is characterized by a light, brisk feeling. The unaccompanied choir sings "I cannot grow", expressing the frustration of non-creativity. Perhaps this was a reflection of Britten's own inability to compose much while in the United States. The second movement, Elegy, shows again the influence of the medieval period on Britten's music. The tenor part has held notes in the medieval medium for plainchant-like quotes, while the treble has light motifs above the held tenor. Of particular interest is the use of vocal imitation of instruments. The passages, marked "quasi violino, quasi flauto, quasi timpani, and quasi tromba", occur in the final sections of the second movement around the cadential halts. These passages, which give the impression of a series of cadenzas, are performed by soloists placed, according to Britten's injunction, "in the middle of the other singers in order to give a suggestion of remoteness."[7]

This work was written for a particular feast day and for Britten's own birthday. But at the same time, it expresses the common feelings of frustration, the need to be creative, and the realization that such inspiration and inner peace come only from above. This is what makes Britten's music universal. Its form and medium, as well as its content, make it most appropriate for the church.

"Rejoice in the Lamb"

Britten calls this work a cantata for a parish church--because it is. It was commissioned in 1943 by the Church of St. Matthew, Northampton, to commemorate the fifieth anniversary of the church's consecration. It is literally a canticle of general praise. The ten sections, extracted from Christopher Smart's "Jubilate Agno", are interspersed with exclamations of "Hallelujah from the heart of God". Smart, a resident in an asylum when he wrote the poem, has various animals giving and asking everyone else to give God the praise. The author's cat, Jeoffrey, worships God by "wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness".

Scored for choir, organ, and four male vocalists (boys' voices), the cantata lasts sixteen minutes, and can be described as follows:

1. Andante misterioso--full chorus asking every creature to praise God.

2. Con brio--a linkage of Old Testament heroes with an appropriate animal, each asking the animal to give praise to God.

Nimrod--leopard
Ishmael--tiger
Balaam--ass
Daniel--lion
Ithamer--chamois
Jakim--stayr
David--bear

3. Hallelujah section--many dancing rhythms, punctuated with dotted rhythms.

4. Jeoffrey--a treble solo in a parlante style.

5. Mouse--an alto solo.

6. Tenor solo--describing flowers on top of 3/4, 4/4, and 5/4 meters.

7. Grave ed appassionato--section on poet's own hardships in the asylum. He is terrified by shouts of "Silly fellow! Silly fellow!" and then experiences a moment of unforgettable beauty when he knows that Christ will deliver him.

8. Bass recitative--description of four letters and what they stand for. One soon understands that they all represent God.

9. Vivace Chorus--imitation of a number of instruments and the words with which they "rhime". It ends with an exaltation "for God the Father Almighty plays upon the harp".

10. Hallelujah

The effect is one of a symbolic mystical vision. Christ, represented by the Lamb, has been preceded by several prophets (animal figures), but it is only the Lamb that can save the madman for death. The theological implication is that it is only the Lamb that can save all of mankind from all kinds of death. The sacrifice idea is seen in the light of salvation--the sacrifice has a purpose. The sacrifice of the Lamb is the basis for man's salvation. Sections eight and nine are musical responses to this revelation. God is found in language, the verbal tools with which one communicates. He is pictured as the source of music. He is inside man and throughout the universe. He is the Source. Britten's musical response? Hallelujah!

Why did Benjamin Britten write an opera? "Opera is a combination of daily life with music that can point up events in people's lives, and their emotions in a most marvelous way. I want to see something stylized. And that is why I believe the operatic form, like the poetic drama, is so much more illuminating than, for instance, just a straight drawing-room comedy. I like the idea of the stylized vision of people's lives."[8]

How does one write an opera? Britten's ideas are paraphrased as follows: One must have an idea and then ask someone to write a libretto on the idea. The poet and the composer must work closely to shape each act, so as to best convey that idea. The numbers, solos, and choruses must be comprised and merged into a unit. This, plus estimating the number of lines needed, takes around a year.

