

Britten, Bach and The Passion

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Given Malcolm Boyd's prodigious Bach scholarship, the present essay is intended as a belated tribute.

Abstract

The influence of Verdi's *Requiem* on Britten's *War Requiem* has been recognized ever since the Britten work's 1962 premiere in Coventry Cathedral. Hitherto unnoticed, however, is the work's generic status—an oratorio Passion, rather than a Requiem—and its profound debt not only to Anglo-German oratorio but to J.S. Bach's Passions specifically. Britten conceived the work just as Peter Pears completed his sessions as Evangelist in Otto Klemperer's recording of Bach's *Matthäuspassion*, in which Pears was partnered with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (as Jesus). The extent to which Britten drew upon the Bach Passion model is suggested by many factors: the troped liturgical text; the disposition of musical forces; and even the allocation of particular texts to tenor quasi Evangelist or baritone quasi Jesus. Regarded as post-Christian Passion rather than concert Requiem, the ironic power of the work is multiplied, foregrounding the futility of religious practice, in defiance of the newly consecrated building.

A few years after the 1962 premiere of Britten's *War Requiem* in the newly-consecrated Coventry Cathedral, Malcolm Boyd published a seminal article detailing the 'likenesses' between the *Messa da Requiem* of Giuseppe Verdi and the new work.¹ In so doing, he went far beyond Peter Heyworth's vague initial impressions that 'the debt to Verdi is less than completely digested':² Boyd's *Tempo* article offered specific comparisons between the works, and particularly of 'instances where the

Latin text has inspired each composer to a very similar type of expression'.³ The resemblances Boyd discusses range from small-scale melodic similarities, through textural parallels in the scoring, to large-scale structural choices (e.g., in each work the unprompted reprise of the 'Dies irae' material after 'Confutatis maledictis'). As all of Boyd's examples deal with the settings of

³ Boyd, *ibid.*

¹ Malcolm Boyd: 'Britten, Verdi and the Requiem', in *Tempo* 86 (1968), pp.2-6.

² Peter Heyworth: 'The two worlds of musical modernism', in *The Observer* (3 June 1962).

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the traditional Latin liturgical text, his treatment only encompasses a portion of Britten's work; the interpolated settings of the war poetry of Wilfred Owen do not correspond to anything in Verdi's work and thus go all but unmentioned.

War Requiem has conventionally been regarded as an outgrowth of the concert requiem genre. In a 1969 interview with Donald Mitchell, when asked directly about the precedents behind the work, Britten responded

I would be a fool if I didn't take notice of how Mozart, Verdi, Dvořák—whoever you like to name—had written their Masses. I mean, many people have pointed out similarities between the Verdi *Requiem* and bits of my own *War Requiem*, and they may be there. If I have not absorbed that, that's too bad. But that's because I'm not a good enough composer, it's not because I'm wrong.⁴

The present essay contends that a compelling reading of *War Requiem* as a whole (Owen tropes and all) is revealed by adding an additional layer of comparison, re-contextualizing the work as an oratorio-passion, and relating it particularly to the *St. Matthew Passion* of J. S. Bach.

In many respects, Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* is far removed from Britten's *War Requiem*. Similarities between the works seem not to have been emphasized in the critical literature. The works exist in separate contextual domains—Bach's as a liturgical oratorio representing eighteenth-century Leipzig Lutheranism, Britten's as a quasi-liturgical⁵ concert work

⁴ Benjamin Britten: 'Mapreading' (1969 interview with Donald Mitchell), in *Britten on Music*, ed. Paul Kildea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.321-329 (at 329).

⁵ The offer of the commission from Coventry specified 'a new

and an ideological statement of Cold War-era Britain.⁶ (Neither *War Requiem* nor its composer is mentioned in Howard Smither's four-volume magisterial history of the oratorio genre: classified as a requiem rather than an oratorio, it was presumably never considered for inclusion.⁷) As will be discussed, *War Requiem* inherits much from the oratorio-passion tradition. Moreover, in 1960-61, as Britten devised the work's ingenious integration of the Owen poetry within the requiem liturgical text, his partner Peter Pears was preoccupied with passions. Figure 1 is a chronicle of an environment steeped in passions, the period during which *War Requiem* was conceived.

