

## CONCERT 27<sup>th</sup> July 2020

Dear WHO and friends

As we near our sixth month of non-music-making I hope the connection of these concert suggestions help in maintaining a line of communication to you all.

Anne and your committee are still working hard behind the scenes (in fact there is a Zoom committee meeting this week) to ensure that the trials we are going through this year don't in any way affect the unique community and musical connection which is WHO.

This was to be my 30th year involved in an institution built from a small adult breakaway from the Box Hill Technical orchestra to the setting up of a chamber sized orchestra in the 80s. On the back of the dedication and commitment of many we have developed into a symphony orchestra of 80 plus; an orchestra and philosophy with which we can be truly proud to be associated. So don't be disheartened. Music making and great concerts given to big appreciative audiences may seem a long way off, but they will return.

I'm beginning to sound like Winston Churchill so let us move on to the music.

One of the benefits of a hiatus is having time to follow your passions and interests uninterrupted. At least that is my case where work, as many of you are involved in, doesn't impinge. Even so, weekends and evenings in lockdown should leave time to listen to, perhaps, uncharted mega works.

The War Requiem by Benjamin Britten is such a work, one that I have been drawn back to study in greater depth.

Born on St. Cecilia's Day, 22 November, 1913, Britten played the piano and viola and was composing pieces by the age of five. Growing up in East Anglia, he had an abiding love and fascination of the sea. An example of this is his extraordinary depictions of looking out across the North Sea with the first light on the horizon between sea and sky in his opera Peter Grimes.

\*Look up Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes "Dawn" for a stunning example.

Lowestoft, the town of his birth and childhood, is on the North Sea and his dentist father's house looked out over it. This environment and his love of English literature plus an absorption into the problem of good and evil causing divisions in the human family, certainly found expression in Britten's music and choice of subject material.

String players will know his work for strings titled "Simple Symphony", published when he was aged only 15, and attracting the attention and ongoing lessons from noted English composer Frank Bridge. Later lessons with John Ireland and Australian composer Arthur Benjamin gave a wonderful grounding to Britten's obvious genius. The 1930s were halcyon days for this young British composer with the likes of Edward Elgar, Vaughan Williams and Frederick Delius leading the way, and William Walton a few steps ahead of him.

Disillusioned with what he saw as the lack of leadership in England towards the grave injustices being perpetrated in Europe, especially in Fascist Germany and Spain, in 1939 Britten wrote the "Ballad of Heroes" a memorial to those fellow countrymen who had died fighting for the Republicans in Spain. W.H. Auden, with whom Britten had collaborated in documentary films earlier that decade, wrote the words. Like many frustrated artists of the time he set sail for America, as did Auden and many other disillusioned artists and writers, stating many years later that he was "a discouraged young composer, fed-up and longing to be used". As an aside my Uncle Pieter, whose statue now presides in the centre of Colombo, was also a disillusioned Cambridge law student who like Britten and many other artists and thinkers went to Spain to fight the cause. He did survive. I feel I understand the frustrations and foreboding of the student thinkers of that time through discussions with him, as his first wife, also studying in Cambridge, was the daughter of a wealthy Jewish industrialist in Germany whose family had been caught up in the terrible atrocities of the times.

All this is a bit of a precursor to the work I am presenting today, Britten's War Requiem. He was commissioned to write a work to commemorate the new Coventry Cathedral, for which he was a great choice as he wasn't afraid to show his emotions through his compositions and was spurred on, as had been witnessed, by a powerful urge whenever there was a specific moral aim in view.

The New Cathedral was one of the most striking architectural works of its day, standing next to the ruins of the ancient Cathedral. The old ruins were left after being bombed "to symbolise the futility of

war and as a warning against the blind destructive forces of evil that can tear civilisation apart unless checked by faith and forgiveness". The bombing of Dresden was of course a tit for tat episode, neither excusable.

So now Britten, because of the grandness of the building and the reason for its existence, composed for large forces: soprano, tenor, and baritone, large chorus, a separate boys' choir, a large symphony orchestra and a chamber orchestra. Plus organ. The first performance was on 30 May, 1962, the occasion commemorating the past but also referring to the present. The piece combines the ageless text of the Latin Mass for the Dead with a sequence of moving poems by poet Wilfred Owen who was killed in action only days before the end of World War 1, in November 1918. Britten set a quotation from the preface which Owen had written for an intended volume of his poems:

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The poetry is in the pity....

All a poet can do is warn.

In the setting of the liturgical Latin, Britten's music resembles ancient forms designed for worship composed by the great masters of church music, then crossing them with his more modern styles. Perhaps influenced by Stravinsky and Mahler, both composers he highly admired, he combined these two forms achieving a unique expression, which, I believe, lifts this work to be one of major importance and substance. Britten threads the poems of Wilfred Owen through the Latin text, movingly bringing together the sacred and the secular.

There is a wonderful and poignant concert from 2018 of this work, combining choruses and orchestras from Germany (NDR) and England (Liverpool Phil.) As is stated in the introduction this wonderful cultural exchange is to be performed in Hanover, then Liverpool. "Players and singers in all senses side by side in perfect harmony".

YouTube NDR Arte concert. The War Requiem goes for an hour and a half but stick with it, it's well worth experiencing.

Britten would be very proud of this unique performance.