After a certain time, one can feel the work take charge. It determines how the words and music are to fit together to shape the ultimate goal--union of the original thought and the final musical expression. (This is partially from Frank Bridge's influence.) However, "once the child (opera) is born, it has to stand on its own feet."[9]

"Noye's Fludde"

"Noye's Fludde", composed in 1957, is taken from the Chester Cycle of the medieval miracle plays. The original cycle was to be performed on a movable cart, called a "Pageant". Britten intended his work to have the same connotation and style of presentation. Ideally, it should be performed in a church, not a theatre, and with the orchestra out in the open, not under a stage.

Professionals are needed for 1) the Voice of God, which requires a mature, demanding personality; 2) Mr. Noye, a bass-baritone; and 3) Mrs. Noye, a contralto. The Noye's three sons--Sem, Ham, and Jaffett-- and their wives, are played by children ages eleven to fifteen. The Gossips, with whom Mrs. Noye hangs around, are to be played by older girls with strong low voices.

Britten likes to write for children. "They find my idiom easier than grown-ups do, and they don't argue with me. You never find a child saying, 'That note should by F natural'".[9a] Consequently, this works calls for from seventy to ninety children, used as 'animals' and as members of the orchestra. Forty-nine species of animals were used in the original Chester Miracle Play. Britten has used thirty-five species (in pairs) and divided them into seven groups, as follows:

I. Lion, leopard, horse, ox, swine, goat, sheep

II. Camel, asses, buck, doe

III. Dog, otter, fox, polecat, hare

IV. Bear, wolf, monkey, squirrel, ferret

V. Cat, rat, mice

VI. Heron, owl, bittern, peacock, redshank, raven

VII. Cock, hen, kite, cuckoo, duck, dove, drake

The orchestra is comprised of two groups. The professional group is made up of a solo string quintet (Violin I, Violin II, 'Cello, Double Bass, and Viola), a solo treble recorder, four-handed piano, organ, and timpani. The amateur orchestra consists of ripieni strings and descant recorders in two parts, Bb bugles in four parts, twelve handbells, and a large group of percussion, which includes--tambourine, cymbals, triangle, whip, gong, Chinese blocks, wind machine, sandpaper, slung mugs (which are hung on strings and hit with wooden spoons), and bass, tenor, and side drums. The amateur violins are divided into three parts: Violin I--capable players not going above the third position: Violin II--players not going out of first position: and, Violin III--players using only the open strings. The other string sections are also divided this way.

The drama is set by the opening drum roll, a symbolic threat of destruction. One then hears God's Voice, speaking in four-line verses, every fourth line in solemn crotchet rhythm. He airs His displeasure and aske Noye to build an ark. The first hammer strokes are heard through the use of pizzicato open strings. During the construction, there is much use of ostinato, which increases, through the addition of more percussion and recorders, as the work progresses. When it is completed, the 'animals' march in through the congregation to the ark, singing 'Kyrie Eleison'. Each of the seven groups is announced by a bugle call.

Quite a struggle ensues as Noye and his three sons attempt to persuade Mrs. Noye to board the ark. Characterized as a comical, cantankerous person, she steadfastly refuses, as she is only too content to stay with her Gossip friends and drink.

As the rain, alluded to by using the tapped, slung mugs, begins to fall, she is finally convinced--or rather, physically forced--to board, leaving her Gossip friends screaming behind.

The storm scene is based on a single ostinato pattern, used twenty-nine times. Over the ostinato, one hears piano and the tapped mugs which give the raindrop sound. Percussion is added as the downpour increases. Trilling recorders become the basis for the wind and the thunder is created by using larger percussion. The rising waves are outlined by string triplet arpeggios. The rigging flaps, because the staccato strings, percussion, and whip convey the aural impression. The addition of piano and cymbals create the allusion of huge waves, which send the ship rocking, as rising scales in the violins heighten the effect. The resulting panic in the 'animals' is musically painted by the use of a wind machine and slowly-rising scales in the orchestra.