Most notable in this list are Pears's recording sessions of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* under Otto Klemperer, his BBC talk on the translation of Bach's passions for performance,⁸ and his editorial collaborations (drawing upon Aldeburgh Festival performances) on two Schütz passions, published a few years later.⁹

choral and orchestral work', but allowed that 'its libretto could be sacred or secular, since there can be concerts both in the Cathedral and in the fine big Coventry Theatre'. (The Coventry commission letter is reproduced in its entirety in Michael Foster: *The Idea Was Good: the story of Britten's War Requiem* (Coventry: Coventry Cathedral Books, 2012), p.53.) That the work was premiered in the Cathedral does not mean that it is a "sacred" work, but rather that it appeared to be one. As will be argued below, it is at most "quasi-liturgical," and powerfully effective because of its post-Christian ethos.

⁶ Of course, the *St. Matthew Passion*'s origins in the Lutheran liturgy makes it no less ideological, even if it is generally not discussed in those terms. For a noteworthy exception to this, see Michael Marissen: *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's St. John Passion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.72-75.

⁷ The relevant volume is Howard E. Smither: *The History of the Oratorio*, vol. 4, *The Oratorio in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁸ Pears eventually published the talk as 'Some Notes on the Translation of Bach's Passions' in Anthony Gishford, ed., *Tribute to Benjamin Britten on his Fiftieth Birthday* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp.84-91.

⁹ Heinrich Schütz, *The Passion According to St. John*, ed. Peter Pears and Imogen Holst (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

Figure 1.

April 1960	Peter Pears gives a talk for BBC Third Programme, later published as “Some Notes on the Translation of Bach’s Passions”
31 August 1960	Britten and Peter Pears visit the cathedral construction site
21, 25-26 November 1960	recording sessions for Otto Klemperer’s recording of Bach <i>St. Matthew Passion</i> (Peter Pears as Evangelist; Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau as Jesus)
3-4 January 1961	Pears and Fischer-Dieskau in another session <i>St. Matthew Passion</i> under Klemperer
9 February 1961	Britten writes to John Lowe about using Fischer-Dieskau
16 February 1961	Britten invites Fischer-Dieskau to participate
March 1961	Britten begins sketching <i>War Requiem</i> ; by April he had settled into the three-ensemble plan, and by early May he had thought to invite Galina Vishnevskaya as the third soloist.
14-15 April; 10-12 May 1961	further sessions for Klemperer <i>St. Matthew Passion</i>
1 July 1961	performance of Schütz <i>St. Matthew Passion</i> at Aldeburgh Festival, with Pears as Evangelist
9 July 1961	performance of Bach <i>St. Matthew Passion</i> at Aldeburgh Festival, with Pears as Evangelist
October 1961	Britten settles on the work’s title; hitherto refers to it as “Owen-Mass” among other things
20 December 1961	Britten completes the composition draft (short score)

Figure 2 shows the cover of Otto Klemperer’s recording of the *St. Matthew Passion*. With Britten’s *War Requiem* in mind, two names fairly leap off of this cover: not only is the Evangelist sung by Peter Pears, but Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau was allotted the part of Jesus—roles that each had made particularly their own, recording them several times (as also with the corresponding roles in the Bach’s *St. John Passion*). Fischer-Dieskau and Pears recorded together in sessions on 3-4 January 1961, and almost certainly also for a few days in late November 1960, as well as re-recording some of the recitatives under George

1963) and *The Passion According to St. Matthew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965). Both of these works, together with Bach’s *St. John Passion*, were recurring features at the Aldeburgh Festival programs during the 1950s and 60s. Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* opened the third Festival (1950). Britten’s own recording of Bach’s *St. John Passion* with Pears as Evangelist was not made until April 1971.

Malcolm without Klemperer’s knowledge on 9 May 1961.¹⁰ Thus it was that when Britten wrote to John Lowe (his principal contact regarding the Coventry Commission) on 9 February 1961 suggesting that Fischer-Dieskau be engaged for the Coventry premiere, his remark that “[w]e both [i.e., Pears and Britten] feel that he would be very likely interested to do this’ suggests that Pears had already approached Fischer-Dieskau about this possibility, very likely during the January sessions.¹¹ It is impossible to know the extent

¹⁰ Alan Sanders: *Walter Legge: A Discography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984), pp.367–72; there were further sessions on 14–15 April, 10–12 May, and 28 November 1960, but it is difficult to establish which of these required the involvement of Pears or Fischer-Dieskau. On the re-recorded recitatives, see Peter Heyworth, *Otto Klemperer: His Life and Times*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.295.