Out of the raging storm emerges the hymn, "Eternal Father", which is sung by the ship residents. After the storm has worn out and the calm returns to the water, Noye sends out a Raven to see if there is any dry land nearby. The Raven's flight is portrayed by a cello obligato in a curious form: four bars of fluttering (acheived with frequent rests), and two measures of flying (acheived by using continuous quavers). The pattern is then repeated a half-tone lower, then a tone higher, then a major third higher, as the Raven flies away. The 'cello's rising scale accompanies the bird's flight until it is out of sight. When the Raven does not return immediately, Mr. Noye decides to send out a Dove.

The flight is again characterized by a fluttering image. This time it is acheived by using flutter-tonguing in the recorders. The same distinct pattern is used to musically portray the bird's flight. When the Dove does return, the music for its arrival is exactly the same as the initial pattern, except that it is reversed.

The family leaves the ark under the rainbow, accompanied by quietly-ringing handbells, which symbolize God's promise of eternal mercy and faithfulness. The hymn, whose nineteenth century harmonies have emerged from the twentieth century storm, is sung in eight parts. The bugles in Bb and handbells in E somehow do merge into a G Major processional, which then leads into the Tallis eight-part canon. The canon is unusual in that all eight parts are singing the same words together.

The congregation is invited to join in the final hymn, which is "The Spacious Firmament on High", and the slow recessional out is accompanied by a gradual diminuendo effect. The drama on the "pageant" is thus ended.

Britten's group of three church parables form a theological triology. Each exemplifies one of the virtues: Hope--"Curlew River", Faith--"The Burning Fiery Furnace", and Charity--"The Prodigal Son". The group has various other factors in common, also. All three are highly stylized and ritualistic. The operas are written for a small stage, partially because the English towns, where they were to be performed, often had their best and only auditoriums in the churches. Because of the limits set on the size of the performance area and the number of performers, the operas give an impression of being more like vocal-instrumental tone poems than one's common understanding of an "opera". There is the typical lack of female voices, and the topics are typical of Britten. "Curlew River", the first parable, is permeated with an absorption with the supernatural. "The Burning Fiery Furnace", the second of the three, pits the individual against the community. The last of the group, "The Prodigal Son", deals with the crisis of following one's conscience.

The musical texture is sparse, sometimes only including a single instrumental line. Because of this, some reviewers feel that the music is best enhanced by the performance in the European buildings, where there is the extra length and added height.[10] There is use of heterphony from the Western medieval and Eastern music, but there is little counterpoint. The reason for this will be explained later. The musicians, comprised of a small group of instrumentalists and choir members without a conductor, are sometimes also members of the cast. Their music is derived from the different plainchants which open each of the parables. The total effect is an elaborate teaching experience--stylized religious education.

"Curlew River", composed in 1964, was dedicated to Michael Tippett in "friendship and admiration".[11] The use of the word 'curlew' has some reference to Britten's East Anglican roots. The curlew is a brown bird found in the fen-land, or low marsh areas near Suffolk.

The work was first presented at the Orford Parish Church of Aldeburgh, June 12, 1964. A terrific storm raged and the main generator was struck. Consequently, the audience was in the dark for nearly an hour. Britten feels that the event was to his advantage--"it put them in the right frame of mind".[12] A musical parable version of the Noh play "Sumidagawa" (Sumida River), it was written by Juro Motomasa (1395-1431). Britten first saw the Noh play during his 1956 visit to Tokyo, Japan, which made a great impression on him. Because William Plomer had background in Japanese tradition and knew the Noh play, he was asked to anglicize the old story and to make it a parable fit for church performance. The original Buddhist teachings had to be replaced and translated into Christian terms. The first step was to replace the Japanese music with a F♯ minor plainchant, entitled "Te lucis ante terminum", to which the cast processes. This corresponds to the ancient Japanese music, guarded by successive generations, used for the Noh plays. The processional, itself, is a modern version of the so-shidai of the Noh ritual and the all-male cast is a Noh tradition.

As the Abbot introduces the inner play by addressing the congregation, he is accompanied by the organ, which plays high and dissonant chords; drums, and a chorus of monks. Whenever the Abbot speakes, his musical counterpart is the organ and the

His invocation is a blessing on "the souls of all that fall by the wayside, all alone". The instrumental interlude which follows is based on "Te lucis", a fusion of western plainchant, eastern sonority, and syncopation. During the interlude, the actors in the inner play are ceremoniously prepared in the acting area. "Miming" (use of masks) is used to isolate the players from their parts.

The parable is a simple story. A Madwoman, insane because her kidnapped son has not been found for a year, comes to cross the river on her search. The Ferryman tells a tale of a young boy who was trying to escape some captors. The small child was very weak and died. Overcome with grief, the Madwoman realizes that the boy is her son and begs someone to take her to his grave. The Traveller, another passenger on the ferry, leads her to the place. As the mother approaches, her son's spirit rises and sings:

> "Go your way in peace, mother
> The dead shall rise again
> And in that blessed day
> We shall meet in Heaven.
> God be with you all.
> God be with you, Mother. Amen."[13]

His words rise out of her choral prayer, appearing as an octave canon, similar to an echo effect. The Abbot pronounces the parable's meaning--"how in sad mischance/A sign was given of God's grace". The actors resume their original monk habits, a final exhortation is given, and the recessional closes the drama.

There are several techniques used. Each character in the parable has a musical counterpart. As mentionned, the Abbot is accompanied by the organ and chorus; the Ferryman is characterized by the use of a horn; the Traveller by a harp and double-bass.

The Madwoman is musically pictured by a flute. Her cries of grief are similar to the call of the curlew, a focal symbol for the entire drama.

The curlew is also used in the notation. Britten invented it to give greater freedom to the vocal lines. The curlew (∽) means that the singer must listen and wait for the others to meet the barline. At every point, one instrument or voice leads the rest of the group in the original chamber music style.

There is much more use of fourths and sevenths, than of octaves and fifths, though all four comprise the predominant intervals of the Noh mode. The free melodic lines, acheived with the curlew (∽), result in the creation of many tone clusters at the various meeting points. This adds to the mystic, visionary atmosphere.

Musical images are painted here, as in "Noye's Fludde". The boat movement is characterized by string bass glissando movements and the daemonic subterranean forces invoked by the Ferryman's tale are outlined with the use of extended percussion--five small untuned drums, five small bells, and one large gong.

The members of the actual cast--Abbot, eleven monks (of which eight form the chorus), four acolytes (three of which are stage assistants), and seven lay brothers (instrumentalists)--are all professionals. Unlike Britten's opera, "Noye's Fludde", there is no congregational participation. It is a parable--"a short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle".[14]

The second parable, lasting sixty-five minutes, is much like "Curlew River" in that it is a play within a play. "The Burning Fiery Furnace" has a cast consisting of an Abbot, Monks, Boys, Acolytes, and Lay Brothers, which enters the church singing the plainchant "Salus aeterna". The Lay Brothers carry in the music and the instruments. The Monks become the Chorus of Courtiers--three tenors, two baritones, and two basses. The Abbot, who becomes the Astrologer, addresses the congregation in song and the cast then dons their secondary costumes before entering the "play area".

The visiting Ananias, Misael, and Asarias, painted an ethereal blue, are appointed by Nebuchadnezzar as governors of the province of Babylon, the inhabitants of which are painted an earth-brown color. Their names become Shadrach, Mechack, and Abednego, respectively, as symbols of their new Babylonian citizenship. To Nebuchadnezzar's displeasure, the three refuse to worship the Babylonian god, Medorak. As he tries to force them to worship the golden image, a slow, obscene hymn is used. It has slow "circus slides" for the instruments and the singers are to imitate the instrumental effects. It is in the form of a Babylonian march--the players leave their seats and march in rhythmic patterns, each playing his own tune. In the original production, two instruments were specially constructed from the original Babylonian ones. Otherwise, a Babylonian drum, a small harp, and a glockenspiel, are successfully implemented. The march bisects the dramatic action, giving the work a distinct binary form.