¹¹ Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke, eds.: *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1913–1976*, vol. 5 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010), p.314.

Figure 2.

Bach: St Matthew Passion



Jesus: Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau - Evangelist: Peter Pears
Elisabeth Schwarzkopf - Christa Ludwig - Nicolai Gedda
Walter Berry - Philharmonia Orchestra and Choir

Otto Klemperer



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to which Pears influenced Britten's conception of the work, but that he was actively involved at an early stage is clear from his annotation in Britten's draft libretto for *War Requiem*.¹²

¹² Britten-Pears Library shelfmark 1-9300837, f. 36v. See Mervyn Cooke: *Britten: War Requiem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 34-36. This portion of Britten's notebook is available as a facsimile online at <http://www.brittenpears.org/page.php?pageid=773>.

Whether or not the work was composed with even a subconscious intention of featuring Pears in his acclaimed passion-Evangelist mode, the following similarities with the oratorio-passion tradition—and with Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* specifically—may suggest further Pears influence.

The most obvious of these similarities is that both works employ poetic tropes juxtaposed against an already existing text. Britten interrupts the liturgical text of the funeral mass to insert settings of Owen's war poetry—texts he described as 'full of the hate of destruction, ... a kind of commentary on the Mass'.¹³ Bach (and, indeed, any composer writing an oratorio-passion) interrupts the verbatim narration of the gospel account to present poetic texts that similarly serve as commentary, often as a way of giving a greater immediacy to the scriptural text, emphasizing its relevance to the congregation present.¹⁴ Despite this general structural similarity, the interaction of the trope with the base text is by no means identical: in Bach's passions the poetic text was conceived for just such a treatment, while Owen's poetry—whether or not it may serve powerfully as a 'commentary on the mass'—was not written to serve as a libretto. Bach's transition between the scriptural text and the poetic commentary and chorales happens always after a clear cadence, and in the *St Matthew Passion* particularly the arias tend to be preceded by extended accompanied recitative, often featuring an entirely new sonic world produced by a novel combination of obbligato instruments. While the move from one sound world to another is also a marked feature of *War Requiem*, in Britten's work the transition between the base text and the trope is much rougher, so that at almost every transition there is a sense of profound disorientation, with one environment disintegrating (even before a convincing cadence) and an entirely foreign one materializing.¹⁵

¹³ Britten to Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (16 February 1961); printed in *Letters from a Life*, vol. 5, p.313.

¹⁴ On Bach's transitions and the consequent performance of time, see John Butt: *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity: Perspectives on the Passions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. pp. 116–118 and 130–35.

¹⁵ Britten's most striking exception to this is the *Agnus Dei*—the only movement in the score in which the Owen text is presented before the Latin and in which the musical textures for both settings are substantially identical. Beyond this, Britten's smoothest transition is from the fugal 'Quam

A more substantial parallel is the division of the ensemble into three parts. Britten's ensemble has three unequal constituents. The Latin liturgical text is given principally to a large ensemble, standard in English oratorio from the choral festival works of the likes of Parry and Stanford on into the twentieth century: a sizeable mixed chorus, vocal soloist (soprano), and full symphony orchestra (including, at one point, the cathedral organ). At a few moments in the piece, Britten supplements this with a boys' choir spatially separated from the larger group, accompanied by a chamber organ, with an instruction that 'the sound should be distant'.¹⁶ All of the troped text is given to an entirely distinct ensemble which never interacts with the other two, even when they are employed simultaneously: two vocal soloists (tenor and baritone) and a 'chamber orchestra'—although with only a single player on each of the five string parts, plus wind quintet, percussion and harp. It is a type of ensemble Britten had made particularly his own (especially in his chamber operas, like *The Turn of the Screw*), and indeed is nearly identical with that of his first published work, the *Sinfonietta* of 1932. In summary, there are two orchestral ensembles with voices, plus a boys choir at a distance.

In the *St. Matthew Passion*—at least in its monumental 1736 version, as it is generally known and was known to Britten—Bach

olim Abrahæ' chorus into the baritone's narrative 'So Abram rose, and clave the wood', a dovetailing that intensifies the effect of Owen's ironic reworking of the story. Of the Bach passions, although the chorales sometimes contrast strongly with the immediately preceding material, the most abrupt transition between trope and base text comes at the beginning of Part II of the *St. Matthew Passion*, in which the opening aria ('Ach nun ist mein Jesus hin') ends suddenly on a half-cadence, and the ensuing recitative resumes the narrative with Jesus' trial before Caiaphas.

¹⁶ Note on the Instrumentation list in the published full score; Benjamin Britten: *War Requiem*, Op. 66 (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1962).

ostensibly doubled his standard church ensemble to yield two almost identical groups: four-part vocal ensemble, two flutes, two oboes, strings and continuo in each. These two groups seldom sound simultaneously, and even then Bach generally exploits the divided forces to pit different ideas against each other.¹⁷ In addition to the two vocal/instrumental ensembles, at a few moments in the piece Bach adds a third ensemble—a choir of trebles (apparently with continuo organ support) spatially separated from the rest of the players.¹⁸

These apparent similarities should not be overstated, because Bach and Britten deploy these forces very differently. Britten is very systematic in his allocation of material to different ensembles: all the Owen poetry is given to the tenor and baritone soloists; all of the mass goes to the large chorus, save for particular lines he wishes to reserve for distant ‘innocent’ voices.¹⁹ Bach’s alternation between Coro I and Coro II is less consistent, but Coro II is generally given the troped poetic commentary while Coro I is given the Gospel narrative, and both are employed either when the text requires a dialogue or suggests the fullness of a *tutti*. (Bach’s treble choir is given its own musical material in only the opening chorus, in which it has the cantus firmus chorale ‘O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig’; it reappears only once, to

¹⁷ Indeed, in a *Musical Pilgrim* booklet owned by Pears (whose copy still survives in the Britten-Pears Library), Charles Sanford Terry discusses Bach’s differentiation between the two ensembles; see Terry: *Bach: The Passions*, Book 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), p.12. More recently, this point is discussed in Daniel R Melamed: *Hearing Bach’s Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.29–30 and 49–65. Melamed is careful to emphasize that in Bach’s one-on-a-part practice, the singers of Coro II were deemed worthy to each be allocated solo arias.

¹⁸ Christoph Wolff: *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), p.297.

¹⁹ When commentator Alec Robertson referred to the boy choir effect as ‘angelic’, Britten bristled and suggested ‘innocent’ instead. See *Letters from a Life*, vol. 5, p.381.

double the choral sopranos in another chorale melody in the concluding chorus of Part I.) Bach’s sound spectrum includes a range of solo characters and ensembles interacting within the drama, while Britten’s two protagonists are tenor and baritone only. Moreover, in Britten these two voices are given only trope text, while in Bach the corresponding parts of the Evangelist and Jesus have instead only the scriptural base text (although Bach’s original vocal partbooks indicate that the same singers—outside of their character roles—participated also in the trope sections as well).²⁰

Despite these differences, the performing forces of the two works are conceived similarly. Given Pears’s involvement with passions during the period in which Britten devised *War Requiem*, the composer’s familiarity with Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* as it was known and performed in the 1950s and 60s (by Pears and Fischer-Dieskau, and so many others) seems to have influenced his disposition of the performing forces of the *War Requiem*—perhaps especially because of his desire to produce a monumental work.²¹ Britten’s decision to pair specifically Fischer-Dieskau and Pears for the Owen settings may then go beyond the need for ‘really first-class’ musicians, and beyond even the much-noted significance of pairing an Englishman with a German (representing enemies in the two World Wars) in artistic collaboration. By selecting musicians so much associated with particular roles in the Bach

²⁰ On the narrative significance of the multiple functions of particular voices in the *St. Matthew Passion*, see Butt: *Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity*, pp. 199–207.