Because the three refuse to yield, Nebuchadnezzar orders them to be put into the fiery furnace. The leaping fiery tongues are musically characterized by an alto trombone. At the appropriate moment, as in "Curlew River", a miraculous sign is sent from God.

An angel appears to shield them from the flames. The three original voices singing from inside the furnace are suddenly joined by the haunting treble voice of the young boy who plays the angel. Faith is again rewarded.

The work reveals its Old Testament lineage, which is combined with eastern overtones and grotesque harmonies. These include the use of adjacent and augmented fourths. Fourths are also used extensively in the music to praise the Babylonian god, Medorak, which is sometimes constructed as a huge, gaudy, collapsible, golden idol. However, though the harmonies are rather grotesque and somewhat awkward, the overall delicate texture is maintained, due to the thinness of the melodic line. This is, of course, dependent to some degree upon the instrumentation and the number of instruments. The grotesque mood is augmented by the character of Nebuchadnezzar, who is fey and waspish. The Chorus is a group of fawnish gossips and the children spit back saucy words.

Even though the work is rather grotesque, the themes are universally valid. Most people can identify with feelings of intolerance and prejudice, both of which are strongly displayed in "The Burning Fiery Furnace".

"The Prodigal Son" is different from the other two--there is no miraculous "sign of God's grace". Rather, the climax of the drama is the decision of the son to return home and the triumph is in the emergence of the son as a mature person.

The cast processes in, singing "Iam lucis orto sidere", (Now that the daylight fills the sky), which is from the office of the Prime. It is appropriate in that it is a prayer for protection from worldly vanities. The Abbot enters already dressed as the Tempter, unlike the others, who dress while he addresses the congregation. He invites them to witness the "dull, respectable family", and to see "how I break it up".

The drama is augmented by a small chorus, which has a greater role than usual, though they are grouped to one side of the stage. They represent the faithful family servants or the good-time city parasites at the appropriate times. This is unusual because Britten's off-stage groups have previously been used as angelic statements. In this parable, they are primarily used as a coloristic took--offering the worldly pleasures of the city in a high treble tone.

The father, a symbol of stability, is emphasized by a recurring Bb major triad. These triads accompany his opening homily--"This is our peaceful life. Our life we maintain by love and toil." This same Bb base is present when the son decides to take his share of the inheritance and leave for the city. It is also there during the servants' farewells and the son's early journey music. As he turns toward the city, however, a D-E ostinato in the bass draws him away from home and the father's influence.

The allures of the city are outlined by the use of a brilliant jazz trumpet in D. The Tempter's instrument, the gliscando harp, and the piccilo, used in the street dance scene, also color the city setting. The son's outlandish money spending is climaxed in the strip scene, which uses 5/4 rhythmic patterns. Robbed of everything, he becomes pensive and reflective. His two conflicting natures, portrayed by an 'extrovert' trumpet and an 'introvert' viola, are finally resolved and he decides to return home. His journey home is again marked by the original D-E ostinato and the reappearance of the Bb triad signals the end of his trip. The chord is again stated as he and his father embrace.

The pastoral home scene to which he returns is musically pictured by the alto flute and the viola. The same instruments characterize the opening scene--giving the work an ABA form: Judean pastoral scene---central city scene---Judean pastoral scene.