²¹ On the monumentality of *War Requiem*, see particularly Heather Wiebe: *Britten’s Unquiet Past: Sound and Memory in Postwar Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.191–225. As he began composition, Britten described *War Requiem* as ‘what I think will be one of my most important works’; Britten to Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, 16 February 1961, printed in *Letters from of Life*, vol. 5, p.313.

passions, Britten effectively borrowed Bach's rhetorical power. The suggestion of Fischer-Dieskau may well have been Pears's originally. Britten almost concedes as much in his letter to Lowe: 'I have thought a great deal, and discussed the matter with Peter, and we feel that the ideal person musically, and also under the circumstances for this particular occasion, would be Fischer-Dieskau.'²²

Figure 3 shows the placement of the Owen poems within the Latin requiem text. The allocation of the poetry between the two male soloists reveals another congruity with the Bach passions. Bach's tenor has the words of the Evangelist recording the story, and thus is an observer to action in which he is not a participant; Bach's baritone has the words of Jesus, and therefore is very

²² *Letters from a Life*, vol. 5, p.314.

much a participant (at times active, at other times passive). The Evangelist speaks always in the third person; Jesus' words tend to be in the second and first persons—addressing others or speaking for himself.²³ While the Owen poems selected by Britten present a mixture of narrative voices, it is significant that in his allocation of these texts to one singer or another Britten adhered strictly to the same Evangelist/Jesus division in the functions of these two soloists.

Figure 3 shown on next page.

²³ Again, John Butt makes a compelling case for the narrative significance of such distinctions; see *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity*, pp. 211–217.

Figure 3.

I. REQUIEM AETERNAM

CHORUS: *Requiem aeternam*

BOYS' CHOIR: *Te decet hymnus*

TENOR: What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
(W. Owen: 'Anthem for doomed Youth')

CHORUS: *Kyrie eleison*

II. DIES IRAE

CHORUS: *Dies irae, dies illa*

BARITONE: Bugles sang, saddening the evening air
(W. Owen: [untitled])

CHORUS with SOPRANO: *Liber scriptus proferetur*

TENOR & BARITONE: Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death
(W. Owen: 'The Next War')

CHORUS: *Recordare Jesu pie*

BARITONE: Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm
(W. Owen: 'Sonnet: On Seeing a Piece of Our Artillery Brought into Action')

CHORUS with SOPRANO: *Dies irae... Lacrimosa dies illa*

TENOR: Move him into the sun
(W. Owen: 'Futility')

CHORUS: *Pie Jesu Domine*

III. OFFERTORIUM

BOYS' CHOIR: *Domine Jesu Christe*

CHORUS: *Sed signifier sanctus Michael*

BARITONE & TENOR: So Abram rose, and clave the wood
(W. Owen: 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young')

BOYS' CHOIR: *Hostias et preces tibi Domine*

CHORUS: *Quam olim Abrahae promisisti*

IV. SANCTUS

CHORUS with SOPRANO: *Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*

CHORUS with SOPRANO: *Benedictus qui venit*

BARITONE: After the blast of lightning from the East
(W. Owen: 'The End')

V. AGNUS DEI

TENOR: One ever hangs where shelled roads part
(W. Owen: 'At a Calvary near the Ancre')

CHORUS: *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi*

TENOR: *Dona nobis pacem* [interpolation from the Mass Ordinary]

VI. LIBERA ME

CHORUS with SOPRANO: *Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna*

TENOR: It seemed that out of battle I escaped...

BARITONE: 'None', said the other, 'save the undone years' ...

TENOR & BARITONE: 'Let us sleep now...'

(W. Owen: 'Strange Meeting')

BOYS' CHOIR, CHORUS with SOPRANO: *In paradisum*

BOYS' CHOIR: *Requiem aeternam dona eis*

CHORUS: *Requiescant in pace. Amen.*

To begin with the clearest example: liturgically, the Agnus Dei comes in the portion of the mass ceremony which commemorates the sacrifice—that is, the commemoration of Jesus’ death on the cross; in this sense it is the ‘passion’ moment in any mass. In Britten’s setting, the tenor opens the movement with a description of another ‘Calvary’: Owen depicts Christ as yet another victim of ‘this war’, while ‘his disciples stood apart’. The musical idiom is not at all that of Bach’s passions, but nonetheless Pears fulfilled his familiar ‘Evangelist’ role, a spectator describing the crucifixion, assisted by the chorus while ‘Jesus’ remains silent. This achieves greater poignancy in the subsequent movement, in which Fischer-Dieskau assumed the voice of the dead enemy soldier, roused in hades by Owen’s narrator: ‘I am the enemy you killed, my friend.’ To hear these not just as the words of a dead soldier but in the familiar voice of ‘Jesus’ (i.e., the baritone Jesus of Bach’s passions) emphasizes Owen’s ‘pity of war’, the sheer wastefulness of it all. It also pointedly puts the voice of Jesus into the mouth of ‘the enemy’.

Developing this Evangelist/Jesus reading of Britten’s work further, Owen’s plaintive ‘Move him into the sun’ which Britten puts near the end of the Dies irae would be an ‘Evangelist’ text—as third-person reflection on a dead protagonist—and Britten duly gives it to the tenor. On the other hand, “Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm” (near the end of the same movement) is an imperative pronouncement in the second person. As a curse, it belongs to ‘Jesus’, and is given to the baritone. The baritone’s ‘After the blast of lightning from the East’ is a prophetic voice, and thus belongs to ‘Jesus’; and his ‘Bugle’s sang, saddening the evening air’ can be read as a Gethsemane text, akin to Jesus’ solemn reflection on the carnage to come. The first poem, ‘What passing bells

for these who die as cattle?’, is rightfully the tenor’s—as another example of third-person reflection on wasteful death.

The tenor/baritone duet ‘Out there, we’ve walked quite friendly up to Death’ (in the Dies irae) is one of two passages in which the tenor is given first-person text (the other, ‘It seemed that out of battle I escaped’, will be considered further below); while the first-person plural voice of the poem benefits from the two-part setting, this example does not fit the Jesus/Evangelist reading offered here. In its boisterousness, Britten’s setting may unconsciously echo Bach’s testimony of the witnesses (‘Er hat gesagt: Ich kann den Tempel Gottes abbrechen’) or the priests rejecting Judas’s money (‘Es taugt nicht, dass wir sie in den Gotteskasten legen’), but this is at best incidental; Britten may be seeking a sort of comic relief. His treatment of Owen’s ‘Parable of the Old Man and the Young’ in the Offertorium is more complicated, but may more closely adhere to Bach’s models. Britten’s juxtaposition of the reference to God’s promise to Abraham in the Latin text against Owen’s brutal reworking of the Abraham/Isaac story is a masterstroke, made even more ingenious by Britten’s musical reworking of his own Canticale II (1952), a setting of the same Abraham/Isaac story. The result is a *tour de force* in every respect. As a parable, this is rightfully a ‘Jesus’ text, and so begins with the baritone. When Isaac speaks, however, the text is shifted to the tenor—the ‘young man’ of the title. The angel calling from heaven is given to both voices together over a luminous sustained major dyad—as in Canticale II: the heightened effect of the two voices for the angel is akin to Bach’s use of sustained strings to accompany only the words of Jesus in the *St. Matthew Passion*, a scoring technique that sets apart those lines from all other dialogue. Then the narration returns to the baritone to finish

the parable ('But the old man would not so, but slew his son'), except for the harrowing final line ('And half the seed of Europe, one by one') which is given to both solo voices together, and punctuated by *forzando* chords in the chamber orchestra. Then silence—or not quite, as from a distance the chamber organ drones a dissonant *ostinato*. The chamber orchestra sounds another *tutti* chord, and the line is restated and the effect repeated. Britten may well have been evoking another favorite oratorio in the English choral festival repertory: Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, with the prophets of Baal gathered around the altar exclaiming 'Hear and answer!' and getting no reply. The reply Britten eventually gives, such as it is, is the distant, detached boys' choir over the dissonant organ drone, carrying on their ritual in some heavenly realm, quite unmoved by the horrible violence of the here and now, offering a prayer that these souls may 'pass from death to life'. These voices may be more substantial than Mendelssohn's silent Baal, but their usefulness to the protagonists amounts to as little. The parable goes unheeded, perhaps even uncomprehended while the church's liturgy grinds inexorably on. If there is a parallel in the Bach passions here, it is in the moments of extreme calm that follow directly after the graphic musical representations of the scourging of Jesus (e.g., in the *St. John Passion*, the arioso 'Betrachte, meine Seel' mit ängstlichem Vergnügen; in the *St. Matthew Passion*, the aria 'Können Thränen meiner Wangen nichts erlangen'), although the parallel is not exact. In both cases the implicit question is 'Why didn't you intervene?'. While Britten emphasizes an intervention ignored (as the soloists repeat 'half the seed of Europe' and 'one by one' again and again, softer each time, and an almost whispered choral reprise of the fugal "Quam olim Abrahae" material, the movement gradually dissipating into nothingness), Bach pauses for a theological reflection on the absence of divine intervention in Jesus' suffering.