"Missa pro Defunctis"

The "War Requiem", or "Missa pro Defunctis", was written for the opening of the rebuilt Coventry Cathedral after World War II. It is Britten's public statement about the futility of war. The words used are a combination of the Latin Mass for the Dead and Wilfred Owen's poetry. Owen wrote,"My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity. All a poet can do today is warn." Wilfred Owen was killed in France just one week before the Armistice in 1918, after winning the Military Cross. He was only twenty-five, but his poetry is profound. War appeared to him as a hellish outrage on a huge scale against humanity, and a violation of Christianity. It is thus appropriate that Britten, a serious conscientious objector, should use Owen's poetry as the basis for his own musical statement.

The Latin liturgical text is the same one used by Mozart, Beethoven, Berlioz, and Verdi. But it is the treatment of the mass that is unique. The work has been conceived on three levels. The first, which includes a massive orchestra and choral group, is used for the Requiem text, making one aware of the actual religious experience in the mass and its meaning. The second, which is comprised of two solo voices and a chamber orchestra of twelve, is used for Owen's poems, a reminder of the reality of the here and now of war. Lastly, there is a distant ensemble of a boys' choir and organ, used for angelic effects, and symbolic of the innocence of youth.

The poems, upon which the other part of the mass is based, are in English, and challenge the complacency of our "Christian civilization". The nine poems that are the basis are as follows:

1. Anthem for Doomed Youth
2. Voices
3. The Next War
4. Sonnet on Seeing a Piece of our Artillery Brought into Action
5. Futility
6. The Parable of the Old Man and the Young
7. The End
8. At a Calvary near the Anore
9. Strange Meeting

The structure of the work is eclectic. It uses open fifths and organum in the Romanesque style: rhythmically differentiated lines of the Gothic: acapoella sounds of the Renaissance: dotted rhythms of the Baroque: jig-time imitations: Classic principles of calculated recurrence: gapped arpeggios and passionate chromatics and appoggiaturas of the Romantics: tonal contradictions, jagged lines, and symmetrical tones--all manipulations of the twentieth century: and new timbres--in the vibraphone.

The subject of death is presented as it faces all men. The poems are personal, intimate expressions of anguish experienced by Man, not by everyman. There is the stark contrast between the eternal, superpersonal lamentations of the Mass and the promise of resurrection, with the doubts, agonies, and sublimations of the poet contemplating the battlefield and its carnage.

"There seems to be a general agreement that the "War Requiem" is the profoundest work Britten has yet produced, and good judges have called it his masterpiece.....It was received as a work of vast scope, in which the composer, by giving it all the technical resources and emotional power at his command, so transcends the personal that he seems to comprehend the sufferings, to transfigure the grief, and to honour the potential goodness of humankind.

It is addressed (and with what poignancy!) to 'Whatever shares The eternal reciprocity of tears.'"[15]

The first movement, Requiem Aeternam, introduces the bell tritone (C-F#), which is first sung by the boys choir, which sings of the promise of deliverance. The first poem, a tenor solo, is preceded by an agitated harp and double-bass from the chamber orchestra. The tenor sings "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?" and the mood switches from a ceremonial ritual of grief to bitterness as the poet observes the slaughter of the battlefield. The choir ends the movement with 'Kyrie eleison', Lord have mercy upon us.

Dies Irae, the second movement, is in Bb, but there is much weight given to C, the supertonic. Some feel that this is a symbolic way of expressing the positive anxiety which lies beyond hope (fight between the tonic and supertonic). There is the use of a special trochaic tetrameter, which is accomodated by the 7/4 meter. At the opening, there is a fanfare portending the Day of Judgement which builds up to a great outburst in the Tuba mirim. The Biblical trumpet calls all to the Last Day. The sound dies away and merges into the entry of the chamber orchestra, which is a signal that the second level is to be used. Consequently, a baritone sings of the apprehension of the young soldiers and the unspoken prospect of sudden, pointless death. This is followed by a solo soprano making a direct plea for mercy, which is augmented by the basses breaking in with a new tempo. The tenors add their plea, first by themselves, then in counterpoint with the basses. A baritone sings of the great evil of the gun and all it signifies, which is followed by a great outbursting of the chorus, singing of the Day of Wrath.