That *War Requiem* might be better regarded as a passion than as a requiem is suggested by its total effect. Both passions and requiems are liturgical entities, but for very different occasions. The passion comes at the culmination of Lent, and leaves the story incomplete—or rather, seemingly completed with Jesus dead and buried. Musical settings invariably end on a note of rest—not necessarily a major chord, but often a choral lullaby of some sort, with a conclusion somehow befitting Jesus' words 'It is finished' (John 19:30). A passion setting generally serves as a meditation on Jesus' death for the sins of the world, foregrounding human guilt. Put another way, a passion deals with suffering and dying, while a requiem deals with the dead. The requiem mass is the proper mass service for All Souls' Day (2 November), although it may be celebrated as a burial mass at any time of year. The default text is cast in the plural ("Grant *them* rest"), but rubrics allow changes to the singular for a specific occasion. Composers have taken a variety of different approaches to setting this text, including even the choice of which bits of the text to set—sometimes rearranging the text in the process.²⁴

Britten's pointed omission of the communion text 'Lux aeterna' ('Let eternal light shine upon them') which should precede the 'Libera Me' is significant; with this omission—and by cutting off the last lines of the liturgical 'Libera Me' and moving them to the very end of the work, he withholds any mention of light until the very last moment. He ends his work in a placid state: the peace of sleep—and the sleep of death. Britten's

²⁴ Both Verdi and Britten took this liberty (particularly with their reprises of the horrifying 'Dies Irae' material)—but then again so did Bach when he borrowed Matthew's account of the temple veil being rent from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51–52), inserting it into the *St. John Passion* where John lacks any mention of the event. Clearly Bach would not let the absence of a good scene in the Gospel account he was setting deter him from using it.

implication is that hell was on earth, in combat. Death is the release from this—but not really a place of light. His “Libera me, Domine” is a graphic representation of ‘foxhole religion’ in the midst of battle, and at the shattering climax (Rehearsal 116) the chorus is left stuttering out only those three words, sinking fast as if bleeding out. Then Britten turns to Owen’s narrative (‘It seemed that out of battle I escaped down some profound dull tunnel...’). The tenor is given first-person text, and becomes an active participant, apparently just killed in combat. Britten sets the poem as accompanied recitative (the closest analog in *War Requiem* to the musical idiom of Bach’s narrative recitatives), but it is an atemporal and sterile mood. (‘Cold’ is the instruction given to the instrumentalists.) The baritone enters with the dead enemy’s response, and Britten introduces instrumental interludes developing the baritone motives, as well as echoes of the past conflict. The joint ‘Let us sleep now’ introduces a comparatively blissful D Lydian lyricism. When the boys’ choir and main choral/orchestral ensemble enter again, their “In paradisum” is the church’s version (or perhaps *perversion* is implied) of the reality experienced by the dead soldiers: peace comes only in death, and that rest is enough of a paradise for anyone who has been through the hell of war.²⁵ The concluding Amen, using the same ambiguous move to F major that ended the first two movements of the work, has often been cited as a pointedly unsatisfying cadence. Indeed, in Heather Wiebe’s words, this ‘fragile, ambiguous episode provides the pillars of the *Requiem*’s structure, bearing a weight it can hardly support.’²⁶

²⁵ Here, with the structure of the passion in mind, Donald Mitchell’s reminder is apt: ‘the lullaby... belongs to the combatants, the *victims* or war, and is addressed to *them*, not to us’. Mitchell: ‘Violent climates’ in Cooke, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.188-261 (at 210).

²⁶ Wiebe, p.210.

Thus the work does not end as a requiem is supposed to, in an eternity of heavenly light. Despite Britten’s use of the ‘In Paradisum’ text (which, like the ‘Libera me’ is not from the requiem proper but from obsequies for burial that would immediately follow the funeral mass), his work ends in the tomb—just as the passion does. *War Requiem* is a post-Christian passion, relying on the past Christian heritage for its meaning and impact.²⁷ As Philip Rupprecht points out, despite Britten’s claim that the work was ‘perfectly in place in Coventry Cathedral’, ‘it is addressed to an audience of listeners rather than a congregation of participating worshippers’.²⁸ To an increasingly secular society—this ‘audience of listeners’—the work appeared to be sacred, and indeed it draws considerable rhetorical power from that association. The commissioning letter offered two venues—the new cathedral or the expansive Coventry Theatre: Britten took advantage of the cathedral ambiance to produce a strong effect of dissonance with the Christian tradition. With the gospel passion settings, the story is not over; the congregation just has to wait for it. With *War Requiem*, the story is over for the two protagonists; insofar as the story continues at all, it is that for Britten’s audience the threat of war persists. Britten’s *War Requiem* may be read as akin to the “Reproaches” from the cross, a liturgical element proper to the Good Friday service. The Owen texts deny any value of Christian ritual; they take aim at the hypocrisy of the established church; they question the point of creation, the efficacy of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice, and the reality of any heavenly afterlife. (As Rupprecht remarks, at the end of the Offertorium, the effect is ‘as if the

²⁷ It is hardly the first work to do so, and perhaps closest to it in many respects are John Fould’s *World Requiem* and Frederick Delius’s Requiem, both reactions to the first World War.

²⁸ Philip Rupprecht: *Britten’s Musical Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.200. On its aptness for Coventry Cathedral, see *ibid.*, 201-203, and James D. Herbert: *Our Distance from God: Studies of the Divine and the Mundane in Western Art and Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp.103-128.

singers themselves no longer know why they are speaking the liturgical words.')²⁹ Hope, such as it is, can only be in a release from the pain of it all. This is the secular passion—and as such an anticipation of the Pulitzer-prize winning *Little Match Girl Passion* of David Lang (2008), which much more overtly takes Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* as a model.

In the same year in which he was writing *War Requiem*, when asked about his compositional process in general, Britten explained:

Well I can only quote T. S. Eliot now. Someone asked him how were the *Four Quartets* getting on, and he said that they were practically finished; but he hadn't written a word—I mean the words came later. The actual thematic material is a very, very late stage, and that it's almost dangerous if you do get thematic ideas in an early stage, in my experience.³⁰

Taking it for granted that there is manifest Verdian influence in *War Requiem*, this quotation perhaps suggests that the influence of the *Saint Matthew Passion* happened early (during the planning stages), while the influence of the *Messa da Requiem* happened later (as Britten set to work writing the music). This accords with the

²⁹ Rupprecht, p.213.

³⁰ 'Britten and Pears in Canada' (CBC interview, 1961), in *Britten on Music*, ed. Kildea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.210–213 (at p. 213).

timing of Britten's first communications with Fischer-Dieskau about the work in February 1961, very likely before a note of music was written. The Bach connection is much more significant than the Verdi correspondences much nearer the musical surface. Britten produced an ingenious reworking of the traditional liturgical passion form, under the guise of a requiem (and using a troped requiem text). Malcolm Boyd's conclusion in 1968 holds just as true even if Verdi is replaced by Bach:

Britten's indebtedness to composers as varied in style and period as Purcell, Mozart, Mahler, and Stravinsky has been generally recognized, without any suggestion of conscious, or even unconscious, imitation of particular works or mannerisms. In the case of the *War Requiem* something rather different has happened; something which cannot be explained as a merely general influence of one composer upon another....An awareness of Britten's closeness to [Bach's passions] in many passages can, in short, strengthen our response to the ironic subtleties which are such a fascinating aspect of the *War Requiem*.³¹

Recognizing the Bach connections and resituating the work as *more-nearly-passion* rather than *more-nearly-requiem* allows for a more coherent reading of this impressive work—a work which is 'difficult' in many senses.

³¹ Boyd, p.6.