The soprano sings of the day of tears and mourning. Her song of grief is interrupted four times by a tenor, singing of the bitter tragedy of a dead comrade. After his final words, the church bell tolls, and the chorus prays for eternal rest.

The Offertorium, movement number three, begins with the boys singing in the distance, calling for the deliverance of the faithful from the depths of hell. The main chorus picks it up and makes a gradual crescendo, which grows every time they sing 'et semini ejus'. Owen's version of the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac is told. The heavenly guidance is ignord, and the son is slain, symbolizing the precedent of violence. The last line of the song, 'And half the seed of Europe, one by one' is repeated three times as the boys'voices, suggesting the innocents being led to slaughter, offer sacrifices of prayer and praise, recalling the promise of salvation.

The Sanctus, movement four, begins with the soprano singing 'Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth' against a rhythmically free background of percussion instruments. The chorus, in eight parts, begins to chant freely, building slowly from a very quiet beginning until layer upon layer of choral and orchestral tone has accumulated in a huge crescendo of praise. (Baroque technique) There is a blast of lightning which introduces the extreme contrast--that of the baritone soloist singing 'Shall life renew these bodies? Of a truth All death will He annul, all tears assuage?--' The ending of the poem is the pivot point of the whole work, the moment when the contrast of formalized aspiration and the poetic vision of dispair is at its extreme.

The Agnus Dei, movement number five, is characterized by the use of the tri-tone. There is a smooth ostinato in the bass which resolves to F major, which doesn't represent a resolution (original key is D major) of all the tensions, but indicates a possibility of peace--more as a possibility than as a planned resolution. This time, the poem is interwoven with the Latin text in a 5/16 meter. The tenor sums up the movement in a single phrase at the end--Dona nobis pacem (Grant us peace).

The last movement, Libera me, begins with a final plea for deliverance, which is a slower version of the music which accompanied the first poem, 'What passing bells'. The march-like movement progresses slowly, gathering speed and intensity to the point of frenzy. The pleas grow stronger, leading to a final vision of the day of wrath. In a long dimuendo the music, rather restless, dies away and dissolves into the dead sound of sustained strings in the chamber orchestra as the tenor begins the last poem.

The final solo ends with the statement--'I am the enemy you killed, my friend.' To some, this represents the paradox of a Christian sacrifice--one is to love the enemy who kills you. In the final pages of the Requiem all the forces are united for the first time. The two soldiers sing 'Let us sleep now', merging into the texture of 'In Paradisum' sung by the boys, the main chorus and the soprano. In the end the church bells sound for the last time, and the unaccompanied chorus sings the final cadence: Requiescant in pace. Amen. (May they rest in peace. Amen.)

Footnotes

[1]Eric Walter White: Benjamin Britten--His Life and Operas (University of California Press, 1970), p. 3-4.

[2]Ibid., p. 3-4.

[3]Imogen Holst: The Great Composers (Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York, 1965), p. 7.

[4]"Britten at Aldeburgh". Musical Review 22:234, 1961

[5]Ibid., p. 234

[5a]Lemonds, William W.: "War Requiem". Choral Journal 8:22-4 n1, 1967

[5b]Ibid.

[6]Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller: Benjamin Britten--A Commentary on his works from a group of specialists. (London and Prescott, 1952)

[7]Ibid.

[8]"Benjamin Britten Talks to Opera News--No Ivory Tower". Opera News April 5, 1969

[9]Ibid.

[9a]Ibid.

[10]"Church Parables". Opera 21:528-9. June, 1970

[11]Blyth, Alan: "Benjamin Britten Talks to Alan Blyth". Gramophone 48:29-30. June, 1970

[12]Ibid.

[13]"Britten's Latest Works". Pan Pipes 57:2-3. n3, 1965

[14] Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (G. and C. Merriam, 1966)

[15] Program notes--"War Requiem". Decca Record Company, 1963. p. 2.

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